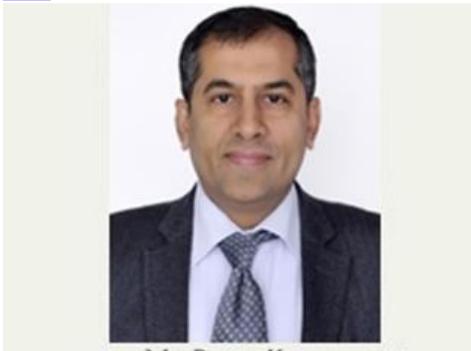


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## Why India must protect the Western Ghats from getting lost

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It could become a model for the e

The Kasturirangan report on the V between development and environ

Sadly, the union government has recommendations of the Kasturira

This is worrying, because India is

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This will cause not just the loss of species and the degradation of unique biodiversity hotspots — the Ghats for, instance, have shrunk by 25% over the past decades — but will also affect rainfall patterns, river flow, water supply and climate across large swathes of the country.

Already, in the devastation that Uttarakhand faced last June, we got a preview of the impact that reckless development can pose not just to the environment — which might seem like an abstract concern compared to profit margins and rising Sensex levels — but to human settlements, cities, residents and families. And yes, to local economies too.

The Kasturirangan panel has sought to balance those two concerns, watering down the environmental regulation regime proposed by the Western Ghats Ecology Experts Panel's Gadgil report in 2012, a year earlier.

What the Kasturirangan report proposed is a more realistic model — one that would not, by any means, protect all of the Western Ghats, or even all that is left unspoiled there, but that could mitigate some of the damage that unchecked development stands to cause.

It is a formula that could work, if the Environment ministry stands firm behind it.

The Kasturirangan report seeks to bring 37% of the Western Ghats under the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) zones — down from the 64% suggested by the Gadgil report. If enforced, this would protect thousands of endemic species.

It seeks to protect water sources that are critical to all of peninsular India, and green swathes that help control temperature and climate across southern India.

This area includes protected areas and UNESCO World Natural Heritage Sites, and excludes nearly all of the Ghats' inhabited areas. Most of these areas are already protected by nor

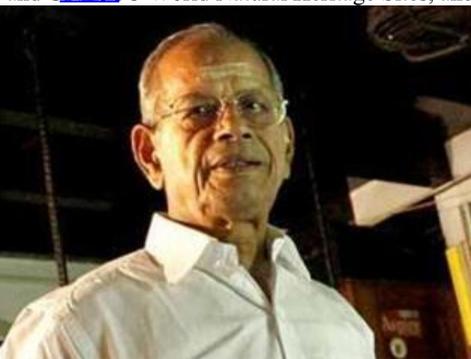
"There needs to be a healthy coex possible when we can discuss the

The report was met with howls of the people had begun to panic, the

In a crucial election year, the Cen

'Govts working with narrow, ve

Madhav Gadgil, a former member of the protection of the pristine ecos, done anything to protect one of the world's finest ecosystems. Excerpts from an interview with Chetan Chauhan.



member of the Madhav Gadgil panel. "But this will only be and scientific manner."

started by local leaders and politicians with vested interests. Once

and running out of time.

Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel and gave recommendations for support. Now he says he feels betrayed that the government has not

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**Why does India need to protect the Western Ghats?**

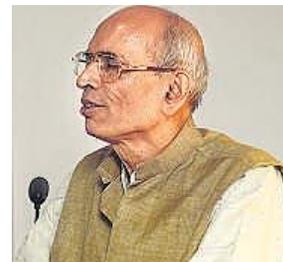
The Western Ghats are very important to peninsular India. They are home to the sources of major rivers like the Krishna and Godavari. Most of the plant and animal species found only in India are found in the Western Ghats. It has important horticultural and agricultural species and rich bio-diversity that helps in climate-proofing the region.

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**Why are governments not interested in protecting the Western Ghats?**

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I think all governments, state and Centre, are working with narrow vested interests. There is clear evidence that they are trying to protect the interest of builders, quarry and mine owners and that their decisions are being controlled by them. The governments have refused to be responsible to the people, who have a Constitutional right to decide what kind of environment they want to live in.



