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Use existing laws to protect Western Ghats: Environmentalists

Samrat Phadnis, TNN | Jun 22, 2014, 12:37 AM IST

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KOLHAPUR: Environmentalists from the southern Maharashtra have demanded that the existing laws should be effectively used to protect the ecologically-sensitive Western Ghats.

They have also warned that the further deterioration of the forests in Western Ghats will lead to the unbearable climatic conditions in coming years.

The environmentalists spoke about a day ahead of Union minister of environment and forest Prakash

Kolhapur on Sunday. He is expected to conduct a meeting with local forest department officials.

The environment activists raised concerns about the toothless government machinery which, according to them, has failed to protect the eco-sensitive areas (ESA) from the rapid urbanization and uncontrolled industrialization. They demanded immediate action plan from the new minister to protect the region.

Most of the environmentalists favour the Gadgil committee report on Western Ghats. The Union government has accepted the Kasturirangan committee recommendations, overriding ecologist Madhavrao Gadgil's suggestion that the entire Western Ghats region be declared ecologically-sensitive area.

Veteran environmentalist Jay Samant said, "The biggest flaw in the Kasturirangan report is that it recommends marking of the already protected areas as eco-sensitive. Since 2013, we have been demanding

declaring the entire region as eco sensitive. The policy makers forget that the Union government had in 1960s provided special status to the region, with a provision for the Western Ghats Development Fund and Hilly Area Development Fund. These two financial resources exist in planning commission's five years plan since last four decades."

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He blamed the government machinery for failing to protect the Western Ghats. He said that effective implementation of the existing laws about water, air, hazardous wastes, forest and wildlife protection is missing, leading to deterioration of the environment and the eco-sensitive areas.

The experts pointed out that the Union or state governments have not come up with any mechanism for the implementation of the Kasturirangan report. "There are differences over the reports. But if the government has accepted the report, it should have identified implementation authorities. Where is the implementation system?" Western Ghats expert Madhukar Bachulkar.

He said that in Maharashtra, the forest department works and the state pollution control board seem to be working in opposing direction. If the state machinery is not changed, it will prove disastrous for the future.

Nana Khamkar, executive council member of the environmental NGO Creative Nature Friends, Karad suggests common regulatory bodies across the six states to utilize the Western Ghats Development Fund.

"I think we must have such bodies in the states, where eco-sensitive zones have been declared. An independent regulatory body could keep a watch over the implementation of norms in these areas. At present, the absence of guidelines and regulation is creating mess in the region," he said.

Ajit Patil, who has been working for the protection of forests in Konkan district, said that there has been rapid deterioration of the green cover in the Western Ghats. "I hardly see any control over tree cutting in the Konkan region, where forest exists on slopes of the Sahyadri ranges. The Gadgil committee suggested effective use of the existing laws, which can curb the forest degradation in Konkan slopes," he said.

State-wise eco-sensitive area

State Western Ghats Ecologically sensitive area (in sq km)

Gujarat 449

Maharashtra 17, 340

Goa 1, 461

Karnataka 20, 668

Tamil Nadu 6, 914

Kerala 9,993

Box II

ESA in Maharashtra

DistrictNumber of villages

Nagar42

Dhule5

Kolhapuri84

Nandurbar2

Nashik 153

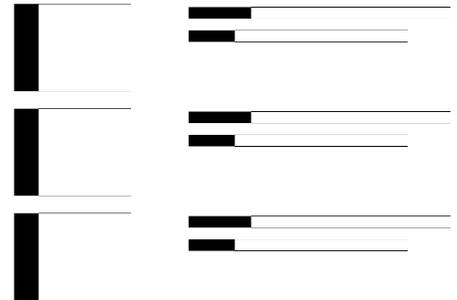
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Progress about the key recommendations made by Kasturirangan Report

Recommendation Implementation

Monitoring and enforcement by state government Nothing happened so far

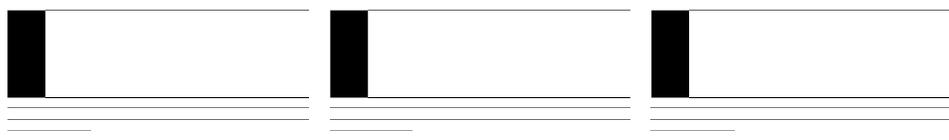
Strengthening of existing regulatory institutions Forest staff is already inadequate

Participation and involvement of local communities Establishment of Eco-Development committees is very slow

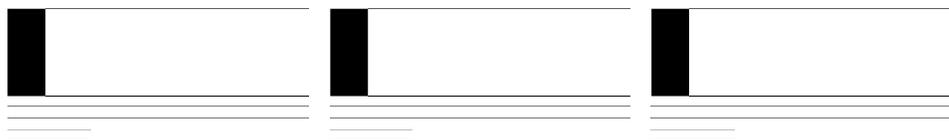
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