

Declare Eastern Ghats UNESCO cultural heritage sites, say environmental groups

'Five States encompassed by the Ghats should come out with action plan'

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All the historically and culturally significant mountains of the Eastern Ghats should be declared UNESCO cultural heritage sites, and the five States that the Ghats encompass - Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka and Odisha - should prepare an action plan to protect and conserve their ecology and natural resources, the Greens' Alliance for Conservation of Eastern Ghats (GRACE) and the Council for Green Revolution (CGR) have said.

They have demanded that the Central government form a Regional Coordination Committee of States on Eastern Ghats with a mandate for linking and coordinating activities relating to the Ghats, and have sought the appointment of a Nature Ombudsman for the Eastern Ghats and the publication of an Environmental Atlas of the Eastern Ghats, incorporating various ecological, social, cultural and heritage information, among others. These were all laid out in a report titled 'Eastern Ghats - Environment Outlook', released here on Tuesday.

The report said the degradation of the Eastern Ghats, which began a century ago, had accelerated since the 1970s, and the ecosystem of the hills had lost their natural species composition, forest structure, size, scale and character.

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the situation was grave due to the threats and challenges to floral and faunal elements, and the bio-geographic significance of the Eastern Ghats was declining fast. "The time has come for all the local governments to ensure that the conservation of the Eastern Ghats and the regeneration of all its biodiversity are top priority," the report said. "The region hosts wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves and Ramsar convention sites. However, a large part of the Eastern

Ghats wilderness is yet to be covered under the conservation umbrella," it added.

"It is incumbent on the five States to make efforts to protect the fragile ecosystem that is home to nearly 5 million tribal people belonging to nearly 60 indigenous communities," environmental scientist Dr. N. Sai Bhaskar Reddy said.

"A session for Members of Parliament from the five States is being planned to educate them about the gravity of the situation and the need to protect the Ghats, so that they can make efforts to bring in policy measures to ensure that the fragile ecosystem is protected," he said.

"The tribes of the Eastern Ghats are stifled in conflicting interests between go-

vernments, corporate and neighbouring lowland societies and militants. Their lands have become sites for clandestine dumping of toxic waste, illegal mining, poaching and hunting, including human trafficking," according to the report.

Former Madras High Court judge, Justice T. Mathivanan, who released the report, said, "I am afraid to know that nearly half of the forest ecosystem has been wiped out of the Eastern Ghats." He added that the biological integrity of the Eastern Ghats had to be protected on a war-footing, and a marshal plan was needed for the revival of its natural glory and green cover and for ensuring that wildlife were free from the fear of extinction.