



PROTECTED AREA UPDATE

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Protected Area Update
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EDITORIAL

One Himalayan blunder too many

There are at least a couple of statistics in this issue of the PA Update that provide a stark and worrisome macro picture of what is happening to natural ecosystems across India. On the one hand there is the slow creeping crisis of spreading invasives and on the other, the active, even aggressive, dismantling of conservation measures by the very institutions mandated to provide protection.

A recent study shows that more than 15,000 sq. km of land across the country including in 167 protected areas is impacted annually by spreading invasives, leading to huge impacts on natural ecosystems, wildlife populations, agriculture and local economies. The estimated annual economic loss over the last six decades has been pegged at Rs. 13,000 crores underlining the deeply connected but deliberately ignored link between ecological issues and economic wellbeing. What might have been an accidental introduction or a deliberate small-scale intervention many decades ago has bloomed into a full-blown crisis that is only escalating. It is also an important reminder of how little we understand nature's way, and how our actions and interventions can lead to disastrous outcomes.

And this as the available evidence shows will only be exacerbated by the changing climate and indeed a political and policy framework that appears to care less about natural ecosystems with every passing day. This is where the other statistics strike hard. Official figures suggest that at least 1000 sq. km of forest have been de-reserved in the country in just the last five years for various developmental projects. Standing forests, a precious irreplaceable resource that is the biggest insurance against climate change, against the spread of invasives and a life and economic support system for millions is being wilfully destroyed. And this does not even

capture actual tree loss given the tree cutting and forest destruction reported regularly from different parts of the country. Conservative numbers compiled by independent entities indicate that nearly 30 lakh trees are to be cut in the near future in places as wide apart as Uttarakhand in the north to Great Nicobar in the extreme south.

Nothing in fact signifies the contradictions and the crisis better than what is happening in Uttarakhand. The Union government has on the one hand initiated steps to protect the Gangotri glacier and ensure protection of the Bhagirathi Eco Sensitive Zone, presumably an acknowledgement of the fragility of the Himalayas and a response to the multiple disasters of recent times. The State government at the same time continues to push the Chardham project by giving regular permissions for the cutting of old growth trees in exactly the same landscape. Blasting and digging continue unabated even as tourism is promoted aggressively in a landscape that is fragile and not able to deal with all these stresses.

Uttarakhand is not alone as even a casual look around the country - be it Jharkhand, Maharashtra, the North East or the islands - will reveal exactly the same picture. Each is a crisis of our own making, each a Himalayan blunder that will allow no undoing. Unless of course, we stop now and do some serious and honest re-thinking. All we will be left with otherwise are ruins from which there will be no coming back.

NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

Tribal leaders allege pressure to surrender land for the Great Nicobar project

Leaders of the Nicobarese community of Great Nicobar alleged in a press conference in the last week of January that they were being asked

to sign certificates surrendering their land for the Great Nicobar mega infrastructure development project. They said that they were relocated from their ancestral land on the west coast to the east coast of the island after the 2004 tsunami with assurances of return, but now face the permanent loss of their land due to the project.

During a press conference on January 22, chiefs of tribal committees on the island said they were invited for a meeting by the district administration on January 7, and then asked to sign surrender certificates in order to show support for the island's development, which they have opposed since 2022. The land used to be occupied by the Nicobarese across 27 villages until the 2004 tsunami, after which they were relocated to settlements in Rajiv Nagar and New Chingenh, near Campbell Bay on the upper east coast.

The Centre is pressing ahead with the nearly Rs. 90,000 crore project despite unresolved objections, legal challenges, and serious risks to vulnerable tribes and protected ecosystems.

(Also see *PA Updates* Vol XXXI, No. 3; Vol. XXX, No. 5, Vol. XXVIII, No. 6, Vol. XXVIII, Nos.5 & 4 and Vol. XXVII, No. 1).

Source: Simrin Sirur. 'Tribal leaders allege pressure to surrender land for the Great Nicobar project'
www.india.mongabay.com,
23/01/2026.

ASSAM

Rajdhani Express mows down seven elephants in Assam's Kamrup

Seven elephants were killed after a New-Delhi bound Rajdhani Express rammed into a herd during the early hours of 20 December 2025. The engine and four coaches of the train were derailed, though no passengers were injured. A grievously injured pregnant elephant delivered a male calf after the hit, while four sub-adults of the same herd and two other females

perished in the collision. The male calf was taken in a critical condition at the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation in Kaziranga.

According to officials at North East Frontier Railway (NFR), around 100 elephants were attempting to cross the railway track when the incident occurred. Locals have alleged however that the accident was a case of negligence as seen in the earlier instances of elephant deaths in the area. The incident has raised a question mark yet again on mitigation efforts aimed at preventing elephant deaths on railway tracks in Assam.

The herd, in the area to feed on the paddy, was observed at around 2 AM to be moving closer to the railway tracks as some people chased them away from their fields.

According to local forest officials there were 150 elephants in the area for a few days. Forest guards were patrolling the Kothiatoli area, around two kilometres from the incident site, where the elephants normally cross the railway tracks and National Highway 27. This was an unusual spot for the elephants to cross according to them; however a similar incident had happened here in December 2016, in which four elephants, including a calf, were mowed down by a speeding train.

The public relations officer (PRO) of NFR said the incident took place at a location which is not a designated elephant corridor. "The loco pilot on observing the herd of elephants applied emergency brakes. However, elephants dashed with the train," the PRO stated in a press release. Locals, however, point to a pattern of elephant hits by speeding trains, which seems to be increasing every season.

Existing elephant corridors here are facing multiple threats due to the conversion of agricultural lands for development projects. It has been pointed out by local journalists and researchers that these elephants used to come from the Mikir Bamuni area which is a designated elephant corridor. The corridor has however been fragmented by a large solar park built by Azure Company and stone quarries in

the area. During the harvest season, around 300 elephants are known to move from eastern Karbi Anglong and Kaziranga towards the Bamuni hills and then further east towards Western Karbi Anglong, along a hilly tract. This tract is facing large-scale land encroachment, land conversion and mining activities, so the elephants now cross through the railway tracks to reach the hilly areas,

Even though NFR maintains that the incident site is not a designated corridor, a joint survey of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Assam Forest Officials, Indian Railways and Wildlife Institute of India, points towards an alarming statistic. The survey conducted between 2023 and 2024 states that a vast railway network often intersects wildlife habitats and movement pathways of wild elephants that occur outside the purview of protected areas.

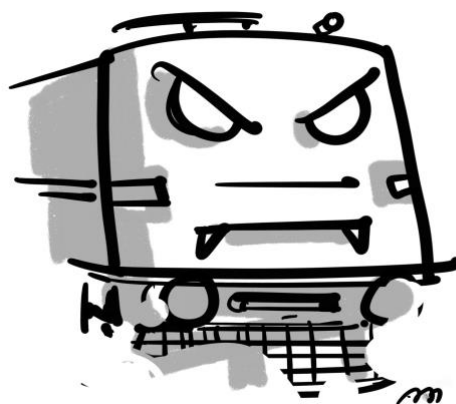
Train hits now account for the second-highest cause of non-natural elephant mortality in Assam, with reports indicating deaths of 115 elephants between 1990 and 2018, and at least 33 elephants between January 2017 and March 2023. Further, the NFR zone alone accounted for the highest number of elephant deaths in the period 2014-2022 (65 deaths) according to the report titled 'Asian Elephant - Train Collisions on Vulnerable Railway Stretches in the State of Assam of 2024'.

