

# Destruction of Ecologically- Sensitive Zones, Western Ghats

## Crisis arose due to destruction of ecologically-sensitive zones in W Ghats

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- A river decided to change its course on August 8 and snaked into human habitat at Kannappankundu in Puthupaddy panchayat in Kozhikode
- 200 people were shifted to relief camps in Thamarassery taluk after landslips occurred on August 9
- At Pallivasal near Munnar, 22 foreigners were trapped at Palm Judy resort following a landslide on August 10
- Landslides near Vythiri bus station and the Ninth hairpin curve on Thamarassery Ghat Road disrupted traffic on August 9

A geographical analysis of areas that suffered maximum damage this monsoon show that they were all classified as ecologically-sensitive zones (ESZs) under the Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel report (WGEEP).

The report was binned by both UDF and LDF governments, with both Idukki and Thamarassery bishops throwing their weight behind the political parties. The UDF government even passed a resolution in the assembly rejecting the report saying that it went against public interest.

The maximum damage inflicted by monsoon in the past ten days were in Wayanad and Idukki. Areas like Munnar, Thamarassery, Vythiri and Thiruvambady were classified under ESZ as per the WGEEP report.

Kerala has 15 taluks under zone-I, two in zone-II and eight within Zone-III. Idukki districts topped the zone-I list and yet maximum illegal buildings came up here. Wayanad followed the 'Munnar model' and nature hit back with a vengeance. People don't understand that WGEEP report is not against development as claimed by Kerala Congress politicians and church authorities. The report allows sustainable development in zone-II and zone-III.

The report said that since zone-I is core forest area, which lies close to Western Ghats, there is a ban on land use for non-forest purpose or agricultural activity. However, it allowed extension of village settlements to accommodate increase in population. It also allowed road and public infra expansion with MoEF nod. Wayanad and Idukki have maximum taluks in zone-I.

Zone-II was allowed to renovate and extend existing structures such as hotels and resorts. Zone-III was allowed use of land for non-agri purpose. Permission for activity was to be given only after considering various socio-economic parameters of the area. "It is important to understand that we need to preserve the buffer zones around the forests in Western Ghats or the region will fall like a pack of cards. If we don't protect the region, landslides and flash floods will follow claiming livelihood and lives," said Madhav Gadgil who headed the WGEEP panel.

Quarrying is another major issue in both these districts. There are 1,700 illegal granite-crushing units in Kerala.

### WHAT WGEEP REPORT RECOMMENDED

- Madhav Gadgil-led Western Ghats Expert Ecology Panel (WGEEP) report recommended that 1.4L sq km in Western Ghats ecosystem be graded into three ecologically-sensitive zones (ESZ) in a uniform, phased manner without adversely affecting the livelihood of inhabitants
- Wayanad, Idukki have max taluks in Zone-I

### ESZ CLASSIFICATION

**Zone-I: 15 taluks**

- It is core forest area that lies close to Western Ghats. Ban on land use for non-forest purpose or agricultural activity
- However, it allows extension of village settlements to accommodate increase in population
- It is not against road and public infra expansion, but MoEF nod is required
- No mining in area

**Zone-II: Two taluks**

- Allows renovation and extension of existing structures such as hotels and resorts
- Mining not permitted

**Zone-III: Eight taluks**

- Allows use of land for non-agri purpose. Permission for activity is given only after considering various socio-economic parameters of the area

### EXPERT SPEAK

Western Ghats, like eastern Himalayan ranges, have become prone to landslides as there has been rampant destruction of nature. Idukki is a classic case where there needs to be greater conservation of green zones. Large perennial tree growth can stop soil erosion, mitigating the risk of landslides

— Madhav Gadgil, ARCHITECT OF WGEEP REPORT

Landslides in Idukki prove that the eco-fragile region needs to be conserved. Gadgil report should be implemented without delay

— VS Vijayan, MEMBER, WGEEP PANEL

### ABOUT WESTERN GHATS

- Western Ghats is a mountain range along the western side of India. The Unesco world heritage site is one of the eight hotspots of biological diversity in the world
- The range starts near the Gujarat and Maharashtra border and runs approximately 1,600km through Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala till Kanyakumari
- These hills form a catchment area for complex riverine drainage systems
- The area has over 5000 species of flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species and 179 amphibian species

### Landslides continue to hit Silent Valley

Palakkad: Landslides are being reported from the core and buffer zones of Silent Valley National Park. There were also landslides in Chandomchola which is the only entrance to the Park. There were also landslides in Alappuzha and Thoni forests near