

THE GADGIL-KASTURIRANGAN REPORTS ON WESTERN GHATS AND CONCERNS OF THE PLANTATION SECTOR

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Received: 24 November 2013 Accepted: 15 December 2013

Thomas, S. and Jacob, J. (2013). The Gadgil-Kasthurirangan reports on Western Ghats and concerns of the plantation sector. *Rubber Science*, 26 (2): 167-174.

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) or the Gadgil Committee (March 2010 - August 2011) and the High Level Working Group (HLWG) or the Kasturirangan Committee (August 2012 – April 2013), both constituted by the Union government and now the Expert Committee of Kerala government (October 2013) are mandated with the responsibility to make recommendations for protecting and rejuvenating the ecology of the Western Ghats (WG). Each committee was constituted to look into the report of the previous one. Some of the best minds in the country served on these committees, but there was no balanced representation of the various sectors and stakeholders of WG. Ecological degradation of WG is mostly due to anthropogenic activities and cultivation of spices and plantation crops constitutes the most significant such activity in the region. Yet, this important sector's concerns were not addressed in the reports submitted by these committees. WG ecology is too important to be delegated to one ministry or department or those who work on forests and ecology alone.

Reports of both WGEEP and HLWG contain sweeping and impractical recommendations that take care of only the ecological concerns of the region and not the genuine socio-economic apprehensions of the two million plus farmers who call WG their home. While WGEEP report put more than 278000 ha of rubber plantations under ecologically sensitive zones (EZS), the HLWG report put about 74000 ha in ecologically sensitive areas (ESA) in the WG. Another 213000 ha of rubber plantations exist in the 10 km buffer zone outside the ESA. The case with other crops such as coffee, tea, cardamom *etc.* must be even worse.

According to the HLWG report, as much as 76 per cent of the geographical area of Kerala falls in the WG region and nearly 44 per cent of the WG region falls into ESA. In other words, nearly 34 per cent of the geographic area of Kerala will be under ESA. Classifying one-third of the state as ESA goes against common sense and practical wisdom and this will lead to serious social unrest in a small and populous state like Kerala.

While making recommendations on ecological protection, agriculture should not be treated on par with industries or activities such as mining or quarrying. Ecological sustainability should not be an end in itself, but this should lead to social and economic security of the people living in the region. Nature and mankind have to coexist, not one at the cost of the other. Hope the latest committee constituted by the Kerala government will come up with pragmatic and realistic recommendations that are in the best interest of ecology and agriculture in the WG region of Kerala.

Keywords: Agriculture, Ecology, Gadgil Committee, Kasturirangan Committee, Natural rubbers, Spices and plantation crops, Western Ghats