Importance of Devdar forests

Prelims: *Current events of national and international importance | Environment*

Why in News?

In 2025, nearly year-long climate disasters caused over 4,000 deaths in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, even as a road project went ahead, cutting down about 7,000 sacred Devdar trees and many other native species.

- **Scientific name** – Cedrus deodara (Deodar)
- **Devdar** – They are majestic, ***high-altitude evergreen coniferous*** ecosystems, known as the "*wood of the gods"*.
- **Etymology –** It is derived from the Sanskrit term devadaru (deva means god, daru means wood), signifying its sacred status in India.
- **Habitat –** They thrive in ***temperate climates***, often found in dense, pure stands or mixed with oak and fir.
- **Distribution –** It is native to the Western Himalayas, spanning Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand), and Nepal.
- **Key Locations in India** – It is commonly found in Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and the Kumaon region, especially located in the *Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone* (4,000 sq. km, notified in 2012).

Key Characteristics

- **Features** – It is a large conifer with needle-like leaves and drooping branchlets. Unlike many conifers, its fat, stout, upright cones disintegrate upon maturity, leaving only an upright spike on the branch.
- **Altitude** – It grows at elevations of 1,500–3,200 m, featuring trees 40–60 m tall with conical crowns and aromatic wood.
- **Significance**
  - **Spiritual –** Ancient Hindu texts & Shaivite traditions refer to these as Darukavana (forest of deodars), often associated with places where sages performed penance.
  - **Economic** – The wood is highly valued for its durability and scent, and it is also used in traditional medicine.
  - **Ecological** – It stabilises slopes, prevents landslides, maintains the water quality of the Ganga (antimicrobial properties) and also regulates microclimates and sustains aquatic ecosystems.
- **Threats –** It faces existential threats from deforestation, flawed infrastructure, climate change, and governance failures.

- **Recent proposals** – *Translocating* ancient Devdar trees is ecologically unsound, as their unique, site-specific functions cannot be recreated elsewhere—making their preservation an environmental necessity rather than a matter of convenience.

Quick Fact

Controversy in Char Dham Project

• **Launched in** – 2016.
• **Purpose** – To provide ***all-weather road connectivity*** to four major pilgrimage sites - *Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri* in Uttarakhand.

• **Status** – As of January 2026, the project is in its final phases, with approximately 75% of the total work completed and expected to be complete by the end of 2026.
• **About controversy** – The approval of the project led to the felling of nearly 7,000 Devdar (Deodar) trees and the diversion of 43 hectares of forest land.
• Adopting flawed DL-PS road standards already triggered more than 800 landslide zones, exposing the vulnerability of the Himalayan ecosystem.
• **Reasons** – Systemic governance lapses and flawed engineering choices include -
- Fragmented EIAs
- Incorrect road-width standards
- Vertical hill-cutting destabilised fragile Himalayan slopes.
- Indiscriminate muck dumping.
- No carrying capacity assessments for tourism and traffic.
- Short-term economic gains are prioritised over long-term disaster resilience.

References

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2. Great Himalayan National Park | Devdar Forest
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