# IUCN World Heritage Outlook 4 Report (2025) — Status of India's Natural World Heritage Sites

# 1. Context and Background

- The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) released its World Heritage Outlook 4 Report (2025) — an assessment of the conservation status of natural and mixed World Heritage Sites globally.
- The report assesses **228 sites** (since 2014) across four assessment cycles: **2014**, **2017**, **2020**, and **2025**.
- It categorises sites into four conservation outlooks:
  - 1. Good
  - 2. Good with some concerns
  - 3. Significant concern
  - 4 Critical

# 2. India's Performance in the 2025 Outlook

# Sites with "Significant Concern"

- Western Ghats
- Manas National Park (Assam)
- Sundarbans National Park (West Bengal)

## Sites with "Good with Some Concerns"

- Great Himalayan National Park Conservation Area (Himachal Pradesh)
- Kaziranga National Park (Assam)
- Keoladeo National Park (Rajasthan)
- Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks (Uttarakhand)

#### Sites Rated "Good"

- Khangchendzonga National Park (Sikkim)
  - Recognised for well-maintained conservation measures and stable ecological conditions.

# 3. Why the Survey Was Conducted

- The report aims to:
  - Assess the ability of World Heritage sites to preserve their natural and cultural values.
  - Identify key threats and management gaps.
  - Provide a "litmus test" for global conservation efforts.
- It offers an in-depth global analysis of threats, protection status, and management effectiveness.

# 4. Major Findings of the IUCN Outlook 4 (2025)

#### **Global Overview**

- Nearly 40% of sites face conservation concerns.
- The proportion of sites with a **positive outlook has dropped** from 63% (2014–2020) to **57%** (2025).
- Climate change remains the most dominant threat to natural heritage globally.

# 5. Key Threats in South Asia (as per the Report)

## **Top Four Threats (2025)**

#### 1. Climate Change

Alters ecosystems, rainfall patterns, and species distribution.

#### 2. Tourism Activities

Leads to over-visitation, waste generation, and habitat degradation.

#### 3. Invasive Alien Species

• Threaten native flora and fauna by competing for space and nutrients.

#### 4. Roads and Infrastructure

 Fragment habitats, increase wildlife-vehicle collisions, and promote encroachment.

#### **Other Threats Identified**

- Forest fires
- Hunting and poaching
- Illegal logging
- Road construction
- Waste disposal
- Encroachment and urban expansion
- Roadkill and habitat fragmentation

# 6. Site-wise Analysis (India)

## (a) Western Ghats - "Significant Concern"

### • Ecological Importance:

- Older than the Himalayas; rich mosaic of forests and grasslands.
- Home to ~325 globally threatened species (Nilgiri tahr, lion-tailed macaque, etc.).
- A biodiversity hotspot recognised by UNESCO.

## Key Threats:

- Hydropower projects (e.g., ₹5,843 crore Sillahalla Pumped Storage Project in Nilgiris).
- Tourism pressure garbage ingestion by wildlife; man-animal conflicts.
- Plantations replacing natural habitats.

- Climate change-induced altitudinal migration (e.g., Nilgiri flycatcher moving upward).
- Invasive exotic species eucalyptus, acacia, etc.

## (b) Manas National Park (Assam) - "Significant Concern"

- UNESCO World Heritage Site, part of the Manas Tiger Reserve.
- Threatened by:
  - · Illegal encroachments and grazing.
  - Poaching of rhinos and elephants.
  - Floods and siltation from Brahmaputra tributaries.
  - Border disturbances near Bhutan.
  - Weak enforcement of protection measures.

# (c) Sundarbans National Park (West Bengal) - "Significant Concern"

- World's largest mangrove forest and home to Royal Bengal Tigers.
- Major Threats:
  - Rising salinity and heavy metal contamination.
  - **Sea-level rise and storm surges** due to climate change.
  - Unsustainable fishing and forest product extraction.
  - Mangrove degradation, reducing biodiversity and carbon sequestration potential.

# 7. Comparative Global Insights

- China: Seven sites rated among the "best protected and managed", including:
  - Badain Jaran Desert Towers of Sand and Lake
  - Chengjiang Fossil Site

- Mount Huangshan
- Indicates effective **national policy**, **community participation**, and **sustainable tourism** models.

# 8. Ecological Importance of World Heritage Sites

- Natural World Heritage Sites cover <1% of Earth's surface, but support:
  - >20% of global species richness.
  - Over 75,000 plant species.
  - Over 30,000 animal species (mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians).

# 9. Global Policy Linkages

- The findings align with the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022)**, which aims to **halt biodiversity loss by 2030**.
- The UNESCO World Heritage Convention plays a key role in:
  - Bridging nature and culture.
  - Protecting high biodiversity and functional habitats.

# 10. Hope and Good Practices

- Positive Examples in Asia:
  - Mount Wuyi (China) local youth involvement.
  - Sinharaja Forest Reserve (Sri Lanka) community-based conservation.
- These demonstrate that inclusive, participatory management can reverse negative trends.

## 11. Key Takeaways for UPSC

## **Conceptual Understanding**

 The IUCN World Heritage Outlook serves as a "health check" and action guide for natural heritage conservation. • **India's challenge:** Strengthen site management, tackle invasive species, regulate tourism, and mitigate climate impacts.

## **Policy and Governance Relevance**

- Relates to:
  - **GS Paper III:** Environment, Conservation, Biodiversity.
  - GS Paper II: International Reports & Conventions.
- Supports initiatives like:
  - National Mission for Biodiversity and Human Well-Being
  - Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs)
  - Project Tiger / Elephant / Crocodile

## 12. Conclusion

- The IUCN Outlook 4 (2025) reveals growing stress on India's and South Asia's natural heritage due to climate change, development, and poor management.
- However, with **community participation, stricter regulation, and sustainable eco-tourism**, India can turn its "significant concern" sites into "good" conservation models.
- The report serves as both a **warning** and an **opportunity** to strengthen the ecological integrity of India's priceless natural treasures.

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