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## Hurdle to heritage tag for Western Ghats sites

Bangalore, June 14, DHNS:

**A proposal of the Centre to accord Unesco's world heritage status to 10 Western Ghats sites in Karnataka faces stiff opposition from the State government.**



A group of ministers (GoM) on Tuesday met here and decided to oppose the heritage tag to 10 select sites in the Western Ghats.

The GoM argues that the heritage status would not only hinder development but also prove to be detrimental to tourism prospects. The State government's decision comes at a time when the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests

(MoEF) is at work to hard sell the Western Ghats as heritage spots in Karnataka and adjoining parts of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala at the World Heritage Convention to be held in Paris from June 19 to 29.

A meeting held at Vidhana Soudha unanimously decided to oppose the Unesco heritage status. The meeting was attended by ministers C H Vijayashankar, S Suresh Kumar, V S Acharya, Krishna Palemar, MLAs Appacchu Ranjan and C T Ravi and Western Ghats Task Force Chairman Ananth Hegde Ashisar. Top officials of the Forest Department were also present.

The MoEF had entrusted the Wildlife Institute of India and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment, Bangalore, with the task of identifying the sites. Thirty-nine sites spread across the four states were listed by the two organisations in 2009. The MoEF has been waiting to take up the cause of the Ghats at the Paris conference.

A K Srivastava, Inspector General of Forests (Wildlife), MoEF, said Karnataka has already given its consent to the status.

He will be attending the Paris convention. To a question whether the state has an option to pull out at this juncture, the officer said: "If there are any apprehensions on the part of the State government, then the ministry will do its best to reassure it. Karnataka's apprehensions may be misplaced. Once we get the letter, the ministry will try to convince it that the legal status of the land will remain the same."

Addressing a press conference, Forest Minister Vijayashankar argued that the Ghats in the state did not deserve the status as it would hinder development.

"Once the status is granted, the state government will have to seek Unesco's permission even if a small project is carried out. It will not be given any financial assistance by Unesco either. On the contrary, the status will only be a hindrance," Vijayashankar said.

The minister said even without the status the Western Ghats' importance is well known. State and Central forest laws are adequate to protect the Ghats. He said the government is not yielding to any pressure and that it was a collective decision taken by the ministers.

This is the first time the Western Ghats will come up for consideration by Unesco. The last time India received the recognition was in 2006 when the Valley of Flowers National Park in the Western Himalayas was given the heritage tag.

However, Srivastava said the rights of the local people will neither be infringed upon nor the State government requires the permission of Unesco to carry out developmental work.

Law Minister Suresh Kumar said: "Even forest department officials are not in favour the heritage tag. Tourism can grow without the tag."