

## **PRINT MEDIA COVERGAE OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN THE WESTERN GHATS**

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### **Abstract**

The Western Ghats are extraordinarily rich source of plant and animal species. They have a huge diversity of natural, semi-natural and agro ecosystems with less than six percent of the land area of India and contain more than 30 percent of all plant, fish, fauna, bird, and mammal species found in India. They are also home to various medicinal plants. At present, environmental issues pertaining to degradation of Western Ghats are being debated in the country. Media play a pivotal role in shaping perception and awareness of environmental issues. This study aims to analyses the role of newspapers in covering environmental issues of the Western Ghats. There is a need to examine how the major English dailies have been reporting issues related to the Western Ghats. An analysis of content in two national English dailies, The Hindu and the Deccan Herald, revealed that the coverage of environmental issues in the two dailies was negligible. In comparison Deccan Herald, a newspaper with greater regional focus, gave more coverage to the environmental news than The Hindu Newspaper

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### ***Keywords:***

Newspaper;  
The Hindu;  
Deccan Herald;  
Environmental issues;  
Western Ghats;  
Content analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

The Western Ghats also known as the Sahyadri hills form one of the world's 25 biodiversity hotspots, which contain more than 30 percent of India's rich sources of flora, fauna, mammal species and flowing rivers. The Ghats directly or indirectly support the livelihoods of over 200 million people through ecosystem services, which is also home to various medicinal plants and important genetic resources such as the wild relatives of grains fruits and spices.

Today the Western Ghats are being rapidly degraded due to various activities that have occurred in the recent past. Apart from the traditional impacts from farming, grazing and fire there are newer changes in land use that are leading to biodiversity losses. This includes deforestation due to mining, roads, dams, townships and industrialization.

The central government took some measures for the protection of Western Ghats, in 2012. The Kasturirangan panel which was set up to study the Gadgil committee report on the Western Ghats recommended prohibition on developmental activities in 37 percent of natural forest that has been identified as ecologically sensitive area.

### Media and environmental issues

The media have been found to be significant sources of information to the public about environmental issues. Media coverage of the environment issues has a positive connection with audience's personal knowledge (Adiga and Poornananda, 2013). The press as an important component of democracy plays a significant role in creating awareness and helping mass movement grow.

Indian environmentalism took the form of a mass movement; the Chipko agitation, the movement against Silent Valley Project and the campaign to protect the TajMahal from pollution. The movement had a profound impact through the mass media when a national dialogue about air and water pollution emerged (Hussain and Ray, 2000).

The Bhopal disaster in 1984 lent urgency to the environmental movement. Increased academic research on the one hand and media attention on the other, helped to expand the environmental debate.

The next landmark and the most visible protest to date was the Narmada movement, which once again reiterated the all-important question: whose development and at whose cost? Newspapers devoted a lot of space to the issue and it goes to their credit that they printed pro Narmada articles as well (Hussain and Ray, 2000).

Environmental catastrophes are the lifeline of environmental news coverage. This is despite the fact that both the press and television have limited "carrying capacity" within a time frame.

Environmental news coverage also suffers because it does not fit easily into the structure of regular news production. The Indian Press is large urban-oriented. Newspapers are mostly concentrated in metropolitan cities and cater to the urban population and only nominally to readers in rural areas (Hussain and Ray, 2000).

When environmental journalism established itself in the early 1970's, the daily newspapers set up an ecology beat. Although the environmental coverage grew, the quality did not always keep pace. A short-term constriction on environmental reporting is the role and influence of news editors (Hussain and Ray, 2000).

Media play a pivotal role in shaping perception and awareness of environmental issues. This study aims to analyse newspaper coverage of environmental issues in the Western Ghats. There is need to examine how national dailies have been reporting issues related to these in the context of rapid degradation of forests and loss of biodiversity.

### **Literature Review**

Most of the studies on environmental issues and media have focused on coverage and agenda setting role. Das, Bacon and Zaman (2009) explored the coverage of environmental issues in the daily newspapers of Bangladesh. It was found that environmental issues were the main agenda of Bangladeshi newspapers rather than social, political and economic issues. The study found that environmental journalists were working on creating awareness among the people about the environmental issues in alliance with non-governmental organizations and the government both in international and local spheres.

