IN MEMORY

Madhav Gadgil: A Sentinel of the Western Ghats (1942–2026)

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Madhav Gadgil, one of India's most distinguished ecologists and public intellectuals, passed away in Pune on the night of 7 January 2026, at the age of 83. With his death, India has lost not merely a scientist of the highest order but a moral voice that consistently reminded the world that nature is not a warehouse of resources but a living, breathing web of relationships.

Did I know him well? Not exactly. I first met Professor Madhav Gadgil sometime in the 1980s. As the founder of the Centre for Ecological Sciences at the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, Gadgil played a pivotal role in building modern ecological thought for the benefit of the world. His research spanned forests, sacred groves, biodiversity, inseparable human–nature interactions, man–animal conflicts, and sustainable resource use. What made his scholarship distinctive was his refusal to separate science from society. For Gadgil, ecology was never merely about species and habitats, nor was it to serve laboratories. For him, it was about knitting people and nature together—empowering both, and sharing power, livelihoods, and justice. Our discussions in those years were around two conceptual tangles. While I would argue for the need to valuate ecosystem services, he was reluctant to put frogs, animals, and humans, and all living and non-living entities, into one basket and evaluate their services. For any aggregation of values, I would urge him to at least provide a lexicographic to order them. Our dialogue would end then.

In 2024, Gadgil was honoured with the United Nations Environment Programme's Champions of the Earth award—the UN's highest environmental recognition—for his lifetime of work in environmental

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protection, especially in the Western Ghats. Yet long before his global recognition, his work had already transformed the way ecology was studied and practised in India. Much earlier, in 2006, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the President of India for his unstinting contribution to the ecological sciences in India.

His understanding of the Western Ghats found its most influential expression in the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), which he chaired in 2010–2011. The panel's report—popularly known as the Gadgil Report—issued a stark warning: the Western Ghats, one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots, was being pushed toward ecological disaster by mining, deforestation, dams, highways, and unregulated construction. The report called for large parts of the Ghats to be declared ecologically sensitive, with development governed by scientific limits and strong community participation. The panel divided the Western Ghats into three graded sensitivity zones, based on ecological importance, hazard risk, biodiversity, and watershed integrity. The report estimated that about 64% of the Western Ghats—spanning 6 states, 44 districts. and 142 taluks—should be placed under these sensitive zones to protect critical ecosystems. In ESZ-1 (the most eco-sensitive zone), restrictions on almost all new mining, quarrying, thermal power plants, red-category industries, and large dams were recommended. The report recommended a bottom–up governance approach, giving more authority to gram sabhas and local biodiversity management committees, instead of a top–down model.

Gadgil proposed the establishment of a Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA) under the Environment (Protection) Act to guide and monitor sustainable development across states. He was also a pioneer of people-centred conservation. He was among the strongest advocates of People's Biodiversity Registers, which place ecological knowledge in the hands of local communities—tribal people, farmers, fishers, and village elders—rather than confining it to distant laboratories and government files. In his view, conservation without democracy was both unjust and ineffective. "Science," he often insisted, "does not live only in laboratories; it must become part of society's relationship with nature." Driven by the same motive, he was instrumental in the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, by the Government of India.

Though the WGEEP report was politically resisted and diluted, history has been steadily vindicating Gadgil's warnings. The devastating floods and landslides in Wayanad, Kerala, the Kodagu and Shirur areas in Karnataka, and other regions were not merely acts of nature. They were, as Gadgil had long argued, the outcomes of fractured landscapes, destabilized slopes, and a reckless disregard for ecological thresholds in a warming climate.

He played a significant role in shaping India's biodiversity governance and served as a member of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) from 2006 to 2009. While in this role he worked to bridge the false divide between wildlife protection and the rights of people living in forested landscapes. In his view, man-to-man conflicts are at the root of man–animal conflicts. I had the privilege of working with him in the NTCA on this theme, bringing the Naxals in protected areas into the mainstream of democratic India.

