

NEXT IAS

**DAILY EDITORIAL
ANALYSIS**

TOPIC

**Growth and Development of
Himalayan Region**

www.nextias.com

GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF HIMALAYAN REGION

In Context

- The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) is known as India's "water tower" and is critical for providing essential ecosystem services. However, there's a dissonance between the region's special development needs and the current development model, leading to potential economic ruin due to resource exploitation.

Importance of Himalayas

The Himalayas, a majestic mountain range spanning over 2,400 km, hold immense ecological, economic, and cultural significance for India and the wider South Asian region.

- **Climate Regulation:** The Himalayas act as a barrier against cold winds from Central Asia, ensuring a milder climate in the Indian subcontinent. They also influence the monsoon patterns, bringing vital rainfall for agriculture.
- **Water Source:** They are the source of major rivers like the Ganges, Indus, and Brahmaputra, providing water for irrigation, hydropower, and domestic use to millions of people.
- **Biodiversity Hotspot:** The Himalayas are home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including rare and endangered species like the snow leopard and red panda, contributing to global biodiversity.
- **Natural Resources:** The mountains are rich in minerals, forests, and medicinal plants, providing livelihoods and resources for local communities.
- **Tourism and Recreation:** The Himalayas attract tourists from around the world, contributing to the local economy and promoting cultural exchange. They also offer opportunities for adventure sports and spiritual retreats.
- **Spiritual Significance:** The Himalayas hold immense spiritual significance for Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, with numerous pilgrimage sites and monasteries dotting the landscape.
- **Disaster Mitigation:** The Himalayas act as a natural barrier against extreme weather events, reducing the impact of cyclones and storms on the Indian subcontinent. However, they are also prone to earthquakes and landslides, necessitating careful development and disaster preparedness.
- **Strategic Importance:** The Himalayas play a crucial role in India's national security, serving as a natural buffer against potential threats from neighboring countries.

Threats to Himalayas Region

The Himalayas, a vital ecological and socioeconomic region, face numerous threats that endanger their delicate balance and the well-being of millions who depend on them.

- **Climate Change:** Rising temperatures are causing rapid glacial melt, altering water availability downstream and increasing the risk of floods and droughts. Unpredictable weather patterns are impacting agriculture and livelihoods in the region.
- **Natural Disasters:** The Himalayas are prone to earthquakes, landslides, and flash floods, exacerbated by climate change and human activities like deforestation and infrastructure development. These disasters cause significant loss of life and property.
- **Unplanned Development:** The current development practices, such as the proliferation of hydroelectric power stations and reckless road widening in the IHR, are in stark contrast to this ecocentric approach.
 - ♦ A post-disaster assessment by the National Disaster Management Authority of the 2023 Himachal Pradesh floods pointed out that rampant construction in violation of norms, especially on river beds and floodplains, contributed significantly to the disaster.
- **Deforestation:** The clearing of forests for agriculture, timber, and development projects disrupts ecosystems, increases soil erosion, and contributes to climate change.
- **Overgrazing:** Uncontrolled grazing by livestock degrades grasslands, leading to soil erosion and reduced water retention capacity.

- **Pollution:** Tourism and pilgrimage activities generate significant waste, polluting water bodies and impacting the fragile mountain ecosystem.
- **Invasive Species:** Introduction of non-native species threatens native biodiversity and disrupts ecological balance.
- **Geopolitical Tensions:** Border disputes and political instability in the region can hinder conservation efforts and sustainable development.

Role of Judiciary in Safeguarding Critical Himalayas

The Supreme Court, in various cases including **State of Telangana vs. Mohd. Abdul Qasim and Ashok Kumar Raghav vs. Union of India**, has underscored the importance of sustainable development, recognizing the intersectionality of human rights, the right to development, and the right to adapt to climate change. The Court has stressed that sustainable infrastructure, resilient to climate impacts, is crucial for equality and equity.

Judiciary has played a crucial role in safeguarding the fragile Himalayan ecosystem through various interventions and landmark judgments.

- **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA):** The judiciary has consistently emphasized the importance of rigorous EIA before approving development projects in the Himalayas. It has often intervened to halt or modify projects that could cause irreversible damage to the environment.
- **Sustainable Development:** The courts have upheld the principle of sustainable development, emphasizing the need to balance economic growth with environmental conservation. They have stressed the importance of long-term ecological sustainability over short-term economic gains.
- **Protection of Forests and Wildlife:** The judiciary has issued orders to protect forests, wildlife habitats, and endangered species in the Himalayas. It has also taken action against illegal mining, deforestation, and poaching activities.
- **Regulation of Tourism:** The courts have intervened to regulate tourism in ecologically sensitive areas, imposing restrictions on construction and vehicular traffic to minimize environmental impact.
- **Public Interest Litigation (PIL):** The judiciary has actively entertained PILs filed by environmental activists and concerned citizens, providing a platform for them to raise concerns about environmental degradation in the Himalayas.
- **Enforcement of Environmental Laws:** The courts have played a crucial role in enforcing environmental laws and regulations, holding violators accountable and imposing penalties.
- **Recognition of Rights of Nature:** In some landmark judgments, the judiciary has recognized the intrinsic value of nature and the rights of rivers and ecosystems, paving the way for a more ecocentric approach to development.
- **Promoting Community Participation:** The courts have emphasized the importance of involving local communities in decision-making processes related to development projects in the Himalayas, ensuring their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

Steps/ Initiatives Taken

- **National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE):** Launched under the National Action Plan on Climate Change, NMSHE aims to understand climate change impacts on the Himalayas and develop adaptation strategies. It focuses on areas like water security, biodiversity conservation, and livelihood enhancement.
- **SECURE Himalaya Project:** Funded by the Global Environment Facility and implemented by the Indian government and UNDP, this project focuses on conserving snow leopards and their habitats, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and strengthening enforcement in the high Himalayan ecosystems.
- **National Green Tribunal (NGT):** The NGT has been instrumental in enforcing environmental laws and regulations in the Himalayas. It has passed several landmark judgments to protect forests, rivers, and wildlife in the region.

- **State-Level Initiatives:** Various Himalayan states have their own conservation programs and policies, such as the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project and the Uttarakhand Action Plan on Climate Change.

Way Ahead

- **Integrated Approach:** A holistic approach integrating conservation, sustainable development, and disaster risk reduction is essential for safeguarding the Himalayas.
- **Strengthening Governance:** Improving governance mechanisms, enhancing enforcement of environmental laws, and promoting transparency are crucial for effective conservation.
- **Climate Action:** Urgent action is needed to address climate change, the most significant threat to the Himalayas. This includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting renewable energy, and adapting to the changing climate.
- **Empowering Local Communities:** Empowering local communities to manage their resources and participate in decision-making is key to sustainable conservation in the Himalayas.

Conclusion

- For true progress, development planning must incorporate disaster management to prevent and build resilience against natural hazards. Development and disaster resilience must go hand-in-hand, with planning, policy, and action aligned in an integrated approach involving all stakeholders, including policymakers, planners, the scientific community, and local communities.

Mains Practice Question

[Q] The Himalayas are an invaluable ecological treasure and a lifeline for millions in the Indian subcontinent. Elucidate the ecological and socioeconomic significance of the Himalayan region for India.