Gadgil Panel Report and Kerala Floods

What is the issue?

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- The recent floods of catastrophic dimensions have ravaged the state of Kerala.
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- This has proved the rejection of Gadgil panel report to be a costly error for people and environment.
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What was the Gadgil Panel on?

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- About 8 years ago, the Centre constituted the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP).
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- It is a 14-member panel under the chairmanship of noted ecologist Madhav Gadgil.
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- It was tasked to look into measures to arrest the ecological devastation from human activities in the Western Ghats.
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- The 1600-km-long mountain range of Western Ghats is a fragile ecosystem.
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- It is regarded as one of the eight ‘hottest’ biodiversity hotspots in the world.
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- Kerala accounts for nearly 18% of the biodiversity-rich Western Ghats.
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- The Gadgil panel submitted its report in 2011.
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What are the key recommendations?

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- The Gadgil Committee divided the Western Ghats into three ecologically sensitive zones (ESZ).
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- These are the highest (ESZ1), high (ESZ2) and moderate sensitivity (ESZ3) zones.
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- This is in addition to the Protected Areas managed under acts such as the Wildlife Protection Act.
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- It suggested that ESZ1 and ESZ2 would be largely ‘no-gone’ zones.
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- So mining, polluting industries as well as large-scale development activities, including new railway lines are restricted.
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- It also objected to new dams, thermal power stations or massive windmill farms or new townships in ESZ1.
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- The panel however gave importance to the local communities and gram sabhas.
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- They were given a larger say in deciding on matters relating to the ecology of these regions.
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- It also called for
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i. stricter regulation on tourism
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ii. phasing out of plastics and chemical fertilisers
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iii. a ban on diversion of forest land into non-forest applications
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iv. a ban on conversion of public lands into private lands
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What happened next?

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- The Gadgil panel report was rejected by the then Union Environment Minister.

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- The report was also unacceptable to any of the six Western Ghats States.
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- These included Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat as well as Pondicherry (UT).
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- A year later, the government appointed a new committee under the chairmanship of K Kasturirangan.
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- It was tasked to “examine” the WGEEP report.
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What were the changes made?

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- The Kasturirangan committee did away with the graded approach in terms of ecological sensitivity.
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- It rather divided the Western Ghats into cultural lands (where there are currently human settlements) and natural lands.
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- It recommended declaring cultural lands into ecologically sensitive area (ESA).
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- This spanned around 60,000 sq-km or 37% of the total area.
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- Recently, the Environment Ministry notified an area of around 56,000 sq km in the Western Ghats as ESA.
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- In Kerala, the Kasturirangan committee had proposed an area of 13,000 sq km as ESA.
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- But under pressure from the Kerala government, the notified area was brought down to less than 10,000 sq km.
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Why was the Gadgil panel report rejected?

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- The Gadgil panel faced stiff resistance from all political parties, particularly

in Kerala.
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- It was primarily because of the involvement of private land.
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- A large part of the ecologically sensitive zones belonged to private citizens.
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- Attempts to introduce social control over the use of private land have often been challenged.
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- The restrictions may not have much of an impact on people.
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- But they are often instigated, by groups with vested interests, to oppose such moves.
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- Popular resistance thus increases the political considerations in implementing such regulations.
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What are its implications?

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- Nearly 40% of the granite quarries in Kerala in 2014-15 were located in ecologically sensitive areas.
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- Significantly, a quarter of them were in the Gadgil committee-earmarked extremely sensitive ESZ1.
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- These are notably some of the regions which have been devastated by the recent floods.
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- The present disaster caused by heavy rainfall in Kerala could not have been completely avoided.
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- But its severity could have significantly been reduced, if not for the rejection of WGEEP's proposed zoning.
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- If the measures to protect the fragile environment were in place, man-made factors would not have worsened the impact.
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- Development in the State in the last several years had materially compromised its ability to deal with a disaster of this proportion.
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What is the way ahead?

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- The Western Ghats States need to reconsider their stand in view of the recent calamity.
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- The "environment vs development and livelihoods" debate should not be used to shield vested interests.
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- A different governance regime, as suggested by the Gadgil panel, may be required to administer the Western Ghats.
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- However, Kasturirangan panel's observation that results are better achieved through incentives than policing is valid.
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- Indeed, the challenge is to set up decentralised, participatory institutions to manage hilly regions and river basins.
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- The Centre should urge the States to accept the best in both the reports.
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- It should not entertain any further reduction of ecologically sensitive areas, for nature's and hence people's sake.
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Source: BusinessLine

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