

Why Implementation of the Recommendations of Kasturirangan Committee in Western Ghats is Important

What is the issue?

Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai informed the Centre that the state is opposed to the Kasturirangan Committee report on Western Ghats.

Why Western Ghats is so important?

- The Western Ghats is spread across the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat.
- It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and is one of the eight "**hottest hot-spots**" of biological diversity in the world.
- It hosts properties including national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, world heritage sites, etc.
- 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.
- Thus, the demarcation of an ESA is an **effort to protect the fragile ecosystem** from indiscriminate industrialisation, mining and unregulated development.
- 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.

What are the recommendations of the Kasturirangan committee report?

*The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), also known as the **Gadgil Commission** has designated the **entire hill range** as an Ecologically Sensitive Area and classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3.*

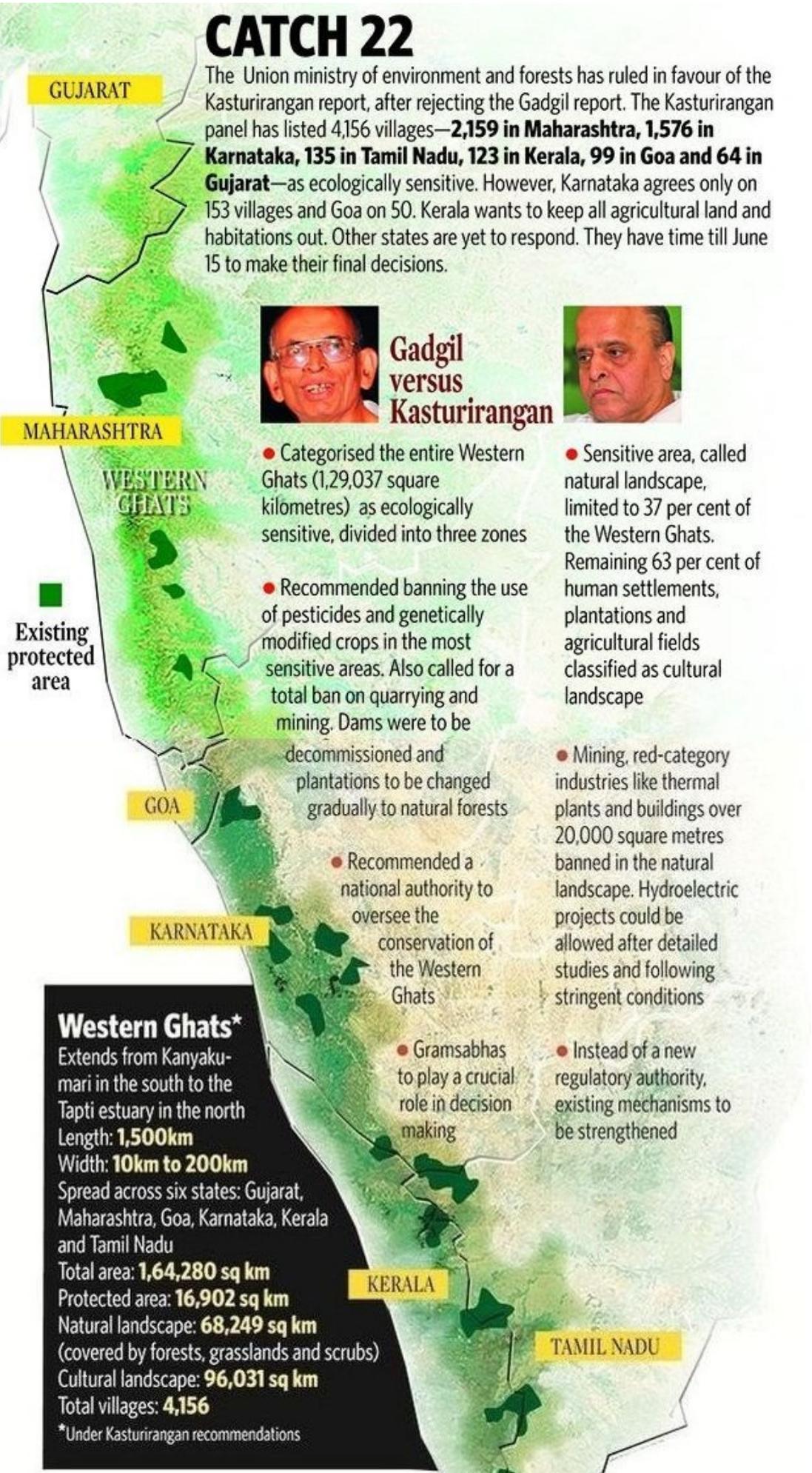
*It suggested the formation of a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA)**, a statutory authority which enjoys the powers under the*

Environment (Protection) Act.