The report recommended reducing elephant-train collisions either by constructing underpasses and overpasses wherever possible, by reducing the time taken by elephants to cross the railway tracks by easing movement across the track through the construction of ramps and level crossings, and by implementation of technology for early detection and warning.

Sources in the railways said in some stretches intrusion detection devices use a network of optical fibre networks and ground knowledge from forest guards and village volunteers. At Kampur, however, which has been reporting increasing instances of human-elephant conflicts, these measures were absent. Between 2000 and 2023, the Wildlife Institute

of India recorded 1,209 elephant deaths of which 626 elephants died due to anthropogenic or human-induced causes. Nagaon Wildlife Division, under which Kampur falls, recorded 76 deaths.

Political activists in the region have demanded the arrest under various sections of the Wildlife (Protection) Act and BNS and termination of the incumbent forest minister, officials of the forest department, and Indian railways officials responsible for this incident. (Also see *PA Updates* Vol XXXI, Nos. 5, 4 & 2; Vol. XXVIII, No. 6)



Source: Anupam Chakravartty. 'Speeding Delhi-bound Rajdhani Express mows down seven elephants in Assam's Kampur', www.downtoearth.org.in, 20/12/2025.

Dibru-Saikhowa NP sees 36% erosion in 25 years

The Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (NP) located in the floodplains of the Brahmaputra has seen an erosion of 36% in the last 25 years. The NP, spread across Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts in Upper Assam on the bank of the Brahmaputra, was created in 1999 with an area of 340 sq km. This area is now 216.53 sq km.

The park witnessed major floods in 2004, 2012 and 2017 resulting in significant hydrological changes, loss of grasslands and an increase in the shrubland area.

According to a study, in 2000, grasslands were the dominant land cover (28.78%), followed by semi-evergreen forests (25.58%). By 2013, shrubland became the most prominent class (81.31 sq. km), and degraded forest expanded to 75.56 sq. km. During this period, substantial areas of grassland (29.94 sq. km), degraded forest (10.87 sq. km), semi-evergreen forest (12.33 sq. km), and bare land (10.50 sq km) were converted to shrubland. In 2024, degraded forest further increased, covering 80.52 sq. km (23.47%).

The study recommends a targeted grassland recovery project, control of invasive species, improved surveillance, increased staffing, and the relocation of forest villages to reduce human impact and support community-based conservation efforts.

Source: Avik Chakraborty. 'Dibru-Saikhowa shrinking amid unabated river erosion', www.eastmojo.com, 11/12/2025.

BIHAR

Kaimur WLS proposed to be 2nd tiger reserve in Bihar

The Bihar government has approved a revised proposal to declare Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) as a tiger reserve (TR). It will be the 2nd one in the state after the Valmiki TR. An earlier proposal was rejected on technical grounds. The state forest minister Pramod Kumar said the objections had been addressed and the proposal would now be sent to the Union government and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) for final approval.

According to the tiger census conducted in 2022, the total number of tigers in Valmiki TR stood at 54, a sevenfold increase since 2010. Forest department officials said the number could rise to around 70 after the current census is completed. Official records show a steady increase in the tiger population

from eight in 2010 to 28 in 2014, 31 in 2018 and 54 in 2022.

The minister also pointed out that there have been instances of tiger attacks on residents living near Valmiki in West Champaran district in recent years. He said the development of Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary as a tiger reserve would help reduce such incidents by providing additional habitat.

Source: Ramashankar. 'Bihar clears revised proposal to develop Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary as second tiger reserve', www.newindianexpress.com, 31/12/2025.

Tracking study of bar-headed goose tagged in Nagi Dam WLS reveals new insights

In a first-of-its kind study in eastern India, a bar-headed goose fitted with a GSM-GPS transmitter has revealed its migration route and flying pattern. The bird, named Gagan successfully crossed the Himalayan range and visited a large lake in Tibet. It covered roughly 780 kilometres and was recorded at heights of 5,220 metres. The total distance of its migration cycle is 1,560 km.

Gagan, along with another bar-headed goose named Vayu, was tagged with a solar-powered GSM-GPS transmitter and released in February 2025 at the Nagi Dam Bird Sanctuary in the state's Jamui district. The tagging operation was conducted as part of a project of the Bombay Natural History Society. Gagan returned to the sanctuary in the first week of December 2025, having completed its migration journey of over nine months. It was spotted on December 6 at the sanctuary by field officials and researchers.

Last year, the Nagi and Nakti Bird Sanctuaries were recognised as 'wetlands of international importance' under the Ramsar Convention. The human-made wetlands were designated as bird sanctuaries in 1984. Over 20,000 birds congregate at the sites during the winter months. This includes one of the largest

congregations of Red-crested pochard on the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

Source: Md Imran Khan. 'From Bihar's plains to Tibet's high plateau: Tracking study of bar-headed goose reveals new insights', www.downtoearth.org.in, 11/12/2025.

DELHI

Delhi Ridge gets new statutory board to oversee protection, permissions

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has reconstituted the Delhi Ridge Management Board (DRMB) with statutory powers. This follows directions by the Supreme Court (SC) that is aimed at creating one entity responsible for issuing permissions related to the use of the Delhi Ridge, for monitoring and acting against encroachments and other violations.

It replaces the existing Ridge Management Board, which was constituted in 1995 and reconstituted several times, albeit without statutory powers. The notification dated 01 December 2025 was issued under powers conferred by sub-section (3) of Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. This section empowers the Central government to establish specific authorities through official gazette orders to exercise and perform certain powers and functions, including issuing directions, for protecting the environment.

On November 11, a bench of then Chief Justice of India BR Gavai and Justice K Vinod Chandran asked MoEFCC to constitute DRMB so that it has teeth to act. In that order, the court said that DRMB needs statutory backing, and pointed out that while there were several entities looking after the Ridge, the overlapping jurisdictions made all of them sub-optimal. The court also said the DRMB thus created would focus on the removal of encroachments and also oversee afforestation.

The 2021 Master Plan for Delhi identifies the Delhi Ridge as an area measuring

7,777 ha of land, divided into four zones: Northern, Central, South Central (Mehrauli), and Southern. The Ridge – often described as the city's "green lungs" – has long been under pressure from real estate interests, construction activity, and government projects.

The DRMB will have 13 members, be headed by the chief secretary of the Delhi government, and include among its members a representative of the Director General of Forests and special secretary MoEFCC not below the rank of Inspector General of Forests; a representative of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs not below the rank of joint secretary; a representative of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) appointed by the SC, and two civil society members to be appointed by the Delhi government. The member of the CEC designated to DRMB shall report to the SC every three months regarding the proper functioning of the DRMB and its standing committee.

MoEFCC had initially opposed granting statutory status to the DRMB, expressing apprehension that if the Centre issues a notification, there would be an overlap with other authorities.

Experts are however not convinced that the creation of DRMB would have the desired outcome. They said it may again start a process of issuance of various orders but not ensure immediate remediation for the Ridge, which already has a lot of encroachments. They have raised questions on the exercise of its powers and how it would direct removal of unauthorised constructions and encroachments. It has been noted for instance that all encroachments have been identified in the Southern Ridge after three extensive surveys and that maps have also been filed in the National Green Tribunal. The only issue that remains is their removal.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'Delhi Ridge gets new statutory board to oversee protection, permissions', www.hindustantimes.com, 11/12/2025.

