

Gadgil Report on Western Ghats: Why the Gadgil Report Still Shapes Environmental Debate

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Gadgil Report Latest News

- Eminent ecologist Madhav Gadgil passed away at 83 in Pune, leaving behind a lasting environmental legacy.
- Among his many contributions, his role as chair of the **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)** remains the most influential.
- Although the panel's report was rejected by the then government, Gadgil consistently advocated for safeguarding the fragile Western Ghats from unregulated development.
- Years on, the report's warnings and recommendations continue to resurface in public debate, especially after landslides and ecological disasters in the region, underscoring its enduring relevance.

A Prescription for Protecting the Western Ghats

- The Western Ghats stretch from Gujarat to Kerala and Tamil Nadu and act as the water tower of peninsular India.

- Major rivers like the Cauvery, Godavari, Krishna, Periyar and Netravathi originate here.
- The region is a global **biodiversity hotspot** with high endemism, hosting species found nowhere else.

Why the WGEEP Was Set Up

- In March 2010, the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) was constituted due to the region's ecological sensitivity, complex geography and growing threats from climate change and unregulated development.
- The panel's formation was triggered by a 2010 meeting of the Save Western Ghats movement in the Nilgiris, attended by then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh. The deliberations led to the creation of WGEEP.
- The panel was tasked with:
 - assessing the ecology of the Western Ghats, identifying ecologically sensitive areas,
 - recommending ecologically sensitive zones, and
 - proposing conservation, rejuvenation and governance mechanisms for sustainable development.

Recommendations of the Gadgil Panel

- **Entire Western Ghats as Ecologically Sensitive** – The Gadgil-led panel designated the entire 1,29,037 sq km of the Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), reflecting the region's overall ecological fragility.
- **Three-Tier Sensitivity Zoning** – The Ghats were divided into three categories — ESZ 1, ESZ 2 and ESZ 3 — based on levels of ecological sensitivity, with stricter controls in the more fragile zones.
- **Restrictions on Development Activities** – The panel proposed banning genetically modified crops, new special economic zones and new hill stations across ESZs.
 - It called for no new mining licences and the phase-out of existing mines within five years in ESZ 1 and 2, and a complete ban on new quarrying in ESZ 1.
- **Limits on Infrastructure Expansion** – New railway lines and major roads were to be avoided in ESZ 1 and 2, except where absolutely essential, to minimise ecological disruption.
- **Creation of a Statutory Authority** – The report recommended setting up a 24-member Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA) under the Environment Protection Act to regulate, manage and plan activities across all ecologically sensitive zones in the six Western Ghats States.
- **Composition of the Authority** – The proposed authority was to include domain and resource experts, along with representatives from key nodal ministries, ensuring coordinated, multi-state environmental governance.

Political Opposition to the Gadgil Panel Report

- The Gadgil panel submitted its draft report in March 2011 and the final version in August 2011.
- The report was not made public and was instead shared with State governments for comments.
 - Environmental groups challenged the secrecy through RTI applications.
 - After intervention by the Chief Information Commissioner and subsequent court proceedings, the report was finally made public in May 2012.
- Gadgil argued that the report promoted inclusive development and **recommended placing its proposals before Gram Sabhas** to move away from exclusionary models of conservation and growth.

State-Level Resistance

- The report faced strong opposition from Kerala and Maharashtra.
- Maharashtra objected to the proposed Western Ghats Ecology Authority, calling it a parallel structure to existing institutions.
- Kerala argued that declaring large areas as **ecologically sensitive** would hurt agriculture and livelihoods in districts such as Idukki and Wayanad.
- Political leaders and the Catholic Church warned of economic disruption and displacement of local communities.

The Kasturirangan Panel and the Scaled-Down Western Ghats Plan

- After widespread opposition to the Gadgil report, the Environment Ministry set up a High-Level Working Group in 2012 under space scientist **K. Kasturirangan** to review the recommendations.

Key Recommendations of the 2013 Report

- The Kasturirangan panel proposed declaring about 56,825 sq km of the Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive.
- It supported curbs on mining, polluting industries, thermal power plants, and large townships, but adopted a **narrower approach** than the Gadgil panel.
- Unlike the earlier report, the panel identified specific **villages as ecologically sensitive** and released state-wise lists, making the proposal more targeted and administratively feasible.

Policy Deadlock Continues

- Based on the report, the Centre has issued **six draft ESA notifications**, the latest in August 2024.
- However, disagreements with States persist, and a committee led by former Director General of Forests Sanjay Kumar is still working to finalise the boundaries.

Source: **IE** | **TH**

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