- The Kasturirangan committee report proposes **37% of the total area of Western Ghats**, which is roughly 60,000 square kilometres, to be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).
- Out of this, 20,668 sq km of the area falls in Karnataka covering 1,576 villages.
- The report recommended a blanket ban on mining, quarrying, setting up of red category industries and thermal power projects.
- It stated that the impact of infrastructural projects on the forest and wildlife should be studied before permission is given for these activities.
- It also stated that the boundary of the 39 UNESCO Heritage sites are in most cases, boundaries of the legally demarcated national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, tiger reserves and forest divisions which are already accorded with high level of protection.
- The state of Karnataka has the highest percentage of the ESA- 46.50 %.

CATCH 22

The Union ministry of environment and forests has ruled in favour of the Kasturirangan report, after rejecting the Gadgil report. The Kasturirangan panel has listed 4,156 villages—**2,159 in Maharashtra, 1,576 in Karnataka, 135 in Tamil Nadu, 123 in Kerala, 99 in Goa and 64 in Gujarat**—as ecologically sensitive. However, Karnataka agrees only on 153 villages and Goa on 50. Kerala wants to keep all agricultural land and habitations out. Other states are yet to respond. They have time till June 15 to make their final decisions.



Gadgil versus Kasturirangan



- Categorized the entire Western Ghats (1,29,037 square kilometres) as ecologically sensitive, divided into three zones

- Recommended banning the use of pesticides and genetically modified crops in the most sensitive areas. Also called for a total ban on quarrying and mining. Dams were to be decommissioned and plantations to be changed gradually to natural forests

- Recommended a national authority to oversee the conservation of the Western Ghats

- Gramsabhas to play a crucial role in decision making

- Sensitive area, called natural landscape, limited to 37 per cent of the Western Ghats. Remaining 63 per cent of human settlements, plantations and agricultural fields classified as cultural landscape

- Mining, red-category industries like thermal plants and buildings over 20,000 square metres banned in the natural landscape. Hydroelectric projects could be allowed after detailed studies and following stringent conditions

- Instead of a new regulatory authority, existing mechanisms to be strengthened

Western Ghats*

Extends from Kanyakumari in the south to the Tapti estuary in the north
Length: **1,500km**

Width: **10km to 200km**

Spread across six states: Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu

Total area: **1,64,280 sq km**

Protected area: **16,902 sq km**

Natural landscape: **68,249 sq km**

(covered by forests, grasslands and scrubs)

Cultural landscape: **96,031 sq km**

Total villages: **4,156**

*Under Kasturirangan recommendations

Why the Karnataka government rejected the report?

- **Environment vs Development-** The state government believes that implementation of the report will halt the developmental activities in the region.
- Bommai said that declaring Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive zone would adversely affect the livelihood of people in the region.
- **Ground reality-** The Kasturirangan report has been prepared based on the satellite images, but the ground reality is different.
- People of the region have adopted agriculture and horticultural activities in an eco-friendly manner prioritising the environment protection as per the Forest Protection Act.

What is the present status of the deemed forest land in Karnataka?

- As per the Supreme Court, in *Godavarman Thirumulpad Vs Union of India & others*, the term forest as per dictionary meaning and the forests recorded in government records were to be included in the broad definition of 'forests' along with notified forests for consideration of any diversion proposal under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.
- The expert committee appointed by the Government of Karnataka identified 10 lakh hectares of land in the State as deemed forest.
- The state expert committee in 1997 had identified 10 lakh hectares of deemed forest area which over the years were shrunk by the successive governments.
- The Karnataka government has planned to further shrink the deemed forest area from 3,30,186.938 hectares to 2 lakh hectares.
- There have been massive encroachments across the state forest areas and these have been done at the behest of political leaders.
- Considering the changes in climate which would affect the people's livelihood and the nation's economy, it is essential to conserve the fragile ecosystems that costs less compared to spending money on restoration and rejuvenation.

Reference

1. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-implementation-recommendations-kasturirangan-committee-western-ghats-important-7660924/>



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