GUJARAT

Three children killed in November in attacks by lion, leopard

Three children were killed in Gir in the month of November 2025 in attacks by lions and a leopard. A two-year-old girl was killed by a lion on 26 November in village Pichhvi and a five-year from a migrant labour family was killed by a lioness in Bagasara taluka of Amreli within 24 hours of the first incident. A day later, a one-year-old girl was dragged out of her house and killed by a leopard in Trambakpur, also in Amreli.

These are in addition to a number of similar such incidents earlier in the year - in June, a five-year-old boy, the son of a migrant labourer, was dragged from bushes near his family's hut in Thordi village, in Savarkundla taluka, and killed by a lion. In March, a farmer was mauled in his field near Kakdi Moli on the Gir-Amreli border, and in February, a seven-year-old boy was killed near Paniya village in Amreli while going to fetch water.

Most of these attacks have been reported from 'revenue land'—farms, village commons, coastal scrub and roadside thickets that lions now use as everyday habitat, indicating a clear trend with the increase in lion numbers and their spread far outside the protected area network.

The 16th Asiatic Lion Census in 2025 counted 891 lions in Gujarat, up by a third from 674 in 2020. Of these only about 384 lions are inside sanctuaries such as Gir, Girnar, Mitiyala and Pania. Roughly 507 (nearly 60%) now roam outside protected forests in a 35,000 sq. km matrix of 11 districts that includes coastal stretches, sugarcane and cotton fields, railway lines and busy highways.

Research has linked a significant share of the attacks to private lands where lions are baited for illegal 'backdoor' tourism, habituating big cats to human presence and livestock carcasses. A 2024 study of these attacks by Keshab Gogoi, a researcher at the Wildlife Institute of India, found that lion

attacks in Gujarat have averaged about 25 a year since 2012, with the highest density around such unregulated tourism hotspots. The findings were published in the journal *Conservation Biology*.

(Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXXI, No. 3; Vol. XXX, No. 4; Vol. XXIX, No. 1; Vol. XXVIII, No. 2, XXVI, No. 3; Vol. XXV, No. 6 and Vol. XIII, No. 2)



Source: Jumana Shah. 'How child deaths in lion attacks threaten to unwrite Gir conservation story', www.indiatoday.in, 04/12/2025.

MADHYA PRADESH

Special highway design to slow down vehicles in Durgavati TR

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has introduced what it describes as India's first integrated "wildlife-safe" road corridor, combining speed-calming design, fencing, animal underpasses and electronic monitoring on a section of National Highway (NH) -45 that cuts through a critical tiger habitat in Madhya Pradesh. The features, on a 12km stretch through the Veerangana Durgavati Tiger Reserve (TR), aim to reduce animal road deaths by addressing not just where wildlife crosses, but how vehicles move. Traffic volumes and speeds have risen sharply on this section as a two-lane road has been widened to four, carrying faster vehicles, heavier loads and far less tolerance for interruptions.

At the centre of the new design is a 2km zone where the asphalt is overlaid with raised red thermoplastic markings, 5mm thick, laid out in a continuous band across the carriageway. The red-marked stretch is meant to slow vehicles gradually, well before they reach the points where animals are most likely to emerge. The bright red texture signals to drivers that they are entering a wildlife-sensitive stretch and its slightly raised surface automatically reduces vehicle speed, the NHAI has said.

Officials say the markings serve two purposes. Visually, they announce that the driver is entering a forest stretch where the rules of the road subtly change. Physically, they produce a mild vibration under the tyres, enough to encourage drivers to ease off the accelerator without the abrupt jolt of a speed breaker, which is considered unsafe on high-speed highways. The technique is widely used in other countries but has rarely been seen in India.

25 wildlife underpasses have also been built below the road, their locations chosen on the basis of observed animal movement. Continuous iron fencing runs on both sides of the highway, guiding animals towards these openings and preventing them from wandering onto the carriageway.

Source: Ramendra Singh. 'In MP, a highway learns to slow down for tigers', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 26/12/2025.

54 tiger deaths in Madhya Pradesh in 2025

54 tiger deaths were reported in Madhya Pradesh in 2025, the highest recorded in the state in a calendar year. This is 17% more than the number of 46 deaths reported for 2024. As per data from the forest department's (FD) wildlife wing, 38 tigers (70%) died due to natural causes in 2025. As many as 10 (18%) fell to unnatural causes (read poaching-related deaths). In six cases, seizures of body parts were reported.

Former PCCF (wildlife) JS Chauhan was of the view that with the tiger population rising steadily, deaths were bound to occur. In 2018, MP became the country's Tiger State with 526 tigers, and the number jumped by more than 49% to 785 in the next census. Anything beyond 70 deaths a year should be a cause of worry, he noted.

What has emerged as a growing concern is electrocution. Setting up high-voltage electric fences and traps to target animals, particularly wild boars, nilgais, chital or blackbucks, has escalated into a major challenge for the FD especially in corridors with heavy tiger movement. Seven of the 10 unnatural deaths in 2025 were found to have been caused by electrocution.

Analysts point out that the slow pace of compensation for crop loss caused by wild animals is a major reason that farmers resort to illegal electrified fencing. The Revenue Book Circular Volume 6, particularly Clause 4 (RBC 6-4), governs financial compensation for farmers for crop damage by wild animals. The norms stipulate 25% crop damage as the threshold for compensation eligibility. Besides, there is no provision for compensation if crops are trampled upon but not consumed.

Train accidents are another worry. The Budhni–Midghat rail section passing through Ratapani Tiger Reserve remains a cause for concern. As many as 13 leopards and four tigers were killed in rail accidents between March 2015 and March 2024. A third line between Barkheda and Budhni was cleared only after the Railways agreed to put in place necessary infrastructure, but very little has been done, including chain-link fencing, underpasses, tunnels, signage and speed control measures.

Source: Anuraag Singh. 'Not the year of the tiger for Madhya Pradesh', www.newindianexpress.com, 20/12/2025.

MAHARASHTRA

Tribal residents protest eviction from SGNP

Raising slogans and holding placards, around 150 residents from tribal hamlets inside Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) staged a peaceful *morcha* outside the park on in the last week of January, protesting against the eviction notices issued by the forest department (FD) and alleging attempts to forcibly displace them from their ancestral land. Eviction notices were put up across several settlements (*padas*) on January 13.

The public notice issued by the office of the deputy director (South), SGNP, stated that “as per the orders passed by the Hon’ble High Court, Bombay, an encroachment removal (*padkam*) campaign will be implemented in SGNP from 19.01.2026 to 28.01.2026”, warning that unauthorised structures will be demolished and legal action initiated if occupants fail to vacate forest land. The notice further cautioned that opposing the proceedings would amount to contempt of court.

Residents alleged that the notices were pasted between 2 am and 3 am. They also claimed that basic services such as bus services and electricity were disrupted soon after the notices were put up. They added that they were summoned to the FD office a week earlier and informed that the action was based on a high court order and they would be shifted to the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) buildings. Activists have pointed out that the move was a fundamental violation of tribal rights and of the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

The current action follows directions issued by a High Court-appointed committee tasked with ensuring the removal of encroachments from SGNP. However, tribal residents insist that they do not fall under the category of encroachers and have lived in the forest for generations. The issue has been brewing since October 2025 when the state government indicated that tribals identified as

encroachers inside SGNP would be shifted to rehabilitation buildings in Marol-Maroshi, triggering widespread opposition. Tribal groups had then argued that relocation without completing the FRA procedures was illegal.

