

Minutes of the thirteenth meeting of Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) held at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, from 20th to 21st June 2011

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel met from 20th to 21st June 2011 at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.

The following members of the WGEEP were present:-

Prof. Madhav Gadgil Chairman
Shri B J Krishnan Member
Dr. V.S. Vijayan Member
Dr. R.V.Varma Member
Prof R. Sukumar Member
Dr. Ligia Noronha Member
Ms. Vidya S. Nayak Member
Dr. G.V. Subrahmanyam Member Secretary

Dr. K.N. Ganeshaiyah, UAS, Bengaluru; Dr. R.R. Navalgund, Director, Space Application Centre, Ahmedabad; Prof. S P Gautam, Chairman, Central Pollution Control Board; Dr. D.K. Subramaniam, IISc, Bengaluru; Dr Renee Borges, IISc, Bengaluru; all Members of the Panel could not attend the meeting. Dr. S.N. Prasad, SACON, Hyderabad and Dr. M.D. Subhash Chandran, CES, IISc also participated in the meeting. Dr. Amit Love (Deputy Director, MoEF) was also present during the meeting.

1. Dr S.N. Prasad gave an elaborate presentation on the geospatial database used for arriving at ecological sensitivity scores. He explained in detail the methodology adopted for scoring the variables used in the geospatial database. The variables used in the geospatial database are (i) elevation, (ii) slope, (iii) % forest cover, (iv) unique evergreen elements, (v) edge, (vi) riparian forests, (vii) endemic plants, and (viii) IUCN Red List category (mammals). He also elaborately explained the process of normalization of variables while calculating ecological sensitivity scores. It was decided that the raw data used in the geospatial database should be made available in the public domain and the detailed methodology used in the geospatial database be clearly brought out in the WGEEP report.

After detailed deliberations it was decided that the Western Ghats would be classified into 3 zones differing in ecological sensitivity, viz. (i) ESZ1, (ii) ESZ2 and (iii) ESZ3 while Protected Areas would be a separate zone by themselves. Protected Areas were given a special status as they are covered under the Wildlife Protection Act. The color scheme, which would be used for the depiction of these zones on the maps, was also finalized. Prof R. Sukumar suggested that habitat connectivity should be added as a variable in the geospatial database for assessing the ecological sensitivity of an area. Prof Madhav Gadgil suggested that the proposals of civil society groups for declaration of ecologically sensitive areas in the Western Ghats should be overlaid on this 4-zone map of the Western Ghats.

This was followed by a discussion on the methodology for demarcation and delineation of ESZ 1, ESZ 2 and ESZ 3 in the Western Ghats. It was agreed that scores of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries can be taken as the bench mark value for defining the lower cut off value for ESZ1, i.e. all grids which had ecological sensitivity scores equal to or higher than the lowest score of any grid in Protected Areas would be considered in ESZ 1. Prof R. Sukumar and Dr. Ligia Noronha said that it was important to identify outliers if such a methodology is adopted.

2. The Western Ghats Natural Heritage proposal submitted by the Government to UNESCO was discussed by WGEEP. It was felt that there is a need for greater participation of local people and communities in formulation and implementation of the Western Ghats National Heritage proposal.

3. Dr. G.V. Subrahmanyam raised the issue of the guidelines of the Wildlife Division of the Ministry with reference to demarcation of ecologically sensitive areas around National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries and how these guidelines can be integrated with the Panel's Recommendations. Prof. Madhav Gadgil said that the Wildlife Division should suitably consider WGEEP's recommendations regarding demarcation of ecologically sensitive zones.

4. Shri B.J. Krishnan gave a talk on the powers, functions and constitution of the proposed Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA). This was followed by a detailed point-wise discussion on the draft note prepared by Shri B.J. Krishnan on the WGEA.

