

# Western Ghats and Wild Life Preservation

*P K Sujathan*

*“What I would like to say is scripted by God in trees, flowers and clouds. So, I will not desist from planting trees for fear that the universe is nearing its end.”*

*-Martin Luther King*



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Social forestry  
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**W**ESTERN GHATS, as the name implies, refers to the impregnable Ghats located at the western side of India. It is the beautiful, critical and invaluable bounty of nature. It is believed that Western Ghats is roughly 500-700 lakh years old i.e older than the Great Himalaya. It is the habitat and biological hotspot of 5000 flora, 16 never ever seen endemic birds, 179 omnivorous species and 191 pure water fishes. It is 1600 km in length and 900 meters in height and stretches from Thapthi river of Gujarat to Kanyakumari of TamilNadu. It is pervasive throughout 6 states of India viz Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The toppest peak of Western Ghats is Anamudi found in the Idukki District of Kerala. The major seven clusters of Western Ghats are Agasthyamala, Periyar, Anamala, Nilagiri, Thalakkaveri, Kudhramukh and Sahyadri. The direct and indirect needs of around thirty crore people of these six states for drinking water and irrigation are invariably met by Western Ghats.

Taking into account the ecological mainstay and traditional significance, Western Ghats have been added to the enviable list of UNESCO's world heritage sites on July 1, 2012 at a meeting in the Russian city of St. Petersburg. Being a treasure trove of biodiversity, the Ghats irrevocably needs tender treatment and unflinching protection. Thirty nine sites of the Ghats have been selected as heritage sites by the World Heritage Committee. The Committee viewed that the Ghats represents 'geomorphic features of immense importance with unique biophysical and ecological processes.'

However, it is dolesome to note that the Ghats is subjected to rigorous exploitation of mankind. The ecological imbalance and the irregular rhythm of nature is mainly attributed to the unfettered axing of trees and thus paving the way for the desertification of the zone. The concomitant occurrence of flood and drought, soil erosion, landmining etc are the deleterious fall-outs of the deforestation drive of mankind. The Red Data published in 2012 signal that the flora and

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fauna of the Ghats is increasingly depleted and decimated over the years. Silent Valley, one of the must see destinations in a man's life also belongs to the Ghats and is on the verge of premature death. The major threats are

- Unscientific methods of fishing such as electro fishing, dynamiting, industrial effluents, introduction of exotic species (the food preference of exotic species is similar to that of endemic species and will adversely affect the progeny of endemic species.)
- Illegal mining is found rampant especially in Goa and Karnataka. Mining activities badly necessitate enormous quantum of water which in turn causes siphoning off water into mining pits. Naturally, there is dearth of water for farming and drinking.
- Indiscriminate sand mining and the profiteering of sand mafia also tell upon the health of the Ghats.
- The large scale thermal plants such as cement, iron and steel in the states of the Ghats heighten the temperature of

nearby regions by dissolving toxic chemicals from air. In addition, thermal power plants emit Fly ash containing lead and mercury which is deposited in river and thereby turn detrimental to the reproductive cycle of fishes.

- Not surprisingly, the unprecedented increase in farm houses in the hill become more consumers of energy as construction fervor is on the upbeat in the Ghats region.
- As a result of the aforesaid nefarious activities, sacred groves are malevolently weeded out and thus displacing and dispossessing the tribals.

### Western Ghats Development Programme

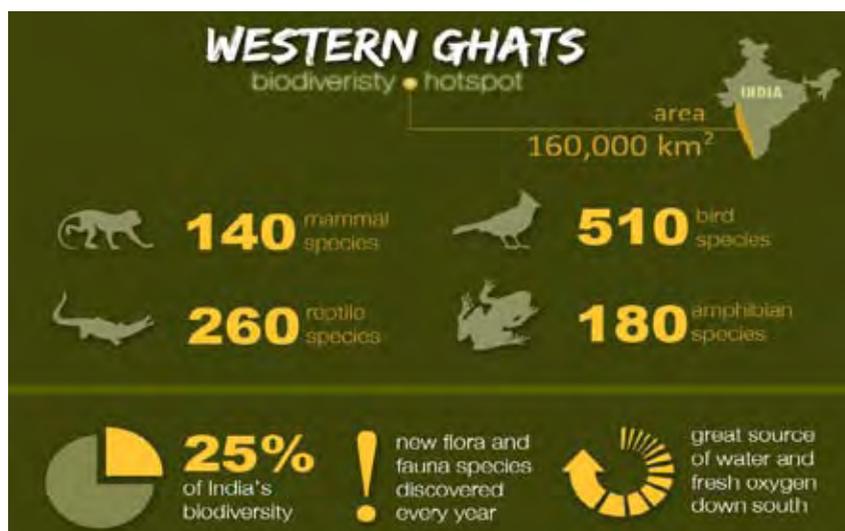
Having understood that preservation of the Ghats and its wildlife is the need of the hour, the Govt of India, following the mandate of the National Development Council, promulgated the execution of the Western Ghats Development Programme in the Fifth FYP (1974-79). Although, at the outset, emphasis on and priority for was accorded to the expansion

of economic activities, there was a paradigm shift from the Ninth FYP onwards wherein *watershed* based development approach became the watchword. The key objectives, therefore included

