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The Seventh Draft: Western Ghats ESA Notification and a Decade of Deadlock

29 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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The Seventh Draft: Western Ghats ESA Notification and a Decade of Deadlock

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued its seventh draft Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA) notification for the Western Ghats on July 27, 2026, proposing 56,825.7 sq km across six states, with public objections invited for 60 days.

THE DRAFT, IN NUMBERS

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Proposed ESA extent	56,825.7 sq km
States covered	Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu
Goa's proposed ESA	1,461 sq km , across 108 villages , unchanged from the sixth draft (2024)
Objection window	60 days from the gazette publication of 27 July 2026
Key prohibitions	Ban on new mining, quarrying and sand mining ; ban on new or expanded thermal power plants , within the ESA
Existing mining	Must cease on lease expiry , or within 5 years of final notification, whichever is earlier

WHY "SEVENTH DRAFT"

The number itself is the story. A notification reaching its seventh draft without finalisation signals sustained, multi-year resistance from the affected States, each iteration attempting to narrow the footprint or adjust provisions in response to State-level objections, only to stall again.

REPORT/DRAFT	YEAR	KEY FEATURE
Madhav Gadgil Committee (Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel)	2011	Recommended the entire Western Ghats (about 1,29,037 sq km) be declared an ESA in graded zones
K. Kasturirangan Committee	2013	Scaled back Gadgil's recommendation to about 37 per cent of the Western Ghats (roughly 60,000 sq km), focusing on remaining natural landscape
Draft notifications 1-6	2014-2024	Successive attempts to finalise an ESA area based broadly on the Kasturirangan recommendation, repeatedly extended or redrafted amid State objections
Seventh draft	2026	Present notification, area of 56,825.7 sq km, revived attention after the 2024 Wayanad landslide

The **Gadgil Committee (2011)** took an ecology-first approach, recommending the broadest protective footprint. The **Kasturirangan Committee (2013)** was commissioned partly in response to State and local pushback against Gadgil's scope, and proposed a substantially narrower area focused on relatively intact natural landscape rather than the entire Western Ghats geography, including areas already under human settlement and cultivation. Even this narrower Kasturirangan-based approach has taken over a decade and seven drafts to approach finalisation.

WHAT AN ESA NOTIFICATION ACTUALLY RESTRICTS

An Eco-Sensitive Area, distinct from a Protected Area (national park, wildlife sanctuary), is a regulatory zone, typically around or within an ecologically significant landscape, where specified activities are prohibited or require special clearance, while other land uses, including habitation and agriculture, generally continue. The Western Ghats ESA is designed around this logic: it targets extractive and heavily polluting activities, mining, quarrying, and new thermal power capacity, rather than imposing a blanket restriction on all human activity within its boundary.

FEATURE	DETAIL
Legal basis	Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 , Section 3, empowering the Centre to restrict activities in specified areas
What it restricts	New/expanded mining and quarrying, new/expanded thermal power plants
What it does not automatically restrict	Existing habitation, agriculture and most non-extractive land use
Distinguishing feature from a Protected Area	An ESA is a regulatory buffer, not a sanctuary or park with dedicated management

THE RECURRING FAULT LINE

The core tension driving repeated redrafts has been the gap between an ecology-and-climate-risk framing (championed by conservationists and reinforced by disaster events like the 2024 Wayanad landslide, widely linked to unstable slopes in ecologically degraded terrain) and a livelihoods-and-development framing (championed by hill-state farmers, plantation owners and mining interests who argue the restrictions threaten existing economic activity without adequate compensation or transition support).

FRAMING	CORE ARGUMENT
Ecology/climate-risk	Unregulated mining, quarrying and land-use change increase landslide and flood risk in a fragile mountain ecosystem, as evidenced by Wayanad
Livelihoods/development	Restrictions threaten existing farming, plantation and mining livelihoods in hill districts without adequate transition support

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, [environmental impact assessment](#); disaster management, particularly landslide risk.

Prelims pointers:

- **Gadgil Committee (2011):** recommended the entire Western Ghats (about 1,29,037 sq km) as an ESA.
- **Kasturirangan Committee (2013):** scaled the recommendation to about 37 per cent of the Western Ghats, roughly 60,000 sq km.
- The **seventh draft (2026)** proposes **56,825.7 sq km** across **six states**.
- Legal basis: **Section 3, Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**.
- ESA notification bans **new mining/quarrying** and **new/expanded thermal power plants**; existing mining phases out on lease expiry or within **5 years**.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

WESTERN GHATS ESA, SEVENTH DRAFT (2026):

Proposed area: 56,825.7 sq km, across Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Goa's ESA unchanged at 1,461 sq km, 108 villages.

Gazette published 27 July 2026; 60-day objection window.

Bans new mining/quarrying/sand mining and new/expanded thermal power plants; existing mining phases out within 5 years or on lease expiry.

COMMITTEE HISTORY:

Gadgil Committee (2011): entire Western Ghats, about 1,29,037 sq km.

Kasturirangan Committee (2013): about 37 per cent of the Western Ghats, roughly 60,000 sq km.

Six earlier drafts (2014-2024) failed to reach finalisation.

Legal basis: Section 3, Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

Sources: Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, PIB

Source: The Seventh Draft: Western Ghats ESA Notification and a Decade of Deadlock — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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