In a subsequent development on 27th January an eviction drive was halted by forest minister Ganesh Naik, bringing relief to 400 families who had been asked to move because they had been allotted flats under a government scheme.

Tribal residents, particularly women, congregated in large numbers outside Navapada, the first hamlet where demolitions were scheduled, and blocked bulldozers from proceeding further. Some protestors were injured due to assault by police and forest officials, they claimed. The national park's gate at Borivali had been closed earlier in the day to allow for the evictions to take place.

(Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXXI, No. 4; XXIX, Nos. 6 & 2; Vol. XXVII, Nos. 5 & 1, Vol. XXVI, No. 5, Vol. XXV, Nos. 4 & 1 and Vol. XXIV, Nos. 3 & 2).

Source: Aditi Shekar. 'National Park tribals protest state's attempt to evict them from ancestral abode', www.hindustantimes.com, 22/01/2026.

Yogesh Naik. 'Relief for SGNP tribals as Naik halts demolition', www.hindustantimes.com, 29/01/2026

MIZORAM

Seven snail species discovered on Blue Mountain in Phawngpui NP

A team of international scientists has discovered seven new species of land snails on Blue Mountain, part of Mizoram's Phawngpui National Park (NP). The discovery is part of a massive taxonomic revision published in the *European Journal of Taxonomy*, which redefines the classification of Himalayan and

Myanmar *Alycaeinae* snails and documents an astonishing 109 species across the region.

The study, authored by Barna Páll-Gergely, Vukašin Gojšina, and Dr. NA Aravind (ATREE), focuses on the genera *Chamalycaeus*, *Cyclorix*, and *Dicharax*. During fieldwork on Blue Mountain—the highest peak in Mizoram at 2,157 metres—the researchers collected 13 species of snails, seven of which turned out to be entirely new to science. The species newly described include *Chamalycaeus mizoramensis*, *Chamalycaeus reflectus*, *Cyclorix rohiniae*, *Dicharax praeda*, *D. semivivus*, *D. umashaankeri*, and *D. ganeshaiahi*.

What makes the discovery remarkable is the lack of prior documentation. According to the study, “There are no historical records of *Alycaeinae* from the Indian state of Mizoram”, underscoring Blue Mountain as a largely unexplored frontier for malacology and biodiversity research. The region, located along the India–Myanmar border, forms part of the Phawngpui NP, a 50 sq km protected area with rugged cliffs, dense forests, and elevations ranging from subtropical to montane climates. The mountain receives an average annual rainfall of 3000 mm and temperatures that range from 0–30°C, creating a humid microclimate ideal for land snails and other moisture-dependent fauna.

Among the discoveries, *Chamalycaeus mizoramensis* stands out as a relatively large species with morphological traits that make it unlike any other known species in the genus. It is found nowhere else except Blue Mountain. The newly described *Chamalycaeus reflectus* is much smaller, just 1.9–2.5 mm in diameter, and is notable for its strongly reflected outer lip and delicate sculpture. A rare find, *Cyclorix rohiniae*, joins the elongated *Cyclorix* group, while four new *Dicharax* species revealing hidden diversity in a genus previously better documented from Myanmar and the eastern Himalayas.

Beyond describing new species, the monograph performs a comprehensive taxonomic overhaul of Himalayan and

Myanmar *Alycaeinae*. The authors formally recognize 109 species and provide illustrations for all of them. Importantly, they identify 37 new synonyms, many correcting species-group assignments made over a century ago by pioneering malacologist Henry Godwin-Austen. By re-examining historical specimens and integrating modern analytical techniques, the study resolves longstanding confusion in the region’s snail taxonomy, offering clarity that will guide future biodiversity assessments.

Source: Roopak Goswami. 'Mizoram: Seven snail species discovered on Blue Mountain'
www.eastmojo.com, 10/12/2025.

SIKKIM

***Neelus sikkimensis*, first of its genus in India reported from Sikkim**

Researchers from the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) have discovered a new species of *Collembola*, or springtail, a tiny soil-dwelling micro-arthropod that plays an outsized role in keeping ecosystems alive. The species, named *Neelus sikkimensis*, marks the first time the genus *Neelus* has been documented in India.

The finding, published in the *Journal of the Entomological Research Society*, strengthens the Eastern Himalayas’ reputation as one of the world’s most important biodiversity hotspots. With this addition, the global count of species within the genus *Neelus* now stands at eight.

The research was carried out by the Apterygota Section of the ZSI, led by Dr Guru Pada Mandal, with scientist Kusumendra Kumar Suman as part of the team. Their work focused on soil and moss samples collected from Sikkim’s high-altitude landscapes, environments that often harbour life forms invisible to the naked eye and overlooked in mainstream conservation narratives.

What sets *Neelus sikkimensis* apart is its extreme adaptation to life underground. The species is microscopic in size, lacks eyes and

survives in complete darkness within soil and moss layers.

Source: 'New eyeless soil organism found in Sikkim expands India's biodiversity map', www.telegraphindia.com, 23/12/2025.

TELANGANA

Reliance's Vantara to start wildlife conservatory, night safari in Telangana

The Reliance Foundation's controversial wildlife conservation initiative, Vantara, has entered a partnership with the Telangana government to set up a wildlife conservatory and a night safari in the state. The partnership was announced at the Telangana Global Rising Summit held at Bharat Future City near Hyderabad on 8th December.

"Designed as a flagship conservation and experiential tourism project, the initiative aims to elevate India's wildlife rehabilitation ecosystem while offering globally benchmarked visitor experiences," a statement from the Telangana government said. The proposed conservatory will "integrate scientific wildlife care, research, habitat restoration and public education through immersive exhibits and guided night-safari experiences," it added.

The Vantara Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre in Gujarat's Jamnagar is said to be one of the world's largest privately run animal care centres, housing rescued elephants, modern veterinary facilities, and conservation initiatives. It has been accused of irregularities in sourcing animals from across the world, with wildlife activists raising concerns about the volume and origin of animal transfers to India in recent years, many of them going to Vantara.

The Supreme Court in September 2025 gave a clean chit to Vantara, accepting a report by a Special Investigation Team (SIT) which probed the allegations and concluded that there was no foul play in the acquisition of

the wild animals. However, a report subsequently published by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) said there were gaps in India's due diligence, which possibly allowed for violations of CITES provisions.

Source: 'Reliance's Vantara to start wildlife conservatory, night safari in Telangana', www.thenewsminute.com, 09/12/2025.

UTTARAKHAND

Ropeway project cleared in Rajaji TR

Despite opposition by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), the Central government has approved the construction of a ropeway in the core zone of Rajaji Tiger Reserve (TR) in Uttarakhand. It will connect Triveni Ghat to Neelkanth Mahadev Mandir, and it aimed at easing traffic congestion on the road which passes through the forest area, especially during the kanwar yatra.

