

How India proposals at UN event can help elephants, migratory birds

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"With a change in season, many mammals and birds move from one country to another in search of food and shelter, and for breeding. Asian elephants, also known as Indian elephants, migrate from India to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar etc."

On Thursday, a committee adopted India's proposals for including three species — great Indian bustard, Asian elephant and Bengal florican — for additional protection under the UN Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). This happened at the 13th Conference of the Parties to the CMS (CMS COP13), which is under way in Gandhinagar, with "Migratory species connect the planet and together we welcome them home" as its theme.

What does the Convention seek to do?

CMS is a treaty agreed by 129 countries plus the European Union, and functions under the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). It works for protection and conservation of species that migrate across frontiers and are facing threats of extinction or require urgent attention. CMS aims to bring together different countries that are part of range of a given species, and facilitate coherent conservation and protection regimes in a group of countries. The conference is being held in India for the first time. Delegates from at least 78 countries are attending.

Why do migratory species need special attention for conservation?

With a change in season, many mammals and birds move from one country to another in search of food and shelter, and for breeding. Asian elephants, also known as Indian elephants, migrate from India to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar etc.

However, wildlife laws and protection regimes for these species can be different in each country, making them vulnerable to taking, hunting, poisoning etc. Many migratory species are threatened with extinction due to habitat degradation, barriers in their migration routes, and other pressures. Therefore, these species need special attention by all countries that are part of their range.

What were India's proposals that were accepted?

India has proposed inclusion of the three species on Appendix-I of the Convention. Appendix-I lists species threatened with extinction, while Appendix-II lists those in need of global cooperation for favourable conservation status. If listed on Appendix-I, it would facilitate trans-boundary conservation efforts of the these species.

The proposals cleared the first hurdle when they were adopted unanimously by the conference's committee of the whole. However, Pakistan, which is the other range country of the great Indian bustard, did not take part in the discussion on the proposals. The plenary of COP13 is expected to take a final call on the listing on Saturday.

What are the grounds on which India has proposed the listing?

Asian elephant: India said the Asian elephant, an endangered species, once used to range from west Asia to north of Yagtze river in China but currently, the range has shrunk to 13 Asian countries, and their population in India to 29,964 in 2017. India said elephants' inclusion on Appendix-I would ensure better coordination among the range countries, facilitate migration, increase effective habitat area, and reduce killings.

Great Indian bustard: Its range stretching across India and Pakistan, it is a critically endangered species with a population of just around 150 individuals and its present habitat having shrunk to 10% of its historical range. India said there is prima facie evidence that the birds fly across the India-Pakistan border and hence the need for bilateral cooperation for recovery of the species.

Bengal florican: This too is a critically endangered species of bird that belongs to the bustard family. In its proposal, India said the present population of the South Asian subspecies has shrunk to around 1,000 individuals and its present habitat been restricted to the Terai and Dooars grassland regions of the Indo-Gangetic and Brahmaputra floodplains.

How does listing on a CMS Appendix help a species?

Listing generally leads to concerted actions in different national jurisdictions in which a species ranges. Actions may include cooperation among range countries, harmonisation in policies etc through regional agreements. CMS has working groups specialising in various fauna families, and a Scientific Council that advises research-based solutions for conservation.

Many countries started shifting towards renewable energy by building infrastructure like wind turbines, power transmission lines, solar parks; these pose risks to wildlife. CMS set up in 2014 an Energy Task Force; it advises contracting parties on how to keep their energy projects wildlife-friendly.

Despite the listing and consequent efforts, 73% of 175 migratory species on Appendix-I and 48% of the 518 on Appendix-II have an overall decreasing population trend, CMS says.

So, what changes for the species in India's proposals?

If the plenary eventually adopts these proposals and the listing goes through, which is expected to happen, a formal regional cooperation among range countries would become possible. Once the listing is done, contracting parties within the range of a species are obliged to cooperate in trans-border conservation efforts.

Bangladesh, for example, welcomed the proposals on the elephant and the florican, a bird that went extinct in that country in 1882. However, Pakistan did not express any views on the proposal on the great Indian bustard. Conservation efforts would also gain from the international expertise of the CMS family, and could increase pressure on Pakistan for preventing alleged hunting of the great Indian bustard.

What else is on the agenda of the conference?

Besides the three species, proposals have been moved for including seven others — jaguar, urial, little bustard, antipodean albatross, oceanic white-tip shark, smooth hammerhead shark and tope shark — for listing on CMS Appendices. COP13 also discussed marine noise pollution, plastic pollution, light pollution, insect decline etc.

India has also invited the COP13 to adopt the 'Gandhinagar Declaration' urging the world community to strive for ensuring ecological connectivity, especially for sustainable management and conservation of migratory species. India has proposed that once adopted, CMS forward the Gandhinagar Declaration to the 15th meeting of UN Convention on Biological Diversity conference in China in October this year, for preparing post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

Q. Recently the Convention on Conservation of Migratory Species of Wildlife (CMS) has been concluded. Consider the following statements: in this context:

1. Its theme is - "Migratory species connect the planet and together we welcome them home."
2. The three species proposed by India (Great Indian Bustard, Asiatic Lion and Bengal Phlororican) have been put in Appendix 1.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) None of these

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 21 Feb., is 1 (c)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

What are the implications of the Indian resolution in the 13th Convention of the United Nations Parties on the Migratory Species recently? How does this convention play a role in the conservation of migratory species? Discuss. (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main 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.

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