

Saving Western Ghats ecosystem need of hour, say experts in Karnataka

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Experts have indicated that the cost of calamities is far higher than the loss of economic activities in the fragile Western Ghats that traverse through four states, including Karnataka, which has once again refused to declare the region as eco-sensitive in the garb of saving livelihoods.

Karnataka chief minister Basvaraj Bommai on December 4 continued to follow the footsteps of his predecessors in refusing to go ahead with the Kasturirangan committee report, which proposed that around 37% of the roughly 60,000 square km area be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).

The Western Ghats, a chain of mountains that run parallel to India's western coast, traverses through Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and is around 1.4 lakh square kms and a 1600 km stretch. Of this, around 20,600 kms falls in Karnataka.

"Considering the climate changes (evident from recurring floods, droughts, landslides, increasing temperature, etc), which would affect the livelihood of all people (irrespective of poor or rich) and hurt the nation's economy. It would be prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems, which costs less compared to the situation prone to calamities (with changes in the climate) than spending money /resources for restoration/rejuvenation," Dr TV Ramachandra, from the Centre for Ecological Sciences in the Indian Institute of Science told Hindustan Times.

To be sure, all other states had earlier rejected the Prof. Madhav Gadgil report, calling it "anti-agrarian", necessitating the setting up of another committee under Dr Kasturirangan, which experts said, was a 'diluted' version that tried to find a balance in saving livelihoods as well as the rapidly denigrating ecology.

This year alone, Karnataka suffered rain-related losses of up to ₹11,916.30 crores in October and November, which have been one of the wettest years in the state's history, indicating the impacts of climate change.

There were 282 landslides in 2020 in this region as against 161 in 2019, registering a 75% increase in Karnataka due to deforestation, unscientific road construction in the southern state alone between 2019 and 2020, according to government data, Hindustan Times reported on April 8.

The data had prompted the environment ministry in the state to reconsider the practice of awarding tenders based on lower costs and consider a more scientific approach in the construction of public infrastructure that does not block natural drainages or deforestation, which would further loosen the soil.

Ramachandra said that only 15% of the state's geographical area is forested, compared to 21% in 1985.

Experts said that the large-scale developmental projects like irrigation, reservoirs, dams, economic zones, townships and land conversion have led to the loss of precious green cover, leaving forest cover and conservation only within protected areas.

Natural forests show a decline from 7.5% in 1985 to 5.7% around 2019. During the same period, moist deciduous forests came down to 4.1% from 5.7%, and dry deciduous forests have nearly halved from 4.0% to 2.2

According to government data, public infrastructure in this fragile region accounts for 2.4% today as against 0.4% in 1974.

Dr K. Ullas Karanth, one of India's most well-known tigers, wildlife and environmental conservationists, said that in a country like India, denying people's legitimate aspirations for developmental activities may not be possible.

However, he does say that the focus should remain on restricting destructive activities.

"Such destructive activities include infrastructure projects as well as local people's exploitation of nature through illegal hunting, excessive livestock grazing, forest product collection and increasingly

a new wave of forest encroachments unleashed by the mindless and never-ending application of the Forest Rights Act," he said.

Karant also questioned the quality of conservationists and the misapplication of funds by forest departments.

"I think this demarcation has to be a careful scientific effort for each Protected Area. Well-intentioned but coarse grain declarations at macro-scales do more harm than good. Earlier overreach by courts and government-appointed experts who identified very large human-dominated landscapes outside the protected areas as the eco-sensitive zone has escalated to the present situation where locally conservationists are being aggressively attacked by everyone else and are losing heart, the forest departments are emasculated and even within areas where the Indian Forest Act and Wildlife Protection are applicable flagrant violations are taking place, he added.

Joseph Hoover, a wildlife activist and former member of the state board for wildlife said that the continued destruction of the western ghats will impact nearly 220 million people living in the southern states alone.

"We are frequently ravaged by extreme climate events, but our short-sighted policymakers haven't assessed the impact of climate change. As they live in comfort, they haven't felt the pinch yet! Most development works could be attributed to electoral promises made by local leaders. Some politicians push for unsustainable projects to earn kickbacks and favour industrialists and business tycoons. Unfortunately, it is being done to the detriment of nature and people," he said.

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