UPSC Daily Current Affairs| Prelimbits 15-07-2025

Centre plans revision of Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) guidelines

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

Why in News?

Recently, the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL) has called for a review of the guidelines governing Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs).

Eco sensitive zones (ESZ)
• **Definition** – They are *buffer areas* created around protected forests, wildlife sanctuaries and national parks. • **Objectives** - To protect wildlife and biodiversity from harmful human activities. • **Prohibited Activities** - *Commercial mining,* sawmills, and industries causing pollution. • The establishment of major hydroelectric projects (HEP), • Commercial use of wood. • **Regulated Activities** - Felling of trees, *the establishment of hotels and resorts, commercial use of natural water*, erection of electrical cables, drastic change of agricultural system. • **Permitted Activities** - Ongoing *agricultural or horticultural practices,* rainwater harvesting, organic farming, use of renewable energy sources, and adoption of green technology for all activities.

- **Need for revision** – To develop a more "*flexible" and "site-specific*" approach that balances conservation goals with local socio-economic "realities".
- **Existing structure** - Current ESZ guidelines are designed primarily with terrestrial sanctuaries in mind and *often do not apply well to marine ecosystems.*

In states like Himachal Pradesh, where approximately 65% of the land is already under forest or protected status, a rigid imposition of ESZ norms could hinder local development without proportional ecological gains.

Recent recommendations

- **Flexible approach** - A more flexible and site-specific ESZ framework is essential to encourage conservation, without creating unintended hardships.
- Several members and state officials flagged concerns over the negative impact of blanket ESZ provisions.
- **Stakeholder involvement** – The proposal involves stakeholder consultations, including inputs from state governments, relevant ministries, environmental experts, and the ESZ division.
- **Complete prohibition** - The notification mentioned a complete ban on ***mining activities*** within a notified ESZ.

- **Developmental hindrance** - The committee noted that the sectors most impacted by ESZ guidelines include mining, highways, railways, housing, and tourism.
- Unlike in protected areas, where compensation is provided during the settlement of rights, no such relief exists for ESZs.
- **Inter-ministerial coordination** - A formal inter-ministerial consultation has been suggested to solicit views from all the departments concerned, before finalising any changes in the guidelines.
- **Preparation of notice** - Following the discussion, the SC-NBWL directed the environment ministry to prepare a note on the issue.
- **Submission of proposals** - The final recommendations will be submitted to the committee for further deliberations.

Reference

Business Standard | Revision of eco-sensitive zone guidelines

Gingee Fort

Prelims: *Current events of National & International importance |Art and culture*

Why in News?

Recently, Gingee Fort in Tamil Nadu was recognised as UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Gingee fort

- **Located in** - Villupuram district, ***Tamil Nadu.***
- **Located atop three hillocks** – Rajagiri, Krishnagiri and Chandragiri
- **Built by** - Ananta Kon of the ***Konar Dynasty.***
- **Built in** - 1200 CE.
- **Known as** –The 'Troy of the East.'
- **Part of** -The Maratha Military Landscapes.



- **Historic legacy** - It was under the possession of several empires, such as the Vijayanagar Nayaks, Marathas, Mughals, Nawabs, the French and British.
- **Features**- Stepped well, a Kalyana Mahal, a durbar hall, a cannon, a clock tower, an armoury, an elephant tank, a stable, a granary, a gymnasium, the Venkataramana temple, and the Sadathtulla mosque.
- **Water supply system** -It consists of two elaborate systems for water supply, which ensured that even the *top of the structure had continuous supply of water.*

Maratha Military Landscapes of India

- The *network of 12 forts* demonstrates the strategic military vision and architectural ingenuity of the Maratha Empire.

- **Located in -** Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
- **Constructed during –** 17th to 19th centuries CE.
- **Selected sites** - Salher, Shivneri, Lohgad, Khanderi, Raigad, Rajgad, Pratapgad, Suvarnadurg, Panhala, Vijaydurg, and Sindhudurg in Maharashtra.
- Gingee Fort in Tamil Nadu.
- **Classifications -**Based on the location
    - **Hill forts** - Salher, Shivneri, Lohgad, Raigad, Rajgad, and Gingee.
    - **Hill forest forts** – Pratapgad.
    - **Hill-plateau fort** – Panhala.
    - **Coastal fort** – Vijaydurg.
    - **Island forts** -Khanderi, Suvarnadurg, and Sindhudurg.

Reference

PIB| UNESCO World Heritage Site- Maratha Military Landscapes

NITI Aayog's Report on Reforming S&T Councils

***Prelims**: Current Events of National and International importance*

Why in News?

