

Violation of Coastal Ecosystem Norms

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Context - The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India tabled a report in Parliament on whether steps taken by the Union Environment Ministry to conserve India's coastal ecosystems have been successful.

The CAG frequently undertakes 'performance audits' of government programmes and ministries.

Centre's obligations on conserving the coastline

- The government has issued notifications under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, to regulate activities along India's coasts particularly regarding construction.
- The Coastal Regulation Zone Notification (CRZ), 2019 implemented by the Ministry, classifies the coastal area into different zones to manage infrastructure activities and regulate them.
- The three institutions responsible for the implementation of the CRZ are:
 1. National Coastal Zone Management Authority (NCZMA) at the Centre,
 2. State/Union Territory Coastal Zone Management Authorities (SCZMAs/UTCZMAs) in every coastal State and Union Territory
 3. District Level Committees (DLCs) in every district that has a coastal stretch and where the CRZ notification is applicable

Functions under CRZ rules

- These bodies examine if CRZ clearances granted by the government are as per procedure, if

project developers are once given the go-ahead are complying with conditions and if the project development objectives under the Integrated Coastal Zone Management Programme (ICZMP) are successful.

- They also evaluate the measures taken up by the government towards achieving the targets under Sustainable Development Goals.

Why did the CAG undertake this audit?

- The CAG has a constitutional mandate to investigate and report on publicly funded programmes.
- The CAG conducted “pre-audit studies” and found that there were large-scale CRZ violations in the coastal stretches.
- Incidences of illegal construction activities (reducing coastal space) and effluent discharges from local bodies, industries and aquaculture farms had been reported by the media and this prompted it to undertake a detailed investigation.

Findings of Recent Audit

The audit pointed out various categories of violations:

- There were instances of the Expert Appraisal Committees —who evaluate the feasibility of an infrastructure project and its environmental consequences — not being present during project deliberations.
- There were also instances of the members of the EAC being fewer than half of the total strength during the deliberations.
- The SCZMA had not been reconstituted in Karnataka and there was delayed reconstitution in the States of Goa, Odisha and West Bengal.
- The DLCs of Tamil Nadu lacked participation from local traditional communities. In Andhra Pradesh, DLCs were not even established.
- There were instances of projects being approved despite inadequacies in the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) reports.

Problems of CAG with States

- Lack of strategy: Tamil Nadu didn't have a strategy in place to conserve the Gulf of Mannar Islands.
- Lack of monitoring: In Goa, there was no system for monitoring coral reefs and no management plans to conserve turtle nesting sites.
- No scientific oversight: In Gujarat, instruments procured to study the physicochemical parameters of soil and water of the inertial area of the Gulf of Kutch weren't used.
- Monitoring issues: Sea patrolling in Gahirmatha Sanctuary, in Kendrapara, Odisha did not happen.
- No information in public domain: There was no website to disseminate the information related to the NCZMA, the CAG found, which is a clear violation of the mandated requirements of the Authority.

Way Forward

- These reports are placed before the Standing Committees of Parliament, which select those findings and recommendations that they judge to be the most critical to public interest and arrange hearings on them.
- In this case, the Environment Ministry is expected to explain omissions pointed out by the CAG and make amends.