

Kasturirangan Committee 2012, Background, Recommendations

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The Kasturirangan Committee is officially known as the High Level Working Group (HLWG). It was constituted in 2012 to review the earlier Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report and propose a balanced framework for conservation and development of Western Ghats. The committee, under the chairmanship of K. Kasturirangan, focused on protecting ecologically sensitive regions of the Western Ghats while accommodating livelihood and developmental needs. Its report highlighted the urgency of conserving biodiversity rich landscapes through a calibrated regulatory approach.

Kasturirangan Committee Background

The Kasturirangan Committee was formed to address conflicts between environmental protection and development needs in the Western Ghats region.

- **Need for Review of Gadgil Report:** The earlier report recommended 64% of Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive, which faced strong opposition from states due to strict restrictions affecting development, agriculture and infrastructure activities.

- **Formation of HLWG Committee:** A 10 member High Level Working Group chaired by K. Kasturirangan was constituted in 2012 to examine the Gadgil Committee recommendations and provide a more accurate and implementable framework.
- **Focus on Balanced Approach:** The committee aimed to reconcile environmental conservation with economic development by reducing regulatory burden while ensuring protection of the most fragile ecosystems across six states.
- **Western Ghats Significance:** The region spans multiple states and is a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot, hosting endangered species, major river systems and ecologically sensitive forest landscapes requiring urgent conservation.
- **Concept of Eco Sensitive Areas (ESA):** ESAs are areas within 10 km of protected regions, notified under the **Environment Protection Act, 1986** to regulate activities and minimize environmental degradation.

Kasturirangan Committee Recommendations

The Kasturirangan Committee proposed specific measures to identify and regulate ecologically sensitive areas while allowing sustainable development.

- **Eco Sensitive Areas Coverage:** The report proposed 37% of the Western Ghats, around 60,000 sq km, as Eco Sensitive Area, significantly lower than the 64% suggested earlier, ensuring a balanced conservation approach.
- **State wise Distribution:** Out of total ESA, about 20,668 sq km falls in Karnataka covering 1,576 villages which highlights the significant impact on specific regions and local populations.
- **Prohibition of Activities:** A complete ban was recommended on mining, quarrying, thermal power plants and red category industries due to their high environmental impact and irreversible ecological damage.
- **Regulation of Infrastructure:** The committee emphasized that infrastructure projects should undergo detailed environmental impact assessment to evaluate effects on forests, wildlife and overall ecosystem before approval.
- **UNESCO Recognition:** It highlighted 39 Components of Protected Areas as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and reserved forests across Western Ghats in Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra as an opportunity to enhance conservation awareness.
- **Landscape Classification:** The report distinguished between natural landscapes and cultural landscapes, excluding inhabited regions and plantations to protect livelihoods while focusing conservation on ecologically rich areas.
- **Mining Phase Out Plan:** Existing mining activities in ESA were to be phased out within five years or upon lease expiry, ensuring gradual transition without sudden economic disruption.
- **Role of State Governments:** States were advised to develop strategies for conservation, sustainable use of resources and long term ecological management aligned with regional development priorities.

Kasturirangan Committee Criticism

The Kasturirangan Committee report faced criticism from states, environmentalists and local communities for various reasons.

- **Opposition from Karnataka Government:** The state government opposed ESA declaration, arguing it would adversely affect livelihoods, halt developmental activities and impact agriculture and local economic systems.
- **Satellite Based Demarcation Issues:** The use of remote sensing and aerial surveys led to criticism that ground realities were ignored, resulting in inclusion of non forest areas and exclusion of ecologically sensitive zones.
- **Impact on Livelihoods:** Farmers and local communities feared displacement, restrictions on farming and reduced economic opportunities due to limitations on development and industrial activities.
- **Environmental Concerns:** Some experts, including members of the earlier panel, termed the report as anti environmental, arguing it diluted protections by reducing ESA coverage from 64% to 37%.
- **Governance Concerns:** Critics highlighted that decision making power remained with bureaucratic authorities rather than local bodies, reducing community participation in environmental governance.
- **Inclusion Errors:** Several villages with plantations or non forest land were included under ESA, creating confusion and opposition among residents who depended on these lands for livelihood.

Kasturirangan Committee Significance

The Kasturirangan Committee report remains a key policy framework in balancing conservation with development in ecologically sensitive regions.

- **Balanced Development Model:** It attempted to harmonize environmental protection with economic growth by reducing ESA coverage while ensuring protection of critical biodiversity rich zones.
- **Climate Change Relevance:** The report emphasized the need for preventive conservation to reduce long term economic costs associated with environmental degradation, disasters and climate induced risks.
- **Sustainable Livelihood Approach:** It recognized that conservation should not eliminate livelihood options but promote environmentally sustainable practices such as eco friendly agriculture and resource management.
- **Policy Framework for ESA:** It provided a structured approach for identifying and managing Eco Sensitive Areas under the Environment Protection Act 1986, strengthening environmental governance.
- **Urgency of Implementation:** The report highlighted that delays in implementation would accelerate ecological degradation, making restoration more costly and difficult in the future.
- **Stakeholder Engagement Need:** It stressed the importance of scientific analysis, stakeholder consultation and consensus building to ensure effective and inclusive environmental decision making.
- **Long Term Ecological Security:** By focusing on conservation of biodiversity hotspots, the report contributes to preserving water resources, forest cover and ecological stability crucial for sustainable development.

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/current-affairs/kasturirangan-committee/>

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