



## Indian Himalayan Region

This editorial is based on [“Policies and People / Don’t destroy the Himalayas for tourism gains”](#) which was published in Hindustan Times on 06/08/2022. It talks about the Indian Himalayan Region and issues associated with unsustainable tourism.

**For Prelims:** Indian Himalayan Region, Microclimate, National Mission on Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystem, Glacial-lake outburst floods, Uttarakhand Flood 2013.

**For Mains:** Significance of Himalayas for India, Challenges Associated With Himalayas in India , Environmental Impact Assessment.

With its **towering peaks, majestic landscapes, rich biodiversity and cultural heritage**, the [Indian Himalayan Region \(IHR\)](#) has long drawn visitors and pilgrims from the Indian sub-continent and across the world.

These dynamics have turned **tourism** into a **key driver of socioeconomic development**. For local mountain people, tourism provides valuable **economic and business opportunities**, and for state governments and private entrepreneurs **it brings revenues and profits**.

But the **prevailing model of tourism in the IHR is viewed as a source of environmental damage and pollution, a threat to socio-cultural heritage**, a heavy use of scarce resources, and potential **cause of negative externalities in society**.

### What is the Significance of Himalayas for India?

- **Source of Rivers:** Abundant rainfall and vast snow-fields as well as large glaciers in Himalayas are the **feeding grounds of the mighty rivers of India**.
  - The great rivers and their tributaries carry enormous quantities of **alluvium** while descending from the Himalayas.
    - This is deposited in the **Great Plain of North India** in the **form of fertile soil**, making the plain **one of the most fertile lands of the world**.
- **Critical for India’s Energy Security:** Almost **33% of the country’s thermal electricity and 52% of its hydropower is dependent on river waters originating in the Himalayas**.
  - These rivers receive a significant part of their water from the melting of glaciers, making them a critical component of **India’s energy security** and its water security needs.
- **Sustaining the Monsoon:** The Himalayas play a very significant role in **influencing the climate of India**. By virtue of their high altitude, length and direction, they effectively **intercept the summer monsoons** coming from the **Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea** and **cause precipitation in the form of rain or snow**.
  - Besides, they **prevent the cold continental air masses of Central Asia** from entering into

India.

- **Forest Wealth:** The Himalayan ranges are very rich in forest resources. In their altitude, the Himalayan ranges show a succession of vegetal cover from the **tropical to the [Alpine](#)**.
  - The Himalayan forests provide **fuel wood and a large variety of raw materials** for forest based industries. Besides, many medicinal plants grow in the Himalayan region.
- **Tourism:** By virtue of their **scenic beauty** and **healthy environment**, the Himalayan ranges have developed a large number of **tourist spots**.
  - The hilly areas in the Himalayas offer cool and comfortable climate when the neighboring plains are reeling under the **scorching heat** of the summer season.

## What are the Challenges Associated With Himalayas in India?

- **No Proper Waste Management:** The cities of the Himalayas are growing and beginning to see the same root as the cities of the plains from **[mountains of garbage and plastic](#), untreated sewage, unplanned urban growth** and even local **[air pollution](#)** because of vehicles.
  - Most mountain villages have **no local, decentralized facility to dispose of the junk safely**. So, they either burn or dump the junk on the slopes.
- **Unsustainable Tourism:** Unfortunately, our mountains are **treated only as tourist destinations** without realizing that **over draining resources beyond a point can be disastrous**.
  - Also, mountains also have their own **[microclimate](#)**. Its unique fauna and flora have a **short reproductive time frame** and are **sensitive to disturbance**. **Unsustainable tourism can upset the natural balance**.
- **Climate Change:** Melting ice and snow due to climate change **form new glacial lakes**, as well as **increase the volumes of existing ones**. This could raise the threat of **[glacial-lake outburst floods](#)**.
  - Some **8,800 glacial lakes in the Himalayas are spread across nations**, and more than **200 of these have been classified as dangerous**.
- **Faulty Infrastructure Projects:** The development of hydroelectricity is important as it provides the country with a renewable source of energy and is a revenue source for the state.
  - But it is also clear that the impact of the flood is exacerbated because of the **number and poor construction of the [hydropower projects](#)**.

