



Current Affairs of the Day

International Snow Leopard Day: How climate change affects the charismatic cat

Mostly Prelims

GS III: Conservation

Bottom line: Climate change will shrink the habitat of this apex alpine predator; the key is to spread the word about its plight and get governments acting for its conservation. This International Snow Leopard Day (23 October) let us take a look at how climate change affects this charismatic cat.

Highlights:

1. As the impacts of climate change become increasingly frequent, the snow leopard, an apex predator of the alpine environment, will be among the first to be affected.
2. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the average annual temperature in South Asia and Tibet will increase by 3-4 degrees Celsius by 2080-2099. In addition, annual precipitation in the region too will increase.
3. Previous studies have shown that warmer and wetter conditions may result in forests ascending into alpine areas, the snow leopards' preferred habitat.
4. The researchers also predict that if forests creep upwards, species adapted to them like common leopards, dholes and tigers would follow and compete with snow leopards.
5. Snow leopards and their prey species would then have to migrate to even higher reaches.
6. As alpine habitat shrinks, competition for its resources between livestock and snow leopard prey species would increase, ultimately leading to their local extirpation by humans. The leopards would then have to hunt livestock, which in turn would exacerbate human-snow leopard conflict.



Background:

Snow Leopard habitat in India:

1. The snow leopard inhabits the higher Himalayan and trans-Himalayan landscape in the five states of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. This area contributes to about 5% of the global snow leopard range.
2. In Uttarakhand, snow leopards are found in Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, Gangotri National Park, Askot Wildlife Sanctuary and other places of altitude between 3000-4500 meters.

Conservation Efforts in India

1. The Government of India has launched the First National Protocol on Snow Leopard Population Assessment.
2. Snow leopards are categorized as 'Vulnerable' by IUCN and in the Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972.
3. The Government of India has identified the snow leopard as a flagship species for the high altitude Himalayas. It has developed a centrally-supported programme called Project Snow Leopard for the conservation of the species and its habitats.
4. Project Snow Leopard (PSL): It promotes an inclusive and participatory approach to conservation that fully involves local communities.
5. SECURE Himalaya: Global Environment Facility (GEF)-United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded the project on conservation of high altitude biodiversity and reducing the dependency of local communities on the natural ecosystem. This project is now operational in four snow leopard range states, namely, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim.
6. Also, Uttarakhand is set to open the country's first snow leopard conservation centre. The centre will be built at the entry point of Gangotri National Park above 2800 meters sea level. It will be built under the central government scheme 'SECURE Himalaya'.



Global Efforts:

1. They are listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), revealing the need for the highest conservation status to the species, both globally and in India.
2. India is part of the Global Snow Leopard & Ecosystem Protection (GSLEP) Program. The GSLEP is a high-level inter-governmental alliance of all the 12 snow leopard range countries. The snow leopard countries namely, India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Mongolia, Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
3. This global snow leopard project seeks to identify at least 20 landscapes and secure them as protected areas for the species till the year 2020.
4. India has identified three such landscapes ranging around 47,000 sq km of the area- Hemis-Spiti in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, Gangotri-Nanda Devi in Uttarakhand, and Kanchendzonga-Tawang in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.

Learn through Graphics: Snow leopard Range