Yadav and Rani (2011) examined the coverage of climate change and global warming issues in the mass media which have become powerful tools for disseminating information about environmental issues. The study, using the content analysis method, found that the depletion of natural resources and burning of fossil fuels were seen as greater threats to the environment. The researchers say that, media played a pivotal role in creating awareness and bringing the positive behavioural change among people in justifying the cause of climate change.

Chan (1999) tested the agenda setting hypothesis for the environmental issues in three daily newspapers of Hong Kong from 1983 to 1995. He found that water pollution sewage treatment, air pollution, environmental education, solid waste disposal and green group activities were most frequently reported in the press. It was found that the agenda-setting hypothesis was supported for the early period of five and a half years. In the subsequent period of seven and a half years, despite the increased media coverage of the issues, there was a significant drop in the perceived salience of the environmental problem. This may be due to the dilution of public attention as a result of diversity in the news agenda and reporting of local environmental problems as 'soft' news. It was also found that the environmental issue failed to compete with other prominent issues directly affecting the public. The mass media played a much less important role in keeping the environmental issue on the public agenda at the later stage.

Boykoff (2009) found that people turn to media such as television, newspapers, magazines, radio, and the internet to help make sense of the many complexities relating to environmental science and governance that consciously shape their lives. The study found that multistage factors have shaped media coverage in complex, dynamic, and nonlinear ways. These inquiries are situated in historical context as well as in larger processes of cultural politics and environmental change. The study suggests that reports influence the spectrum of possibilities for different forms of environmental governance.

Sampei and Aoyagi (2009) examined the coverage of global warming in the daily newspapers of Japan from January 1998 to July 2007. The study found that a dramatic increase in newspaper coverage of global warming from January 2007 connected with an increase in public concern for

the issue. The study suggests that for more effective communication of climate change, strategies aimed at maintaining mass-media coverage of global warming are required.

From the literature survey it was found that the environmental issues received lesser attention compared to other issues affecting the public. The studies suggest that the media did not play an active role in creating awareness among the people about environmental issues. The present study attempts to understand how national English dailies cover the environmental issues in Western Ghats which have been the focus of debate in the recent years.

### **General objective**

The general objective of the study is to examine how two major English dailies cover environmental issues in the Western Ghats.

### **Specific objectives:**

- To analyse the importance given to environmental issues of the Western Ghats in the two national dailies.
- To examine what aspects of the environmental issues of the Western Ghats have been covered by the newspapers.

## **2. Research Method**

The study used content analysis method to analyse the coverage of news about the Western Ghats in The Hindu and Deccan Herald, the two English dailies which have readership throughout Karnataka, the state in which a large part of the Western Ghats is located. According to the Indian Readership Survey in 2012, the Hindu was the third most widely read English newspaper in India with a readership of 2.2 million people. The survey also showed that in a span of 50 years the readership of the Deccan Herald increased to 423,000.

These dailies have been selected because of circulation, geographical location and language. Newspaper issues published between January 2014 to December 2014 have been selected for the study. A representative sample was drawn for each paper to make generalizations possible for the entire year.

Seven issues constituting one week in each of the 12 months in the year were selected. Out of four Sundays of a month one Sunday and out of four Mondays of a month one Monday were selected and similarly other days of the week were randomly selected for a month to construct a week. From each newspaper 12 constructed weeks were selected leading to a sample of 84 issues. A total of 168 issues (84x2) were selected for the content analysis. Content categories were identified and operational definitions were provided. A coding sheet was prepared for the purpose of tabulating the data. The unit of analysis was a news story. Six categories were made for the purpose of coding the content: deforestation, global warming, threat to wildlife, Dam, Displacement and Environment in General.

