Proposed ESZ in Neyyar and Peppara Wildlife Sanctuaries

Why in news?

The MoEFCC has issued a draft notification to declare an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) that will encompass large swathes of areas around the Neyyar and Peppara wildlife sanctuaries in Thiruvananthapuram.

What is the significance about Neyyar and Peppara wildlife sanctuaries?

- The Neyyar and Peppara wildlife sanctuaries form a part of the core area of the Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve in the Western Ghats.
- There are around 1000 species of flowering plants that belong to 132 families in the protected areas.
- They are known to sustain diverse fauna including 43 mammal species, 233 bird species, 46 reptile species, 13 amphibian species, 27 marine species and a wide variety of butterflies and odonates.
- The endangered Myristica swamps are also endemic to the protected areas.

Myristica swamps are a type of freshwater swamp forest that have adapted to inundation by way of stilt roots and knee roots. They are found in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka State, southern parts of Kerala and in Maharashtra's Sindhudurga district.

What is the notification about?

- The draft notification seeks to conserve and protect an area of 70.906 sq km.
- **Activities promoted in the ESZ-** The eco-friendly activities that will be encouraged include
    - Rain water harvesting
    - Organic farming
    - Cottage industries
    - Use of renewable energy and fuels
    - Agro-forestry
    - Eco-friendly transport
    - Restoration of degraded forests
    - Horticulture and herbal plantation
    - Propagation of environmental awareness
- **Activities prohibited in the ESZ-** The draft notification chiefly proposes a blanket prohibition on 15 activities including
    - All new and existing commercial mining, stone quarrying and crushing units
    - New industries and expansion of existing polluting industries
    - Setting up for major hydroelectric projects, solid waste disposal sites, large-scale commercial livestock and poultry farms, saw mills, other wood-based industrial units and

brick kilns
    - Use, production and storage of hazardous and explosives items, discharge of untreated effluents, s, commercial use of firewood, dumping of solid, plastic and chemical wastes in rivers and land areas, and encroachment of riverbanks
- **Activities strictly regulated in the ESZ**
    - No constructions of any kind will be permitted within 1 km of the protected areas
    - No trees can be felled without prior permission of a competent authority in the State government
    - Regulation of
        - collection of non-timber forest produce
        - erection of electrical and communication towers, cable-laying
        - infrastructure development including widening of existing roads and construction of new ones
        - tourism-related activities
        - night-time vehicular movement
        - discharge of treated waste water and effluents
        - commercial extraction of surface and ground water
        - solid waste management
    - The local communities will be permitted to continue ongoing agriculture, horticulture, dairy farming and aquaculture under applicable laws.

What are the other provisions of the notification?

- **Zonal Master Plan**- The draft notification mandates the preparation of a Zonal Master Plan in consultation with various departments.
- A master plan for tourism will form a component of the Zonal Master Plan.
- **Monitoring committee**- A monitoring committee chaired by the District Collector will have to be constituted to monitor the ESZ.
- It will comprise the district panchayat president, a representative of a NGO involved in natural conservation, an expert in ecology and environment and a representative of the Kerala State Biodiversity Board.

What are the apprehensions of the local populace?

- **Affects infra development**- The restrictions are likely to hinder the ongoing infrastructure development projects including the Hill Highway project that is aimed at improving road connectivity in the high ranges.

- **Migration problems**- The residents fear such hindrances could stagnate the quality of life and eventually lead to a phased migration from the region.
- **Affects title deeds**- Numerous families who have been awaiting the disbursal of title deeds for occupied lands feared the notification could affect their hopes.
- **Impact on agriculture**- Farmers in Amboori where rubber cultivation accounts for nearly 90% of agricultural activities feels the regulations might create difficulties in chopping down trees for replanting.

What lies ahead?

- Human habitations and agricultural lands around the Thattekad bird sanctuary in Ernakulam were recently excluded from the proposed ESZ on the basis of the State government's proposal that followed widespread protests.
- The MoEFCC has provided 60 days to raise objections or suggestions on the proposals.
- The State government will be provided an opportunity to submit a revised proposal at a later stage.

Reference

1. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/explained-proposed-eco-sensitive-zone-in-neyyar-and-peppara-wildlife-sanctuaries/article65298862.ece?homepage=true

