Fire Engulfs Trekkers

What is the issue?

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- Forest fire in the Western Ghats segment in Theni district of Tamil Nadu has claimed the lives of 11 trekkers.
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- An enquiry into the causes, the effectiveness of the response and the lapses in regulations (if any) is needed.
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How did the tragedy unfold?

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- A team of 25 adventurers had ventured into the Western Ghats forests to trek the “Kurangani to Kolukkumalai” route.
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- Forest fire that ranged in the region seems to have caught them on the wrong foot and claimed the lives of the 11 people.
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- While there is no clarity if the rescue operations were prompt, it appears that the difficult terrain made it rescue operations difficult.
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- The tragedy has highlighted the lack of emphasis on safety for such events and both the organisers and the government is to blame.
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- Also, as February – June interval is prone to forest fires, questions are being raised on whether officials have lapsed in allowing the trek to proceed.
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What are the technical issues involved?

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- The risk of fire is particularly important, given that 55% of forest cover in India is assessed by the ISRO as being vulnerable.
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- The National Remote Sensing Centre has been regularly issuing fire alerts to the forest department and this should’ve ideally alerted the concerned officials.
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- The State government’s inquiry into the Theni tragedy should reveal whether it was part of the alerts system, and whether they were actually issued.
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- Also, in future, the database on fires could be added to the online GIS information for instant mass dissemination of such events.
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- It is also important to estimate the cause of fire, for better future prospecting.
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What is the way ahead?

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- Organisers need to be trained in fire escape manoeuvres, and carry the right equipment, including wireless communication sets.
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- Care must be taken to see that small children are not part of such groups.
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- Raising safety standards in tourism and creating safe experiences is the imperative, as more young Indians will continue to seek adventure.
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- The importance of raising the capabilities of district hospitals has also been underscored by the disaster.
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Source: The Hindu

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