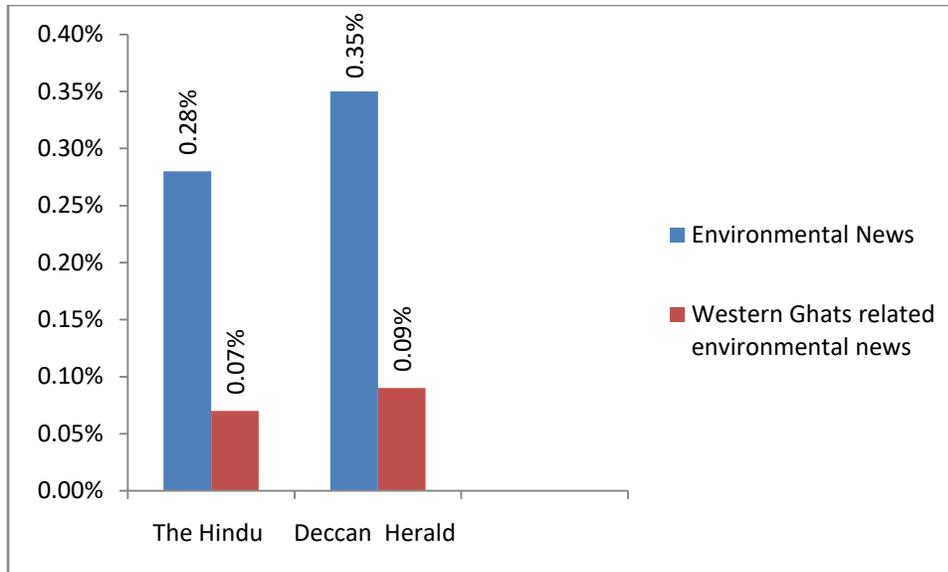
### 3. Results and Analysis

Table 1 shows that only 0.32 percent of the all-news stories found in the sample newspapers were about issues related to the environment. 0.008 percent of the environmental stories were about issues in the Western Ghats. Among the two newspapers the Deccan Herald carried more environmental news than The Hindu.

**Table-1: Coverage of news**

Type of news	The Hindu	Deccan Herald	Total
All news	6911 (49.66 %)	7003 (50.33 %)	13914
Environmental News	20 (0.28 %)	25 (0.35 %)	45 (0.32%)
News on Western Ghats	05 (0.07 %)	07 (0.09 %)	12 (0.08%)

It is interesting to note that 0.09 percent of the environmental news in Deccan Herald was about issues in the Western Ghats regions. In The Hindu 0.07 percent of the environmental stories were about Western Ghats. It should be noted that the issues in the Western Ghats received fairly good coverage in the two dailies.

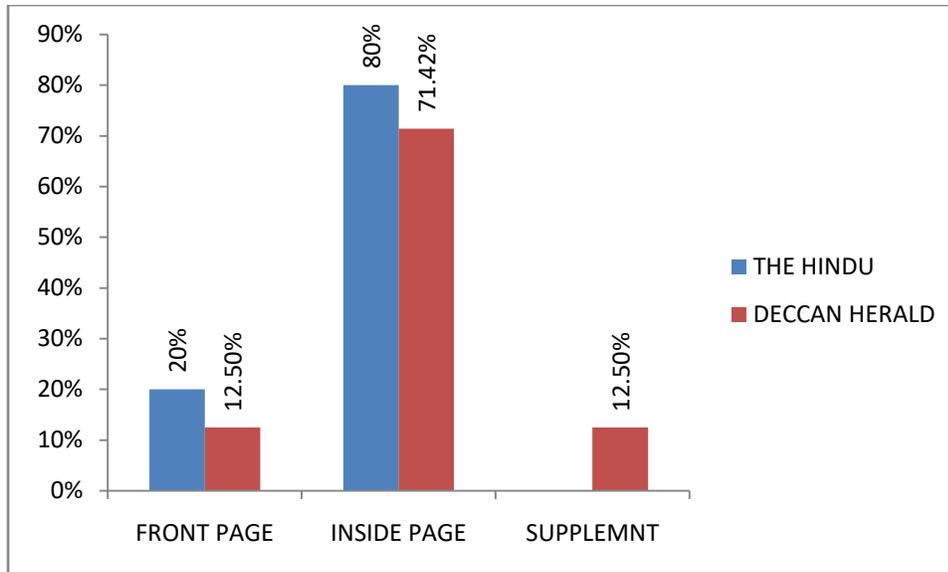


**Figure -1: coverage of environmental issues in the two newspapers**

Figure-1 shows that, the news about the percent of environmental issues and Western Ghats in these two newspapers was negligible. The Deccan Herald had 0.35 percent of its total number of stories on environmental issues while 0.9 percent related to Western Ghats. The Hindu had 0.28 percent of new stories related to environmental issues and 0.07 percent of news related to the Western Ghats.