**The state governments say that**

No recommendation made by any framework of the Constitution. W

**Do you think the government is**

The government is not working for it is curbing the democratic rights of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert was not accepted by the governm



**will stall development in the region. What is your view on this?**

mental laws such as the Environment Protection Act, or the overall ed in the right spirit, and the view of local bodies heard.

**Backtracking in Karnataka, Ke**

Nachiappan, 46, a farmer in the Nilgiri biosphere, bought a 5-litre can of green paint last month, after hearing a rumour that all houses in the Ghats' eco-sensitive zones would have to [Aparna Reddy berlineske pinjition quirks omesh Mubhs of the Kastir](#) irangan report.

He is now planning to return the paint, after hearing that the report is not likely to be implemented anyway.

PHOTO BY GEO

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Not far away, another farmer, Muthuvel, sold three of his cows after hearing that forest officials would soon have to impose a ceiling on the number of grazing animals per household.

In reality, the report had recommended restrictions on quarrying, deforestation and large-scale cattle-grazing.

Still, leaders declared that it was a displace and victimise farmers.

Following an uproar from political community leaders ahead of a crucial year, Kerala chief minister Oommen the Congress party rushed to Delhi prime minister, soon after the report released, saying his government would if farmers were "victimised".



Soon after, union environment minister Veerappa Moily put on hold all plans to

**GHATS, EVEN PROVISIONS TO LIMIT ANY FURTHER INGRESS**  
**HAVE MET WITH VIOLENT OPPOSITION**

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implement the recommendations of the report

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"Come what may, we will not allow this," says Bishop Remigius, Indian archbishop of the embassy in Kerala, a state where the inhabited portions of the Western Ghats are populated mainly by Christians. "In the name of ecological terrorism, poor farmers cannot be thrown out of their homes."

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In Tamil Nadu, the Western Ghats People's Protection Forum has been among those leading protests. The Tamil Nadu government has also opposed the recommendations of the report, saying they intrude on the state's authority and right to determine ecological governance.

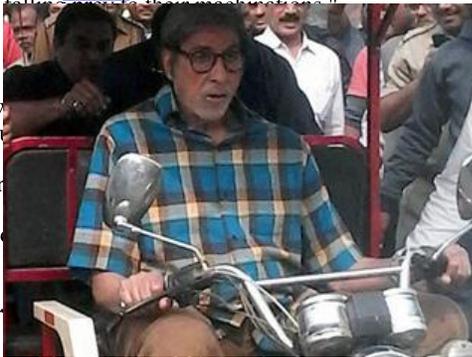
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For activists like N Badusha, who has been fighting to protect the Ghats for four decades, the campaign of misinformation and manipulation is troubling.

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"It is worrying that even the Kasturirangan report, which is a far milder version of the earlier Gadgil report, has provoked this outrage," he says. "Those with vested interests are spreading rumours of farmers being thrown out of their homes. In reality, the report sought to tackle, among other things, the more than 300 illegal mining units in the core areas of the Ghats, along Kerala-Karnataka border, and the land and wood mafias active here. Sadly, instead of taking them on, we are falling for their machinations."

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Meanwhile, for now, grazing and

ats; homes will continue to be built.

Some of these settlements are now see wild elephants curling their tr

few metres away, in areas such as Bandipur in Karnataka, you can on leaves and lion-tailed macaques at their quarrelsome best.

Meanwhile, with both panel report

ns for development here.

Up next: Hydro-electric power pro Ghats.

the Gundia river in Karnataka, both nestled within the Western

*By Ramesh Babu (With inputs fr*

### Fighting for status quo in Maharashtra, Goa and Gujarat

The implementation of the Kasturirangan report would mean large-scale destruction of forests for wind turbines and fancy hill stations in Maharashtra.

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But that's not a concern Maharashtra chief minister Prithviraj Chavan raised during his meeting with Veerappa Moily, soon after the latter took additional charge as union environment minister on December 1.

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Instead, Chavan opposed the recommendations of a ban on mining, quarrying, thermal power projects and red-category industries within sections of the Ghats. The recommendations had, in fact, caused an uproar within his government, with industries minister Narayan Rane threatening to bar all forest officers from entering his home district of Sindhudurg.