In its proposal, the Uttarakhand Government said the temple was about 27 km from Rishikesh and took one and a half hours to reach the temple. "Since Neelkanth Mahadev Mandir is surrounded by forest land, all alignments possible had to necessarily pass through the forest area if the primary objective of linking the temple with Parvati Mata Mandir was to be achieved. Hence, there is no escape from using the forest land for development of ropeway," it said in a proposal.

Moreover, the revised proposal on the extent of the eco-sensitive zone of the reserve is yet to be finalised by the state government. During the kanwar yatra, lakhs of pilgrims use pathways which pass through the reserve. They can now use the ropeway resulting in less interference with the wildlife in the reserve. The proposal also notes that the ropeway will provide an additional means to monitor wildlife movement here.

The NTCA in its objections noted that the ropeway alone would not be sufficient to accommodate the heavy tourist influx to Neelkanth Mahadev Temple. Consequently, both the roadway and ropeway would likely remain operational, increasing overall human presence and disturbance in the core of the reserve. Not recommending the project for approval, the NTCA said in its report that an alternative alignment and less invasive solutions should be explored.

The Uttarakhand Government to commission a study through the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) to assess animal movement patterns and recommend suitable mitigation measures prior to commencement of the project.

Source: Aksheev Thakur. 'Despite apex tiger body's disapproval, wildlife panel clears ropeway project in Rajaji reserve', www.tribuneindia.com, 23/12/2025

Centre orders study of Gangotri glacier, Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone

The Union environment ministry has directed the GB Pant Society of Himalayan Environment and Development to study the Gangotri glacier, the Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone and alternative livelihood models for the region. The institute has been directed to work in specific areas related to:

1. Studying the Gangotri glacier,
2. Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone and also studying the alternative livelihoods models,
3. Becoming a knowledge partner towards 100% completion of biodiversity registers in the Himalayan region,
4. Becoming the knowledge centre for the Ramsar sites in the Greater Himalayan region,
5. Time-bound project and action plan for all centres

The last stretch of the Char Dham road project passes through the Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone (BESZ) and is facing stiff opposition from environmentalists (see

accompanying story). Constructing the Tekhla-Badethi stretch alone will involve the felling of 530 trees, according to documents available on the Union environment ministry's Parivesh website. The annexures to the Zonal Master Plan of BESZ, available on the ministry's website, add that a key concern is the need to protect the forests and green cover in the BESZ.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'Centre orders study of Gangotri glacier, Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone', www.hindustantimes.com, 02/12/2025.

Uttarakhand govt approves Char Dham project road widening in Bhagirathi ESZ

The Uttarakhand government has given its nod to the widening of a 20.6-km stretch under the Char Dham project in the upper reaches of the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive zone (ESZ). The 20.6-km stretch, called package 1, links Bhaironghat to Jhala villages in Uttarkashi district. According to a letter from the Uttarakhand Head of Forest Forces (HoFF), the stretch will involve the loss of 41.92 ha of forest area, which includes several Deodar trees.

The letter dated 12 November 2025 to the state nodal officer, forest land, says that the road widening is "strategically important for national security". The project, hence, has been considered under section 1A, sub-section (2)(c) of the Forest (Conservation and Augmentation) Act, 1980 (as amended in 2023), which exempts strategic linear projects, situated within a distance of 100km along international borders or Line of Control or Line of Actual Control, from forest clearance, the letter said.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'Uttarakhand govt approves Char Dham project road widening' www.hindustantimes.com, 06/12/2025.

Uttarakhand to set up wildlife sterilisation centres, empower rangers to deal with rise in animal attacks

Amid a rise in bear and leopard attacks, the Uttarakhand government has announced that it will set up wildlife sterilisation, rescue and rehabilitation centres, and grant range officers greater powers to “deal with” wild animals by amending rules under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The government has also decided to install solar fencing and sensor-based alert systems across districts.

A minimum of 10 Nali in hilly forest areas and a minimum of 1 acre of land in plain forest areas will be reserved for setting up the sterilisation and rehabilitation centres, the chief minister of the state said.

Source: Aiswarya Raj. 'Uttarakhand to set up wildlife sterilisation centres, empower rangers amid rise in animal attacks', www.indianexpress.com, 21/12/2025.

NATIONAL NEWS

ICMR approves Rs. 13.5 crore 4-year study to prevent snakebite deaths in country



The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has approved a Rs. 13.5-crore, four-year national study aimed at developing a unified and scalable model to

prevent snakebite-related deaths across the country.

The initiative—titled “Zero Snakebite Death: Community Empowerment & Engagement for Mitigation of Snakebite Envenoming”—will be implemented across seven states: Assam, West Bengal, Odisha,

Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Jharkhand. The project is led by Dr. Jaideep Menon of the Amrita Institute of Medical Sciences, Kerala, who will serve as the Principal Investigator.

The Demow Model from Assam's Sivasagar district has been selected as one of the successful grassroots interventions to be scientifically evaluated and potentially replicated nationwide. Known for its robust network of community volunteers, early referral mechanisms and sustained awareness campaigns, the model will now form a key pillar of the national framework being developed under the study.

The research will compare and integrate several proven regional approaches, including the Demow Model (Assam), which emphasises community engagement and volunteer-driven referral networks; the Maharashtra Model, which focuses on distributing protective gear to reduce high-risk occupational exposure; the Himachal Pradesh Model, which involves administering anti-snake venom (ASV) during patient transport to strengthen pre-hospital care; and the Kerala Model, which uses digital coordination tools for real-time tracking and rapid response.

The study will be implemented under SARPA (Snakebite Awareness, Response, Prevention & Action), a platform designed to strengthen the interface between vulnerable communities and the formal healthcare system, ensuring quicker access to life-saving treatment during the critical 'golden hour' following a snakebite.

The project will commence in January 2026, with ICMR deploying one research scientist and four technical staff members in each participating state to support field operations, monitoring and data collection. The project will assess improvements in awareness among communities, frontline health workers and clinicians, while developing a national digital dashboard for real-time snakebite surveillance and response.

Source: Roopak Goswami. 'ICMR picks Assam's Demow model to eliminate nationwide snakebite deaths', www.eastmojo.com, 15/12/2025.

NBWL may allow state wildlife boards to clear oil pipeline projects in protected forests; also reconsidering SOPs for religious areas in forests and wildlife areas

The Standing Committee (SC) of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) is considering a proposal to allow state wildlife boards to consider the laying of slurry, petroleum and crude oil pipelines through roads inside protected forests and wildlife areas.

The SC, which met on December 9, also discussed the finalisation of a standard operating procedure (SOP) for cultural and religious institutions located within forest and wildlife areas. The Union environment ministry had constituted an expert committee to consider such proposals and has already sought comments from states on the expert committee report.

Matters related to petroleum or crude oil pipelines were earlier considered in the NBWL meetings, but now, the standing committee has proposed that they can be cleared at the state level just like drinking water pipelines, optical fiber cables (OFC), telephone lines, and electricity cables.

The Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023 currently grant general approval for the use of forest land within the right of way (RoW) of roads and for underground utilities. Para 12 of the revised guidelines of the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023 delegates certain powers to the State Board for Wildlife (SBWL). Specifically, it allows the SBWL to grant approvals for the underground laying of drinking water pipelines, OFCs, and power lines up to 11 kilovolts within the permitted RoW of roads located inside national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and tiger reserves notified under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

The NBWL has received several representations from the industrial associations to streamline approvals for slurry pipelines as well.

