

General Studies – 1; Topic: World geography

Protecting mountains

1) Introduction

- The world's mountains are home to a diverse range of populations
- The cultural diversity of mountains and the need to protect the identity of highland people find voice in this year's International Mountain Day celebration.
- Himalayas are culturally rich. If we go by history and anthropology, the Himalayas have been our cradle for culture.

2) Background

- Covering around 22 percent of the earth's land surface, mountains play a critical role in moving the world towards sustainable economic growth.
- They provide sustenance and wellbeing to 915 million mountain people around the world, representing 13 percent of global population
- Mountains also indirectly benefit billions more living downstream.

3) International Mountain Day

- International Mountain Day, held each year on 11 December, which was established by the UN General Assembly in 2003 to encourage sustainable development in mountains
- 2016 Theme "Mountain Cultures: Celebrating diversity and strengthening identity"
- FAO is the U.N. organization mandated to lead observance of International Mountain Day.

4) Importance of mountains

- Mountains host communities with ancient cultures and traditions
- Mountains are also the sources of springs and rivers
- A large proportion of the world's minority populations live in mountain areas.
- Mountains and mountain-protected areas are places of spiritual solace, inspiration, recreation and relaxation.
- The world's mountains encompass some of the most spectacular landscapes, a wide variety of ecosystems and a great diversity of species
- The world's principal biome types—from hyper-arid hot desert and tropical forest to arid polar icecaps—all occur in mountains.
- Mountains support about one quarter of world's terrestrial biological diversity
- Nearly half of the world's biodiversity "hotspots" concentrated in mountains
- Genetic diversity tends to be higher in mountains associated with cultural diversity and extreme variation in local environmental conditions.

5) Vulnerable mountains of India

- From Jammu and Kashmir in the north to east-most Arunachal Pradesh, mountain-dwellers across India are battling more climate vagaries than ever before.
- villages in Ladakh are battling severe water shortage as a result of changing patterns of glacier melting
- Uttarakhand is still recovering from the disastrous floods of 2013.
- farmers of mountains in the northeast are struggling to find ways to deal with changing rainfall patterns

- higher incidence of unexpected floods and droughts, greatly impacting the livelihood security and agriculture of river-dependent people

6) Tourism threat

- Mass tourism as “unplanned and unchecked” is also undermining mountain cultures.
- We need responsible tourism implementing a code of conduct with environmental and cultural friendliness
- For tourism to benefit mountain people there is a need to control the flow of tourists visiting the Himalayas.
- Sensitisation of visitors, urging them to behave in a responsible manner, is also the need of the hour.
- It is important to ensure that mountain tourism does not add pressure on mountain environments and the valuable assets they provide such as water and biodiversity.
- Investing in sustainable tourism can reduce the costs of energy, water and waste disposal
- sustainable tourism can enhance the value of biodiversity, ecosystems and cultural heritage
- Economic benefits that arise from tourism must remain in local communities.

7) Threats

- Mountains are vulnerable to a host of natural and anthropogenic threats
- These include seismic hazards, fire, climate change, land cover change and agricultural intensification, infrastructure development, and armed conflict.
- These pressures degrade mountain environments and affect the provision of ecosystem services and the livelihoods of people dependent upon them.
- People living in mountain areas are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity.
- Harsh climate and inaccessible terrain, combined with political and social marginality, make mountain people vulnerable to food shortages.

8) Concerns / challenges

- The stability of mountain populations is at present threatened by migration.
- Exodus of highland people to the plains in search of livelihood opportunities has become a major problem.
- With this, the traditional knowledge of mountain people is getting destroyed.
- With water shortage and degradation of grazing land due to furious dam- building activity, life has become harder for those who choose to stay behind.
- Mountain people are some of the world’s poorest people.
- Most highland farmers cannot compete with the high production volume of lowlands
- Highland farmers are frequently paid only a fraction of the value of their produce due to long supply chains that increase transportation and other costs.

9) Way Forward

- To secure the existence of highland people, we need to create sustainable economic avenues
- Generating new income streams for mountain producers can make a real difference and help prevent migration.
- On International Mountain Day let us resolve to conserve mountain biological diversity.