



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)