During the study period, The Hindu carried 20 environmental stories, and 05 stories on Western Ghats and Deccan Herald newspaper published 25 stories on environmental issues and 07 stories on Western Ghats.

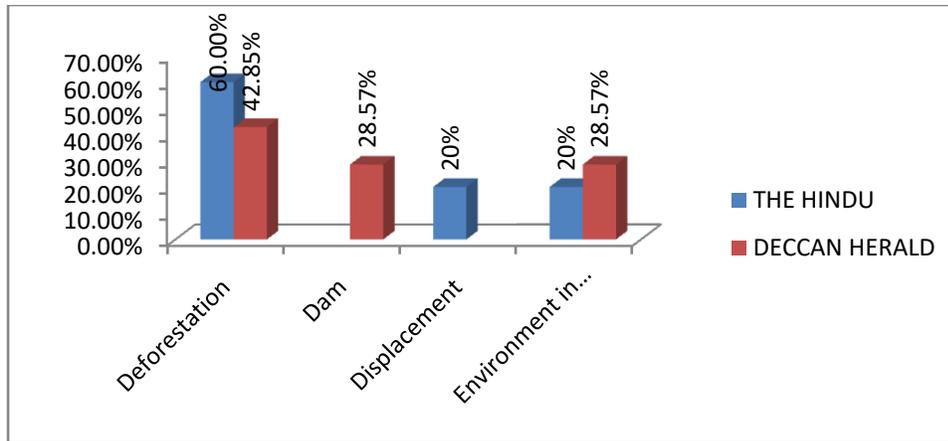
The above result illustrates that more environmental news was published in the Deccan Herald compared to The Hindu newspaper during the study period. With most of its circulation concentrated in Karnataka, the Deccan Herald has greater regional focus than The Hindu. Therefore, The Western Ghats issues are likely to be covered more often in Deccan Herald.



**Figure-2 location of environmental news in the newspapers related to the Western Ghats**

Figure 2 shows that as many as 20 percent of the stories about the environmental issues of the Western Ghats appeared on the front page The Hindu indicating the importance the newspaper gave to the issues. When compared to The Hindu the Deccan Herald carried lesser percentage (12.5) of the news on the Western Ghats. However the Deccan Herald the equal amount of news on the front page and in the supplements. The front page and the supplements accounted for 25 percent of the news about Western Ghats. Considering the norm that only a small percentage of all new stories are carried on the front page the importance given to the news of the Western Ghats is considerable.

The percentage in case of Deccan Herald was found to be 71.42 percent inside the page of newspaper, and 12.5 percent related to both front page and supplement edition of newspaper. It has been observed that environmental issues generally did not get a chance to appear on the front page, unless they referred to major issues like nuclear treaty, poaching activities, and deforestation and implementation of central or state government environmental policies.



