

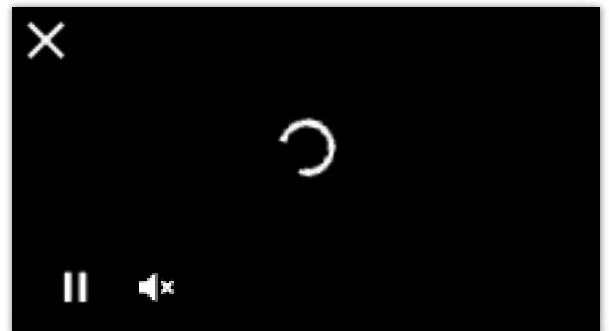


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Western Ghats and Kerala calamity



Ajmal V, DH Web Desk, Bengaluru, AUG 21 2018, 11:07AM IST | UPDATED: AUG 21 2018, 12:21PM IST





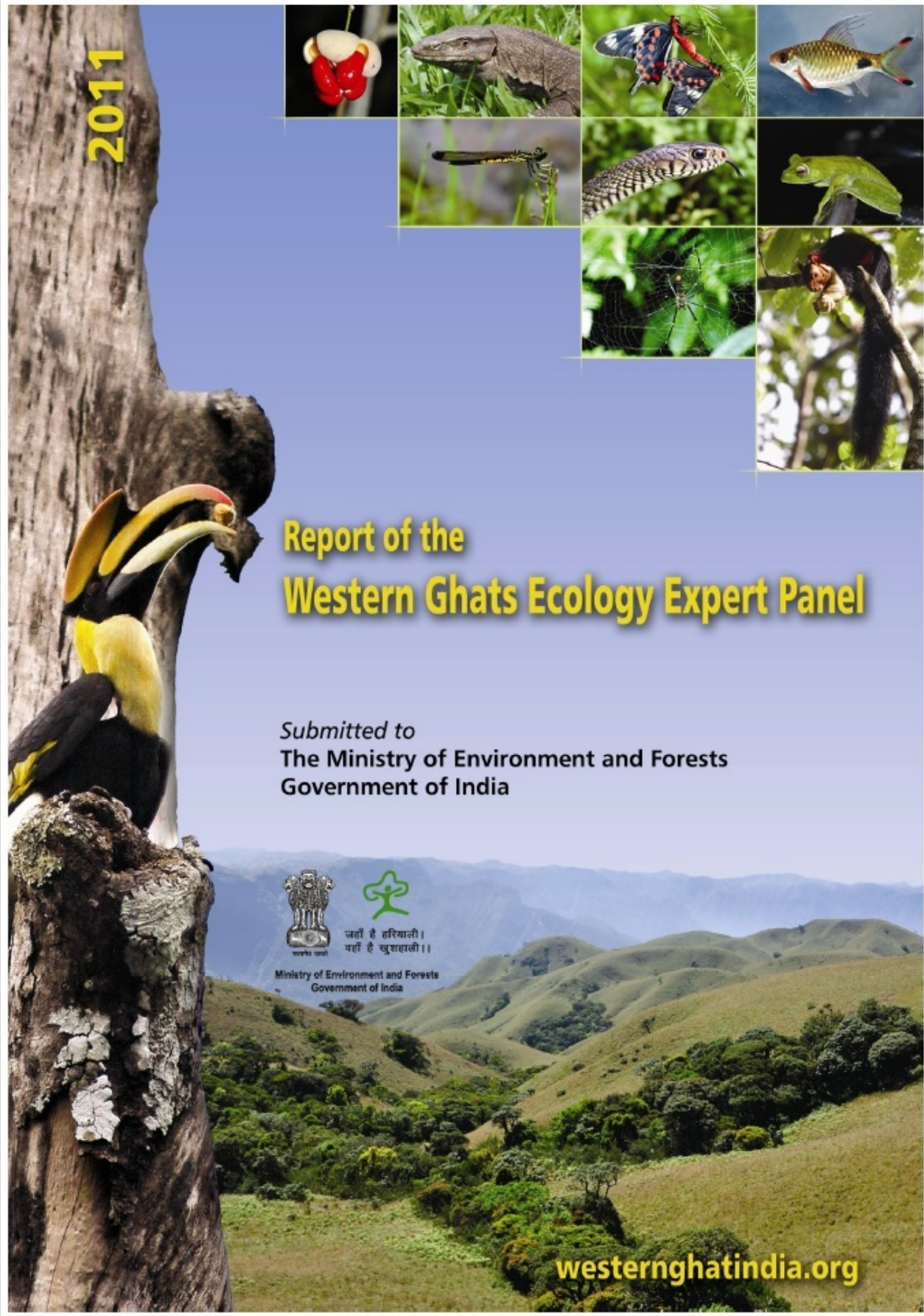
Rescue workers search for the bodies of missing persons after a landslide, triggered by heavy rains and floods, at Nenmara in Palakkad on Friday, Aug 17, 2018. 10 people have reportedly died in the mishap. (PTI Photo)

