Eco-Sensitive Zones of Western Ghats

Why in news?

Karnataka, Maharashtra and Goa seek shrinking of eco-sensitive areas in Western Ghats.

What are Eco-Sensitive Zones?

- **Conception** – The concept of ESZ was conceived during the XXI meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife held in 2002, when the *Wildlife Conservation Strategy, 2002* was adopted.
- The *National Wildlife Action Plan (NWAP) (2002-2016)* indicated that 'Areas outside the protected area network are often vital ecological corridor links and must be protected to prevent isolation of fragments of bio-diversity which will not survive in the long run.
- *National Environment Policy (2006) has defined* the ESZ.
- **Definition** – An areas/zones with *identified environmental resources* having incomparable values *which require special attention* for their conservation" because of its landscape, wildlife, biodiversity, historical and natural values.
- **Declaration** – They are *declared by the Ministry of Environment*, Forest and Climate Change (***MoEFCC***) as per the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- **Coverage** – The lands falling ***within 10kms of the boundaries*** of national parks and sanctuaries should be notified as eco-fragile zones under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- While the 10-km rule is implemented as a general principle, the extent of its application can vary.
- Areas *beyond 10-km can also be notified* by the Union government as ESZs, if they hold larger ecologically important *"sensitive corridors."*
- **Purpose** – *Protect environment* and *avoid its degradation* due to anthropogenic activities.
- Create some kind of barrier/ *shock absorber for the specialized ecosystem* (PAs).
- Act as *transition zone* from areas of higher protection to areas involving lesser protection.
- **Objective** – To maintain the response level of an ecosystem within the permissible limits w.r.t environmental parameters.
- To notify the area as an Eco- sensitive zone and to *regulate the developmental activities* in a sustainable manner taking into consideration the needs and aspiration of the local people.
- **Salient features of ESZ** – The ESZ Notification captures the following features:
    - Brief on the Protected Area
    - Area of ESZ and Extent of ESZ (Minimum and Maximum)
    - Available Flora, Fauna [Including Endemic, Rare, Endangered and Threaten (RET) species]
    - Boundary Description of ESZ
    - Maps of the ESZ
    - Geo-coordinates of prominent locations of PA and ESZ along with Shape/ KML files
    - List of villages along with Geo-co-ordinates
    - General guideline on Zonal Master Plan
    - Measures to be taken by the State Government
- Prohibited and Regulated Activities along with Promoted Activities
- Details of Monitoring Committee
- It does ***not involve displacement and evacuation*** of farmers/people living in the villages.



What are the Prohibited, Regulated and Permitted activities in ESZs?

Prohibited activities

- *Commercial mining*, but it will not prohibit the digging of earth for construction for repair of houses and for manufacture of country tiles or bricks for personal consumption.
- Setting of saw mills
- Setting of *industries causing pollution* (water, air, soil, noise etc)
- *Commercial use of firewood*
- Establishment of *major hydroelectric projects*
- Use or production of any *hazardous substances*
- Undertaking activities related to *tourism* like over-flying the National Park area by any aircraft, hot-air balloons
- *Discharge of effluent and solid waste* in natural water bodies or terrestrial area.

Regulated activities

- Felling of trees
- Establishment of hotels
- Drastic change of agriculture systems
- Commercial use of natural water resources including ground water harvesting
- Erection of electrical cables be regulated while underground cabling should be promoted
- Fencing of premises of hotels and lodges
- Use of polythene bags by shopkeepers
- Widening of roads should be done with proper EIA and mitigation measures
- Movement of vehicular traffic at night for commercial purpose
- Introduction of exotic species
- Protection of hill slopes and river banks
- Air and vehicular pollution
- Sign boards & hoardings.