### Figure-3 Environmental news related to the Western Ghats

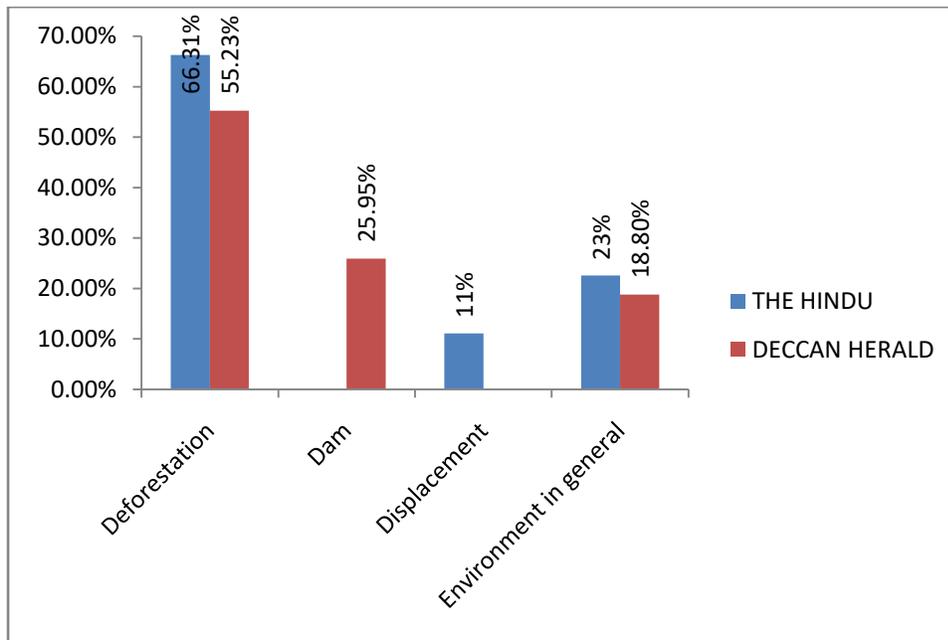
The above finding shows that, 50 percent of deforestation news stories found in selected two newspapers. 25 percent of news stories on environment in general and 16.66 percent of news stories on dam respectively. 8.3 percent of news stories on displacement. Among the two newspapers Deccan Herald carried more Western Ghats related environmental stories than the Hindu.

Figure-3 shows that, news about Western Ghats, The Hindu published 60 percent of news on deforestation and 20 percent of news on displacement and environment in general. The coverage on dam news stories was totally negligible.

While Deccan Herald published 42.85 percent of news on deforestation and it gave equal space to dam and environment in general with 28.57 percent. And displacement received hardly any attention in the newspaper. Among the two newspapers Deccan Herald carried more Western Ghats related environmental stories than the Hindu.

The news about the Western Ghats, both newspapers carried deforestation, dam, displacement and environment in general. But global warming and wildlife news stories were neglected.

The most important ecological damage inflicted upon the Western Ghats was deforestation. Within the past one century more than 50 percent of the forest vegetation of this tract has been lost. The remaining forests are extremely fragmented due to execution of irrigation or by hydroelectric project.



**Figure-4 columns space analysis of environmental news related to Western Ghats**

Out of the space given to the issues of the Western Ghats 59 percent was about deforestation, 20.08 percent about environment in general, 17.13 percent about big dams and 3.7 percent about displacement (Figure 4).

Figure-4 shows that, deforestation in the Western Ghats was the major issue covered by the two newspapers. The Hindu newspaper gave 66.31 percent news space on deforestation, as much as 22.56 percent of the news about the Western Ghats was about environmental destruction in general without referring to any specific problem. And 11.11 percent news space on displacement. No news about dam was found in The Hindu.

While Deccan Herald provided 55.23 percent space allocation to deforestation, 25.95 percent space allocation to dam and 18.80 percent space allocation to environment in general. While no news about displacement was reported in Deccan Herald.

During this study period the central government appointed the Kasthurirangan committee to study the Gadgil committee report on the Western Ghats. The Kasturirangan Committee recommended prohibition on developmental activities in 37 percent of the natural forest. The

Western Ghats contain more than 30 percent of all plant, fish, fauna, birds and mammal species found in India. Many species are endemic. Western Ghats are today rapidly degraded because of deforestation and construction of dam, mining, biodiversity loss, and climate change. These issues have been reported by the newspapers.

### **Analysis of news stories:**

The Hindu newspaper did not give detailed information about different categories of environmental issues in the Western Ghats. The newspaper covered news stories about policies and implementation of Kasthurirangan Committee report. An article titled “Centre soft-peddalling on enforcing Western Ghats report” (Jan 5, 2014, page no 09) argued that the Government was back-peddalling on the implementation of Western Ghats report by Kasthurirangan panel.