- To make use of land and water in the vicinity in a judicious manner so as to tide over soil erosion, drought etc and thereby improve availability of water, food, fodder and fuel.
- To execute in letter and spirit watershed based development programmes with the help of watershed society.
- To select a vibrant Programme Implementing Agency to prioritise the implementation of locally felt needs.
- To optimize the use of natural resources and assure the safety of forest.
- To establish proper linkage between watershed committee and Financial Institutions.
- To assure equality and social justice for the destitute and women.
- To foster watershed based research programmes.
- To bring about entry point activities such as protection of pond and water tank, infrastructure development, construction of food bridge, digging common well, electrification, construction of open auditorium, irrigation pumpset, drainage etc.

### Modus operandi of implementation

As part of its execution, a watershed committee comprising of the president of the local body concerned as the chairman or the chairperson and agriculture



officer as the convener would be constituted. The committee is required to gather information on the watershed with the help of the resource map of the Panchayat. Thereafter the problems of the watershed area such as poverty eradication, improvement in infrastructure, trends in agriculture production etc and their suggestions and solutions would be charted out on a priority basis with the help of local people. On this basis, a draft action plan comprising the following areas would be prepared threadbare.

- a. Why action Plan?
- b. Information on the watershed area such as its total length, location, features of the soil, slope of the land etc.

- c. Major objectives of the scheme.
- d. Training and awareness programmes, administrative expenses etc
- e. Preparation of watershed master plan, topo sheets, cadastral map etc
- f. Period of implementation (usually three years)
- g. Approval of the governing body of the respective local bodies.

Finally the District Level Co-ordination Committee, the apex committee at the district level under the chairmanship of the District Collector would accord final endorsement for the action plan. Out of the

total outlay, 80% would be the share of WGDP, 10% is the contribution from local body and the remaining 10% would be the contribution of the beneficiaries. It is also possible to construct footbridges the cost of which, should not exceed Rs2 lakh.

### Madhav Gadgil Committee Report

Madhav Gadgil, famous ecologist, was deputed to be the chairman of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel. The main objective of the Committee is to study the ecological and environmental issues hovering around Western Ghats and give salutary recommendations. Prof Gadgil submitted the report in August 2011 to the Union Ministry

Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ)			
	Zone #1	Zone #2	Zone #3
<b>Mining</b>	Do not give new licenses for mining.		Allow New mining license only if scarce minerals not available on the plains.  Existing mines should be under strict regulation and social audit.
	Where mining exists, it should be phased out in 5 years.	Existing mines should be under strict regulation and social audit.	
<b>Polluting Industry (Red/ Orange)</b>	Do not allow new industries. Existing industries must switch to zero pollution by 2016 or else close them down.		Allow new industries but with strict regulation and social audit.
<b>Non polluting industry (green/blue)</b>	Allow, but with strict regulation and social audit		
<b>River projects/dams</b>	No river projects higher than 3 meters.	Not higher than 15m	Any height allowed but with detailed environmental impact assessment.
<b>Power plants</b>	Do not allow new power plants.		Existing power plants may be allowed with strict regulation and social audit. New plants allowed only if they've zero pollution.
<b>Transport</b>	No new railway lines and major roads, except where it is highly essential (e.g Goa),  Avoid new highways, Expressways		Allowed, but only with strict regulation and social audit.
<b>Tourism</b>	Waste management, traffic, water and energy use to be strictly regulated.		

of Environment and Forest. He submitted Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) into three zones.

Zone 1: Needs highest protection.

Zone 2: Needs intermediate protection.

Zone 3: Needs moderate protection.

The Committee recommended to constitute Western Ghats Ecology Authority. This will have jurisdiction over the Western Ghats districts in six states i.e. Karnataka, Maharashtra, T. Nadu, Goa, Gujarat and Kerala.

### **Kasthurirangan Committee**

The Kasthurirangan panel was set up by GOI to study the Gadgil committee report on Western Ghats. The Committee's report was brought to light on 18/04/2013. Some of the crucial recommendations are

- a. There should be complete ban on mining activities in Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA).
- b. The ongoing mining activities should be banned within 5 years or as and when mining lease is expired.
- c. 90% of the natural forests left in the Ghats to be conserved under the ESA provisions.
- d. The Panel did not recommend an outright rejection of the Athirapally hydroelectric project in Karnataka and Gundiy Dam in Karnataka.
- e. The forest area falling within the ESA covers 4156 villages and so the villagers should be involved in decision making on the future projects.
- f. The township or construction over the size of 20,000 sqm in the ESA to be banned.

### **Conclusion**

Establishment of National Parks and National Sanctuaries is the best way to foster ecofriendship and develop green growth. Above all, Social forestry with a stress on exploitation of renewable forest resources may also be encouraged. Ernest efforts should also be taken to minimise the fragmentation of wild life habitat. □

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