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tower of Peninsular India". It is one of the global 'hotspots' of biodiversity.

It consists of a wide variety of forest types such as tropical wet evergreen, montane stunted evergreen (shola), moist deciduous, dry deciduous and dry thorn forests, and grasslands.

Some of these are critical habitats for plants and animals. The Western Ghats is also critical for as many as 58 major Indian rivers that originate from it, including Godavari, Krishna, Cauvery, Kali, Bedthi, and Sharavati.

The Western Ghats landscape is dominated by forests. The total area under the Western Ghats is about 1,29,037 sq. km, out of which about 87,307 sq. km is under forests.

According to the Forest Survey of India, area under forests in the Western Ghats is increasing marginally in recent years. But this includes increase in area under plantations such as coffee, coconut, areca, cashew, cocoa and mango which are included in the definition of forests.

A study in the southern region, comprising the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, showed that between the period 1920 and 1990, about 40 per cent of the original vegetation cover was lost or converted to another form of land use.

According to a study based on remote sensing data, the loss of forest cover between 1973 and 1995 in the southern part of the Western Ghats is estimated to be 25.6 per cent.

An analysis of the area under forests in the states and districts of the Western Ghats region between 2003 to 2013 shows a decline of 670 sq. km in Goa, while about 2 sq. km of dense forest and 1,621 sq. km of moderately dense forests were lost in Karnataka. Even during 2013, an area of about 8,979 ha was diverted for non-forestry purposes in Karnataka alone.

Encroachment of forests is increasing in the Western Ghats and according to the Forest Department, there are 92,232 cases involving about 65,000 ha of forest land. In addition to loss or conversion of forests legally or through encroachment, the forests are also subjected to various stresses and pressures leading to degradation.

Livestock grazing leads to loss of regeneration in forests and population density of livestock is very high. For example it is 445 per sq. km in Belagavi, 203 in Shivamogga and 182 in Chikkamagaluru.

Invasive species such as Lantana, Eupatorium, Parthenium, Mikania (American Rope or Chinese Creeper) and Chromolaena (Devil weed) seem to be taking over many parts of the Western Ghats, due to canopy opening, fire and degradation, suppressing natural regeneration and biodiversity.

The Western Ghats is also home to about 50 million people belonging to the six states of the country. The local communities depend on forests for a whole range of products and services. Extraction of green timber, though banned, continues. Over extraction of non-timber forest products such as fuelwood, fruit, flowers, gum and bamboo have led to degradation of forests.

Afforestation in the Western Ghats is dominated by exotics and monocultures of Australian Acacia (Wattle), Eucalyptus and Silver Oak, contributing to loss of regeneration of native vegetation. Demand for land for expansion of plantation crops such as coffee, tea, cocoa, cashew, rubber, coconut, arecanut, etc. has led to loss of forest lands.

Forest fire incidence, induced by humans, is increasing both in protected areas and outside, leading to degradation of forests, threatening biodiversity, including wildlife. Increasing human-wildlife conflicts involving elephant, leopard, bear, gaur etc, are turning local communities in the conflict area against wildlife.

Impact of climate change

Rainfall analysis for the region shows a decline in the recent decades and further



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decline is projected, under climate change. According to modelling studies by the Indian Institute of Science, forests in many districts of the Western Ghats are projected to be impacted by climate change even by 2030s, leading to forest die-back and irreversible loss of biodiversity.

Threats to the Western Ghats forests and biodiversity are projected to increase from firstly, demand for forest land for expansion of power projects, infrastructure, mining, manufacturing industries, plantation crops, agriculture and settlements and secondly, from growing demand and non-sustainable extraction of timber, fuelwood, fruit etc.

The state government, the Forest Department, NGOs, people's representatives and local communities seem to have strong views on the issue of "UNESCO Heritage" status, the recommendation of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel and High Level Working Group on Western Ghats.

The state government is in the process of formulating its formal response to the Centre. In this context, it is important for all the stakeholders to seriously consider the current status of Western Ghats, the threats and pressures on forests, biodiversity and ecosystem services, and addresses the drivers of forest degradation and loss.

There is a need to take a holistic view of threats and demands on the forest land, products and services of the Western Ghats and devise strategies to address these threats, including climate change. What is needed as advocated by the Western Ghats

Ecology Expert Panel "is a model of conservation and development compatible with each other encompassing the whole of the Western Ghats region, to replace the prevailing, develop recklessly – conserve thoughtlessly pattern with one of, develop sustainably – conserve thoughtfully".

(The writers are with the Indian Institute of Science -Bangalore)

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