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# Activists denounce Western Ghats decision

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**P**UNE: Outraged with the drastic reduction in the eco-sensitive area (ESA) in the Western Ghats in Maharashtra suggested by the state government, environmental activists said here on Friday that the move would have adverse long-term consequences for the region.

The ministry of environment forests and climate change had issued a draft notification on September 4 declaring the ESA in five states, including 17,340 sq km in Maharashtra. However, the state government has proposed merely 6,719 sq km to be declared as part of the ESA in its report submitted to the ministry on September 8.

"This was our biggest fear. The notification was based on the K Kasturirangan committee recommendations, which had marked out only 37% of the total area as ESA. Now they are further reducing it. When we saw the manner in which the consultation process was carried out at the village level, we had feared this. It shows that the process of issuing the draft declaration was a farce," said Sali Palande Datar, a member of Kalpavriksh.

Datar said that with such a small ESA, it may not be possible to conserve the whole landscape and instead there will be further fragmentation of the natural habitat, which is already deteriorating under the pressures of development.

Renowned ecologist Madhav Gadgil, who had headed the first panel on the Western Ghats, also cited the fragmentation of the landscape as a key concern. "Taking these decisions with such little foresight will have serious environmental consequences," Gadgil said.

By failing to restrict mining and highly polluting industries, local politicians and administration are only looking at the short-term benefits, not at the long-term impact these decision can have. The future looks bleak, said Kolhapur-based botanist and environmental activist Madhukar Bachulkar.

"Here in Kolhapur and nearby Sangli and Satara, we saw for ourselves how the villagers were turned against the ESA. Politicians and even officials from the administration completely misguided the villagers," Bachulkar said.

Swati Gole, founder member of the Ecological Society, pointed out that the conservation of the Western Ghats was important not just for the preservation of local biodiversity, but also from an economic point of view. "The sources of important rivers, including Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri, are in the Western Ghats. If these sources are not protected then the entire river basin would be affected. As it is, we are reeling under the effects of drought this year. In the coming years, climate change would only worsen the situation," she said.

Yet another concern voiced by activists was the change in land-use patterns. "The biodiversity of the region is not just limited to the forest areas. Wildlife also relies on agricultural land nearby and would be affected by activities like mining. If certain regulations had been kept then the change in land use could have been prevented," Datar said.

But what irked the activists the most was the lack of transparency in the entire process. They pointed out that the report submitted by the Maharashtra government to the ministry has not been made public. "We don't know anything about the reasons they have given for this decision. There is no transparency at all," said Madhavi Rahirkar, city-based activist.

"If we are so much in the dark imagine the plight of the villagers who have been told so little about what has been going on," Datar added.