

Eco-Sensitive Zones and Long Debate between Environment Conservation and Economic Development

December 13, 2021

Manifest pedagogy:

Karnataka Government has submitted its opposition to the Centre against the Kasturirangan Committee report as it can adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region. Kerala has sought clarity on 'non-core' areas in Western Ghats. In this context, any UPSC aspirant should know the debate surrounding conservation of Western Ghats.

In news: Karnataka is opposed to implementation of Kasturirangan report on Western Ghats, CM informs Centre

Placing it in syllabus: Environment

Static dimensions:

- What are eco-sensitive zones?
- Madhav Gadgil report on Western Ghats
- Kasturirangan report

Current dimensions:

- Opposition of the states: Moves of Kerala and Karnataka
- Effect on the economic development of the communities

Content:

What are eco-sensitive zones?

- Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) is a buffer or transition zone around highly-protected areas such as National Parks and

Wildlife Sanctuaries.

- Eco-Sensitive Areas are ecologically and economically important but are vulnerable to even mild disturbance.
- The purpose of declaring ESZs is to create some kind of “shock absorbers” to the protected areas by regulating and managing the activities around such areas.
- The Government Regulates and Manages the activities in such areas, so that there is no external harm to the higher protected areas.
- Therefore the basic aim is to regulate certain activities around National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries so as to minimise their impact on fragile ecosystem of the Protected Areas
- Eco Sensitive Zones are notified by the Central Government through Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change (MOEFCC) under the provisions of the Environment Protection Act of 1986
- However, the delineation of the extent of the ESZ area is site specific. Its width varies from one protected area to the other.
- As per the Wildlife Conservation Strategy 2002-2005 and Supreme Court judgements the area may generally extend up to 10 km around the protected area.

Features of Eco Sensitive Areas:

- Biologically and ecologically rich, valuable and unique
- Largely irreplaceable if destroyed
- High value to human societies
- Maintain ecological stability of the area
- Conserves biological diversity

The Environment Protection Act, 1986 does not mention the word “Eco-sensitive Zones”.

The **section 3(2)(v)** of the Act, says that Central Government can restrict areas in which any industries, operations or processes shall not be carried out or shall be carried out

subject to certain safeguards

Besides the **section 5 (1)** of this act says that central government can prohibit or restrict the location of industries and carrying on certain operations or processes on the basis of considerations like the biological diversity of an area, maximum allowable limits of concentration of pollutants for an area, environmentally compatible land use, and proximity to protected areas.

The above **two clauses have been effectively used** by the government **to declare Eco-Sensitive Zones or Ecologically Fragile Areas (EFA)**.

The same criteria have been used by the government to declare **No Development Zones** also.

Madhav Gadgil report on Western Ghats

The commission is formally known as Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP). It was an environmental research commission is named after its chairman Madhav Gadgil.

Summary of Gadgil Commission Report is as follows:

- **Designated the entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA):** It recommended to assign three levels of Ecological Sensitivity to different regions of Western Ghats. The panel classified the extensive region of 64% of the Western Ghats, spanning over six States, 44 districts and 142 taluks, into Ecologically Sensitive Zones, called ESZ 1, ESZ 2 and ESZ 3.
- **ESZ-1 of the Ghats was given high priority:** almost all developmental activities like mining, construction of thermal power plants, dams etc were suggested to stop along with the decommissioning of similar projects that have completed their shelf life.
- **Advocates a graded or layered approach of conservation:**

with regulatory as well as promotional measures appropriately fine-tuned to local ecological and social contexts within the broad framework of ESZ1, ESZ2 and ESZ3.

- ***Suggested a better way of governance of the environment:***
It proposed a bottom to top approach instead of a top to bottom approach, basically, the decentralization and more powers to local authorities.
- ***Suggested the need to regulate developmental activities:***
stopping creation of new hill stations, changing the land use from farmland to non-farm land and the stoppage of diversions of rivers in order to protect the ecology of the region.
- ***Constitution of a Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA)***, as a statutory authority under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, with the powers under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

Criticisms of Gadgil Report

- It was more environment-friendly and not in tune with the ground realities.
- Recommendations were cited as impractical to implement.
- Gadgil report has asked for a complete eco-sensitive cover for the Western Ghats which hamper different states on energy and development fronts.
- States opined that the constitution of a new body called WGEA is unnecessary. They insist that protection can be given under existing laws.
- The report doesn't give a solution for revenue losses due to the implementation of its recommendations.
- Gadgil report is against dams in the Western Ghats, which is a crucial blow on the ailing power sector.

Kasturirangan report:

The Kasturirangan committee was constituted to examine the WGEEP report or Gadgil Report.

Officially it is known as – high-level working group (HLWG) – it denotes the 10 member committee, headed by Kasturirangan.

