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WWF Report on Sturgeon

- According to a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) report, illegal sale of sturgeon is rampant in the lower Danube region (mainly in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine) - first survey to quantify illegal trade.
- [Danube is Europe's second-longest river after the Volga, flowing through much of Central and Southeastern Europe, from the Black Forest into the Black Sea.]
- Sturgeon is poached for its meat and caviar - Caviar is a food consisting of salt-cured egg of a fish. It is considered a delicacy.
- The researchers did an isotope analysis for each sample and found that almost 20% were wild-caught sturgeon and did not come from farms.
- The report recommended controlling domestic trade; increasing border controls; improved inter-agency cooperation and coordination; controlling the CITES caviar labelling requirements.

Sturgeons

- Sturgeons, which are one of the most endangered fish species, have existed since the time of dinosaurs - for about 200 million years.
- They are called ‘living fossils’ as their appearance has altered very little over the years.
- As the sturgeons live for many years, mature late and spawn with long intervals, they take a long time to recover from environmental and human pressures.
- This makes them great indicators for the health of the river and other ecological parameters.
- **Threats** - They are now on the brink of extinction due to overfishing, illegal caviar trade, habitat degradation and loss, and pollution. Also, a wave of new hydropower dams built particularly in the Danube basin.
- **IUCN Red List Status**
    a. 63% of the 27 species of sturgeon, which includes Caspian Sea species, 5 of the 6 Danube River species - Critically Endangered
    b. Four species - Possibly Extinct
- **CITES** - Appendix-II

Rebooting Opium Strategy

- The Centre would rope in the private sector to commence production of Concentrated Poppy Straw (CPS) from India's opium poppy crop to boost their yield of alkaloids for medical and export purposes.
- [Poppy straws, which contain very small morphine content, are the husk left after the opium is extracted from pods.]
- For roping in private players to partner with the government in producing CPS and extracting alkaloids, the **Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985** must be amended.
- Currently, India only extracts alkaloids from opium gum of the crop at facilities controlled by the Revenue Department in the Finance Ministry.
- This decision entails farmers extracting opium gum by manually lancing the opium pods and selling it to the government factories.
- The Ministry has decided to switch to new technologies, after cultivation reports submitted by two private firms showed higher extraction of alkaloids using the concentrated poppy straw (CPS).
- The Revenue Department would appoint a consultant to help in frame the bidding parameters and concession agreements, who will help,

a. Frame the modalities for this endeavour, with an appropriate model including public-private partnership (PPP),
b. Advise on the changes needed to the rules and laws to facilitate this, and
c. Recommend security measures to protect the crop and product.

Opium in India

- Opium gum and Concentrate of Poppy Straw (CPS) are the two Narcotic Raw Materials that can be produced from opium.
- India produced only opium gum. If the amendment is made, CPS production will commence in India.
- **Opium growing States** - Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Here, poppy crop cultivation is allowed based on licences issued annually by the Central Bureau of Narcotics.

Gyanvapi Mosque Dispute

- A civil court in Uttar Pradesh asked the Archaeological Survey of India to conduct a survey at the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi to determine whether it was built over a Kashi Vishwanath temple.
- The order was passed after a suit claimed that the mosque was built at the site after a temple was demolished in 1669 by Aurangazeb.
- The difference between this dispute and the Babri Masjid dispute is related to the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991.
- This Act excluded the Babri Masjid dispute from its ambit since the matter

was under legal contest and politically very sensitive at that time.
- To know more about the Places of Worship Act, 1991, click here.

Artificial Islands

- A report by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) showed that the Maldives government is developing at least three artificial islands to tide over the rising sea-levels due to climate change.
- Maldives is one of the world's most low-lying terrains. About 80% of the archipelago's coral islands are at less than 1 metre above sea level.
- **Hulhumale** is an artificial island located to the northeast of Male.
- The government had started constructing Hulhumale in 1997 on a lagoon off Male to accommodate the capital's population swell.
- It was created by pumping out sand from the seafloor onto a submerged coral platform and is now Maldives's fourth-largest island.
- Since the 1990s, the government has expanded at least two other coral atolls - **Thilafushi and Gulhifalhuea** - through land reclamation.
- They are currently being used as industrial areas or landfills.
- The coral atolls have natural properties to resist sea-level rise. Most of the reefs have remained stable or even grown larger in recent decades.

Other Findings

- US Geological Survey study 2018 - The low-lying islands will become uninhabitable by 2050 due to flooding and scarcity of freshwater.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change - Sea-level will rise half a metre by 2100 if greenhouse gas emissions are drastically reduced, or by 1 m if they continue to rise.

On-tap Licences

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) set up a Standing External Advisory Committee (SEAC) to evaluate applications for on-tap licences to start Universal Banks and Small Finance Banks (SFBs) in the private sector.
- [An 'on-tap' facility would mean that the RBI will accept applications and grant license for banks throughout the year, subject to the fulfillment of the set conditions.]
- The five member committee will be headed by former deputy governor Shyamala Gopinath.
- For a Universal Bank, the initial minimum paid-up voting equity capital/ net worth has been set at ₹500 crore. Thereafter, the Bank has to maintain a minimum net worth of ₹500 crore at all times.
- For a SFB, the minimum paid-up voting equity capital/ net worth is ₹200

crore.
- For Urban Co-operative Banks keen of transiting into SFBs, the initial net worth has been set at ₹100 crore, which will be increased to ₹200 crore within five years from the date of commencement of business.

Previously

- The last time that the RBI granted universal bank licences was in 2015, when Bandhan Bank and IDFC Bank were granted licence to carry out the banking business in India.
- These banks were given licenses under the guidelines for licensing of new Banks in the private sector, issued in 2013.

HGCO19

- The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) has approved additional funding towards clinical studies of India's 'first of its kind' mRNA-based COVID-19 vaccine - HGCO19.
- This funding has been awarded under the ‘Mission Covid Suraksha - The Indian COVID-19 Vaccine Development Mission’, implemented by the Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC).

mRNA Vaccines

- mRNA vaccines are considered safe as mRNA is non-infectious, non-integrating in nature, and degraded by standard cellular mechanisms.
- They are highly efficacious because of their inherent capability of being translatable into the protein structure inside the cell cytoplasm.
- Additionally, mRNA vaccines are fully synthetic and do not require a host for growth, e.g., eggs or bacteria.
- Therefore, they can be quickly manufactured inexpensively under cGMP conditions to ensure their "availability" and "accessibility" for mass vaccination on a sustainable basis.

Mission COVID Suraksha

- It is the Indian Covid-19 Vaccine Development Mission, which will help the development process of the vaccine candidates.
- It is led by the Department of Biotechnology and implemented by Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC).
- It has an end-to-end focus from preclinical development through clinical development and manufacturing and regulatory facilitation for deployment.
- This will help accelerate development of vaccine candidates and ensure that these are brought closer to licensure.

- It will ensure the introduction of these vaccines in the market for consideration of regulatory authorities for introduction in public health systems, to combat further spread of COVID infection.
- It will support the capabilities for process development, cell line development and manufacturing of GMP batches for animal toxicology studies and clinical trials.
- It will support the development of suitable Target Product Profile so that vaccines being introduced through the mission have preferred characteristics applicable for India.
- Phase-I of the Mission has been allotted Rs.900 Crore for a period of 12 months. A total of 10 vaccine candidates have been supported by Department of Biotechnology so far at both academia and industry.

Source: The Hindu, The Indian Express, Down To Earth, Business Line, Economic Times, Scroll

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