Another significant agenda that was discussed includes an SOP for submission of proposals concerning cultural and religious institutions located within forest and wildlife areas. Presently, proposals concerning the establishment or continuation of religious sites, religious institutions located within forest or wildlife areas are required to be submitted through the respective SBWLs to the SC of the NBWL for consideration and recommendation. While examining such proposals, the SC observed the necessity of formulating an SOP to ensure consistency, transparency, and judicious decision-making in each case. The ministry had formed an expert committee consisting of two NBWL members who had already drafted the SOP.

The majority of responding states (Bihar, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Odisha, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, West Bengal, Chandigarh and Andhra Pradesh) have stated that the SOP should apply only to national parks and wildlife sanctuaries (NP/WLS) notified under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. They are not agreeable to the SOP being implemented for other categories such as reserve forests, protected forests and community reserves, and hence sought changes. Only Arunachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh have given their consent.

Further, States and Union Territories have submitted their observations and comments on the guidelines for infrastructure development in and around wetlands located within protected areas and their notified eco sensitive zones.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'NBWL considering proposal to allow state wildlife boards to clear oil pipeline projects in protected forests', www.hindustantimes.com, 15/12/2025.

India's natural areas losing 15,500 sq km a year to fast-spreading invasive species; 167 PAs impacted

A new study published in the journal *Nature Sustainability* has reported that invasive alien plants are expanding across 15,500 sq. km of India's natural areas every year impacting 144 million people and large areas of farmland and wildlife habitat. The three main species responsible were reported to be *Lantana camara*, *Chromolaena odorata* and *Prosopis juliflora*; these together dominate two-thirds of natural ecosystems.

The invasions are accelerating due to climate change, land-use shifts, altered fire regimes and biodiversity loss. Invasive species have nearly doubled their range in ecologically sensitive regions such as the Western Ghats, the Himalayas and the north-east.

The authors assessed 16 years of systematic monitoring, covering 277,000 sq km across India between 2006 and 2022, to examine how plant invasions intersect with global environmental changes such as warming, altered fire regimes, shifts in herbivory and rapid land-use transformation. By 2022, invasions had affected 266,954 sq km of natural areas containing abundant native forage for livestock and wild herbivores, 212,450 sq km of wild herbivore-occupied landscapes, and 105,725 sq km of tiger habitat.

Almost two-thirds of India's natural ecosystems now contain at least 11 major invasive plant species, including *Lantana camara*, *Chromolaena odorata* and *Prosopis juliflora*. The study compiled 1.06 million records of alien plants collected over a 16-year period. *Chromolaena odorata* was found to be expanding fastest, spreading at a rate of 1,988 sq. km per year. In the Western Ghats and the north-east, the species has almost doubled its range within two decades.

In India's dry regions, *Prosopis juliflora*, introduced historically to prevent desertification, has spread across entire landscapes, displacing native shrubs and

grasses essential for wildlife and pastoral communities, the findings of the report stated.

Some species previously thought to be confined to arid environments have now moved into the Himalayan regions and wet evergreen forests. Open natural ecosystems such as the dry grasslands of peninsular India, wet grasslands along the Ganga and Brahmaputra, shola grasslands in the Western Ghats and savannas across the country were identified as the most vulnerable.

Wet-biome invaders such as *Ageratina adenophora*, *Chromolaena odorata* and *Mikania micrantha* expanded with increasing fire frequency, declining soil moisture and rising temperatures, the researchers stated. Conversely, dry biomes invasions (e.g., *Prosopis juliflora* syn. *Neltuma juliflora* and *Xanthium strumarium*) increased with declining fire frequency, increasing soil moisture, increasing livestock grazing, and increasing rainfall.

The researchers identified 243 sub-districts and 167 protected areas as being at high risk, and therefore priorities for intervention. *Lantana camara* emerged as the most dominant invader in most states, while *Chromolaena odorata* was identified as the fastest-growing threat. High-risk clusters were mapped in the Shivalik-Terai belt in the north, the Duars in the north-east, the Aravalli ranges, the Dandakaranya forests in central India, and the Nilgiri region of the Western Ghats.

India's economic losses from invasive species between 1960 and 2020 are estimated at \$127.3 billion (Rs. 8,30,000 crore).

Source: Himanshu Nitnaware. 'India's natural areas losing 15,500 sq km a year to fast-spreading invasive species', www.downtoearth.org.in, 03/12/2025.

Over 99,000 ha forest land diverted for projects in last five years: Govt

India has diverted more than 99,000 ha of forest land for non-forestry purposes since 2020, with roads, mining, hydroelectric, and

irrigation projects accounting for the largest share. Union Minister of State for Environment Kirti Vardhan Singh told the Rajya Sabha recently that 22,233 ha were diverted for road projects alone between 2020-21 and 2024-25, followed by 18,914 ha for mining and quarrying, and 17,434 ha for hydel and irrigation works. Power transmission lines required 13,859 ha, while railway projects saw the diversion of 5,957 ha.

Other major categories include forest village conversion (1,362 ha), drinking water projects (1,281 ha), rehabilitation works (1,508 ha), defence projects (6,042 ha), optical fibre cable (391 ha), industries (150 ha), and new petrol pumps (1,927 ha).

The ministry said that a total of 3,826 road projects received forest clearance since 2020, the highest across all sectors. Pipelines (756), drinking water projects (676), optical fibre cable (524), hydel/irrigation (194), mining/quarrying (190) and railway projects (182) formed the next major categories.

Smaller notable categories include defence (116 clearances), industry (41), village electricity (31), school and educational institutions (37), and non-conventional energy (7).

Source: 'Over 99,000 ha forest land diverted for projects in last five years: Govt', www.arunachaltimes.in, 05/12/2025.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

30,000 live animals seized in month-long global wildlife crime crackdown by Interpol

More than 30,000 live animals, along with protected plants and timber, were seized during a month-long global crackdown on illegal wildlife and forestry trade, according to Interpol. The seizures were made during a coordinated operation between September 15 and October 15, 2025, involving police,



customs, border security, forestry and wildlife authorities in 134 countries. In total, 4,640 seizures were recorded in just one month.

The operation uncovered thousands of

protected animals and plants, tens of thousands of cubic metres of illegally logged timber and more than 30 tonnes of spices listed as endangered under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Interpol said the operation revealed an escalating illicit trade in bushmeat — meat from wild animals, particularly from tropical regions. Belgian authorities intercepted primate meat, Kenyan officials seized more than 400 kg of giraffe meat, and Tanzanian law enforcement recovered zebra and antelope meat and skins valued at about \$10,000 (about Rs. 9 lakh). “Globally, a record 5.8 tonnes of bushmeat was seized, with a notable increase in cases from Africa into Europe,” Interpol stated.

The crackdown, known as Operation Thunder 2025, was coordinated by Interpol in partnership with the World Customs Organization. It was aimed at intercepting and seizing illegally traded wildlife and forest products, disrupting global supply chains, dismantling criminal networks and identifying suspects involved in environmental crime, estimated to be worth up to \$20 billion annually. Authorities cautioned that the true scale of the trade is likely to be higher, given its clandestine nature.