The article expressed dismay over keeping in abeyance the draft notifications with regard to Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) prepared by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The orders of the ministry had also laid down that agriculture and other livelihood activities of people falling within the ESA of the Western Ghats would not be impacted. The order for various state and central bodies not to entertain new environment clearance proposals for mining and other polluting industries too had been finalised. The paper was critical about the implementation of the decisions.

The Hindu also published a story titled “**State wants only 850 villages under ESZ in Western Ghats**” (April, 29, 2014, Page no 4) which questioned the rationality of the state government’s decision to include only about 850 villages in the Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) as against over 1580 villages recommended by the Kasthurirangan Committee report. Law and parliamentary affairs minister T.B.Jayachandra was quoted as saying that the government had almost accepted the majority of the recommendations, but rejected amendments to those that appeared to affect residents of the area. The story highlighted the argument that stone quarrying and sand mining activities had to be allowed to meet the local demand. The report included the stand of the government and the demands of the people with regard to the Kasthurirangan Committee report.

The Hindu newspaper explained the Kasthurirangan committee report with the headline **“State agrees to ban mining in the Western Ghats” (May 7, 2014. page no 5)**. The report said there would be a complete ban on mining but not to a ban on quarrying and sand mining within the Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA). During that period people raised objections to the report of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel as they were living in the ecologically sensitive area and were fully dependent upon the forests for their actual survival. People taking to several forms of protest were reported in newspapers.

*The Hindu* published an article on July 3, 2014 entitled **“Land acquisition for Krishna projects under new law” (Page 4)** that explained that the state government would pay compensation to farmers for land acquisition for projects under the Upper Krishna ‘B’ scheme, according to the new central land acquisition law.

The article said “according to the new Land Acquisition Act, the state government is mandated to pay four times the guidance value of the land as compensation for farmers who have lost their lands for the project.” The article argued for paying of compensation as per the new law.

The Hindu newspaper focused on the rights of the tribal communities in an article titled **“Trespassing’, collecting honey among charges against Nagarahloe tribal people”**(September 4, 2014, **P. 5**). The article brought into focus the demand of the tribals of Nagarahole for better amenities and implementation of the Forests Rights Act. While providing the details of the cases filed against the tribal community for alleged offenses which included encroaching forest land, collecting honey and growing ginger, the paper argued that the Karnataka government had not properly rehabilitated the tribal people of Nagarahole.

A feature that appeared in Deccan Herald on **January, 7 2014 (P. 22)** showed mangroves were being destroyed. The loss of mangroves was estimated to be around 2 to 5 times higher than the average percentage of loss of all forests. It was found that human activities, including aquaculture, coastal development, overexploitation of timber and pollution were the primary causes of mangrove loss. The writer said that saving mangroves and its terrestrial ecosystems had been largely ignored. In the light of the rapid global decline of mangroves, it was critical to

build a more holistic understanding to plan for effective management of the whole ecosystem, the feature argued.

The Deccan Herald also published an article titled “ **Vested interests harm Western Ghats**” (March 28, 2014. Page no 11) which recorded opposition to the Kasthurirangan Committee Report as well as the MadavaGadgil Committee Report by the communities living in the Western Ghats region. There was opposition to the prohibition on developmental activities in 37 percent of natural forest identified as ecologically sensitive. Religious leaders also joined the protest. *The article critical of the developmental activities in the ecological sensitive area and defended the move to protect the forest.*

The *Deccan Herald* explained the river diversion issues in an article titled “**Oppose diversion of rivers in malnad: Seer (July 3, 2014. page no 3).** The paper quoted a swamiji as saying that diverting rivers of malnad region to provide drinking water to people of arid land region was unscientific. He expressed his opposition to diverting the flow of major rivers of Shimoga, Uttara Kannada and Udupi districts. The newspaper highlighted his argument that the government should come up with alternative projects to provide drinking water to the people of drought-prone districts.

