

## Kerala still undecided on eco-sensitive zone status

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A granite quarry in Mallapuram.

Two consecutive years of unprecedented floods and landslides have killed hundreds of people in Kerala, but the state government is still undecided on whether to notify areas falling under the Western Ghats as eco-sensitive zones (ESZs) in order to avert further disasters.

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“We have not decided yet. First, the forest boundary needs to be demarcated and fixed. There is a discussion on declaring 1 km from the forest boundary as an eco-sensitive zone. It's only a proposal. We have not discarded the Gadgil committee report either,” said Kerala forest minister K Raju.

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) headed by noted ecologist Madhav Gadgil had in 2011 submitted a report recommending measures for the protection of the region.

In fact, not only Kerala, but the remaining five states falling in the Western Ghats — Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu — are also yet to notify ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ) as suggested by various expert committees.

“The notification is still in the draft stage. States have agreed to notify but they have not agreed on the number of villages to be notified. They still need to send us maps as per their decision,” said CK Mishra, secretary, ministry of environment.

The draft notification issued by the Centre in 2014 lapsed because all states rejected it saying proposed ESZs would impact economic development in villages and towns. Karnataka forest minister R Shankar had told HT last year that the state government was not even agreeable to the concept of ESZ as it would affect the state’s economy.

The draft notification for implementation of ESZs in Western Ghats is based on a report submitted by a high-level working group headed by former Indian Space Research Organisation chief K Kasturirangan in 2013.

This report is a watered down version of the one submitted by the Gadgil panel, which had divided the Western Ghats, one of the eight biodiversity hotspots in the world, into three eco-sensitive zones — ESZ 1, 2 and 3 — based on ecological and cultural parameters.

It had recommended no mining, thermal power plants among others, be allowed in ESZ 1 and 2. The panel also suggested that no streams or rivers be diverted for any power projects in any of ESZs besides recommending phasing out of plastic bags, curbing conversion of forest land to non-forest use; discouraging plantation of annual crops on slopes in the ESZs among others.

The six states had rejected the Gadgil report, following which the Centre did not treat it as an official document. Meanwhile, several scientific studies by different institutions reiterated that the Western Ghats are extremely vulnerable and need a special strategy.

Professor TV Ramachandra from Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, who has published several papers on the Karnataka stretch of Western Ghats, said, “Deforestation in Coorg evident from the loss of forest cover from 40% (1973) to 24% (2018). Coorg landscape is ecologically fragile and [there is a] need to maintain the structure of the landscape to ensure its capability — hydrological, structural stability, etc.”

“The present status of forests are fragmented and dominated by monoculture plantations and construction [of resorts]. Higher rainfall in short duration and the removal of vegetation of native species, has eroded the landscape capability to allow the water to percolate,” he said.

Last year, Kerala witnessed the worst floods in a century, which claimed the lives of around 500 people. A year later, floods and landslides caused by heavy rain killed over 120 people.

Sajin Kumar KS, assistant professor of geology at the University of Kerala, stressed the need to create “a landslide zonation [distribution] map” at panchayat level.

“Land use needs to be changed there. In Puthumala, I have been told that cardamom pits would displace a large amount of soil and cause infiltration of water. Farmers and government have allowed a lot of water to infiltrate without considering the topography. Quarrying which is rampant in other parts is unscientific. Uncontrolled blasting can cause tremors up to 2 km. Of course it affects the fragile land here,” he added.

The concept of notifying ESZs in the Western Ghats is seen as “anti-development” although there is enough scientific evidence in its favour. Most villagers in landslide-affected Wayanad and Mallapuram are clueless about the concept of ESZs and how it will affect their lives.

“The legal clauses that enable the declaration of ESZs are very flexible. They can ensure that both environment protection and land use planning can go hand in hand. Often the manner in which ESZs are declared have been exclusionary which has given the impression that regulation or prohibitions have been imposed,” said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher at Delhi-based Centre for Policy Research.

“It is important to understand that ESZs have the potential for deliberative and holistic conservation planning that can identify threats to both conservation and livelihoods,” she added.