

Nikhil M Ghanekar | November 9, 2019





for what the government terms “essential development requirements of the state” according to the Maharashtra government proposal to the union environment ministry, accessed by **IndiaSpend** under the Right to Information Act.

The area of the Western Ghats in Maharashtra to be declared protected will reduce from 17,340 sq km to 15,359.40 sq km if the central environment ministry approves the proposal. Among the villages to be excluded are some where companies have been pulled up for pollution and for operating without environmental permissions. They are also home to the Indian gaur and form a crucial corridor used by tigers and elephants.

The Western Ghats, rich in biodiversity, are the source of several perennial rivers and crucial for the southwest monsoon in the entire Indian peninsula, home to nearly [245 million](#) people. It is also home to species of flora and fauna that are only found there.

The decision to tag areas as ESA is crucial as tagging, once approved by the central environment ministry, debars mining, quarrying, sand mining and polluting industries.

An October 4, 2018 draft [notification](#) on the Western Ghats issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) had proposed to declare 2,133 villages in Maharashtra as ESA--landscapes that have high biological richness, low fragmentation and low population density, and those that may comprise of protected areas, world heritage sites, and tiger and elephant corridors. However, the Maharashtra state government has proposed to classify only 2,092 villages as eco-sensitive, in the report accessed by **IndiaSpend** under the Right to Information Act.

The 388 excluded villages are not within the ESA boundary and some were omitted as they were mining villages or because designated industrial zones already existed in these villages, the state government has said in its proposal. Maharashtra has also proposed to add 347 villages to the ESA list that were previously not classified as ESA.

Once an area is marked as ESA, all existing mines need to be phased out within five years from the date of the final notification or on the expiry of the existing mining lease, whichever is earlier. All new ‘red’ category or highly polluting industries, and the expansion of any existing industries will be prohibited in areas marked ESA.

This Maharashtra government proposal is in line with previous decisions by various state and central governments approving projects in ecologically sensitive areas. Over 500 projects were cleared in India’s protected and eco-sensitive areas by the National Board of Wildlife over the four years of the Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance



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