

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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