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"The Kasturirangan report tried to strike a balance between the wishes of the government, ministers and corporations, and yet even this report has caused a backlash," said an environmental scientist, requesting anonymity. "In Maharashtra, politicians who bought land to develop them as hill stations and have identified potential sites for tourism here are determined that the report be quashed," he added.

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In Maharashtra, the Ghats cover 55,345 sq km across 11 districts. In its recommendations, the Kasturirangan report suggested that 17,340 sq km be declared ecologically sensitive.



With the government intent on ma say further development will see t placing endangered species in fur

any cost, environmentalists across the country and

Environmentalists are also conce ore mining and an integral part of and the critically endangered tiger

arg taluka, a hotbed of iron-dangered Asiatic elephant

"Projects in these corridors will d environmental NGO Vanashakti.

man-animal conflict," says Stalin D, project director of

In Goa, an area of 1,461 sq km ha Manohar Parrikar government has stridently opposed.

ad to the closing of 38 mines — a recommendation that the BJP-led

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In Gujarat, home to just two protected areas in the northern tip of Western Ghats, with 449 sq km proposed as eco-sensitive areas, there have been no concerns raised by either the Narendra Modi government, the opposition or the environmentalists in that state.

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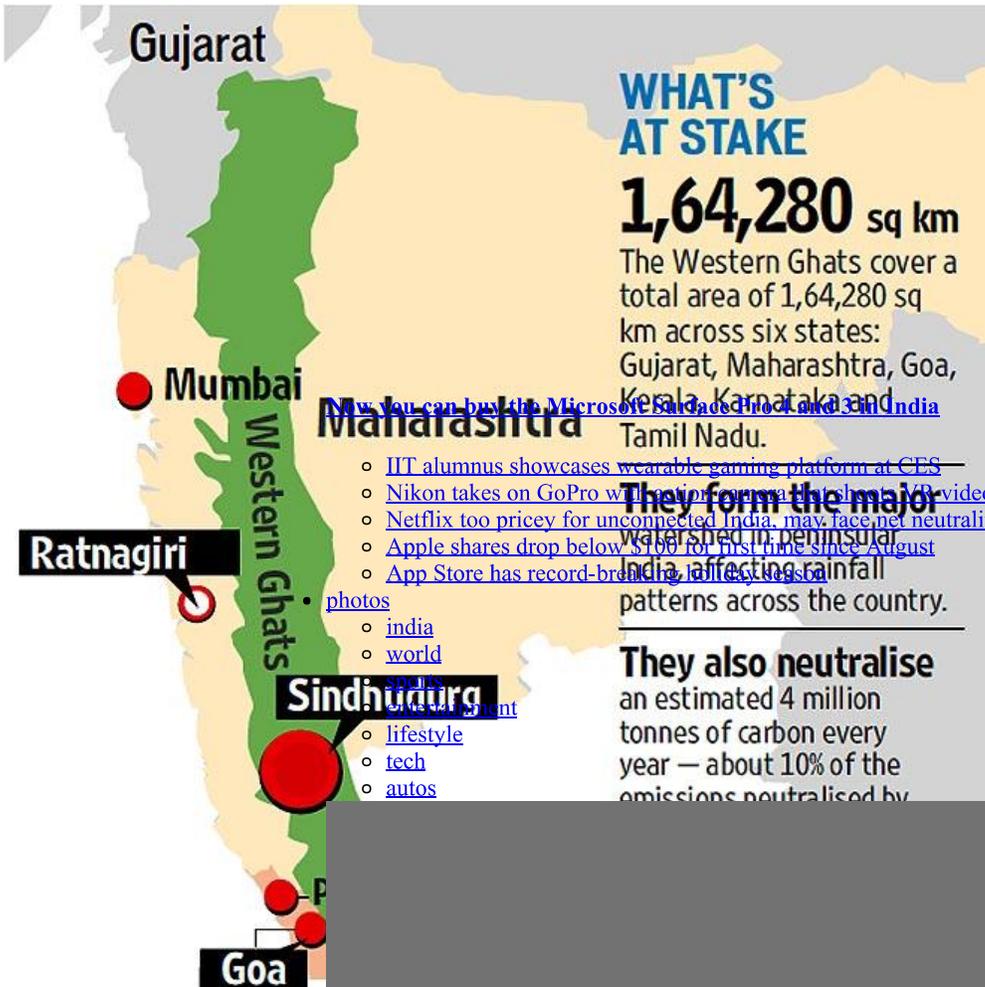
*By Snehal Rebello*