Recently, Niti Aayog has proposed a roadmap to strengthen State Science and Technology (S&T).

- **Aim** - To decentralize scientific governance and boost region-specific innovation for economic growth.
- **Focus** - It is focusing on structural reforms, funding strategies, and stronger industry linkages to make these councils drivers of technological self-reliance and sustainable development.
- **Transforming Councils into Innovation Hubs** - State S&T Councils must evolve from passive bodies into dynamic enablers of regional innovation.
- **Funding Imbalances** - The report recommends performance-linked funding and encouraging councils to secure project grants and private sector support.

    - States like Kerala and Karnataka, have leveraged their councils to drive initiatives whereas other states remain hindered by irregular meetings, limited autonomy, and over-reliance on core grants from central agencies.
- **Leadership** - Niti Aayog suggests full-time executive directors with industry expertise and including industry bodies (CII, FICCI), scientists in council governance for better accountability and impact.
- **Boosting Industry Partnerships** – Strengthening Industry engagement ties is crucial for converting research into market-ready solutions and fostering local entrepreneurship.
- **Successful State Initiatives**
    - Punjab's anti-stubble burning briquetting plants,
    - Mizoram's grassroots innovation centre, and
    - Kerala's fellowship for women scientists returning to research.
- **Towards a Knowledge Economy** - State S&T Councils are vital for addressing local challenges in agriculture, renewable energy, disaster management, and healthcare.
    - Empowering them is key to building a resilient, innovation-driven India ready to compete globally.
- **Need for Reform** - India faces rising global competition in innovation and seeks to improve its R&D rankings.
    - Empowering state institutions is seen as essential for bridging gaps in the decentralised R&D landscape and achieving technological ambitions.

Reference

BW| Niti Ayog's Report on Reforming S&T Councils

Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill, 2024

***Prelims**: Current Events of National and International Importance*

Why in the News?

Recently the Maharashtra Assembly passed the Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill, 2024, aimed at preventing "unlawful activities of Left-Wing Extremist organisations or similar groups".

Key features of the bill

- The Bill defines certain activities by an ***individual or an organisation as unlawful.***
- **Unlawful Activities mentioned in the bill -** Any action or speech that constitutes
    - Danger to public order,
    - Incites violence,
    - Disrupts communication, or
    - Encourages disobedience to established law and its institutions.
- **Advisory Board -** The Bill constitutes an Advisory Board to examine the decision to designate an organisation as unlawful.
- The designation comes into effect only after approval from the Board.

- **Offences under the Bill -** Being a member of an unlawful organisation, attending its activities, promoting its meetings, managing its affairs, or planning or committing unlawful activities.
- Contributing or soliciting contributions as a non-member will also be punishable.
- **Penalties and Enforcement -** Offences are ***cognisable and non-bailable,*** with jail terms of 2–7 years and fines up to Rs.5 lakh.
- **Forfeiting properties -** Authorities can seize and forfeit properties and funds linked to unlawful groups, sometimes before trial, with limited judicial oversight.
- **Administrative Powers -** District magistrates and police commissioners can notify, evict, and seize assets tied to banned organisations.
- The Bill allows for expedited prosecution, bypassing higher-level approval for certain actions.

Similar Laws in Other States
• **Chhattisgarh Vishesh Jan Suraksha Adhiniyam, 2005** - Empowers the state to ban extremist organisations, seize assets, and prosecute members, upheld by the High Court in 2014. • **Andhra Pradesh Public Security Act,1992 -** Provides for banning Naxal organisations and criminalising support structures. • **Telangana and Odisha Public Security Laws** -Telangana inherited Andhra Pradesh's framework; Odisha uses the Indian Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1908, to ban extremist groups. • **Common Features -** All these laws enable swift action against extremist networks, asset forfeiture, and criminalise association—Maharashtra's Bill closely mirrors these provisions.

- **Concerns – Broad and Stringent Provisions –** The bill's wide definitions could target legitimate dissent, student groups, and protest movements.
- Civil society and opposition parties argue it risks misuse, bypasses judicial safeguards, and duplicates existing laws like UAPA and MCOCA.
- **Ambiguity and Potential for Misuse -** Ambiguous definitions of "unlawful activity" and "extremist organisation" may lead to arbitrary enforcement.
- Concerns persist over civil liberties, freedom of association, and the potential chilling effect on democratic expression.
- **Balancing Security and Rights** – The Bill aims to *address urban extremism* but must ensure safeguards to prevent overreach and protect democratic freedoms, reflecting ongoing debates seen in other states.

Reference

The Hindu| Maharashtra Special Public Security Bill, 2024

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