5. Prof Madhav Gadgil informed the Panel members that it would be advisable for the WGEEP to submit an interim report on the matters referred to WGEEP by June 30, 2011. The issues referred to the WGEA are (i) moratorium on setting up of new industry and mining in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts of Maharashtra, (ii) Gundia hydroelectric power project, Karnataka, (iii) Athirappilly Hydroelectric Power Project, Kerala, and (iv) mining in Goa. All these issues were discussed in detail by the Panel.

6. Dr. Ligia Noronha gave a presentation on the mining sector in the state of Goa. M.D. Subash Chandran gave a talk on the Gundia Hydroelectric Power Project covering the chronological details of the project and the environmental and ecological impacts of the proposed project. He also provided an overview of the forest types of the area and the unique endemic species found in the project area of the Gundia Hydroelectric Power Project. Prof. Madhav Gadgil presented the salient points of his detailed report on Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg districts.

7. Dr. V.S. Vijayan gave a presentation on the Athirappilly Hydroelectric Power Project in Kerala. He detailed the chronological events with respect to the EIA process, environmental clearances and the cases in the High Court of Kerala. He further brought out the objections, which have been raised by the civil society groups on the techno-

economic feasibility of the project and adverse environmental impacts of the project. He highlighted the fact that construction of the Athirappilly dam will adversely effect the biodiversity of the area and lead to the destruction of lowland riparian forests; Dr Vijayan provided details of the biodiversity elements of the Athirappilly area. He also highlighted that the forest rights of the *Kadars* which are a Primitive Tribal Group inhabiting the area have not been settled under the Forests Right Act by the State Government.

8. After the presentations, Prof. Madhav Gadgil drew the attention of members to the ecological security of pristine rivers in the Western Ghats. He gave the example of Aghanashini River as one such pristine river. This was followed by a discussion on whether pristine river stretches in Western Ghats region could be considered as ecologically sensitive areas.

9. Dr Ligia Naronha said that special emphasis should be given to protection of critical habitats and there should be a section in the WGEEP report dealing with these habitats. Prof Raman Sukumar was requested to write a note in this regard for WGEEP report. It was decided that the Panel would recommend that the Ministry could initiate a study on riverine and riparian ecosystems in the Western Ghats. It was decided that Dr. R.V. Varma, Chairman, Kerala State Biodiversity Board, could act as a focal point for implementing the study across the Western Ghats.

10. It was decided that the final WGEEP report would include sector-wise guidelines for ESZ1, ESZ2 and ESZ3 in a matrix form. Prof. R. Sukumar initiated the discussion on the broad sector-wise guidelines for the different ecosensitive zones, viz. ESZ1, ESZ2 and ESZ3. The following sectors were deliberated in detail: mining, power, roads and highways, infrastructure, industries, tourism, agriculture and plantations. The broad regulatory and promotional activities were discussed. It was decided that the panel would give broad policy recommendations for each sector. Detailed sectoral guidelines would be finalized by the proposed Western Ghats Ecology Authority in consultation with the local communities.

11. Finally, the framework of the WGEEP report was deliberated upon by the members. The contents of the reports were discussed. It was suggested that the report may have sections on delineation of ecologically sensitive areas, a broad introduction to the Western Ghats which would include the environmental setting, critical habitats, the boundary of the Western Ghats region, sector-wise guidelines, governance issues, nature of powers and functions of the proposed Western Ghats Ecology Authority, and Appendices. It was decided that many case studies would be incorporated in the relevant sections, which would highlight specific issues related to the Western Ghats region.

12. This was followed by a discussion on timelines and the expected date for submission of the final report of the Panel. The Panel felt that keeping in view the complex issues, which would be addressed in the WGEEP report, it would be meaningful to seek an extension of the tenure of the Panel till 31 Aug 2011. In this regard a specific request can be sent on behalf of the Panel to the Hon'ble MEF by Prof Madhav Gadgil, Chairman, WGEEP. It was also decided that the Panel would meet on 16–17 August 2011 at CES, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, to finalize the report.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks to the Chair.