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■ A mining site within the Ghats in Goa. HT FILE PHOTOS





### WHAT'S AT STAKE

# 1,64,280 sq km

The Western Ghats cover a total area of 1,64,280 sq km across six states: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

**They form the major watershed in peninsular India, affecting rainfall patterns across the country.**

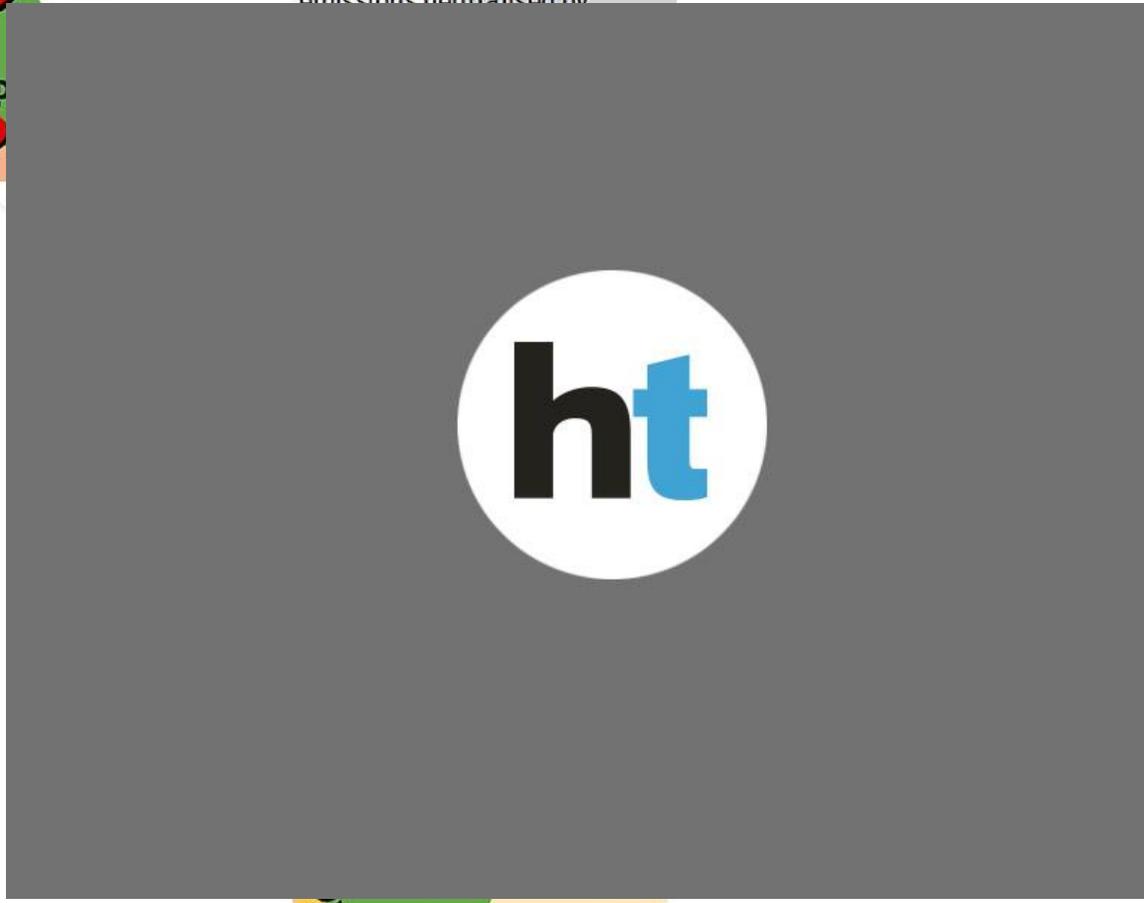
**They also neutralise an estimated 4 million tonnes of carbon every year — about 10% of the emissions neutralised by**

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