

COP15: The Biodiversity Commitment

❖ At this major international conference in Montreal, countries have pledged to take steps towards preventing the Great Extinction - a threat to the existence of a million or more species if urgent action is not taken.

A major international environmental conference has just concluded in Montreal, Canada, promising to take urgent action to protect and restore the world's biodiversity — all the different forms of life, plants as well as animals, that inhabit this planet.

This conference was the biodiversity equivalent of the more high-profile climate meetings that are held every year. Signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), a 1993 agreement, meet every two years — not annually like the climate meetings — to work on a global plan to halt biodiversity loss and restore natural ecosystems. The Montreal meeting was the 15th edition of this conference, hence the name COP15 — or the 15th Conference of the Parties to the CBD.

The Montreal Conference has delivered a new agreement called the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which contains four goals and 23 targets that need to be achieved by 2030. The GBF is being compared to the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change that is guiding global climate action.

Biodiversity Convention

The comparison of the biodiversity meetings with the climate conferences is not incidental. The two are in fact closely related. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the CBD were both outcomes of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit — as was the third member of the family, the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), which deals specifically with the issue of land degradation. The CBD came into force in 1993; the other two in the following year.

The three environmental conventions seek to address the issues that overlap among them. Climate change is one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss, while changes in land and ocean use have an impact on climate change. Land degradation appears as a cause as well as effect in both climate change and biodiversity loss. So, while all the three agreements hold their separate COPs, the interlinkages, not very obvious in the 1990s, are getting increasingly evident. The success on any one helps the cause of the others too.

The CBD is not just about conservation and restoration of ecosystems. It is also about sustainable use of natural resources, and equitable sharing of benefits from the use of these resources. For example, if a European pharmaceutical company wants to make use of some medicinal properties of plants grown in Tamil Nadu, the benefits of such use, monetary or otherwise, must be equitably shared among all stakeholders, including the indigenous populations that are custodians of that specific biological resource.

Cartagena and Nagoya

The CBD has given rise to two 'supplementary' agreements — the Cartagena Protocol of 2003 and the Nagoya Protocol of 2014. Both agreements take their names from the places where they were negotiated.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety seeks to protect biodiversity from genetically modified organisms by ensuring their safe handling, transport and use. Genetically modified crops, for example, can interfere with natural ecosystems in ways that might not yet be fully understood. That is the reason why GM crops are cultivated on segregated farms.

The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing deals with the commercial utilisation of biological and genetic resources, for example, by pharma companies. It asks the host countries to provide access to its genetic resources in a legal, fair and non-arbitrary manner and, as mentioned above, offers them a fair and equitable share of benefits arising out of the utilisation of those resources.

Stockholm Conference (1972)

- ↳ In 1972, the United Nations organized the first environmental conference of all the countries of the world in Stockholm (Sweden) as the initial conference of international environmental consciousness and environmental movement. 119 countries participated in this international conference and the principle of one earth was universally recognized.
- ↳ The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) was launched in 1972 during the Stockholm Conference (Headquarters – Nairobi, Kenya). It is the apex global environmental authority that operates within the United Nations system in terms of the formulation of the global environmental agenda and the implementation of climate policies.

Earth Summit 1992

- ↳ The background of the Earth Summit is prepared in the 'United Nations Conference on the Human Environment' held in Stockholm in 1972.
- ↳ This summit organized by the United Nations on Environment and Development is also known as 'Earth Conference' or 'Rio Conference'. This summit was held from 3 June 1992 to 14 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Brazil, in which representatives of 182 countries participated.
- ↳ During the Earth Summit 2 documents (Agenda-21 and Rio Declaration) were presented and it gave rise to three important conventions (UNFCCC, United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and Desertification).

Agenda-21 and Rio Declaration

- ↳ Agenda-21 is an international document in the context of environment and development which was unanimously accepted by the representatives of 182 countries present in the conference. Although Agenda-21 is not binding on the member states, yet it was expected from the nations that they will formulate their future development policies according to the policies of Agenda-21. To comply with the declarations contained in Agenda-21, a commission was formed in 1993, which was called the Commission on Sustainable Development. This commission started functioning from May, 1993.
- ↳ The adoption of the Rio Declaration or the Earth Charter was a significant achievement of the Earth Summit. The Declaration strikes a balance between the responsibilities of the industrialized world and the developmental needs of developing countries. The Rio Declaration was based on 27 principles.

