Forest Fires in Himachal Pradesh

Why in news?

Recently, Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) is witnessing widespread forest fires across the region.

What is the status of forest fires in Himachal Pradesh?

- **Geography** – The state's total geographical area is 55,673 sq km, out of which 15,443 sq km is ***forest cover, which is 27.72% of the total area***.
- Chir Pine, Deodar, Oak, Kail, Fir and Spruce are some of the common trees found here.
- **Transformation of forests** – A crucial watershed moment in Indian forestry began with the construction of railways in the 1850s.
- From 1853 to 1910, the construction of around 80,000 kms of railway track led to an *assault on forests* and the *extinction of the customary rights of the people*.
- Between 1869 and 1885, 6.5 million sleepers were made of Deodar, and the *area for Chir pines was expanded* for timber and resin.
- Total trees from which resin was tapped between 1910 and 1920 increased from 2,60,000 to 21,35,000.

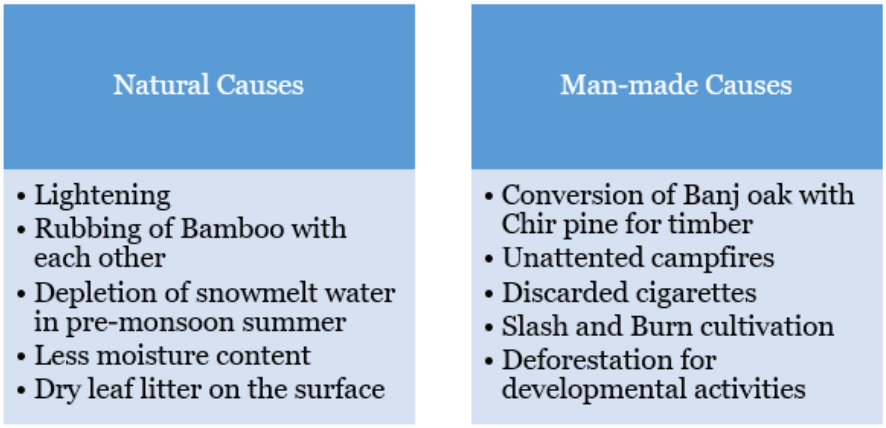
- **Forest fire** – It is an *uncontrolled fire in an area* of combustible vegetation that occurs in the countryside or rural area.
- **Higher incidence of forest fires** – According to the Himachal Pradesh Forest department, there have been a ***total of 1,684 forest fires since April 2024.***

  Uttarakhand and Himachal, two of India's Himalayan states, ranked first and second among states where most fire alerts had been sounded in 2023-2024.

- **Impact** – These fires have *damaged a total of 17,471 hectares of forest land*, resulting in significant loss to wildlife.
- From 2001 to 2023, H.P. has *lost 957 hectares of tree cover* from fires and 4.37 thousand hectares from all other drivers of loss.

To know more about Forest Fires in India, Click here

What are the cause for forest fires in the state?



- **Natural causes** – It relates to *lightning* or *rubbing of dry bamboos* with each other can sometimes result in fires.
- **Depletion of snow** – Fires in the Himalayas occur during the pre-monsoon summer period of *moisture stress*, due to the resultant *depletion of snowmelt water*.
- **Less moisture content** – The less moisture there is, the *greater the impact of the fires*.
- **Dry leaf litter** – Fallen tree leaves, dry grass, weeds, low brushwood, deadwood on the forest floor, logs and stumps etc *form the surface fuels*.
- **Climate Changes –** There is higher incidence of heatwaves and droughts in recent times that are favoring forest fires.
- **Faulty Human practices** – The primary causes of these forest fires are faulty forestry practices, and *treating forests from a utilitarian perspective*, excluding people's participation.
- **Irrational human activities** – Activities like *unattended campfires, discarded cigarettes* etc., are also some of the common causes for forest fires.
- **Slash and Burn practices** – When people burn their fields to clear them of stubble, dry grass or undergrowth, the *fire sometimes spreads to the adjoining forest*.
- **Replacement of the Banj oak with Chir pine** – Chir pine forests are very vulnerable to forest fires.
- Ecologically, *Banj forests absorb a high content of rainwater*, leading to better moisture retention and water springs in the mountains.

What are the impacts of forest fires?

- **Environment degradation** – These fires are also a major source of pollutants, including black carbon.
- It can significantly contribute to glacier melt in the Himalayas and negatively influences the regional climate.
- **Low Productivity** – Forests help maintain aquifers and continuous flow of streams and springs, and provide firewood, fodder and non-timber produce to the local communities all these capacities may get adversely affected in case of a fire.
- **Invasion by exotic species** – Moisture-loving trees such as ***Oaks and Deodars*** may give way to other species and exotic weeds.
- **Erosion** – Forest fires may destroy organic matter in the soil and expose the top layer to erosion.
- **Danger to wildlife** – Fires may also impact the wildlife by burning eggs, killing young

animals and driving the adult animals away from their safe haven.
- **Affect human settlements** – Sometimes, a forest fire may get out of control and extend to human settlements, thus posing danger to human life and property.

What lies ahead?

- **Democratise forests –** It is essential to ensure that people and communities who have lived in and around forests are made part of the forest management process.
- **Restore community rights** – The rights of the local community have been periodically curtailed, and as a result, when forest fires start, first responders are nowhere to be found.
- The traditional forest rights of Himalayan dwellers included the right to extract wood for fuel, timber, fodder, and other activities.
- **Promote peoples participation** – There is a need for involving local communities in decision making of development based projects in the state.
- Create environmental services at the village level.

*Himachal Pradesh is under **Schedule V of the Indian Constitution**, which requires community assent for development activities in the region. However, for large projects like hydro power generation, road widening, and four-lane highways, forests are being diverted with ease.*

- **Increase biodiversity –** Build mixed forestry and remove pine trees.
- **Enhance knowledge convergence** – There is a need to ensure that both scientific and community knowledge converge and forest management is conducted in a participatory manner.
- **Build infrastructural solutions** – We need to implement check dams and other methods to revive water springs.
- **Seek disaster management funds –** We need to articulate their case with the ongoing ***16th Finance Commission***, seeking help apart from disaster mitigation funds.



References

1. The Hindu| Higher incidence of Forest Fires in Himachal Pradesh
2. Down To Earth| Himalayas on Fire



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