Kottiyoor, a village in the eastern side of Kannur district of Kerala, witnessed violence as part of a protest against the recommendations of Kasturirangan committee report to protect the Western Ghats in November 2013. A [viral video of a horrible landslide](#) shot from the same Kottiyoor! The panchayat Kottiyoor was one of the 123 villages categorised as Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) in Kasturirangan Committee report on the Western Ghats.

The Dr K Kasturirangan-led '[High-Level Working Group on Western Ghats](#)' (HWGWG) as well as the previous report of '[Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel](#)' (WGEEP) led by Prof Madhav Gadgil, recommended reducing the mass-scale constructions, banning mining and the quarrying and promotion of eco-friendly agricultural activities in these zones. While the Gadgil committee considered the entire Western Ghats as Ecologically Sensitive Area and categorised into three zones with specific recommendations to pursue the activities in each zone, the Kasturirangan omitted almost 60 per cent areas from the ESZs.

The comprehensive analysis by the Gadgil and Kasturirangan committees had revealed the vulnerability of the ecosystem in the Western Ghats. The widespread landslide and majority of the deaths in Kerala this year reported from the hilly areas of the Western Ghats and most of them are under ESZ categories as put in both reports.

More
than
50
per
cent



Report of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel

(approx 20,000 sq km) of the total land area of Kerala are the Western Ghats and the existence of the

ghats is necessary for the Indian peninsula since it helps the ecological balance of entire South India. It plays the role of a wall and determines the climate of the western coast of southern India including Kerala. Historically, the ghats receive heavy rainfalls - as high as 500 cm - and the thick vegetation and soil preserve the water. The excess water would flow through the natural streams, which eventually form rivers, which is known as hydrological pathways. Almost all major rivers in South India (and all 44 rivers in Kerala) originate from the ghats.

Land occupation and side effects

The original residents in the Western Ghats area were tribals. In the second half of the 19th century, the British planters occupied a very large area for cultivating cash crops like tea, coffee, and spices. The British government also tried to protect the forest by implementing reserve forest policy.

Later, people migrated to high-range areas in the Western Ghats, especially Wayanad, Idukki and eastern parts of northern districts from other parts of the state during the popular Malabar Migrations. These people cleared a wide area of forest land for agriculture and plantations. The big players also started occupying the lands in the area for big plantations and the boom in tourism led to the popping up of resorts and other related industries. A study by biodiversity board reveals that there is over 1,500 per cent increase in the population in these areas in last 80 years.

