

Over 21 lakh trees to face the axe



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Rapacious projects imperil Western Ghats ecosystem

Home to fragile ecosystem with lakhs of floral and faunal species, the Western Ghats in Karnataka is hailed as one of the world's key biodiversity hotspots. Spread across six states, the majestic mountain range is at the centre of Peninsular India's food and water security as the hills spanning 1,60,000 square km form the catchment area for several rivers that cater to about 40% of the country. But the delicate ecosystem today stands on the precipice of destruction as various linear projects are lined up for final approval from the state and central governments.

The projects, if given clearance, would unleash an ecological mayhem on the lines of Kerala and Kodagu, severely affecting the people of all riparian states. The dense vegetation in the region is attributed to bounteous monsoon in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu as they add a significant quantity of moisture to the southwestern winds. However, putting at stake thousands of acres of pristine forests, the governments at both the state and the centre have not only been toying with the idea of development but also contemplating to cut through the dense vegetation terrain with several road projects.

of more than 21 lakh trees in the region.

T V Ramachandra of Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru says that the government through its projects would kill one of the most sensitive ecological regions of the world. “It is nothing but a perilous thought which will end in the destruction of Western Ghats. These projects would not only disturb the ecological fragility of these mountains but also affect the water and food security of the vast geographical area,” Ramachandra opines.

A study by the researchers of IISc on estimating the carrying capacity of these mountain regions across Uttara Kannada, Shivamogga and other districts has revealed a rise in the mean temperature and gradual reduction in the annual precipitation. Another research by the IISc team points that in the entire Sharavathi basin that spans Uttara Kannada and Shivamogga, the loss of vegetation resulted in the reduction of rainfall by 100 to 200 mm while triggering the mercury levels to rise by at least one to two degree centigrade during the peak rain months of June-July.

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Hanging in balance

1

Hubballi-Ankola Railway Line

Distance 163 km - Passes through two protected areas: tiger reserve, elephant corridor

2

Doubling of Tinai Ghat-Castle Rock Railway Line

Total distance between Goa and Londa is 97 km (80 km in Goa and 17 Km in Karnataka) Estimated cost of project Rs 1,198 crore. Trees to be cut between Alnavar-Tinai Ghat - **15,890**.

3

Widening of Sirsi-Kumta State Highway

Total distance - 50 km; **15,072 trees** to be cut for the widening and trees on 71.42 ha will be 'trimmed' to allow street lights. Proposal to upgrade six other state highways to NH under the Sagar Mala project.

4

Widening of National Highway 4A Phase two: 50 km stretch between Khanapur and Goa border, passes through elephant corridor; **22,622 trees to be cut.**

**Evergreen forests in Uttara Kannada s
34.63% in 1973 to 5.22% in 2013**

■ Rehabilitation projects are undertaken inside the West

- The district has seen several protests against development. If they succeeded in preventing some projects, the government has not done so in most of the cases.
- **New projects are either not participatory or have poor implementation.**
- Environmentalists claim that the government is misusing the forest land to benefit rich and influential people, while the tribal people are being pushed to the margins.

Dinesh Holla, convenor of Sahyadri Sanchaya, a group working towards conservation of Western Ghats, has observed that in recent times grass along the mountains has begun to turn yellowish in October itself which otherwise would be a general phenomenon in January-February. “These grasslands will help retain the water which will be later fed into the rivulets and small streams through the Shola forest. But with the loss of moisture, the water inflow into several streams that form the tributary of major rivers like Nethravathi and Kumaradhara is reducing with every passing day,” he explains.

Ramachandra further cautions, “Nature has been consistent in warning the humankind over rapacious development at the cost of forest and wildlife. While all of us are aware of what happened in Kodagu and Kerala, the same had happened during 2009-10 in Karwar. But we fail to notice and learn. Wherever the linear projects have come up, the detailed research by experts has revealed that streams in the vicinity have become seasonal and despite heavy rainfall this year, they are bone-dry as early as in November. The barren landscape has to be blamed for this. These perennial rivers have been the source of water and food in these two states.”

Of the seven districts in Karnataka that form a part of the Western Ghats, the degradation of forest is highest in Kodagu and Shivamogga followed by Dakshina Kannada and Uttara Kannada. Most of the linear projects, especially the roads, have been routed through Shivamogga.

To pave way for development, vegetation in the highest rainfall areas like Agumbe shall be axed for the project. Widening of NH 169 from Shivamogga to Mangaluru passing through vegetation-rich Koppa and Karkala will see axing of about 1,500 trees. Project to lift water

quench the thirst of Bengaluru would also result in the cutting of one lakh trees. Similarly, the railway line between Talaguppa and Honnavar would result in cutting of more than two lakh trees. Widening of the road between Sagar and Kollur passing through Sharavathi Valley and Kollur Mookambika Wildlife Sanctuary will bring down about one lakh trees.

