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Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area Draft Notification Reissued for the Seventh Time Amid Continuing Centre–State Deadlock

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Recent Developments:

- The **Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** has issued the **seventh draft notification** proposing an **Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA)** in the **Western Ghats** after the previous draft lapsed without final notification.
- The latest draft retains the proposed **56,825.7 sq. km** ESA across **Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu** and invites **public objections for 60 days** before finalisation.

About the Western Ghats:

Geographical Features:

- The **Western Ghats** are a **1,500–1,600 km** long mountain chain running parallel to the western coast of Peninsular India.
- The mountain range extends across **Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu**.
- The **Palghat Gap** is the most prominent natural break separating the northern and southern Western Ghats.
- The **Western and Eastern Ghats** converge at the **Nilgiri Hills**.

Ecological Importance:

- The **Western Ghats** are recognised as one of the **world's eight hottest biodiversity hotspots**.
- The region was designated a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in **2012** under **Criteria (ix) and (x)** for its exceptional ecological and biological value.
- The mountain system is **geologically older than the Himalayas**.
- The ecosystem supports a very high level of **endemism** in plants, amphibians, reptiles, fishes and mammals.
- The region contains unique ecosystems such as **Shola forests, Myristica swamps** and montane grasslands.
- The Western Ghats strongly influence the **South-West Monsoon** by intercepting moisture-laden winds.
- The range forms the catchment of major peninsular rivers including the **Godavari, Krishna, Cauvery, Tungabhadra and Periyar**.
- The UNESCO property comprises **39 protected components** grouped into **7 sub-clusters**, including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and reserved forests.

Flagship Species:

- The Western Ghats provide habitat to **Lion-tailed Macaque, Nilgiri Tahr, Nilgiri Langur, Asian Elephant, Tiger, Gaur** and numerous endemic amphibians.

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Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA):

Meaning and Legal Basis:

- An **Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA)** is a region notified under the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986** to regulate environmentally harmful developmental activities.
- The objective of ESA notification is to balance **ecological conservation** with **sustainable development** rather than imposing a complete prohibition on human activities.

Major Objectives:

- To conserve fragile ecosystems and biodiversity.
- To regulate high-impact developmental activities.
- To reduce ecological degradation and disaster vulnerability.
- To ensure sustainable livelihood opportunities for local communities.

Gadgil Committee (Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel), 2011:

Background:

- The **Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)** chaired by **Madhav Gadgil** submitted the first comprehensive conservation framework for the Western Ghats in **2011**.

Major Recommendations:

- The **entire Western Ghats** should be declared an **Ecologically Sensitive Area**.
- The region should be classified into **ESZ-1, ESZ-2 and ESZ-3** according to ecological sensitivity.
- **Mining, quarrying and highly polluting industries** should be prohibited in **ESZ-1**.
- Existing polluting industries should be phased out from ecologically sensitive regions.
- Sustainable agriculture and **organic farming** should be promoted.
- Conservation should follow a **bottom-up governance model** with active participation of **Gram Sabhas** and local communities.

Concerns Raised by States:

- States argued that the recommendations imposed excessive restrictions on agriculture, plantations and infrastructure development.
- The report was criticised for insufficient consideration of regional socio-economic conditions.
- Several state governments viewed the recommendations as excessively restrictive for development.

Kasturirangan Committee (High Level Working Group), 2012:

Background:

- The **High Level Working Group (HLWG)** chaired by **K. Kasturirangan** was constituted to review the Gadgil recommendations and evolve a more balanced framework.

Major Recommendations:

- Only about **37%** of the Western Ghats should be notified as an **Ecologically Sensitive Area**.
- **Mining, quarrying, sand mining and thermal power plants** should be prohibited within the notified ESA.
- Highly polluting industries should remain under strict regulation.
- **Human settlements and agricultural plantations** should generally remain outside the notified ESA.

- Hydroelectric projects and major construction activities should be regulated instead of being universally prohibited.
- Conservation and economic development should proceed simultaneously through sustainable development.

Criticism:

- States alleged that the remote sensing-based demarcation included several villages having plantations rather than natural forests.
- Environmental experts argued that some ecologically important regions were excluded from ESA.
- Kerala constituted the **Oommen V. Oommen Committee**, which recommended further exclusion of plantations and inhabited regions.

Seventh Draft ESA Notification (2026):

Major Features:

- The proposed ESA continues to cover **56,825.7 sq. km** across six states.
- The notified area, village list and regulatory framework remain substantially unchanged from the **2024 draft**.
- The draft introduces flexibility by permitting **phased implementation**, either **state-wise** or through a **single combined notification**.
- The final notified area will consider recommendations of states, stakeholders and the expert committee.

Prohibited Activities:

- **Mining, quarrying and sand mining.**
- Establishment of new **thermal power plants.**
- Establishment of specified **highly polluting industries.**
- Large-scale construction projects beyond prescribed limits.

Regulated Activities:

- **Hydroelectric power projects.**
- Major infrastructure and construction activities.
- Agriculture and plantation activities continue without fresh restrictions under the present draft.

Major Issues in the Western Ghats Debate:

Conservation, Development:

- Environmental experts emphasise that strict ecological protection is essential to prevent biodiversity loss, landslides and long-term water insecurity.
- States and local communities seek greater flexibility to protect livelihoods, agriculture and regional development.

Scientific Demarcation, Political Acceptability:

- The **Gadgil Committee** offered stronger ecological protection but lacked political acceptance.
- The **Kasturirangan Committee** improved political acceptability but attracted criticism regarding scientific demarcation.
- The absence of broad consensus has delayed final ESA notification for more than a decade.

Federal Governance:

- The Union Government seeks a common conservation framework across the Western Ghats.

- States demand greater autonomy to determine local conservation priorities based on regional conditions.

Increasing Disaster Risk:

- Recurrent landslides and extreme rainfall events in regions such as **Wayanad** have strengthened calls for stricter ecological regulation.
- Scientists associate increasing disaster vulnerability with **deforestation, unplanned construction, quarrying and climate change.**

Significance for India:

Environmental Importance:

- Conserves globally significant biodiversity and endemic species.
- Maintains ecological stability and climate regulation across Peninsular India.
- Supports long-term water security through perennial river systems.

Economic Importance:

- Sustains agriculture, plantations, fisheries, hydropower and eco-tourism.
- Provides ecosystem services supporting millions of livelihoods.

Strategic Importance:

- Enhances India's commitments under the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and the **Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.**
- Contributes to achieving **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** related to biodiversity, climate action and sustainable ecosystems.

Way Forward:

Balanced Conservation Framework:

- Conservation policies should integrate ecological science with local socio-economic realities.
- Village-level participatory governance should strengthen long-term environmental stewardship.
- Scientific mapping should combine satellite-based assessment with detailed field verification.
- Sustainable agriculture, eco-tourism and nature-based livelihoods should receive policy support.
- Cooperative federalism should guide the final ESA notification through continuous Centre–State consultation.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Facts for Prelims:

- **UNESCO World Heritage Site: 2012.**
- **Global Status:** One of the **Eight Hottest Biodiversity Hotspots.**
- **Legal Basis of ESA: Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.**
- **WGEEP (Gadgil Committee): 2011.**
- **HLWG (Kasturirangan Committee): 2012.**
- **UNESCO Criteria: (ix)** – Ecological and biological processes, **(x)** – Biodiversity conservation.
- **Important Map Locations: Palghat Gap, Nilgiri Hills, Anaimalai Hills, Cardamom Hills, Agasthyamalai Hills, Doddabetta Peak**