Madhav Gadgil's life was, at its core, a lifelong conversation with the living world—its soils, rivers, forests, frogs, birds, and, above all, its people. He named what others ignored, counted what others dismissed, and issued warnings when others remained silent. Today, as climate extremes intensify and ecological crises deepen, his words sound less like prophecy and more like solid, scientific truth. He leaves behind not only an extraordinary body of research and public thought, but also a profound ethical legacy: that development without ecological wisdom is self-destruction, and that a just society must learn to live within nature's limits.

When Kasturirangan's "High Level Working Group on Western Ghats Report" came out in 2013, Madhav Gadgil told him,

> It would appear that we are now more British than the British and are asserting that a nature friendly approach in the cultural landscape is merely a contrivance to prevent the rich and powerful of the country and of the globalized world from taking over all lands and waters to exploit and pollute as they wish while pursuing lawless, jobless economic growth. It is astonishing that your report strongly endorses such an approach. Reality is indeed stranger than we can suppose! (This is reminiscent of an expression of JBS Haldane in his 1927 collection, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays.)*

In remembering Madhav Gadgil, we are reminded that the future of the Western Ghats—and indeed of India's environment—still stands on the foundations he so courageously laid.

A Sentinel of the Ghats—A Salute to Madhav Gadgil

He strolled with thoughts on soils,
In his loud voice, in the rains
And taught us how to listen;
The tearful cry of mighty mountains

Pilgrims made on the Western Ghats—
Green slopes sentient in their hearts

Into rivers and villages on one might
Always saw their whispering secrets.

How the roots of trees held the earth
As we rushed ahead, blind and swift,
He wrote—a tragedy for pillars of lands,
A plea scribbled in soil, leaf, and trunks.

"The Western Ghats are being torn asunder
By the greed of the elite all over,
And gnawed at by the poor."
None to listen to his messaged anger.

Warned the world about getting warmer,
And with warmth came cloud and storm:
"Hence, there is more water vapour
Leading to more frequent and intense rainfall…"

He walked through Wayanad's shattered earth,
Felt the grief of landslides, full of tears
Spoke on firm action and needed urgency:
Not as alarm, but as absolute truth.

That floods and destruction, a routine now
Are not merely nature's wrath,
But echoes of fractured landscapes
Leaving mankind with regular tragedies.

He named the rivers, soils, and frogs
Counted the birds, snails, and squirrels,
Measured the pulse of forests,
Linked them as nature's cyclic gifts.

Never forgot the ancient heartbeat
Of the people who lived there:
Tribals, children, elderly, and farmers
Whose futures intertwined as life cycles.

"Science is not only in the lab,"
Not even just in classrooms,
"It must become the balance
Between society and nature…

Between the hum of machinery
And the hush of forests."
A bridge of warning thoughts,
Between what is built and what is born.

He urged us to write our own registers—
Not ledgers of wealth, and history of wraths
But People's Biodiversity Registers,
A world to remember the gift of nature

Every stream is named, "in situ"
Every grove remembered, "in plateau"
Every specie counted, "by gene and taxa"
In the ledger of the living for citing.

He said, "If my report," raising his voice,
"Had been heeded when first alarmed,
There could have been fewer tears—
And mankind handling the hills as sacred."

"Not as resources to extract,
But as relatives to protect.
Sacred groves as *panch bhutas* primer
Get in turn lifelong nectar of nature."

And now, as the world grapples
All over rage with rains,
And winds that wander too wide,
We hear his voice not distant.

NTCA member as he was one time
Spelt out then on "man-to-man conflicts"
Wrongly leading to man–animal conflicts
A theory of his own, full of intellect

But urged as ever a moment to pause,
To tend, to uphold his call for civility
Balancing between human needs
And nature's gentle lasting gift.

O Madhav, sage of forested lore,
Your wisdom knocks on every door.
Your memory arms our fragile days,
Your message lights our future ways.

We salute your soul, your tireless sight,
Your words that turn our dark to light—
A world you loved, a world you gave,
A world we now must strive to save.