The article referred to the stand the former chairman of Western Ghats task force AnanthHegdeAshisara had taken with regard to the controversial Yettinahole and Nethravathi river diversion projects. The projects were proposed despite the fact that the native population was opposed to such a diversion. Similarly talks are on the divert fellow of the river. The article strongly opposed the river diversion projects that included Sharavathi, Aganishini, Bedthi and Varada rivers.

A story in Deccan Herald titled “Government **calls meet over Yettinahole**” (September 19, 2014. P. 5) explained how the government was trying to convince the environmentalists and others that the Yettinahole project would not cause any harm to the environment. According to the story the Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Water Resource Minister M.B. Patil argued that if the project was implemented there would be no adverse effect in Dakshina Kannada.

In another article titled “**Forest department plans Great Canara Trails(November 2, 2014. P. 8)** asked for early scheduling of the controversial trekking plan from Jog Falls in Shivamogga district to Castle Rock in Uttara Kannada district. The plan was to allow nature-loving trekkers to trek along the Western Ghats in order to see biodiversity in the region. Despite the fact that the plan was opposed by environmentalists the article saw at a great opportunity for promoting eco-tourism.

In a report titled “**463 villages in district come under Western Ghats” (November 2, 2014. P.3)** Deccan Herald quoted the deputy commissioner of Shivamogga district who said that though 25 percent of the 463 villages in the Western Ghats region were in the district the implementation of the Kasthurirangan Committee’s recommendations would not cause any harm to the residents of the villages. The report had the deputy commissioner’s categorical statement that prohibition of all developmental activities in ecologically sensitive area was necessary. The news story was focused on the need to convince the residents of the villages with regard to the Kasthurirangan report.

The newspaper provided a detailed account of (**District admin permits stone crushing unit in eco-sensitive zone, December 2, 2014.P.2**) how a stone crushing unit at Agumbe was posing a serious threat to the endangered flora and fauna of the ecologically sensitive area. The deputy commissioner who gave permission to the stone crushing unit by diluting certain guidelines of Karnataka Regulation of Stone Crushers Act, 2011 came under severe criticism.

The Deccan Herald published stories about river diversion, development of tourism, mangroves, controversy over the MadhavaGadgil committee report, modified Kasturirangan Committee report, preservation of biodiversity and other stories covering a wide variety of issues in the Western Ghats.

Interestingly The Hindu and the Deccan Herald did not publish During this study period similar stories about Western Ghats indicating that they were not just reporting events but taking interest in focusing on some of the issues they considered as important. In terms of views expressed in the articles published the two newspapers differed. The Hindu newspaper carried stories about

Kasthurirangan Committees, ban on thermal power projects, and red-category industries and conservation of tribal rights with details.

The Deccan Herald carried stories on issues like river diversion and mangroves but at the same time carried a report that welcomed the controversial Great Canara Trials indicating the presence of different view. Both the newspapers focused mainly on the recommendations of the Kasthurirangan Committees and the problems involved in implementing them including the resistance by the forest-dwellers in the Western Ghats region. Deforestation was a major news in both the newspapers reflecting the serious threat the unscientific developmental activities were posing to the biodiversity of the Western Ghats.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The findings of the study indicate that the two English dailies did not give adequate coverage to environmental issues. There were very few stories about environmental issues of the Western Ghats considered as one of the 24 biological hotspots in the world. Of all the environmental problems deforestation received higher coverage. Despite the fact that preservation of the Western Ghats has been on the agenda of environmental groups and government agencies the coverage is negligible. All issues and their different dimensions that need to be debated in media have not been adequately covered. The Deccan Herald which has a greater regional focus carried more stories than The Hindu which has its editions in several states. The reality is that environmental issues of the Western Ghats do not relate only to Karnataka region but to the entire south-western region of India as rivers that take birth here are the lifelines of millions of people. Several studies in the past have shown that the coverage of environmental news is Indian newspapers is negligible. This study also found that the issues in the Western Ghats received very low coverage in the two prominent newspapers of Karnataka. It is important that the newspapers provide adequate coverage to environmental issues at a time when more and more people are suffering from environmental degradation. The print media has to play major role in creating awareness and in bringing about positive attitude towards environment issues among the readers.

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