The region is the last surviving habitat for the endangered lion-tailed macaque and cutting of trees would only further reduce the number of these primates. Even more controversial is the widening of Shivamogga-Honnarva National Highway which proposes to cut over two lakh trees.

A similar proposal of laying a new road between Byrapura and Shishila has left the people of Chikkamagaluru and Dakshina Kannada agitated. "When you have three major National Highways connecting the coasts with the hinterland, where is the need for another road? By contemplating the road through evergreen forests, the government is only playing to the demands of powerful contractors' lobby as they will be the only beneficiaries. The government has already completed alignment survey in the region and waiting to award contract for the preparation of detailed project report. The road will require axing of more

Kodagu

| PROJECTS | NO OF TREES |
|--|-----------------|
| NH from Somwarpet to Manantawadi (proposed) | 1,50,000 |
| Mysuru to Thalassery Railway Line (proposed) | 1,50,000 |
| Mysuru-Virajpet-Kannur SH to NH upgradation (proposed) | 30,000 |
| Mysuru-Kushalanagar-Madikeri-Mangaluru Railway Line (proposed) | 45,000 |
| Madikeri-Kadamakal- Subramanya Road (proposed) | 28,000 |
| 400 KV HT Power Line from Mysuru to Kozhikode (complete) | 54,000 |
| Total number of trees cut/to be cut | 4,57,000 |

Shivamogga

| | |
|--|------------------|
| Lifting of water from Linganamakki to Bengaluru (proposed) | 2,00,000 |
| Talaguppa-Honnarva Railway Line (proposed) | 2,00,000 |
| Sagar-Kollur NH via Sharavathi and Kollur Mookambika sanctuaries | 3,00,000 |
| Upgradation of Shivamogga-Honnarva Road (proposed) | 2,00,000 |
| Upgradation of Shikaripura-Byndoor NH 766 C2 (proposed) | 2,00,000 |
| Four-lane NH between Thirthahalli and Malpe via Someshwara Sanctuary and Agumbe (proposed) | 1,00,000 |
| Widening of NH 169 between Shivamogga and Mangaluru (under progress) | 1,000 |
| Conversion of Jog Falls into all-season Falls (under progress) | 5,000 |
| Total number of trees cut/to be cut | 12,06,000 |

Uttara Kannada

| | |
|--|-----------------|
| Rail link between Karnataka & Goa via Dandeli Sanctuary (proposed) | 1,000 |
| Expansion of Kaiga Plant and transmission lines (proposed) | 1,00,000 |
| Rail link between Hubballi-Ankola (proposed) | 1,78,325 |
| Widening of State Highway between Sirsi-Kumta (proposed) | 15,072 |
| Total number of trees to be cut | 2,94,327 |
| Setting up of 2000 MW underground power generation unit in Sharavathi Sanctuary - Diversion of 150 acres of dense evergreen forest area | |

Chikkamagaluru

| | |
|---|---------------|
| Building 4 lane NH between Shishila-Byrapura (under progress) | 50,000 |
| Tunga Lift Irrigation Project (under progress) | 24,000 |
| Total number trees to be cut | 74,000 |

activist and campaigner from Chikmagalur.

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Kali River (Photo credit: Dr B L Sowjanya)

Recovering from the worst catastrophe in recent times, Kodagu seems to have woken up to the cause and a steady dissent is fast brewing against the unscientific development. Having lost about 50,000 trees for laying of transmission line between Mysuru and Kozhikode a few years ago, Kodagu will soon have four highways. “A few days after the landslides that displaced 1,400 people in Kodagu, the government has proposed to build four highways on a terrain that is susceptible to further landslides. Areas prone to landslides need more trees to hold the soil tight. In a few years, the temperature will increase and the area would reel under severe shortage of water,” says Col (Rtd) Sundar Muthanna, president of Coorg Wildlife Society in Madikeri.

The IISc studies in the Cauvery basin across Kodagu revealed that the district had 50 per cent of its geographical area under dense evergreen forest four decades ago. But today, the same has been reduced to a mere 17%.

In fact, a group of people from Malnad districts petitioned the state government following a large scale destruction in Kodagu. Listing various projects that are in the pipeline along the Western Ghats, the petitioners informed the Chief Minister that a whopping 21,69,500 trees will be cut for these projects in the next four to five years and demanded that a sustainable solution needs to be evolved to tackle floods, landslides and drought incidents in the Malnad region.

Ramachandra says, “The rivers that drain Karnataka have their origin in the Western Ghats region. If the government is committed to ensure availability of potable water to the entire state, then it must immediately stop these projects. Development needs to happen but not

measures or if needed, drop the project permanently to keep the region recognised as sensitive by experts like Madhav Gadgil and K Kasturirangan intact.”



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