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**INDIA NEWS**

Failure to Stop Degradation of Western Ghats Worsened Kerala Floods

By Vishwa Mohan | TNN · 27 August 2018 · TWC India



The Western Ghats (Pixabay)

More than four years and three draft notifications since March 2014 when the Centre recognised the need to prevent further degradation of the fragile ecology of Western Ghats, it has failed to bring six states on board for urgent action.

As a result, 56,825 sq km of 'ecologically sensitive' area could not be earmarked as 'no go' zone for polluting activities and deforestation — a prerequisite to save the region from constant environmental degradation.

Earmarking Kerala's 9,993 sq km as Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA) four years ago may not have saved the state from excessive rainfall but the delay is certainly making the state, along with five others in the Western Ghats, more vulnerable.

Since the demarcated areas remain on paper despite the draft being notified thrice in the past four years, continued deforestation in the fragile zone has left the entire stretch of 1,500 km running through the six states prone to landslides and floods even in a situation of 'above normal' rainfall during a short period of time.

"High rainfall needs vegetated hills to break the rain's energy and clear drainage lines (stream and rivers) to safely take the silt and water to the seas. Over time, denudation of hills, raising of dams, diversion of drainage lines and occupation of floodplains created a recipe for what has been witnessed," environmentalist Manoj Misra said.

"Unless 'business as usual' is reversed, Kerala 2018 is not the last that the nation has seen," Misra, convener of Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan, said while noting that destruction of 'ecologically sensitive' area in Kerala was one of the reasons for the devastation it witnessed this month.

Every time the environment ministry notified the ESA draft, as recommended by a high level working group (HLWG) headed by space scientist K Kasturirangan, it asked the Western Ghats states — Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala — to submit their views or objections.

The process, however, has already seen a four-year delay. It has got entangled in states' objections — mainly from Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. "As a result, large-scale deforestation, mining and construction are continuing unabated, hurting the ecology of Western Ghats. Such harmful practices will increase the intensity of disaster. This flood (in Kerala) would have happened in any case. The destruction of Western Ghats made its impact worse," said Chandra Bhushan, climate change expert at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE).

The HLWG had submitted its recommendations on earmarking ESA in April 2013 after examining details of an earlier report by ecologist Madhav Gadgil. Both reports had flagged need to earmark ESA to prevent deforestation in Western Ghats.

The ministry wants the states to speed up the process. It told Parliament last month that "finalisation of draft notification is subject to the final views of state governments".

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