Summary of recommendations are as follows:

- Opined that the “blanket prescription” approach of the Gadgil committee would be harmful to the economy.
- The report categorized areas on the basis of their ecological sensitivity.
- It classified 60% of the Western Ghats as a cultural landscape with human settlements, agriculture and plantations. Remaining area was termed as natural landscape, with 37% “biologically rich” area
- Instead of the total area of Western Ghats, only 37% (close to 60,000 sq. km.) of the total area will be brought under ESA under the Kasturirangan report.
- A complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA.
- Distinguished between cultural (58% occupied in the Western Ghats by it like human settlements, agricultural fields and plantations) and natural landscape (90% of it should come under ESA according to the committee).
- Current mining areas in the ESA should be phased out within the next five years, or at the time of expiry of mining lease, whichever is earlier.
- No thermal power be allowed and hydropower projects are allowed only after detailed study.
- Red industries, i.e. which are highly polluting, are strictly banned in ESA areas.
- The Kasturirangan report on the Western Ghats has made several pro-farmer recommendations, including the exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ecologically sensitive areas (ESAs).
- The Kasturirangan report had said 123 villages fall under the ESA purview.
- It also stated that the UNESCO Heritage tag is an opportunity to build global and domestic recognition of

the enormous natural wealth that exists in the Western Ghats. The 39 sites are located across the Western Ghats and distributed across the states (Kerala 19), Karnataka (10), Tamil Nadu (6) and Maharashtra (4).

- The state of Karnataka has the highest percentage of the ESA- 46.50 per cent.

Criticism of Kasturirangan Report:

- The Kasturirangan panel used remote sensing and aerial survey methods for zonal demarcation of land in the Western Ghats. The usage of such techniques, without examining the ground reality, has caused many errors in the report.
- The use of “erroneous method” had caused inclusion of many villages under Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) though there were only rubber plantations and no forest land!
- The power is vested with the bureaucrats and forest officials and not with gram sabhas.
- Many fear that the farmers would get evicted if the Kasturirangan Committee report is implemented.
- The Kasturirangan report included ecologically non-sensitive areas under ESA, and left out many ecologically sensitive areas!

Opposition of the states: Moves of Kerala and Karnataka

- The Gadgil Committee report prioritized the Environment and recommended measures keeping it at the centre.
- Whereas the Kasturirangan committee tried to balance the recommendations with development, simultaneously with safeguards.
- However, both the reports have evoked sharp reactions from the stakeholders

Karnataka's position:

- The Karnataka government has repeatedly rejected the implementation of the Kasturirangan report.
- The state government believes that implementation of the report will halt the developmental activities in the region.
- CM Bommai said that Karnataka has the distinction of being one of the states with extensive forest cover and the government has taken care to protect the biodiversity of Western Ghats.
- Kasturirangan report has been prepared based on the satellite images, but the ground reality is different. So the Karnataka government and the people living in the region are opposed to implementation of the Kasturirangan report.
- In Karnataka, the government has pointed out that the implementation of the report would impact 1,576 villages spread across 20,668 sq km of Western Ghats region in the state.
- The union government since 2014 has issued several draft notifications to the Karnataka government to finalise the eco-sensitive areas in the Western Ghats but the government has been firm in rejecting the implementation of the report.

Moves by Kerala

- Kerala appointed the **Oommen V Oommen committee** to review the Kasturirangan panel's recommendations since the latter had not physically visited the Western Ghats region in Kerala before demarcating 9,993.7 square kilometres as ESA.
- Later, the State constituted **another panel under P H Kurian** for a more scientific appraisal of the Kasturirangan report.
- The **Kurian committee** found that the ESA would be confined to 92 villages spread over 8,656.4 square kilometres. Kerala had submitted the report to the

Centre in 2018.

- Kerala has urged the Central Ministry for Environment, Forest and Climate Change to define 'non-core' areas in the Western Ghats, where relaxation in Western Ghats environmental protection regulations is applicable
- It asked the Centre to demarcate the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) without unsettling the present population living in the region.
- Also demand for excluding 1,337.24 square kilometres from the ESA.

Effect on the economic development of the communities

- It is claimed that declaring Western Ghats as an ecologically sensitive zone would adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region.
- Considering the changes in climate (evident from recurring floods, droughts, landslides, increasing temperature, etc), which would affect the livelihood of all people (irrespective of poor or rich) and hurt the nation's economy.
- It is prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems that cost less compared to the situation prone to calamities (with changes in the climate) than spending money /resources for restoration / rejuvenation.

Mould your thought:

1. What is an Eco-Sensitive Area? Why are states opposing the implementation of Kasturirangan Report on Western Ghats?

Approach to the answer-

- Introduction to the topic
- Define Eco-sensitive Area
- Mention the features of ESAs
- Discuss the major recommendations of Kasturirangan

Report

- Discuss the criticism of the report and moves by Karnataka and Kerala govts
- Conclusion