

Western Ghats - Natural Site of Significant Concern

Mains: GS III - Environment and biodiversity

Why in News?

Recently, serious concerns were raised over India's ecologically vital landscapes, including the Western Ghats, in the World Heritage Outlook 4 (2025) report released by (IUCN).

What is the report?

- **Report** - World heritage outlook
- **Published by** - IUCN (International union for conservation of nature).
- **Categories** - The report categorises the natural sites as "
 - Good
 - Good with some concerns
 - Significant concern
 - Critical.
- **Recent Assessment** - The report, which assesses 271 natural and mixed World Heritage sites, categorises the Western Ghats and two national parks in India - Assam's Manas national park and West Bengal's Sundarbans national park - as being of "significant concern".

What are world heritage sites?

- **Recognition** - The 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is the primary instrument that provides for the designation and conservation of World Heritage Sites.
- The convention was adopted by UNESCO and formally came into effect in 1975 after 20 countries ratified it.
- **3 categories** - The document classifies the World Heritage sites into three categories
 - Natural heritage sites,
 - Cultural heritage sites, and
 - Mixed sites.
- The UNESCO World Heritage Committee is the primary body that is responsible for administering the convention.
- **Selection process** - The selection of world heritage sites follows a well-defined and rigorous process, and is guided by scientific evaluation by IUCN (for natural sites) and International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (for cultural sites).
- **Final decision** - The final decision is made by the World Heritage Committee, which is composed of representatives from member countries.

- **Criteria** - To be designated as a World Heritage site, a site must possess 'Outstanding Universal Value' and meet at least one of the selection criteria provided under the operational guidelines of the Convention.
- As the convention set out the duties of state parties, the designation requires stronger legal and physical protection of the sites.
- **World data** - There are a total of 1,248 World Heritage Sites in the world.
- **Indian data** - 44 of World heritage site located in India (including 36 cultural, 7 natural, 1 mixed).
- The Western Ghats is one of the natural sites in India, which was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012.
- As of September 2025, a total of 69 sites from India are under consideration by UNESCO, comprising 49 cultural, 17 natural, and 3 mixed heritage properties.
- World heritage sites are sites of 'Outstanding Universal Value' to humanity.

What is the Western Ghats?

- **The Western Ghats** - It is also known as the Shayadari hills, hold immense ecological and biodiversity value, making them one of the most critical natural assets of India and the World.
- **States covered** - It stretches along the western coast of the Indian peninsula, spanning six states - Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.
- **Significance** - The region has outstanding universal value due to its exceptional biodiversity, endemism, and its role in maintaining vital ecological and climatic processes.
 - Ecologically, the Western Ghats serve as a crucial climatic regulator for peninsular India.
 - Acting as a barrier to the South-West monsoon, the range ensures high supporting lush forests and numerous rivers that sustain millions of people.
 - They also hold immense genetic resources, including wild relatives of many economically important crops and spices such as pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon.
 - The Ghats are also home to diverse ecosystems, including tropical evergreen forests, grasslands, Myristica swamps, and the distinctive shola forest.
 - These ecosystems harbour a wide variety of flora and fauna, many of which are endemic.
 - Western Ghats are the habitat for several threatened species, such as lion-tailed macaque, Nilgiri Tahr, and tiger.
 - Around 325 species in the region are listed as threatened in the IUCN Red List, out of which 129 are classified as Vulnerable, 145 as Endangered, and 51 as Critically Endangered.
 - Thus, the Western Ghats hold significance not only for India but for the entire world, serving as a global biodiversity treasure.

Western Ghats are among the four of the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots located in India.

The other three biodiversity hotspots are the Himalayas, the Indo-Burma region, and the Sundaland.



What are the major threats highlighted in the report?

- **Climate change** – It is red-flagged as the most prevalent threat to natural heritage sites in Asia. Climate impacts such as rising temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and melting glaciers are accelerating biodiversity loss and altering ecosystems.
- **Tourism-related activities** – These continue to be the second biggest threat. Unregulated tourism increases waste generation, disturbs wildlife, and puts pressure on natural resources, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions.
- **Invasive species** – The report also highlights the growing problem of invasive alien species as the third most significant threat.
- These species disrupt native ecosystems, reduce biodiversity and affect the regeneration capacity of forests.
- **Infrastructure development** – For the first time the activities such as road and railway expansion, has been listed among the threats.
- **Other threats** – Additionally, anthropogenic pressures, such as encroachment, logging, waste disposal, and agricultural expansion, continue to degrade habitats even within protected areas.
- Overall, the report reflects a concerning trend: localised human threats are now compounded by large-scale systematic pressures, especially climate change and infrastructure development, which collectively endanger the ecological integrity of Asia's most valuable natural sites, including the Western Ghats.



What are the efforts by the Indian government to protect the Western Ghats?

- **Policy frameworks** – At the policy level, the National Forest Policy, 1988, the National Environment Policy, 2006, and the National Wildlife Action Plan guide forest conservation, biodiversity protection, and sustainable development.
- **Legal measures** – On the legal front, the government has enacted the Wildlife Protection Act, under which many parts of the Western Ghats have been declared as protected areas, such as National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves, Tiger reserves, etc.
- These legal safeguards help minimise anthropogenic activities to protect wildlife and plant species.
- To protect the forests and to curb deforestation, the Indian Forest Act of 1927, and Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980, have been enacted.
- These laws prohibit the conversion of forest land into non-forest land without the permission of the central government.
- **Committees** – Moreover, to assess the negative impact of anthropogenic activities in the Western Ghats, the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change (MoEFCC) formed two expert panels – the Madhav Gadgil committee and the Kasturirangan committee.
- Based on their reports, a draft notification was issued in 2024 under the Environment Protection Act, 1986, to declare an area of around 56,000 sq. km spread across six states of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu as ecologically sensitive area (ESA).

- **Institutional measures** - The ESA is buffer areas demarcated around protected areas to minimise the negative impact of anthropogenic activities such as mining, hydropower projects, etc.
- However, the draft notification was opposed due to its potential negative impact on local livelihoods and development. It has not been implemented.

What lies ahead?

- The Outlook 4 offers a timely reminder that the Western Ghats are under increasing threat and require urgent and coordinated action. Despite the enactment of laws and policy, weak implementation remains the main concern.
- Also, the increasing anthropogenic pressure needs to be controlled. For this, the timely implementation of the draft ESA notification would be a decisive step.
- However, it must be based on participatory decision-making by the government and the local bodies to balance conservation and community livelihoods.
- Such an approach would harmonize environmental protection with responsible economic activities.
- In addition to this, integrating scientific monitoring, climate adaptation strategies, and community-led conservation would strengthen resilience against climate change and habitat degradation.
- Protecting the Western Ghats is not merely an environmental priority but a national necessity, vital for the environment, biodiversity and climate stability.

Reference

[The Indian Express| Western Ghats](#)