Panel Reports on Western Ghats

What is the issue?

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- Recently, floods have wrecked havoc in Kerala and Costal Karnataka.
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- In this context, the various reports on western ghat ecosystems have assumed new focus that calls for further brainstorming and discussions.
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Why are the various reports on Western Ghats currently significant?

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- The catastrophic monsoon floods in Kerala and parts of Karnataka have opened brought back the various reports published on the Western Ghats.
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- 7 years ago, “Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel” (WGEEP) was constituted by the “Union Environment Ministry” with “Madhav Gadgil” as chairman.
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- The Gadgil Committee published its report recommending actions to preserving the fragile system, most of which weren’t accepted.
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- While this was due to political reasons, some experts have now opined that Kerala’s deluge was largely due to short-sighted policymaking.
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- Further, they’ve also warned that Goa may also be in the line of nature’s fury eventually akin to how Kerala and Karnataka (coastal region) had suffered.
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- They’ve hence asked the Western Ghats states (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Goa and Maharashtra), to get together to coordinate strategies.
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- Further, the Gadgil Report and subsequently, the toned down Kasturirangan Committee Report on the same issue, needs to be taken up

seriously.
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What are the varying estimates?

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- Western Ghats is spread over 1,29,037 sq.km according to the WGEEP estimate but the same was noted as 1,64,280 sq.km by Kasturirangan panel.
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- The crux of the problem is in calculating what constitutes the sensitive core and what activities can be carried out there.
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- The entire system is globally acknowledged as a biodiversity hotspot, but population estimates within the sensitive zones vary greatly.
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- In Kerala, for instance, one expert assessment says 39 lakh households are in the ESZs outlined by the WGEEP.
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- But the figure drops sharply to four lakh households for a smaller area of zones identified by the Kasturirangan panel.
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What is the way ahead?

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- **Intent -** Kerala's Finance Minister, Thomas Isaac, has acknowledged the need to review decisions affecting the environment, in the wake of the floods.
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- Public consultation on the expert reports that includes people's representatives will find greater resonance now, and help chart a sustainable path ahead.
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- The role of big hydroelectric dams must now be considered afresh and proposals for new ones dropped considering the ecological challenges.
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- A moratorium on quarrying and mining in the identified sensitive zones, in Kerala and also other States, is necessary to assess their environmental

impact.
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- **Actions -** The concerned state governments have the task of initiating corrective measures to adhere to environmental policy decisions.
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- This is not going to be easy, given the need to balance human development pressures with stronger protection of the Western Ghats ecology.
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- The issue of allowing extractive industries such as quarrying and mining to operate is arguably the most contentious.
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- In this context, the regulatory framework like the “Western Ghats Ecology Authority” as proposed by the Gadgil report can be considered.
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- Commissioning state-level units, under the Environment (Protection) Act, and to adopt the zoning systems as proposed are other aspects to consider.
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- These actions can help in keeping incompatible activities out of the Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs).
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Source: The Hindu

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