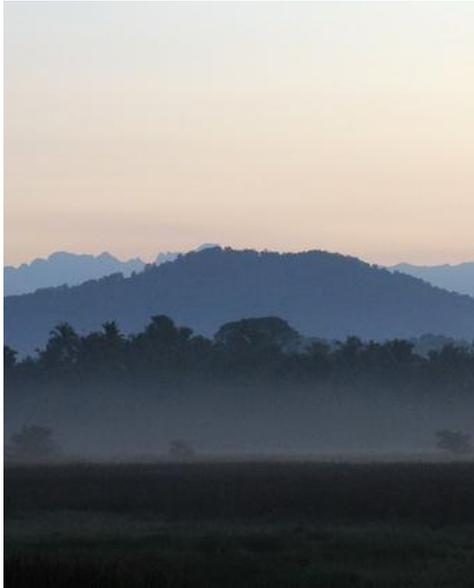


[News](#) » [National](#)

Published: October 15, 2013 23:28 IST | Updated: October 16, 2013 08:40 IST

A third of Western Ghats to get protective cover

Nitin Sethi



The Western Ghats provides the perfect backdrop as the morning mist lifts to reveal the sprawling fields at Vellayani in Thiruvananthapuram. File photo: S.Gopakumar

The area will turn into a 'no-go zone' for mining and thermal power plants

The Environment Ministry has decided to turn approximately 60,000 square kilometres of the Western Ghats across six States into an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), banning mining, quarrying, thermal power plants and polluting industries over the entire range. All other projects would be allowed only with the prior consent of gram sabhas (village councils) in the zone.

The decision has been taken by the Environment and Forests Minister Jayanthi Natarajan as a follow-up on the two reports on the Ghats, one headed by ecologist Madhav Gadgil and the other by Planning Commission member K. Kasturirangan. The decision, once formally notified, would make the identified region of the Western Ghats complex the largest protected forests in India ranging over 1,500 km linear distance from the Tapti river in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. Going with the recommendations of the high-level panel that was headed by Mr. Kasturirangan, the Ministry has decided to declare the ESA over 37% of the Western Ghats under the Environment Protection Act, 1986.

The Ministry has drafted the notification and it will be put out soon for comments. Ms. Natarajan has approved the use of three criteria that the panel had recommended — biodiversity richness, fragmentation of forests and human population density to demarcate these forest patches that would turn into a no-go zone for mining, thermal power plants and other dirty industries.

The type of industries banned would be those included in the 'red list' issued by the government under the Environment Protection Act. These are usually considered to be the most polluting of the lot. Going against the recommendation of the Environment Secretary, the Minister retained the criteria to leave areas with high-density of population out of this regulated zone's ambit. The panel had recommended that the hill tracts with high population densities be kept out of the ESA ambit. The report had said, "Close to 60 per cent of the Western Ghats region is under cultural landscape — human dominated land use of settlements, agriculture and plantations." It had advised against using the legal force that the ESA would provide to alter the economic practices in these areas, instead suggesting economic and other tools to incentivise more ecologically sustainable activities.

Within the ESA prior consent from the gram sabhas and strict adherence to the Forest Rights Act would be made mandatory for any of the projects that are not on the negative list. This too would be done after studying cumulative impacts of the projects in the region.

Townships and buildings over 20,000 square metres in the region too would not be allowed once the draft notification is published. But those already in the pipeline in different States would be allowed to go ahead. Applications for such townships would not be entertained in future.

Windmills

The Ministry has decided to not go with the recommendations of the high-level panel in the case of windmills. Construction of windmills would be permitted in the ecologically sensitive area though environment regulations to review their impact may be brought in through other legal routes available to the government.

Hydro-electric projects would be permitted in the ESA but with a new set of strict regulations that the Kasturirangan-led panel has recommended, including those on maintaining ecological flows in the rivers.

The decisions on two specific hydro-electric projects that had been talked of by both the committees, the 163-MW Athirappilly in Kerala and 400-MW Gundya in Karnataka are not likely to be included in the ESA notification. Instead, the government is likely to ask the two States to send separate comments on the two cases before it takes a call.

The moratorium on mining in most parts of the two districts of Maharashtra — Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri — could soon be removed with the panel finding most of the area of the two districts falling outside the demarcated forest zone which is to be declared as the ESA.

Keywords: [Union Environment Ministry](#), [Western Ghats](#), [environment protection](#), [Ecologically Sensitive Area](#), [projects clearance](#), [gram sabhas consent](#), [forest zones](#), [demarcated forest zone](#), [Environment Protection Act](#)

Printable version | Apr 15, 2014 4:24:02 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/a-third-of-western-ghats-to-get-protective-cover/article5237835.ece>

© The Hindu