

Western Ghats Under Threat: IUCN Flags Biodiversity Risks in India's Natural Heritage

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IUCN Report Latest News

- The **IUCN** has classified India's Western Ghats, along with Manas National Park (Assam) and Sundarbans National Park (West Bengal), as sites of "significant concern" in its **World Heritage Outlook 4 report**.

IUCN World Heritage Outlook

- The IUCN World Heritage Outlook is the only global assessment that evaluates all natural and mixed World Heritage sites every 3-5 years.
- It tracks their conservation status, identifies threats, and highlights best management practices to enhance long-term preservation.
- Implemented by the IUCN World Heritage Team and World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), it provides reliable, transparent, and independent data about the state and prospects of these globally significant natural sites.

- This initiative supports stakeholders in aligning conservation strategies with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF) goals for 2030.

IUCN's Global Conservation Assessment

- The IUCN's World Heritage Outlook 4 report identifies **climate change, tourism, invasive species, and road development** as the four major threats to biodiversity loss in South Asia.
- It categorises sites as “good,” “good with some concerns,” “significant concern,” and “critical,” reflecting their conservation status and urgency of action.
- Based on four assessment cycles since 2014, the report finds that **40% of World Heritage sites face conservation concerns**, with **climate change emerging as the most pervasive threat** and a decline in the number of sites showing positive conservation outlooks for the first time.

India's Conservation Outlook: Mixed Picture for World Heritage Sites

- The IUCN World Heritage Outlook 4 (2025) shows a decline in global conservation health — only 57% of 228 sites assessed now have a positive outlook, down from 63% in 2014, 2017, and 2020.
- In Asia, **climate change has replaced hunting as the most serious threat**, followed by tourism, invasive species, and, for the first time, roads and railways, which are now among the top five dangers to natural heritage.
 - Other growing threats include forest fires, encroachment, illegal logging, waste disposal, and road construction.
- In India, **four sites are rated “good with some concerns”** — *The Great Himalayan National Park, Kaziranga, Keoladeo, and Nanda Devi-Valley of Flowers* — while **Khangchendzonga National Park (Sikkim)** remains the only site rated “good.”
- The Western Ghats, though globally renowned for their ancient ecosystems and 325 threatened species, including the Nilgiri tahr, are now listed under “significant concern”.
- This highlights urgent conservation needs for one of the world's richest biodiversity hotspots.

Why the Western Ghats Are Becoming Increasingly Fragile

- The Western Ghats, one of the world's richest biodiversity hotspots, face escalating threats from **hydropower projects, tourism, plantations, and climate change**.
- Projects like the Sillahalla Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Project in the Nilgiris involve dam construction across the Sillahalla and Kundah rivers, endangering forest ecosystems and river habitats.
- **Unregulated tourism** has led to garbage accumulation, often eaten by wildlife such as elephants, aggravating human-animal conflict.
- **Commercial plantations** are replacing natural forests, while invasive species like eucalyptus and acacia—introduced during colonial times—are spreading rapidly.
- **Climate change** is driving species like the Nilgiri flycatcher and black-and-orange flycatcher to shift to higher altitudes due to rising temperatures.
- Elsewhere, in the Sundarbans, **salinity, pollution, over-extraction of resources, and sea level rise** are eroding mangrove biodiversity and threatening iconic species like the swimming tigers.

A Glimmer of Hope for Global Biodiversity Conservation

- Despite alarming trends, the **IUCN report** highlights positive examples of effective conservation and collaboration worldwide.

Global Conservation Successes

- **Seven sites in China**, including the Badain Jaran Desert, Chengjiang Fossil Site, and Mount Huangshan, are recognised as “**best protected and managed**” areas.
- Such examples show that focused policies and community involvement can reverse ecological decline.

A Call to Action

- Though Natural World Heritage sites cover **less than 1% of Earth’s surface**, they nurture **over 20% of global species richness**, hosting **75,000 plant species** and **30,000 animal species** — making them vital for ecological stability.
- The report aligns with the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework**, urging nations to halt biodiversity loss through better integration of **nature and culture** in conservation.
- Hope lies in **local participation and youth engagement**, as seen in **Mount Wuyi (China)** and **Sinharaja Forest Reserve (Sri Lanka)**, where community-driven stewardship has improved protection and awareness.

Conclusion

- Described as a “**guide for action**”, the IUCN’s 10-year analysis serves as a **litmus test** for conservation efforts — reminding nations that coordinated global action can still secure the planet’s most precious ecosystems.

Source: TH | IUCN

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