More than the GBF that countries agreed to in Montreal earlier this week, it is these two Protocols that are comparable to the Paris Agreement on climate change.

COP-15 and The 30x30 Target

The meeting in Montreal that concluded on Monday was the second part of COP15, the first part having been held in Kunming in China last year. Kunming was supposed to hold the entire COP15, but due to Covid-19 restrictions, it could only organise a hybrid event — part online, part in-person meetings — in October last year. A full meeting was scheduled for April this year, but the Covid situation in China was still not conducive. Finally, the conference had to be shifted to Montreal, the home of CBD, even though it was held under the presidency of China.

The headline grabbing part of the four goals and 23 targets in the Global Biodiversity Framework is what is commonly referred to as the 30×30 target: a commitment to protect at least 30 per cent of the world's lands, oceans and coastal areas by 2030. A related commitment is to ensure that restoration activities would be started on at least 30 per cent of degraded land or marine ecosystems by 2030.

The overall goal is to ensure that all natural ecosystems are either maintained, enhanced or restored “substantially”, with an overall increase in the area of natural ecosystems by 2050. Another goal is to ensure a ten-fold reduction in extinction rate of species — currently estimated to be tens to hundreds of times higher than the average of the last 10 million years. A recent report said that about 1 million species face extinction, some within a few decades, if urgent action is not taken.

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

- ➔ The International Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was established during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This treaty was adopted by emphasizing on 'Strategy of Sustainable Development' in order to meet future needs and present needs. Through the CBD, a commitment was expressed to maintain biodiversity while establishing harmony between people's livelihood and global economic development. This treaty was signed by 193 governments on it. India is a party country to this treaty.
- ➔ The International Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is a legally binding international treaty. The three main goals of the International Convention on Biological Diversity are-
 1. conservation of biodiversity;
 2. sustainable use of components of biodiversity; And
 3. Fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of genetic resources

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)

- ➔ The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) was adopted during the Earth Summit. It is a binding international agreement in the context of environment and development. In the General Assembly of the United Nations, a proposal to prevent desertification was proposed in 1994, which was approved in December 1996. India became a signatory to the UNCCD on 14 October 1994.
- ➔ Every year on June 17, 'World Desertification and Drought Prevention Day' is celebrated to deal with the challenge of desertification in the world and to raise awareness among the people.

Among the other 2030 targets is a commitment to reduce global food wastage by half, reduce the risk of pesticides and other chemicals by half, and cut at least US\$ 500 billion every year from subsidies that harm biodiversity. The 23 targets for 2030, including the 30×30 target, are milestones towards the overall goals for 2050.

Evaluating The Deal

Though important, this is not the first time that countries at CBD have listed out specific targets for protecting biodiversity. In fact, the latest exercise is just a replacement of similar targets that were meant to be achieved in the 2010-2020 decade.

In 2010, at COP10 in Nagoya, Japan, countries had agreed to a Strategic Plan for Biodiversity containing 20 targets. These used to be called the Aichi targets — Aichi is the region in which Nagoya city is located. A recent report showed that none of these targets were achieved at the end of the decade. The GBF is to the 2020-30 decade what the Aichi targets were for the previous one. The challenge will be in their implementation.

Expected Question

Que. Consider the following statements -

1. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
2. International Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)
3. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

Which of the above are binding agreements?

- (a) 1 and 2 (b) 2 and 3 Committed To Excellence
- (c) 1 and 3 (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer : A

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). In the above context, state the main points of the COP-15 Biodiversity Summit and also give a brief description of the Cartagena and Nagoya protocols.

Answer Format :

- ❖ Give a brief account of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).
- ❖ State the main points of the COP-15 Biodiversity Summit.
- ❖ Briefly describe the Cartagena and Nagoya protocols.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.