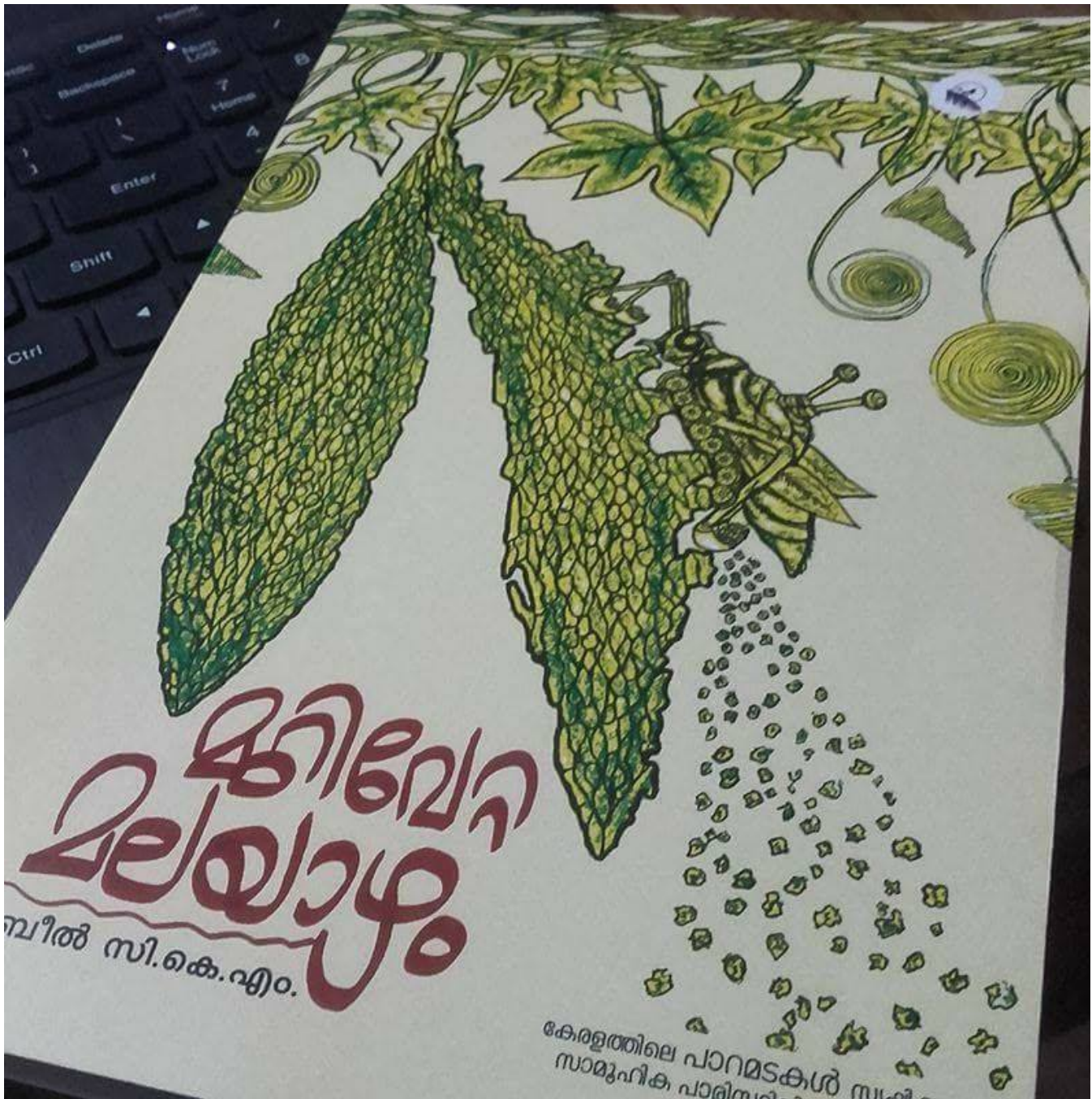
Worst are the mining and quarrying on the west-face slope of the Western Ghats. The granite rich hills quickly turned to quarries without proper clearance from authorities. The hills become bald as trees were cleared for constructions, mining and quarrying, and plantations. According to an [Indian Institute of Science \(IISc\) study](#) titled 'Four decades of forest loss: Drought in Kerala', the state lost 906,440 hectares forest land between 1973 and 2016.

On the other hand, the government has no data regarding the total number of the quarries in the state, despite having the compulsory clearance from nine state departments. However, a recent study by researchers T V Sajeer and Alex C J mapped a total of 5,924 granite quarries spread across 7157.6 hectares in 13 districts.

Apart from blocking the natural streams of the water the soil erosion due to deforestation and other activities also damaged the ecosystem in the ghats. During the monsoons for last few decades, eastern Kerala witnessed landslides almost all slope areas in the Western Ghats, which was unheard in earlier times. A [research on the landslide on the west-face side of the Western Ghats](#) by Sekhar L Kuriakose, G Sankar and C Muraleedharan states that early reports and documents show "a reduced rate of slope instability in the past."

The incessant rains in this monsoon season badly hit the fragile high range in the Western Ghats which eventually led to widespread landslides and flash floods and caused the highest casualties in the death toll. Initial reports from environmentalists in Kerala prove that almost all quarry-concentrated areas had witnessed landslides this time.

Nabeel C K M, researcher and author of a book on quarries in the Western Ghats, said the rampant



'Murivetta Malayazham'
book by Nabeel CKM

mining of granite stone highly contributed to calamities. For example, he points out "the Chaliyar river in Malappuram district has no dams, but this time this river overflowed due to the landslides and water gush from the hills in the catchment areas. There is a rampant quarrying happening on the hills near the Chaliyar river and most of them are illegal."

