

Western Ghats ESA: The Debate Over Protecting India's Biodiversity Hotspot

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Western Ghats ESA Latest News

- The Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) notification, currently valid until the end of July 2026, is once again in focus.
- Six state governments continue to resist finalisation of ESA boundaries, even as a fresh expert committee works toward a resolution.
- The debate captures a fundamental tension in Indian environmental governance — conservation versus development.

What Are the Western Ghats and Why Do They Matter

- The Western Ghats are a nearly unbroken **mountain chain** stretching 1,500 km along **India's western coast**.

- Second only to the Himalayas in ecological importance, the Ghats are **one of the eight “hottest hotspots”** of biological diversity in the entire world. They harbour hundreds of plant and animal species found nowhere else on earth.
- The Ghats are not just ecologically rich — they are **hydrologically critical**. They act as a physical barrier against moisture-carrying monsoon winds, channelling heavy rainfall onto the coastal side.
- This rainfall feeds major rivers including the Godavari, Krishna, Cauvery, and Periyar — rivers that sustain the livelihoods of millions across peninsular India.
- Importantly, unlike most protected ecosystems, the **Western Ghats are densely populated** and economically active.
- The region is famous for cash crops — pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, coffee, mango, and jackfruit.
- It spans **six states**: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.
- This combination of ecological fragility and human habitation is at the heart of the ESA dispute.

What Is an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA)

- Under the **Environment Protection Act, 1986**, the Central Government can notify certain areas as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs) — also called Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs).
- The idea is to regulate or prohibit activities that could damage fragile ecosystems.
- In an ESA, activities like mining, quarrying, red-category polluting industries, thermal power plants, and large construction and townships are either banned or heavily regulated.
- ESAs have previously been notified around Dahanu (Maharashtra), Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani, and the Doon Valley.

The Two Panels: Gadgil vs. Kasturirangan

- **The Gadgil Panel (2011)**
 - The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, chaired by ecologist Madhav Gadgil, submitted its report in 2011.
 - It took a strict position: the entire 1,29,037 sq km of the Ghats should be designated as ESA, with heavy cross-sectoral restrictions on development activities.
 - States and local communities found this too restrictive and strongly opposed it.
- **The Kasturirangan Panel (2013)**
 - Given the political resistance to the Gadgil report, the Centre set up a high-level working group under K. Kasturirangan, former chief of ISRO. His panel took a more calibrated approach.
 - The panel identified 1,64,280 sq km as the Ghats’ total extent. Of this, it found that **60% was already “cultural landscape”** — land under human use: settlements, plantations, and agriculture.
 - The remaining **40%** (approximately 60,000 sq km) was classified as **“natural landscape”** — high biological richness, low human density, and home to national parks, tiger reserves, and elephant habitats.
 - The panel recommended that only this 60,000 sq km natural landscape be notified as ESA, along with a ban on the most damaging industrial activities.
 - The then government accepted this in principle in December 2013.

A Decade of Draft Notifications and Deadlock

- The Centre issued its first draft ESA notification in March 2014, demarcating **56,825.7 sq km** — already reduced from the 60,000 sq km recommended by Kasturirangan.
- Since 2014, the ESA draft notification has been issued and **revised six times**. The latest notification was issued on July 31, 2024, and is valid until the end of July 2026.
- Each time, the Environment Ministry has sought state approval on final ESA boundaries. Each time, states have returned with fresh demands or remained deadlocked.
- A notable change in the July 2024 notification: for the first time, it introduced a provision to finalise ESA in a **phased, state-wise manner** — rather than waiting for all six states to agree simultaneously.
- This allows the Centre to proceed with states where consensus is closer, without being held back by the more resistant ones.

Why Are States Opposing the ESA

- The core objection is economic. States fear that ESA notification will impose severe restrictions on industrial activity, mining, quarrying, and construction in their territories.
- **Karnataka** has been the most resistant. It has completely rejected the Kasturirangan panel recommendations and remains far from consensus.
- **Kerala** has sought to reduce its notified area from 9,993.7 sq km by another approximately 1,000 sq km. It wants villages in Idukki — particularly in the Cardamom Hills — excluded, citing active plantation and agricultural activity.
- **Maharashtra** has sought exclusion of 378 villages from the 2,133 listed in the draft, arguing these villages host industries, mining operations, or are geographically distant from core ESA zones.
- **Goa, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu** have also raised objections, though the most acute tensions remain in Kerala and Karnataka.

The 2022 Expert Committee: A Fresh Attempt

- In 2022, the Centre constituted a new expert committee under **Sanjay Kumar**, former Director General of Forests, to re-examine state objections while keeping conservation needs in view.
- It has been working to resolve ground-level disputes — reconciling village-level data, revenue records, and satellite imagery.
- Notably, the committee is also considering **financial incentives for states** that protect the Ghats.
 - The Kasturirangan panel had recommended that the six states negotiate for a **grant-in-aid from the Centre** as compensation for ecological protection.
- The concept of **Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES)** — where states receive financial compensation for the ecological services their forests provide (clean water, carbon sequestration, biodiversity) — is also on the table.

Conclusion

- The Western Ghats debate is not just about land demarcation. It is about how India balances ecological survival with economic development — a question central to India's climate commitments, disaster preparedness, and long-term water security.
- The region has already seen the consequences of ecological degradation. Landslides and floods — including the devastating 2018 and 2019 Kerala floods — have been partly attributed to deforestation and unregulated construction in ecologically sensitive zones.
- Civil society groups in Kerala, Goa, Karnataka, and Maharashtra have simultaneously protested demanding both stronger protection and exclusion of their villages — reflecting the internal contradictions within states themselves.

Source: IE

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