

## 37% of Western Ghats ecologically sensitive: Kasturirangan panel report

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The Kasturirangan panel was set up to study the Gadgil committee report on the Western Ghats. NEW DELHI: Around 60,000 sq km of Western Ghats, spread across six states, should be turned into a no-go area for commercial activities like mining, thermal power plants, polluting industries and large housing plans, the high-level working group headed by Planning Commission member K Kasturirangan has recommended.

The Kasturirangan panel was set up to study the Gadgil committee report on the Western Ghats. The Gadgil panel report had faced unanimous opposition from state governments for recommending that almost three-fourth of the hills, including plantations, cultivated lands and large habitations, be turned into a restricted development zone with an over-arching authority to regulate the region superseding the elected authorities' role.

The Kasturirangan committee has in contrast advised against bringing cultivated lands, plantations and habitations outside the ambit of such a restrictive regime - called Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA) under the Environment Protection Act, 1976. Instead, it has suggested that 90% of the natural forests left in the Western Ghats complex - adding upto 60,000 sq km and constituting 37% of the entire hilly belt — be conserved under the ESA provisions of the green law. The forest area falling within the ESA would also cover 4,156 villages across the six states. The panel has said, "The villages falling under ESA will be involved in decision making on the future projects. All projects will require prior-informed consent and no-objection from the gram sabha (village council) of the village."

The panel has recommended that there should be a complete ban on mining activity in this zone and current mining activities should be phased out within five years, or at the time of expiry of the mining lease. It has banned development of any township or construction over the size of 20,000 sq m in the ESA zone. It has not recommended a ban on hydroelectric projects in the zone, but put a regime of stricter clearances for dams and other projects. For dams, it has demanded an uninterrupted ecological flow of at least 30% level of the rivers flow till individual baselines for dams are set. Cumulative studies to assess impact of dams on a river and ensuring that the minimum distance between projects is maintained at three km and that not more than 50% of the river basin is affected at any time.

The report suggests doing away with the complete moratorium on industrial and mining activity in the two Maharashtra districts of Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri. It has suggested persisting with the ban only on the area of the two districts falling within the ESA and a strict regulation in the rest.

The report has steered clear from demanding a strict ecological control over the Western Ghat complex requiring changes and regulations on agricultural practices the way Gadgil committee report had suggested. It has also favoured a new authority to regulate the region's development and economic growth. The authors say, "The high-level working group has deviated from WGEEP (Gadgil committee report) by not recommending a blanket prescriptive on what constitutes good development, which will be implemented through a prohibitory regime. Instead, HLWG has considered and recommended prohibitory and regulatory regime only for those activities with maximum interventionist and destructive impact on the ecosystem."

Sunita Narain, member of the Kasturirangan panel and director general of Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), said, "We have recommended ESA for natural areas which constitute 37% of the ghats. These areas must be protected. There is great biodiversity value outside these patches too but there we recommend a framework to incentivize people towards green growth and not a prohibitory or penalizing regime."

The panel consisted of Ajay Tyagi, joint secretary in the environment ministry; J M Mauskar, retired senior bureaucrat; academicians C R Babu and Kanchan Chopra; Jagdish Kishwan, retired senior forest officer, P S Roy, deputy director of National Remote Sensing Centre; **Darshan Shankar of Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions, a Karnataka-based NGO** and Indrani Chandrasekharan of Planning Commission besides Kasturirangan and Narain.

The committee has also not recommended an outright rejection of the Athirapally hydroelectric project in Kerala and Gundya dam in Karnataka. It has warned that the state government must assess if the Athirapally dam is viable and if the trade off against the loss of irreplaceable biodiversity is beneficial. On the Gundya hydroelectric project, it has advised extreme caution and said the project should not get a green nod till an elaborate review of the river flows and ecological damage are made.

**Reference: <http://m.timesofindia.com/india/37-of-Western-Ghats-ecologically-sensitive-Kasturirangan-panel-report/articleshow/19607237.cms>**