Nabeel alleged that the current LDF government in Kerala diluted two laws regarding the stone quarries to help the Vizhinjam Project. "The government bypassed the existing law by reducing the distance between human settlement and quarry to 100 metres from 200 metres and also permitted to start quarries in the plantations, which ultimately help Vizhinjam Project, that need 700 cores of huge rocks for the construction of seaport," said Nabeel.

"The reason for environmentalists accusing quarries led to the widespread landslide is Kasaragod district, where no landslide has been reported so far. Because, there is no rampant quarrying going on the district," he added.

Western Ghats protection attempts

The year-long demands of environmentalists forced the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) to set up a committee to study and analysis to seek possibilities to protect the biodiversity of Western Ghats.

Prof Madhav Gadgil from Indian Institute of Science (IISc) Bangalore was the chairman of the committee formed in March 2010. The committee, in its report submitted in August 2011, recommended 'indefinite moratorium' on environmental clearance for constructions including power projects, dams, roads etc, mining and quarrying in the ESZ 1 and partial ban or phase out in the ESZ 2 and regulated activities in ESZ 3. The committee also recommended compulsory consent of local village committees for any developmental activities in the area termed under ESZ.

After the resentment from state governments and people residing in the ESZs, the MoEF formed a [High-level Working Group](#) under the chairmanship of Dr Kasturirangan, a retired scientist from ISRO in August 2012 and submitted the report in April 2013. The committee divided the areas into two - Natural Landscape, consisting of forests and protected areas, and Cultural Landscape consisting of human settlements, agricultural lands and plantations in the Western Ghats. The report recommended reducing the human intervention in Natural Landscape.

Green hills in the Western Ghats

Futile recommendations

Both recommendations faced fierce opposition from people in Kerala. Apart from some, all the political leaders protested against the implementation of Kasturirangan committee recommendations and the government led by Oommen Chandy set up a three-member committee to study the implementations of the High-level Working Group report in the state under the chairmanship Oommen V Oommen of Kerala Biodiversity Board.

The committee also recommended several suggestions to the government. They considered the people in the area and most of the recommendations are just dilution of that of Gadgil and Kasturirangan committees. But the governments -- Oommen Chandy-led UDF and the subsequent Pinarayi Vijayan led-LDF hardly done anything to implement the recommendations of these committees.

[Dr Madhav Gadgil told DH](#) that Kerala and Kodagu floods are man-made because of the ignorant attitude of the governments.

“Due to pressure from various quarters the reports were put on the backburner. The rain is historical and unprecedented. Development should not just be real estate. Development has many aspects - clean

water, clean air and health. This is being ignored not just here (Karnataka and Kerala) and Uttarakhand, but all over the country.”



-- Prof Madhav Gadgil

Dr K Kasturirangan said very good laws exist, but are not strictly followed.

Shrinking Wetlands

The vast wetlands and backwaters in the plains and lower areas of Kerala had been the storage of the water and it also helped to spread the flood water. But the area of wetlands and backwaters see a dramatic decline. The data shows, the area of the wetlands in 2007 was 7,66,066 hectares and now it is only 1,65,486 hectares. The backwater area has seen a drop of 7-time in the same period. This describes the dangerous situation in Kerala which has only 38,863 km² total area.

Whenever there are rains, the water has no place spread as the natural lands - wetlands and backwaters - have been converted to roads, concrete buildings for residential and commercial purposes.

Could Kerala have avoided the inevitable catastrophe if the recommendations had implemented?

No. What Kerala is witnessing now could not be avoidable as the rate of exploitation of nature has been very high. The fruitiness of the recommendations will take time to see on the ground. As the committees recommended, considering the futile nature of the land, the government has to take concrete steps to preserve one of the eight hottest bio-diversity spots with local participation.

Western Ghats

Kerala floods

madhav gadgil



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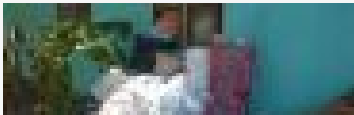
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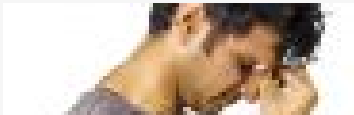
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