



Protecting Western Ghats

This editorial is based on [“Why There Should Be No Delay In Protecting The Western Ghats”](#) which was published in Hindustan Times on 03/01/2022. It talks about the threats faced by the Western Ghats and the declaration of the Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA).

For Prelims: Western Ghats, Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA), Gadgil Committee, Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), Kasturirangan Committee.

For Mains: Significance of Western Ghats, Threats Faced by Western Ghats, Need to declare Western Ghats as ESA, Protecting the Western Ghats while ensuring no threats to the livelihoods of the local people of the region.

The link between the climate crisis and extreme weather events such as cloudbursts and flash floods is now well understood by the virtue of numerous researches and various IPCC reports.

Mindless construction and land use has only exacerbated all these impacts, particularly in ecologically vulnerable regions such as the [Western Ghats](#).

However, the Central Government and the [Western Ghat state governments have remained oblivious](#) of this science especially in case of land use planning in the region.

Western Ghats

- **About:** Western Ghats consist of a chain of mountains running parallel to India's Western Coast and passing from the states of **Kerala, Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka**.
- **Significance:**
 - The Ghats **influence the Indian monsoon weather patterns** that mediate the warm tropical climate of the region.
 - They **act as a barrier to rain-laden monsoon winds** that sweep in from the south-west.
 - Western Ghats are **home to tropical evergreen forests**, as well as to **325 globally threatened species**.
- **Threats to Western Ghats:**
 - **Developmental Pressures: Urbanisation together with agricultural expansion** and livestock grazing are posing serious threats to the region.
 - About **50 million people** are estimated to live in the Western Ghats Region, resulting in developmental pressures that are orders of magnitude greater than many protected areas around the world.
 - **Biodiversity Relates Issues: Forest loss, habitat fragmentation**, habitat degradation by **invasive plant species, encroachment** and **conversion** also continue to affect the Ghats.

- Fragmentation caused by development pressure in the Western Ghats is **shrinking the availability of wildlife corridors** and suitable habitats outside Protected Areas.
- **Climate Change:** In the intermediate years, the climate crisis has gained momentum:
 - In the past four years (2018-21), **floods have ravaged the ghat areas of Kerala thrice** killing hundreds of people and delivering an overwhelming blow to infrastructure and livelihoods
 - **Landslides and flash floods** ravaged the ghat areas of Konkan in 2021
 - **Cyclones are also gaining intensity** with the **warming of the Arabian Sea** leaving the west coast especially vulnerable.
- **Threats from Industrialisation:** More polluting industries, **quarries and mines, roads, and townships are likely to be planned** due to the **absence of the Western Ghats ESA policy.**
 - This implies more damage to the fragile landscape of the region in future.
- **Committees for Western Ghats:**
 - **Gadgil Committee (2011):** Also known as the [Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel \(WGEEP\)](#), it recommended that **all of the Western Ghats be declared as the Ecological Sensitive Areas (ESA)** with only limited development allowed in graded zones.
 - **Kasturirangan Committee (2013):** It **sought to balance the development and environment protection** in contrast to the system proposed by the Gadgil report.
 - The [Kasturirangan committee](#) recommended that instead of the total area of Western Ghats, **only 37% of the total area should be brought under ESA** and a complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining be imposed in ESA.
- **Procedural Delays in Western Ghats ESA Declaration:**
 - The Centre has kept the **notification of the Western Ghats ESA pending since 2011.**
 - Since the recommendations of the Kasturirangan Committee, four draft notifications have been issued but to no avail.
 - More recently, the Central Government **extended the deadline till June 30, 2022 to notify the 2018 draft** Western Ghats ESA notification.
 - While a six-month extension may seem inconsequential, implementation of the **Western Ghats ESA policy has been pending for over 10 years now.**
 - While the government intends to prohibit or restrict industrial and developmental activities in some 37% of the mountain range, the **Western Ghats states are opposed to many such barriers.**

Way Forward

- **Preventive Approach:** Considering the changes in climate, which would affect the livelihood of all people and hurt the nation's economy, it is **prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems.**
 - This will cost less compared to the situation prone to calamities than spending money /resources for restoration / rejuvenation.
 - Thus, any **further delay in the implementation will only accentuate degrading** of the most prized natural resource of the country.
- **Engaging With All Stakeholders:** A proper analysis based on scientific study followed by **consensus among various stakeholders** by **addressing respective concerns** is required urgently.
 - **Holistic view of threats and demands** on the forest land, products and services, devising strategies to address these with clearly stated objectives for the authorities involved must be taken.
- **Addressing the Concerns of Local People:** Arguments go that the idea of demarcating an ecologically sensitive area is inherently against people and their developmental aspirations.
 - However, many of the local people might have no information on what is an ESA; whether it will derail development in the region and what are the alternative models of development.
 - The issue can be discussed through **detailed public consultations** so that the policy is not seen to have a top-down approach.
- **Role of State Governments:** The states must recognise the dangers of destroying the ecosystem, especially when India has been facing the brunt of the climate crisis.
 - They must realise that the climate crisis is a reality, and instead of delaying the decision-

making process, **devise more decisive climate-proofing actions** to save the valuable Western Ghats.

- **Empowering Local Communities:** The WGEEP emphasised that it **is the people at the grassroots level** who have the knowledge and are tied to the environment should have the motivation to safeguard the region.
 - The way forward lies in the **pursuit of genuine democratic decentralisation and empowering local communities** in villages and cities.
 - The people of Western have previously pioneered progressive initiatives such as the People's Planning Campaign in Kerala. The spirit of such movements should now be restored to **effectively counter resource exhaustion**.

Conclusion

- There are no two views on protecting the Western Ghats, but also, there is a need to strike a balance between safeguarding the forests and the right to livelihood of the local people.
- It is important to realise that the Western Ghats or any natural resource for that matter, is not just ours to destroy. It is everyone's duty to preserve it for posterity.

Drishti Mains Question

"There is a need to strike a balance between safeguarding the forests and the right to livelihood of the local people". In the context of the threats being faced by the Western Ghats, justify this statement.

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