

Western Ghats – ESAs Proposed by Gadgil & Kasturirangan

The Western Ghats are the forested hill range running parallel to the Arabian Sea for about 1,500 -1600 km from Gujarat's Tapi river in the north to just short of Kanyakumari in south while its east-west width varies from 10 to 210 km in India.

The Ghats host India's richest wilderness in 13 national parks and several sanctuaries and is recognised by UNESCO as one of the world's eight most important biodiversity hotspots. The ecosystems of the Western Ghats comprising parts of six states - Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu - need to be protected at all costs.

On persistent demand, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) set up in March 2010 an expert panel under the chairmanship of ecologist Prof Madhav Gadgil to suggest ways to preserve the Ghats in best possible manner.

'The Gadgil panel went by forest types above a certain altitude and defined the Western Ghats landscape across 1,29,037 sq km.

'Gadgil's report proposed to declare this entire landscape as ESA, creating three ESZs within it. He prescribed that the existing sanctuaries and ESZ-1 (77000 sq km) would together cover 60 percent of this landscape. The 25 percent lowest priority areas would be marked as ESZ-3 (32000 sq km) to allow all developmental activities with precautions. The remaining 15 percent area would become ESZ-2 (20000 sq km). For example, while no mining would be allowed within ESZ- 1, existing mines could continue in ESZ-2 with a moratorium on new licences. In ESZ-3, new mines could come up.'

The Gadgil or Western Ghats Ecological Expert Panel (WGEEP) report did not find favour with industry and concerned states. No decision was taken on the report by MoEF and instead it appointed another panel, High Level Working Group (HLWG) led by Planning Commission member and astrophysicist Krishnaswamy Kasturirangan to examine the Gadgil report, consult the stakeholders and suggest how to implement it in "the most effective and holistic manner". This panel came out with its report in April 2013 with suggestions of its own on ESAs.

HLWG followed the criteria of the Western Ghats Development Programme of the Planning Commission and identified 188 talukas as its Western Ghats landscape, which worked out to 1,64,280 sq km. He marked 37 percent (60000 sq km) of this stretch as ESA where hazardous industries, thermal plants or mines would not be allowed.

There has been lot of debate on ESAs suggested by Gadgil and Kasturirangan and many environmentalists are insisting on acceptance of ESAs suggested by Gadgil.

¹ : <http://tehelka.com/the-real-gap-between-two-western-ghats/#sthash.h3xCQG6X.dpuf>

ERC has prepared maps overlaying the ESAs suggested by Gadgil and Kasturirangan along with the physical maps of the region. These maps clearly provide perspective regarding the ESAs suggested by two panels.

Subsequent to submission of Kasturirangan report, Kerala government has reviewed the suggested ESA of 13,108 sq km and came up with the decision that it should be reduced by about 3200 sq km. MoEF has in March 2014 issued a Draft Notification of Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) covering about 56,825 sq. km, the ESA in Kerala is spread over an area of 9,993.7 sq km only.