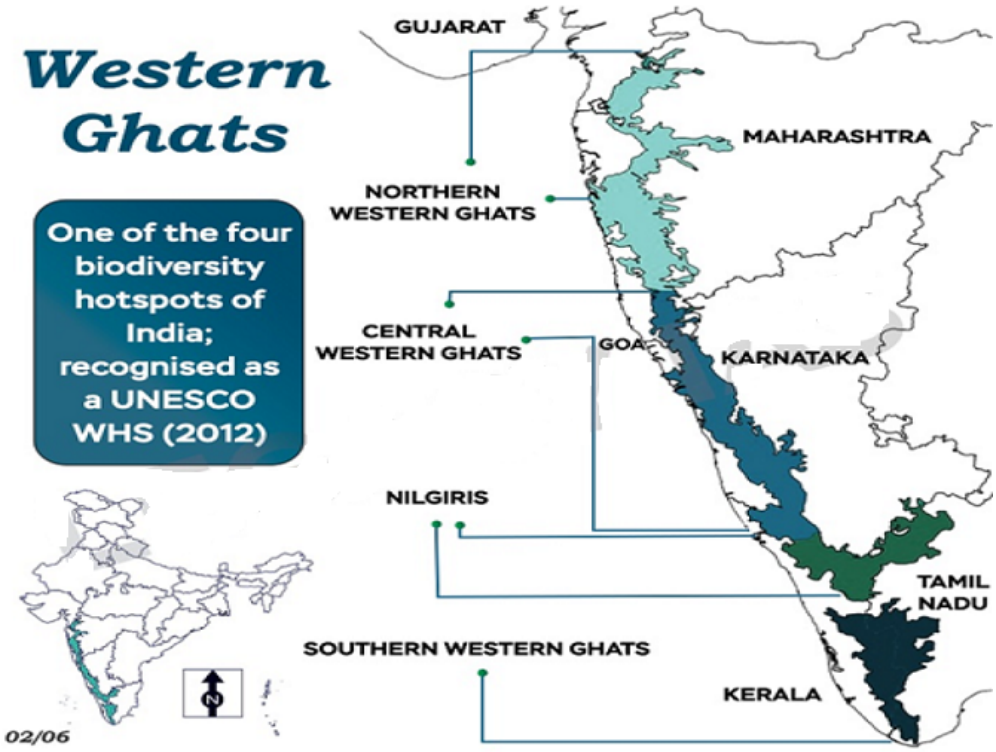
Permitted activities

- Ongoing *agriculture and horticulture practices* by local communities.
- However, excessive expansion of some of these activities should be regulated as per the master plan.

- *Rain water harvesting*
- Organic farming
- Use of *renewable energy sources*
- Adoption of green technology

Why Western Ghats is important?

- **Western Ghats** – They are mountain ranges that runs *parallel to the western coast* of the Indian peninsula, located entirely in India.
- **Coverage** – It extends along six states of India.
- They are Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.



- **Biodiversity** – It has over 7,402 species of flowering plants, 1,814 species of non-flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species, 179 amphibian species, 6,000 insects species and 290 freshwater fish species.
- **Measures** – Gadgil and Kasturirangan commitee were appointed to identify the areas that needed to be kept out from such activities.
- **The Kasturirangan panel** – It had identified ***37% of the Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive*** and recommended prohibition or regulation of certain activities.
- **Gadgil Commission** - The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) also known as the Gadgil Commission has designated the ***entire hill range as an ESA.***
- **Recognition** – It is a *UNESCO World Heritage Site* and is one of the eight "*hot-spots*" of biological diversity in the world.

What are the major concerns in declaring ESZs?

- **Development Restrictions** – Limits on construction, infrastructure projects, and industrial activities can hinder economic growth and development in the region.
- **Livelihood Impact** – Restrictions can affect local communities, particularly those dependent on land and natural resources for their livelihoods, such as agriculture, forestry, and mining.
- **Property Rights** – Landowners may face limitations on how they can use or develop their property, potentially leading to conflicts and disputes.

- **Economic Loss** – Potential loss of revenue for state and local governments due to reduced industrial and commercial activities.
- **Implementation Challenges** – Ensuring effective enforcement of ESA regulations can be difficult, requiring substantial resources and coordination among various government agencies.
- **Balancing Conservation and Development** – Finding a middle ground that protects the environment while allowing for necessary development is often challenging.

What lies ahead?

- **Implement a zoning system** – Designates specific areas for conservation, sustainable agriculture, limited development, and urbanization.
- This helps in managing human activities while protecting critical ecosystems.
- **Involve community participation** – They should be allowed to participate in conservation planning and decision-making.
- Empower them with knowledge and resources to manage natural resources sustainably.
- **Promote economic diversification** – This will reduce dependency on activities of local communities that harm the environment.
- Develop alternative livelihood opportunities, such as eco-tourism, agroforestry, and handicrafts.
- **Strengthen the legal and policy framework** – Enforce existing environmental laws and regulations, and update them to address emerging challenges.

References

1. The Indian Express| Plans to Reduce ESZ in Western Ghats
2. MoEFCC| Eco Sensitive Zones (ESZ)

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