In South Africa, police arrested 24 suspects and seized protected succulents, live pangolins and more than 17,000 abalone, as well as unlicensed firearms and ammunition. Across the operation, authorities seized 215 kg and 1,900 pieces of elephant ivory; 28 kg and seven rhinoceros horns; 159 kg and 338 pieces

of big cats and other felines; and seven tonnes of pangolin scales and meat. Other seizures included 1,560 pieces of primates, 830 pieces and derivatives of bears, 4,340 pieces of birds and 38,850 pieces of reptiles. Primate body parts and skulls were intercepted from a shipment arriving from Asia at a North American mail centre.

Indonesian authorities seized birds and arthropods, including butterflies, spiders and centipedes. Turtles and tortoises accounted for 3,640 pieces, while arthropod seizures totalled 10,500 pieces. Marine species made up 245 tonnes and 91,000 pieces, including 4,000 shark fins. Other wildlife seizures amounted to five tonnes and 32,000 pieces. Plants and timber accounted for 10 tonnes of plant material and derivatives, as well as 31,560 sq. m and 14,320 pieces of timber respectively.

While iconic large mammals often dominate public attention, Interpol said the operation highlighted a growing threat to smaller species and plants. In particular, there was a sharp rise in the trafficking of exotic arthropods. Nearly 10,500 butterflies, spiders and insects — many protected under CITES — were seized around the world as part of the operation.

The illegal plant trade also reached record levels in 2025, with more than 10 tonnes of live plants and plant derivatives seized, driven largely by demand from horticulture and collector markets, authorities said.

Among major individual cases, Qatari authorities arrested a person attempting to sell an endangered primate for \$14,000 on social media. In Brazil, police dismantled a trafficking network, identified 145 suspects and rescued more than 200 wild animals, including breaking up an international golden lion tamarin trafficking ring. Mexican authorities seized seven animals in Sinaloa, including two tigers, alongside firearm components linked to organised crime. In the United States, officials intercepted more than 40 shipments of insects and 80 shipments of butterflies originating from Germany, Slovakia and the UK.

French customs seized ivory pieces from marketplaces, while Austrian authorities recovered six more from an ivory dealer's home. Vietnamese officials detained two people and seized a fishing vessel carrying 4.2 tonnes of pangolin scales, along with other reptiles and bird parts. Germany intercepted more than 1,000 illegal wildlife and forestry items — including ivory, reptile parts, coral, plant derivatives and live specimens — primarily at mail centres and airports.

Interpol's Secretary General, Valdecy Urquiza, said the operation had once again exposed the scale and sophistication of criminal networks behind the illegal wildlife and forestry trade. "These networks increasingly intersect with other forms of serious crime, from drug trafficking to human exploitation," he said. "They target vulnerable species, undermine the rule of law and endanger communities worldwide."

Source: Himanshu Nitnaware. '30,000 live animals seized in global wildlife crime crackdown by Interpol', www.downtoearth.org.in, 14/12/2025.

Dhole now survives in only small, fragmented populations: study

A recent large-scale study spanning 12 countries within the dhole's known range, grouped into three regions - Mainland China, the Indian subcontinent (India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh), and Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia) - has found that the animal is now found only in small fragmented populations. The global adult dhole population is estimated at just 4,500-10,500 individuals, of which 1,000-2,000 are adult, mature individuals capable of reproducing.

Researchers assessed which landscapes still provide the ecological conditions necessary for dholes. They then used MaxEnt (Maximum Entropy) modelling, a computational method, to predict habitat

suitability using 24 environmental variables (such as climate, ecology, geophysical characteristics, and human impact), which are known to influence the distribution of large, wide-ranging carnivores.

The team compiled a dataset of 1,604 verified dhole observations recorded between 1996 and 2018. The data was provided by participants of a 2019 workshop co-organised by the IUCN Dhole Working Group, the IUCN Conservation Planning Specialist Group, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, Kasetsart University, and Thailand's Khao Yai National Park. Because dholes are more often spotted in protected forests, the data was filtered using spatial software to ensure records were evenly spaced, reducing sampling bias.

Two models were then run: a coarse-scale model to identify broad regions of suitability, and a fine-scale model to zoom in on likely areas of dhole presence. Both were validated with independent datasets and statistical tests, showing strong predictive accuracy. The models highlighted three primary regions of suitable dhole habitat: Western India, Central India, and across the Himalayan foothills through Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia as a region was found to have the largest share of potential dhole habitat (56%). Among individual countries, India held the largest proportion of the potential range. Meanwhile, Bhutan, Thailand, Cambodia, and Malaysia showed the highest relative probability of dhole presence within their habitats.

The study also found that legally protected forests were the strongest predictor of whether dholes can survive in an area, which means conservation efforts cannot rely only on isolated reserves. Corridors and surrounding landscapes need protection too if populations are to remain connected and viable.

Even in areas where suitable habitat remains the study reported that dholes face ongoing pressures. These include among others clearance of forests for agriculture, roads, and urban expansion, livestock grazing, and diseases from domestic dogs.

Source: Sneha Mahale. 'Study maps habitat regions as dhole populations dwindle in Asia', www.scroll.in, 23/12/2025.





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We've published regularly every two months and put together more than 6000 reports from across the country over this three decade period. This is a well organised, easily accessible and usable archive that provides important insights into the discourse of wildlife conservation in India, and how the news media have perceived wildlife, environment, and development issues in the country.



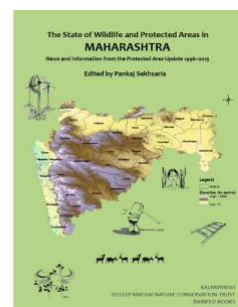
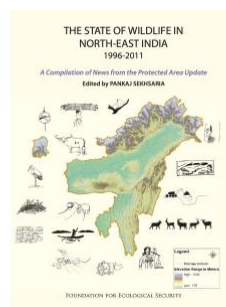
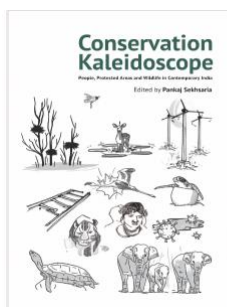
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The *Protected Area Update* team is very happy to announce the creation and publication of the *Protected Area Update Database*, a searchable online resource that archives and brings together nearly 30 years of the news and information published in the *PA Update* since in its beginning in 1994.

The *PA Update*, a 24-page publication in English, provides an overview of what is happening in the field of wildlife protection and conservation in Protected Areas from across South Asia, particularly India. It is published six times a year and mailed to nearly 2000 people including students, teachers, activists, and researchers. Additionally, it

is sent as an electronic version via an email list to about 4500 individuals and is also uploaded on the Kalpavriksh. The newsletter, in its 31st year of publication, has curated and published 6000+ news reports over the years. This number is constantly increasing with each issue of the newsletter.

The *PA Update Database*, a joint project of Kalpavriksh, the Foundation for Ecological Security, The Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Foundation, The Environment and Ecology Research Group (EERG), at C-TARA, IIT Bombay and the DST, Govt of India supported GISE Hub, IITB Bombay brings together about 4500 of these stories from 300+ protected areas from around the country on one single platform to make it more accessible and user-friendly. It facilitates and hopes to provide important insights into the discourse of wildlife conservation in India, how the news media has perceived wildlife, environment, and development issues in the country over the past three decades.



