

# Outlook

## Why 'eco-sensitive zones' in Kerala's protected forests have left the state divided

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The Supreme Court order on June 3 to create a one-kilometre Eco-sensitive Zone (ESZ) within the boundaries of all wildlife sanctuaries, protected forest lands and national parks has been mounting protests and criticism in the hilly regions of Kerala. A three-judge bench of Justices L Nageswara Rao, BR Gavai and Aniruddha Bose, pronounced the judgement in a petition seeking protection of forest lands in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. The judgement referred to the guidelines on buffer zones issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) of the Government of India on February 9, 2011.

If the existing ESZ goes beyond the one-kilometer buffer zone or if any statutory instrument prescribes a higher limit, then such extended boundary shall prevail, reported the *Live Law*.

Following a series of protests and disgruntlement among politicians and people of the State, the Center on Saturday said that it will approach the apex court regarding the order. However, responding to a query about the order, Union Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution and Environment, Forest and Climate Change Ashwini Kumar Choubey said any verdict of the Supreme Court has to be accepted.

What is an Eco-sensitive Zone and why is it needed?

As per the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016), issued by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, land within 10 km of the boundaries of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries are to be notified as eco-fragile zones or Eco-sensitive Zones.

However, the general rule of a 10km boundary may vary depending on the ecology of the land. Areas beyond 10 km can also be notified by the Union government as ESZs, if they hold larger ecologically important "sensitive corridors".

ESZs will act as a "shock absorber" for the protected areas. According to the [guidelines on the buffer zone](#), they would act as a transition zone from areas with higher protection to the ones with lesser protection. It will further protect the fragile ecology of certain areas from the impact of human activities. While few activities will be prohibited, others can be regulated.

According to the guidelines, activities like mining, commercial use of woods, setting up of industries and salt mines, use of hazardous subjects and so on, within the ESZ, are now allowed. While setting up of hotels, felling of trees, movement of vehicles etc can be regulated, organic farming and rainwater harvesting will be allowed.

Why are people protesting in Kerala?

Idukki district observed a hartal on Friday, called by the ruling CPI(M), seeking the Center's intervention. In the Wayanad district, various political parties, farmers' outfits and trade bodies have charted out protests in the coming weeks.

The Kerala Independent Farmers Association (KIFA) chairman Alex Ozhukayil said that around 20 towns and one lakh families in the State will be affected, according to a report by *The New Indian Express*.

He said that the total extent of the wildlife sanctuaries in Kerala is eight lakh acres. If one km of ESZ is demarcated from their boundaries, around 4 lakh acres of human settlements, including farmlands, would come within that purview and that would be a matter of sheer survival of lakhs of people.

Speaking on the matter, State Forest Minister A K Saseendran said that the SC direction to implement an ESZ of one kilometre around each protected forest would cause considerable hardships to the people of Kerala, especially those living or working close to forested areas for years. Due to the high density of human population around the forest lands, politicians and people are demanding that human settlements must be exempted from it.

Saseendran said that there were 23 such places in the state which would be adversely affected by the court's direction. He also said that the verdict came at a time when the Centre was about to allow the state's request for exempting 20 out of these 23 places from being brought within the limits of any ESZ.

The High Range Protection Committee in the Idukki district of the state has vehemently opposed the SC direction. The convener of the committee told a TV channel that it was a dangerous decision as far as Idukki was concerned and was the outcome of the alleged conspiracy of environmental organisations and the forest department.

A similar stand was indicated by residents and traders of Sulthan Bathery town in the Wayanad district of the State.

The town, surrounded on all sides by dense forests, would cease to exist if the apex court direction is implemented, some people of the area told a TV channel.

On Sunday, at an event held on the occasion of World Environment Day, Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan had welcomed the apex court's direction, but at the same time had also said that the interests of the people, living in areas which may fall in the ESZ, also have to be protected.

He had said that the government will consider legal solutions to the problem and will raise the issue before the central government.

Environmentalists remain divided

Kerala Agricultural University wildlife science department dean P O Nameer said that there was no need to panic and the livelihood of farmers will not be affected, reported *The New Indian Express*.

At the same time, refuting rumours of human settlements being affected, the Head of forest force (HoFF) Bennichen Thomas told *TNIE* that the steps involved would not upset the farmers' livelihood. "Only quarrying, red category polluting industries and major hydroelectric projects will be prohibited. There exists a default 10km ESZ around the forest areas now. Has any farmer been affected?" he told the publication.

A section of environmentalists and policy activists have criticised the order citing that they have no scientific basis and do not address topographical features. They further urged the authorities to consider participatory planning exercises while implementing the ESZ.

Speaking to *DownToEarth*, Kanchi Kohli, a researcher at the Centre for Policy Research said that declaring ESZs around PAs is a vexed, negotiated and conflicted process. "It ideally requires governments to reconcile historical and current land, its uses and rights through a participatory planning exercise," he added.

A report by *The News Minute* quoted CR Bijoy, a researcher and an expert in resource conflicts, "No criteria for eco-sensitive zones have been specified. One needs to ask what is the science behind this one kilometre? There are areas where states are yet to demarcate the zones."

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