



Weather
Max: 35.9°C
Min: 23.8°C



In Bangalore
Partially cloudy



Greens question Karnataka govt's opposition to heritage tag for W. Ghats

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The Karnataka government's opposition to Unesco's heritage tag for the Western Ghats is being strongly criticised by greens and environmental scientists as illogical and another example of the BJP administration's ignorance about global issues.



The greens have also trashed state Forest Minister C.P. Yogeshwar's claims that the heritage tag will prevent development and spur Maoist activities.

The Western Ghats are a 1,600-km-long mountain range spread over a 140,000 sq km area in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. About 60

percent of the Ghats lie in Karnataka. The Western Ghats are home to rare plants and various birds and animal species but are "threatened by a number of developmental activities such as roads, railways, dams, etc", says an experts group set up by the central environment ministry.

"The move by the Karnataka government is not only illogical but it has no basis for the allegation that it will lead to more Naxal (Maoist) activities," Panduranga Hegde, a leading environmentalist in Karnataka, told IANS.

T.V. Ramachandra, professor at the Indian Institute of Science and member of the Western Ghats Task Force set up by the Karnataka government, feels that those opposing the tag have not understood what it means.

"It appears that irrespective of political affiliations, all politicians are against the heritage tag and none of them have bothered to look up the concept," Ramachandra told IANS.

For Sanjay Gubbi, another prominent environmentalist, this declaration is neither an issue to celebrate nor a matter to worry about.

"It will be good to get it. However, there seems to be no major benefit by declaring the Western Ghats a World Heritage site except the fact that it may get some minimal recognition," Gubbi told IANS.

Praveen Bhargav, managing trustee of Wildlife First, an NGO active in the cause of conservation, is of the view that the state's decision to oppose the heritage tag was "unfortunate and betrays a total lack of vision and scientific temper".

"While the heritage tag itself is symbolic, it is nonetheless a recognition of the state's and the community's effort to conserve the Western Ghats," Bhargav told IANS.

Hegde noted that the opposition is mainly from a few elected representatives from Kodagu (a hilly district known for its coffee plantations and about 280 km from Bangalore) who have vested interests in plantations and mining rather than the interest of the local people or the environment.

"The government is bending backwards to their pressure which is unfortunate. It is nothing but an extension of the narrow ruling party views on global issues," he said.

"The government should know that there is no precedent in the heritage sites where people have been uprooted or development has come to a standstill," Hegde asserted.

Leo Saldanha of the Environment Support Group (ESG) told IANS that the forest minister's claim is desperate scaremongering to cover up what truly is a state policy of keeping these mountain ranges accessible to all sorts of destructive development.

Gubbi contended: "I do not think the tag can spur any Maoist activities in the region. Perhaps the forest minister has been given wrong information about this issue."

He noted that "Unesco cannot enact any law to restrict the activities of the people living in those areas. This declaration (of heritage tag) has no legal teeth to impose any restrictions on agriculture, livelihood or any other activity".

Saldanha said: "If the provisions of the Forest Rights Act and the district planning process envisioned in the constitutional 73rd and 74th amendments were meaningfully implemented, it is more than likely that the local communities would only propose such activities that are in sync with the ecological landscape."

"Naxalism (Maoist activities) spreads where democratic decision-making is not allowed to work, especially when communities are keen to take responsibility of their own lives, livelihoods and futures, or when the state suppresses this natural aspiration ruthlessly. All this is true wherever Naxalism is active in Karnataka," he said.

Ramachandra, who teaches at the Centre for Ecological Sciences of the Indian Institute of Science, said the political leaders "need to understand that to ensure their own survival (to get elected again) they have to ensure the sustenance of natural resources".

"Water and food security provided by the Western Ghats can only be sustained by appropriate conservation measures and not by short-sighted exploitation of the resources," he added.

Ramachandra said the Western Ghats Task Force would discuss the issue soon and attempt to convince the state government about the heritage tag for the Western Ghats.

Unesco recently accorded the heritage tag for 10 sites in Karnataka. They include the Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, the Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, the Talacauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, the Kudremukh National Park and the Someshwara Wildlife Sanctuary.

The 10 sites were among the 39 chosen for the tag by the central government in consultation with the states concerned. The others are in Kerala (19 sites), Tamil Nadu (six) and Maharashtra (four).