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Ecologically Sensitive Areas in Western Ghats

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Why in News

Recently, the Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change interacted with Chief Ministers of six states through a video conference to discuss issues relating to notification of **Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) pertaining to Western Ghats**.

These six states include **Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu**.

Background

- The government had constituted a High Level Working Group under the **Chairmanship of Dr. Kasturirangan to conserve and protect the biodiversity of Western Ghats** while allowing for sustainable and inclusive development of the region.
- The Committee had recommended that identified geographical areas falling in the six States of Kerala, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu may be declared as **Ecologically Sensitive Areas**.
 - The Committee recommended to bring just **37% of the Western Ghats** under the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) zones — **down from the 64%** suggested by the **Gadgil Committee report**.
 - The **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, also known as the Gadgil Committee** was an environmental research commission appointed by the government in 2011.
- A **draft notification** related to the same was issued in **2018** mentioning the areas to be notified in the ESA.

Key Points

- All the involved States recognised a **need to protect the Western Ghats**. However, the states expressed their concerns related to **the allowed activities and extent of area** mentioned in the draft notification.
- Further, it has been also decided that **state specific issues** will be discussed and **resolved through the consensus**.

Eco-Sensitive Areas

- Eco-Sensitive Areas (ESAs) are located within **10 kms** around Protected Areas, National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries.
- ESAs are notified by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** under **Environment Protection Act 1986**.
- The basic aim is to regulate certain activities around National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries so as to minimise the negative impacts of such activities on the fragile ecosystem encompassing the protected areas.

Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel

- A committee headed by ecologist Madhav Gadgil also known as the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) in 2011 recommended that all of the Western Ghats be declared as the Ecological Sensitive Areas (ESA) with **only limited development allowed in graded zones**.
- The panel had classified the Western Ghats into **Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) 1, 2 and 3 of which ESA-1 is high priority**, almost all developmental activities (mining, thermal power plants etc) were restricted in it.
- It specified that the system of governance of the environment should be a **bottom to top approach (right from Gram sabhas)** rather than a top to bottom approach.
- It also recommended the 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.
- The report was criticized for being **more environment-friendly** and not in tune with the ground realities.

Kasturirangan Committee

The Kasturirangan Commission sought to **balance the development and environment** protection in contrast to the system proposed by the Gadgil report. The committee's major recommendations were:

- Instead of the total area of Western Ghats, **only 37%** of the total area to be brought under ESA.
- Complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA.
- No thermal power projects to be allowed and hydropower projects be allowed only after detailed study.
- Red industries i.e. which are highly polluting to be strictly banned.
- The report recommended exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ESAs making it a pro farmer approach.

Way Forward

- It is a **Development vs Conservation debate. Hence,** 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.
- Any further delay in the implementation will only accentuate degrading of the most prized natural resource of the country.

Source:PIB