We hope that this online *PA Update* database will provide a starting point for enquiries into and/or studies on wildlife and media reporting for students, researchers, journalists, activists, and concerned citizens. For further details and feedback please write to pskhsaria@gmail.com

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In Memory Suresh Jones

Keeper of *Noorukuppalakonda* - the hundred peaks

Listening to 'Marooned' by Pink Floyd and closing my eyes, I can teleport myself to the rocky landscape sprinkled with shrubbery in Madanapalli sitting next to Suresh Jones, a landscape he used to lovingly call 'Marlboro country'.

I got in touch with Suresh more than a decade ago when I found out about his significant conservation efforts in the Eastern Ghats. He duly replied to my email with a lot of excitement and attached a map of his area of conservation interest with the following words: "These are reserve forests harbouring many globally threatened species of flora and fauna, including a few endemics. My dream is to protect these habitats and the corridors or stepping stones and improve the connectivity between these two protected areas, to begin with and address the larger landscape later."

A psychologist by training but a naturalist and an ecologist by practice, Suresh was a member of the IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas and Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group, a key guest faculty in the Rishi Valley school and had worked with the Foundation for Ecological Security. In the early 2000s, Suresh was awarded the Conservation Leadership Programme funding for his Four-horned antelope project to draw long-term conservation plans for the species and its habitat. Suresh and his team's efforts resulted in abating the water availability crisis in the summer period for the species and generated support from the local community. In the year 2007, Suresh founded the LORIS - Biodiversity Conservation Society to pursue his keen interest in conserving species and habitats in the Eastern Ghats. More recently, his work with Diya Paul, published in the *Ecology and Society* journal in the year 2021, recognises and discusses the importance of the interactions and

inter-dependence between the Yanadi community and the forests they inhabit.

His knowledge of the flora of the forests around Madanapalli never ceased to amaze me. A walk with him was always replete with first-hand fine observations made by him over the years of his spending time in that landscape. We were discussing a project proposal to revive populations of *Shorea roxburghii*, an endangered evergreen tree endemic to the Eastern Ghats, in the forests in and around Noorukuppalakonda and Tavalam Reserve Forests. Unfortunately, the project never came to fruition due to his deteriorating health and other circumstances.

Over the last decade, I met him a dozen times. Having packed lemon rice, curd and boiled eggs in our bento, we walked around the 'Marlboro' country, Noorukuppalakonda, Tavalam Reserve Forest and the villages around. We spoke about conservation issues, music, pets, and beaches, all of which were very dear to him. When I moved to Goa in 2020, he had told me that he had always wanted to take a long holiday with a beach close by and I insisted he visit us. He had agreed to but never could as over the last few years, his health deteriorated and he could not travel much.

Having learnt about the Madanapalli landscape, its biodiversity and the conservation issues through discussions with him, I realise he was a sole stalwart of that region and had unique perspectives and stories—lions, *Shorea roxburghii*, Four-horned antelopes, yellow-throated bulbuls and the Yanadi people, to name a few.

Unfortunately his demise is a big loss for the hundred and more peaks there.

- **Karthik Teegalapalli** is an ecologist based in Goa interested in restoration of degraded forests. Email: kartix@gmail.com

SOUTH ASIA

MoU to study climate change impact in the transboundary Kailash Sacred Landscape

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and the Uttarakhand Space Application Centre (USAC) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to undertake a study of the impact of climate change in the Himalayas. The MoU is a part of the Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL) project that involves India, Nepal and China.

The KSL project is a trans-boundary collaborative programme between the three countries and is meant for the long-term conservation of ecosystems, habitats and biodiversity while encouraging sustainable development.

Source: 'WII, state space centre sign MOU', *The Tribune*, 06/12/15.

BHUTAN

Training for Bhutanese officers on genetic techniques for wildlife monitoring

13 officers of the Department of Forests and Park Services from Bhutan participated in a recent capacity building workshop on the application of genetic techniques for wildlife population monitoring. Titled "Hands on training on genetic population estimation", the program was organized by Aaranyak's Wildlife Genetics Division and sponsored by the



Government of Bhutan. It was conducted in Guwahati and covered various aspects of application of genetic tools for population monitoring such as study design, development of sampling strategies, various molecular biology laboratory techniques and statistical data analysis.

Source: Drishana Kalita. 'Training on Wildlife Genetic Research', *Assam Times*, 13/12/15.

NEPAL/INDIA

India and Nepal to share information on poaching; common approach for Askot WLS, Api Nampa Conservation Area

Indian and Nepalese forest officials have decided on a number of steps to work jointly on conservation issues. In order to tackle smuggling of bear gall bladders across the Indo-China border, forest officials and scientists from the two countries will work in tandem and the divisional forest official's office at Baithani in Nepal has been identified as the focal centre for sharing information on poachers.

It was also decided that the 10-year financial management plan of the Askot Wildlife Sanctuary will now be the same as for the Api Nampa Conservation Area of Nepal. Both these PAs are separated by the Kali river, and hence a common approach through mutual deliberation in the form of similar management will be devised and implemented in both protected areas.

The decisions were taken in a workshop that was held in Pithoragarh recently.

Source: 'India, Nepal to share info on poaching', *The Times of India*, 05/12/15.

PERSPECTIVE

Listening as Conservation Practice: Lessons from a coastal village in Maharashtra

On a hot sultry day, sitting at a *chai tapri* (tea shack) by the beach in Anjarle, Maharashtra, my field collaborator and I were sharing stories about the state of the world. Out of curiosity, almost afraid of his response, I asked: “What do you think we as conservationists should do to help the community better?”. He wisely said “नीट ऐका आणि आमच्याशी बोला, आमच्यावर नाही. (Listen carefully and talk with us, not at us)”

As conservationists we often speak about meaningful engagement, inclusion and trust building. Many of us have been trained to think of trust building as an initial step to working with communities. But this reduces “trust building” to a yet another activity to be ticked in the long arduous list of tasks to be done. Perhaps trust is not just an outcome but a result of sustained listening to the community. Can listening itself become part of the infrastructure through which trust is built?

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines listening as ‘hearing something with thoughtful attention; give consideration’. Listening with intention allows for relationality and empathy, it is sitting with disagreement and discomfort when challenged by conservation assumptions, it is recognizing that expertise lies as much with the conventionally educated as those with lived experiences.

Working with fishing communities in Maharashtra, I realised much of what listening taught me happened outside of formal workshops and interview surveys - over a cup of tea when conversations wandered from fisheries to family woes, frustrating weather patterns or unjust regulations. It was during these moments that my understanding of deep listening were steadily reshaped. Listening, as I realised, was more about creating a space for priorities different from mine and less about controlling a narrative that is comfortable.

Community members agreeing to attend a multi-stakeholder workshop, or

agreeing with conservation goals announced by a scientist or accepting an intervention that might benefit them, while an aid in trust, are primarily demonstrations of willingness. Sustained bonds are built when the community feels validated; they believe their concerns are taken seriously; expect reciprocity in information and their demonstrated confidence that engagement won’t disappear after data collection. This also begs the question, ‘Is trust something that communities must develop towards conservation practitioners or something that practitioners must earn through consistency, accountability and reciprocity?’

Trust is often treated as an outcome of conservation interventions. Recently, I’ve been reflecting whether trust could be better understood as crucial infrastructure that is built gradually though repeated and intentional acts of listening, reciprocity, and humility. Perhaps listening more and preaching less is not only good advice for us practitioners but a necessary starting point for conservation that hopes to endure.

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