

# Western Ghats Panel Identifies 17 Eco-sensitive Spots

by Anil S

**Kochi:** In view of the increasing decay of eco-systems and ecologically fragile lands (EFLs), the Western Ghats Expert Panel has been identifying ecologically sensitive areas in the Western Ghats ranges. A total of 17 eco-sensitive areas were identified in Kerala. The panel will finalise its findings by next week.

"The expert panel has been identifying ecologically-sensitive areas in the Western Ghats. This will be submitted to the soon-to-be-formed Western Ghats Authority. The sensitive spots will be finalised by May 3, 4 and 5. The panel will also recommend the terms for setting up the new authority," said V S Vijayan of the Western Ghats Expert Panel, who is also a former chairman of the Biodiversity Board, Kerala.

A number of major eco-systems across the state are currently facing destruction owing to various factors, including government intervention, population demands



and plantations. Environmentalists point out that interventions in the name of eco-tourism have been affecting sanctuaries in the state.

"The Western Ghats mountain range is one major eco-system which is broken at different stretches. The Chandragiri mountain ranges at Wayanad is broken at different places. It's not only about the continuity of the mountains, but also about the buffer zone and the fragile ecology associated with these areas," pointed out environmentalist Geojose.

Gavi and Sabarimala in Pathanamthitta are two locations which have been adversely affected due to hu-

man intervention. While in Gavi, the interventions are being done in the name of tourism, it's construction activities that affect the fragility of the Sabarimala forest region. Demands are on to protect Pulmedu (grasslands) associated with the Sabarimala temple.

"The Kochi backwaters which is part of the Vembanad estuary is under tremendous pressure due to increased activities. There's no proper authorised body to take a decision on what could be done or not in an EFL. The demand is to form a system which takes these aspects into consideration," Geojose said.

EFLs near paddy fields

and river basins should be brought under special focus, opined N Ramachandran of the Paristhithi Samrakshana Sangham, Aluva. "Paddy fields at Aluva were considered to be water storages for agriculture. With the leveling of paddy fields and sand mining, the Periyar has now become dead. The river has now become stagnant with 16 dams and three bunds at Parappallykkavu, Manjummal and Pathalam," he pointed out.

Greens point out the need to set up more sanctuaries for protection of mangroves. There are certain mangrove pockets like Kunjumangalam and Pappinisseri in Kannur and Kasargod districts. "Currently, the rights of EFLs are vested with the state government. There have been some delays in notifying some EFLs in the state," said Chief Conservator of Forests (Development and Custodian, EFL) K P Ouseph.

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