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Shivalik Elephant Reserve: Uttarakhand

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Why in News

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has asked the Uttarakhand government to consider avoiding sensitive areas of the Shivalik Elephant Reserve while exploring land suitable to use for the expansion of Dehradun's Jolly Grant Airport.

Key Points

- **Background:** The area proposed for the expansion, is a part of the **Shivalik Elephant Reserve** and it falls **within a 10-km radius of Rajaji National Park**.
- **Protests:** Children and social activists have tied protective strings around the trees marked to be cut, similar to the **Chipko movement** of the 1970s, when villagers in Chamoli hugged trees to stop contractors from felling them.
- **Concerns:** The expansion will threaten hundreds of species of fauna in Thano (near Rajaji National Park) and the elephant corridor nearby.
 - The State **also falls in seismic Zone IV and V**, as per the Earthquake Zoning Map, and uprooting Thano will lead to **soil erosion**, a factor that exacerbated the **2013 Kedarnath floods**, endangering countless lives.
 - Earlier, social activists had **criticised Chardham Pariyojana** on environmental grounds.

It is a programme taken up by the **Ministry of Road Transport and Highways** for connectivity improvement for Chardham (Kedarnath, Badrinath, Yamunotri and Gangotri) in Uttarakhand.
 - Recently, the **Supreme Court** upheld the 2011 order of the Madras High Court (HC) on the Nilgiris elephant corridor, affirming the **right of passage of the animals** and the closure of resorts in the area.

- **Shivalik Elephant Reserve:**

- It was **notified in 2002** under the '**Project Elephant**'.

Project Elephant was launched by the Government of India in the year 1992 as a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** with following objectives:

- To protect elephants, their habitat & corridors.
 - To address issues of man-animal conflict.
 - Welfare of captive elephants.
- The **Kansora-Barkot Elephant Corridor** is located near to it.
 - It is considered to have **one of the highest densities of elephants** found in India.
 - The **Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus*)** occurs in the central and southern Western Ghats, North-east India, eastern India and northern India and in some parts of southern peninsular India. As per the Elephant Census, 2017, **Karnataka has the highest population** of Indian elephants.
 - It is included in **Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** and in **Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna (CITES)**.
 - It is '**Endangered**' as per the **IUCN Red List**.

- **Rajaji National Park:**

- **Location:** Haridwar, along the foothills of the Shivalik range, spans 820 square kilometres.
- **Background:** Three sanctuaries in the Uttarakhand i.e. Rajaji, Motichur and Chila were amalgamated into a large protected area and named Rajaji National Park in the year 1983 **after the famous freedom fighter C. Rajgopalachari; popularly known as "Rajaji"**.
- **Features:**
 - This area is the **North Western Limit of habitat of Asian elephants**.
 - Forest types include sal forests, riverine forests, broad-leaved mixed forests, scrubland and grassy.
 - It possesses as many as 23 species of mammals and 315 bird species such as elephants, tigers, leopards, deers and ghorals, etc.
 - It was declared a **Tiger Reserve** in 2015.
 - It is **home to the Van Gujjars in the winters**. Van Gujjars are one of the few **forest-dwelling nomadic** communities in the country.

- **Other Protected Areas in Uttarakhand:**

- Jim Corbett National Park (first National Park of India).
- Valley of Flowers National Park and Nanda Devi National Park which together are a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**.
- Govind Pashu Vihar National Park and Sanctuary.
- **Gangotri National Park**.
- Nandhaur Wildlife Sanctuary.

Way Forward

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- Though the expansion project is of strategic importance, the government needs to remember that the Shivalik Elephant Reserve is a biodiversity hub of Uttarakhand, home to elephants, leopards and endless other avian and mammals species.
 - Government before passing laws should consider that India is on board global climate agreements like the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Kyoto Protocol**, implying that it has some international commitments.

Source: IE