



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
Only IAS Academy by Grandson of "Perunthalsivam Kamarajar"

Karnataka Assembly Rejects Kasturirangan Recommendations, Renewing Debate Over Western Ghats Conservation and Development

Published On: 24-09-2026

Recent Developments: Karnataka Assembly Rejects Kasturirangan Report

- The **Karnataka Legislative Assembly** on **22 September 2026** unanimously passed a resolution rejecting the **Kasturirangan Committee recommendations** concerning the Western Ghats, citing concerns over their impact on local communities, agriculture and development.
- The issue was discussed during a special Assembly session as Karnataka continues to oppose implementation of the proposed **Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area (WG-ESA)** framework.
- Karnataka has argued that the proposed ESA boundaries could bring substantial **agricultural land, inhabited areas and privately occupied land** under environmental restrictions, creating uncertainty for farmers and residents.
- The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has continued the process of finalising the Western Ghats ESA through successive draft notifications; the **31 July 2024 draft notification** proposed an ESA of **56,825.7 sq. km** across six States.
- The dispute reflects a broader policy challenge involving **ecological conservation, livelihood security, federal coordination and sustainable development**.

Kasturirangan Committee: Background and Recommendations

Formation and Mandate:

- The **High-Level Working Group (HLWG)** chaired by **Dr. K. Kasturirangan** was constituted in **2012** to examine the recommendations of the **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel**, headed by Madhav Gadgil.
- The committee adopted a comparatively **development-sensitive approach**, seeking to identify ecologically important landscapes while allowing greater flexibility for economic activities outside the proposed ESA.
- It recommended designating about **37% of the Western Ghats**, covering approximately **59,940 sq. km**, as an **Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA)**.
- The proposed ESA approach focused primarily on regulating environmentally damaging activities while permitting **sustainable livelihoods and development activities** compatible with ecological conditions.

Major Recommendations:

- The committee proposed restrictions on environmentally intensive activities such as **mining, quarrying, highly polluting industries and certain large infrastructure projects** within identified sensitive areas.
- It supported **strengthening the existing environmental-clearance framework** rather than creating an entirely separate regulatory architecture for the entire Western Ghats.
- It recommended establishing a **state-of-the-art monitoring mechanism** for improved environmental surveillance, compliance and enforcement.

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477 / Whatsapp : 09710729833**

- The approach attempted to balance **environmental protection with economic development**, particularly in areas where communities depend on agriculture and other livelihood activities.

Madhav Gadgil Committee: A More Restrictive Conservation Approach

Ecologically Sensitive Zones:

- The **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel**, chaired by **Professor Madhav Gadgil**, adopted a broader conservation approach and recommended treating the **entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area**.
- It proposed dividing approximately **64% of the Western Ghats** into three categories, namely **ESZ 1, ESZ 2 and ESZ 3**, according to ecological sensitivity.
- **ESZ 1** was proposed as the most strictly regulated category, with severe restrictions on activities such as mining, large construction projects, thermal power projects and certain dams.
- The report also recommended reviewing or decommissioning environmentally damaging projects that had completed their operational life.

Western Ghats Ecology Authority:

- The Gadgil Committee recommended establishing a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority** under the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**.
- The proposed authority was intended to provide a professional institutional mechanism for **ecological regulation, conservation and sustainable development** across the Western Ghats.
- The recommendation reflected the committee's emphasis on **region-wide ecological governance** rather than fragmented State-level regulation.

Commercial Cropping and Ecological Concerns:

- The committee expressed concern over the expansion of **single commercial crops**, including tea, coffee, cardamom, rubber, banana and pineapple, because intensive monoculture could contribute to **forest fragmentation, soil erosion, degradation of river ecosystems and environmental contamination**.
- It therefore favoured stronger ecological safeguards in areas where commercial agricultural expansion could adversely affect natural ecosystems.

Community Participation and Forest Rights:

- The Gadgil Committee emphasised **participatory environmental governance** and recommended greater involvement of local communities in conservation decisions.
- It called for effective implementation of **Community Forest Resource** provisions under the **Forest Rights Act, 2006**.
- This approach linked environmental conservation with **community rights, decentralised governance and livelihood security**.

Western Ghats: Geography and Ecological Significance

Geographical Features:

- The **Western Ghats** are a mountain chain extending for approximately **1,600 km** along India's western side, broadly parallel to the Arabian Sea coast.
- The range extends from the **Tapi region in the north to Kanyakumari in the south** and passes through **Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu**.
- The range is interrupted by the **Palghat Gap**, an important geographical break that influences ecological and climatic patterns.

- Karnataka contains a substantial share of the Western Ghats and therefore remains central to the debate over the proposed ESA framework.

Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services:

- The Western Ghats are recognised as one of the world's major **biodiversity hotspots** because of their exceptionally high levels of species diversity and endemism.
- The region contains **at least 325 globally threatened species**, including plants, mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish.
- Montane forests of the Western Ghats influence **Indian monsoon patterns** and help regulate the tropical climate of peninsular India.
- The mountains also perform important **ecosystem services**, including water regulation, soil conservation, carbon storage, biodiversity conservation and maintenance of river systems.

UNESCO World Heritage Status:

- The **Western Ghats were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2012 under Criteria (ix) and (x)**.
- Criterion **(ix)** recognises ecological and evolutionary processes, while Criterion **(x)** recognises exceptional biodiversity and threatened species.
- UNESCO identifies the Western Ghats as a region of exceptional **biological diversity, endemism and ecological significance**.

Karnataka's Concerns Over ESA Implementation

Livelihood and Land-Use Concerns:

- Karnataka has raised concerns that ESA restrictions could affect **farmers, plantations, settlements and infrastructure development** in the Western Ghats region.
- The State has particularly objected to the inclusion of inhabited villages and privately occupied agricultural areas within the proposed regulatory framework.
- The State government has argued that environmental regulation should distinguish between **natural forests and long-established human settlements and agricultural landscapes**.

Federal and Governance Issues:

- The Western Ghats ESA issue demonstrates the challenge of implementing **national environmental objectives through cooperation with State governments**.
- Environmental regulation requires coordination among the **Union Government, State Governments, local communities, scientific institutions and regulatory agencies**.
- The controversy also highlights the need for **scientific mapping, stakeholder consultation, carrying-capacity assessment and location-specific regulation**.

Gadgil vs Kasturirangan: Key Differences

Approach to Conservation:

- **Gadgil Committee:** Favoured a **broader and more decentralised conservation framework**, with the entire Western Ghats treated as ecologically sensitive and divided into three sensitivity zones.
- **Kasturirangan Committee:** Favoured a **more targeted ESA framework**, covering approximately 37% of the Western Ghats while seeking greater compatibility between conservation and development.

Governance Model:

Kamaraj IAS Academy

Plot A P.127, AF block, 6 th street, 11th Main Rd, Shanthi Colony, Anna Nagar, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600040

Phone: **044 4353 9988 / 98403 94477 / Whatsapp : 09710729833**

- **Gadgil Committee:** Proposed a dedicated **Western Ghats Ecology Authority** and stronger participation of local communities.
- **Kasturirangan Committee:** Preferred strengthening the **existing environmental-clearance and monitoring framework**.

Development Perspective:

- **Gadgil Committee:** Recommended stronger restrictions on environmentally intensive activities in highly sensitive areas.
- **Kasturirangan Committee:** Sought to permit greater economic flexibility outside identified ecologically sensitive areas while regulating damaging activities within the ESA.

Way Forward: Sustainable Development and Ecological Governance

Balancing Conservation and Livelihoods:

- Future ESA implementation should combine **scientific ecological assessment with socio-economic mapping** so that conservation boundaries accurately reflect ecological vulnerability and settlement patterns.
- **Carrying-capacity studies** should guide decisions on tourism, infrastructure, mining and urbanisation in ecologically fragile landscapes.
- Local communities should participate meaningfully in conservation planning because their **livelihoods, land rights and traditional ecological knowledge** are directly connected with the landscape.
- Environmental regulation should adopt a **graded, location-specific approach** rather than applying identical restrictions across ecologically and socio-economically different areas.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **GS-I:** Western Ghats, Peninsular India, biodiversity hotspots, monsoon influence, Palghat Gap and physical geography.
- **GS-II:** Centre-State relations, cooperative federalism, decentralised governance, community participation and environmental governance.
- **GS-III:** Biodiversity conservation, environmental impact assessment, sustainable development, ecological security, climate resilience and carrying capacity.
- **GS-IV:** Environmental ethics, intergenerational equity, public interest, stakeholder participation and responsible governance.
- **Prelims Fact:** The Western Ghats were inscribed on the **UNESCO World Heritage List in 2012** under **Criteria (ix) and (x)**.
- **Prelims Fact:** The **Gadgil Committee** proposed approximately **64%** of the Western Ghats under three ecological sensitivity categories, whereas the **Kasturirangan Committee** proposed approximately **37%** as ESA.
- **Conceptual Link:** The Western Ghats debate illustrates the tension between **conservation versus development**, but UPSC answers should frame the issue as a search for **ecologically sustainable and socially inclusive development** rather than treating the two objectives as mutually exclusive.