## What is Char Dham Highway Development Project?

- **[Char Dham Highway Development Project](#)** is a central highway expansion project, envisaged in 2016, to **widen 889 km of hill roads to provide all-weather connectivity** in the **Char Dham circuit**, covering Uttarakhand's four major shrines- **Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri** in the upper Himalayas.
- While **conceived primarily to facilitate the Char Dham yatras (pilgrimage)** and to **boost tourism**, the project also has a **strategic angle** to it as the highways would facilitate **troop movement to areas closer to the [China border](#)**.
  - In conclusion, a **road that is disaster-resilient is much more important than a wider road prone to frequent blocks, [landslides](#), and slope failures**, which suggests a **middle width for Himalayan highways** that is more **judicious for pilgrimage as well as country's defence needs**.

## What Should be Our Approach Forward?

- **Environmental Impact Assessment:** The state should encourage tourism, but the goal should be **responsible tourism**, which means that before opening up new tourism areas, an **[assessment of the effect](#) of such endeavors must be conducted**.
- **Pan-Himalayan Strategy:** There is a need to think about a **pan-Himalayan strategy so that states can evolve common policies** and not follow the race to the bottom.
  - These strategies **should also take into account the region's natural resources**, including **forests, water, biodiversity, organic and specialty foods, nature tourism**,

as well as address specific threats so that **growth does not lead to environmental degradation.**

- [National Mission on Sustaining Himalayan Ecosystem](#) is a good step in this direction.
- **Sustainable Infrastructure Projects:** The **building design of towns** associated with the Himalayan region **must reflect the local ecosystem** while incorporating **seismic fragility** and **aesthetics**. Unmanaged and unchecked urban growth should not be permitted. All this will require **strong regulatory institutions** in these towns.
  - Also, there is a need to **design sustainable hydropower projects to maximize the use** of available water for energy generation.
    - **Rivers cannot and must not be re-engineered**, but **dams can be re-engineered** to maximize use of available water.
    - Locals should also benefit from **projects** through **interactive grids**.
- **Revisiting the Policies:** A common policy should be developed to improve forest value in Himalayan states by discussing agriculture practices in hilly regions.
  - For instance, **Sikkim has promoted organic cardamom crop, but finds that forest laws do not allow it to take benefit of cultivation on these lands**, which is done without destroying forests.
- **Sustainable Tourism:** Appropriate mechanisms should be devised to help achieve **tourism growth in the landscape in a sustainable manner having minimal impact on biodiversity**, while providing sustainable livelihood options for the local community.
  - The [Uttarakhand Flood 2013](#) teaches us that we must learn to build **sustainable models for pilgrim-based tourism in the fragile hills**.
  - The move towards **ecotourism** needs to be promoted carefully so that best practices can be learnt and disseminated.
- **Vigilance and Regular Patrolling:** **Protected areas** in Himalayan region like [Hemis National Park](#) and [Karakoram Sanctuary](#) in **Ladakh** require **vigilance and regular patrolling** to **reduce unwanted wildlife-tourist interaction** as well as habitat destruction due to off-road driving and encroachment.
- **International Collaboration:** [Himalayan countries](#) need to build an **international network that will monitor risks such as those from glacial lakes**, and give early warning of hazards **similar to the tsunami warning systems installed around the Indian Ocean** over the past decade

### ***Drishti Mains Question***

Discuss the challenges associated with Himalayas in India. What role can Environmental Impact Assessment play in reducing the prevailing environmental issues in the Indian Himalayas?

## **UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQ)**

**Q. When you travel in Himalayas, you will see the following: (2012)**

1. Deep gorges
2. U-turn river courses
3. Parallel mountain ranges
4. Steep gradients causing land sliding

**Which of the above can be said to be the evidence for Himalayas being young fold mountains?**

- (a)** 1 and 2 only
- (b)** 1, 2 and 4 only
- (c)** 3 and 4 only
- (d)** 1, 2, 3 and 4

**Ans: (d)**

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