Western Ghats notified as Ecologically Sensitive Area

Why in news?

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After several years of discussions, the government has finally notified 56,825 square km area in the Western Ghats (WG) region as ecologically sensitive area (ESA).

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What does it mean?

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- The notified land is spread over six states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
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- Concerned state govts and stakeholders have 60 days' time to raise objections/make suggestions. If no changes have to be made, the notification will become final.
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- In the ESA, all kinds of mining activities, thermal power plants and highly polluting industries would no longer be allowed.
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- The existing mines shall be phased out within five years from the issue of final notification or on the expiry of the existing mining lease, whichever is earlier.
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- All new **'Red' category industries** and the expansion of such existing industries shall be banned.
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- Other kinds of projects and activities, like operation of hydropower plants, and **'orange' category of industries,** will be strictly regulated in the ESA.
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- New expansion projects of building and construction with built-up area of 20,000 square meters and above shall be prohibited too.
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Why Western Ghats is so important?

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- Western Ghats is a mountain range that runs parallel to the western coast of the Indian peninsula, located entirely in India.
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- It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of the eight **"hottest hot-spots"** of biological diversity in the world.
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- A total of 39 properties including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries were designated as world heritage sites - twenty in Kerala, ten in Karnataka, five in Tamil Nadu and four in Maharashtra.
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- 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.
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- Thus, the demarcation of an ESA is an **effort to protect the fragile eco-system** from indiscriminate industrialisation, mining and unregulated development.
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- Two committees – Gadgil and Kasturirangan – were appointed in the last eight years to identify the areas that needed to be kept out from such activities.
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What did Gadgil report say?

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- The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), also known as the Gadgil Commission has **designated the entire hill range as an Ecologically Sensitive Area**.
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- The panel has classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3.
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- It recommended that no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1.

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- For Goa, the committee suggested an indefinite moratorium on new environmental clearances for mining in ESZ 1 and 2.
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- No new polluting industries, including coal-based power plants, should be allowed in ESZ 1 and 2.
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- The existing red and orange category industries should be asked to switch to zero pollution by 2016.
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- Gadgil Committee asked for bottom to top approach i.e., from Gram sabhas to top, rather than a top to bottom approach.
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- It suggested the formation of a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA),** a statutory authority which enjoys the powers under the Environment (Protection) Act.
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- The major criticism faced by Gagdil Committee was that it was **more environment-friendly** and is not in tune with the ground realities.
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What did Kasturirangan report say?

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- The report has **sought to balance the two concerns** of development and environment protection, by watering down the environmental regulation regime proposed by Gadgil.
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- It seeks to bring just **37% of the Western Ghats under the ESA zones** — down from the 64% suggested by the Gadgil report.
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- The report distinguishes between cultural and natural landscape.
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- It said that cultural landscapes, which include human settlements, agri fields and plantations, covered 58.44% of the Western Ghats.
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- It identified 90% of the remaining natural landscape area marked as an ESA. The panel called for a complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in this area.
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- It also made several **pro-farmer recommendations**, including the

exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ESAs.
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- The major criticism of the committee is it used remote sensing and aerial survey methods for zonal demarcation of land in WG.
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- The use of this erroneous method had caused inclusion of many villages under ESAs.
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What needs to be done?

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- The question that needs speedy resolution is how much of the Western Ghats can be demarcated as ecologically sensitive?
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- Are other areas free to be exploited for industrial activity with no environmental consequences?
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- More complicated is the assessment of ecosystem services delivered by the forests, lakes, rivers to communities.
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- All this points to the **need for wider and more open consultation with people at all levels,** imbuing the process with scientific insights.
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- Thus, there is little purpose in the centre returning with another draft notification to identify ecologically sensitive areas.
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- What it needs is a framework under which scientific evidence and public concerns are debated and the baseline for ESAs arrived at.
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Source: The Indian Express

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