

## ‘PROTECT PLACES OUTSIDE ECOLOGICALLY SENSITIVE ZONES’

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

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Protection of places that are located outside the Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) notified by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) is very critical for the protection of the Western Ghats, according to K. C. Malhotra, Founder Chairperson of Save Western Ghats Movement (SWGM).

Such places constitute close to 90% of the Western Ghats, conservation strategy for which was not addressed in the reports of both the High Level Working Group on Western Ghats (Kasturirangan Committee Report) and Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (Gadgil Commission), he said.

“Around 10 % to 20 % of places in the Western Ghats are covered in ESA. The remaining places outside the ESA are spread across individual holdings in the forms of farms and estates. No study has been done to find what individuals and farmers living in these places are doing to the environment.

Micro-level understanding of their role is very critical in protecting the Western Ghats. These are the main issues SWGM is trying to address,” said Mr. Malhotra on the sidelines of the Ecological Festival of Western Ghats started in Coimbatore on Friday.

The latest notification by the MoEF had marked 56,825 sq.km. in the Western Ghats as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) as per the recommendations of the High Level Working Group.

### **Sacred groves**

According to Mr. Malhotra, the largest biodiversity spots he had witnessed outside the protected areas were in sacred groves, numbers of which have decreased drastically over the years.

“Some of the best sacred groves in the country are situated in Kerala, known as 'Kaavu' and around 2,000 of them are still remaining. Similar types of sacred groves are seen in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Apart from protecting some of the endangered species, several new species were discovered in sacred groves. All together, they constitute 4% of biodiversity outside the forests,” he said.

More focus was required for the protection of the coastal lines of the Western Ghats, which have got less attention over the years. SWGM, several groups and NGOs are working towards this goal, he said.

“A larger role is left in reaching out to the people to teach them their role in protecting the environment and the Western Ghats in individual and family level.

Social media is one of the means. Suitable literature has to be created to reach out to the children, in local languages too, which we are going to do with the help of Centre for Environment Education, Ahmedabad,” he said.

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