

Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ)

February 13, 2021

Earlier, the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries had a buffer zone which prohibited the local villagers to set up a colony too close to the wildlife reserves. Due to the lack of proper guidelines, many cases of human-animals conflicts came to light. This also highlighted the evergoing illegal activities rampant in the areas surrounding the Protected Areas. The latest innovation in protecting these buffer zones is the notification of Eco Sensitive Zones.

In news: Controversy over proposed ESZ around Wayanad wildlife sanctuary in Kerala

Placing it in syllabus: Environment

Dimensions

- What Are Eco-Sensitive Zones?
- Who notifies them and the Procedure
- Activities allowed and prohibited in Eco Sensitive Zones
- Importance of ESZ
- Challenges to them
- Way Forward

Content:

- On January 28, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change published a draft notification to declare an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) around the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala.
- Issuing the draft notification, the Ministry invited objections or suggestions from the public on the proposal, which should be submitted within a period of 60 days.
- Since then, resistance against the proposed ESZ has been mounting from the district, especially from political parties and local bodies in the region.

- Wayanad District Panchayat passed a resolution against the draft notification. Several block panchayats have also initiated similar steps.
- Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala sought the intervention of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to repeal the draft notification.
- He said that the notification would affect the farmers living in densely populated areas coming under the proposed notified areas.

What Are Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ)?

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

Who Notifies ESZs?

- 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, delineation of the extent of 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.

- If sensitive corridors, connectivity and ecologically important patches, crucial for landscape linkage are involved then areas beyond 10 kilometres width can also be notified as the Eco-Sensitive Zones.
- Moreover, the distribution of an area of ESZ and the extent of regulation may not be uniform all around and it could be of variable width and extent.

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.

Procedure for Notifying ESZ:

- A small committee made of Wildlife Warden, an Ecologist, Revenue department officials and officials from local bodies to study the activities around protected areas.
- This committee prepares an inventory of land use

patterns, different types activities and number of industries around Protected Areas and Wildlife Corridors etc

- Chief Wildlife Warden then groups the activities under prohibited, restricted or permissible categories.
- Once these proposals are finalised they are sent to the MoEFCC for further processing and notification

Activities Allowed and Prohibited in ESZs:

- **Prohibited activities:** The Ministry has proposed prohibiting nine activities in the Eco-Sensitive Zone. They include:
 - Commercial mining, Stone quarrying and Crushing units
 - New or expansion of existing saw mills,
 - Setting up of Brick Kilns
 - industries causing pollution (air, water, soil, noise etc),
 - establishment of major hydroelectric projects (HEP),
 - commercial use of wood,
 - Tourism activities like hot-air balloons over the National Park,
 - discharge of effluents or any solid waste or production of hazardous substances.
- **Regulated activities:** will be permitted with regulations as applicable under the laws. They include:
 - Felling of trees,
 - establishment of hotels and resorts,
 - commercial use of natural water,
 - erection of electrical cables,
 - drastic change of agriculture system, e.g. adoption of heavy technology, pesticides etc,
 - widening of roads.
- **Permitted activities:**

- Ongoing agricultural or horticultural practices,
- rainwater harvesting,
- organic farming,
- use of renewable energy sources,
- adoption of green technology for all activities.

Importance of ESZs:

- A forest area or a protected zone cannot be differentiated from the mainland by drawing a line between the two. The Eco-Sensitive Zone is like an **ecotone** – the transition between two biological communities or ecosystems.
- It **reduces the impact of human intervention** in the core protected areas
- ESZs **help in in-situ conservation**, which deals with conservation of an endangered species in its natural habitat, for example the conservation of the One-horned Rhino of Kaziranga National Park, Assam.
- They also **minimise forest depletion and man-animal conflict**. The protected areas are based on the core and buffer model of management, through which local area communities are also protected and benefitted.

Challenges for setting up Eco-Sensitive Zones

Need for Developmental activities:

- Activities such as construction of dams, roads, urban and rural infrastructures in the ESZ, create interference, negatively impact upon the environment and imbalance the ecological system.
- For example, construction of road would lead to cutting down of trees which would further impact upon soil erosion thereby destroying the habitats of the species preserved under the ESZ.

Governance and new laws:

- By failing to recognize the rights of forest communities and curbing poaching of animals, legislations like Environmental Protection Act 1986, and Wildlife Protection Act 1972, undermine the ESZs in favour of developmental activities.
- For example – the new draft notification for reducing the ESZs of Bannerghatta National Park.

Tourism:

- As the pressure of tourism is rising, the government is developing new sites and gateways to the ESZ.
- To cater to the increasing demand for eco-tourism, land around parks and sanctuaries is being cleared through deforestation, displacement of local people etc.
- The tourists leave behind garbage such as plastic bags and bottles etc. which lead to environmental degradation.

Exotic and Invasive species:

- Exotic species like Eucalyptus and Acacia auriculiformis etc., and their plantations create a competing demand on naturally occurring forests.

Climate change:

- Biodiversity and climate change are interconnected, for example, the rise in global temperature has generated land, water and ecological stress on the ESZs.
- For example, forest fires or the Assam floods which badly affected the Kaziranga National Park and its wildlife.

Opposition from Local communities:

- Slash and burn techniques used in agriculture, pressure of increasing population and the rising demand for firewood and forest produce, etc. exerts pressure on the protected areas.

- Manier times, human settlements, including tribal colonies and agricultural lands, come within the proposed Eco-Sensitive Zone.
- Thus regulation of activities in these ESZ is vehemently opposed by the local population

Way Forward:

- Giving more impetus to afforestation and reforestation of degraded forest, regeneration of lost habitats, reducing climate change impacts by promoting carbon footprints and through education etc.
- Propagating Conservation techniques and creating awareness about overexploitation of resources and its adverse impacts among masses.
- Government, civil societies and stakeholders are largely required to collaborate with each other for balancing sustainable development with development.

Mould your thought: Protection of the wildlife sanctuary is, in fact, protecting the sustenance of people. Comment on the notification of ESZ and the controversies surrounding it.

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Elaborate the statement briefly
- Mention what are ESZ
- How they help to protect environment
- Mention issues and concerns surrounding ESZ
- Conclusion