



Himalayan Tahr Conservation

Managing Human Activity in Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary

Exam Relevance

UPSC GS-I: Himalayan Geography | Distribution of Wildlife and Vegetation

UPSC GS-III: Biodiversity Conservation | Protected Areas | Human–Wildlife Interaction | Eco-tourism | Climate Change

HPAS: Wildlife and Protected Areas of Himachal Pradesh | Environment

Prelims: Himalayan Tahr | Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary | Bugyals | IUCN Red List | Wild Life (Protection) Act Schedules

Why in News?

The **Kedarnath Wildlife Division in Uttarakhand** is preparing to regulate human activity in high-altitude alpine meadows (**bugyals**) and run cleanliness drives after it was found that visitors and local residents were feeding **Himalayan tahrs**, and that tourist waste was changing how the animals search for food.

Earlier in 2026, researchers from the **Department of Wildlife Sciences, Aligarh Muslim University**, using camera traps in the **Rudranath–Tungnath area** of the sanctuary, reported tahrs feeding in garbage-filled meadows near trekking routes, temporary camps and food stalls. Most of these routes lack proper bins, waste segregation and collection points.

The division also plans awareness programmes to discourage wildlife feeding. **The exact restrictions and their implementation dates have not yet been announced.**

What is the Himalayan Tahr?

The **Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*)** is a large, wild, goat-like mammal built for steep Himalayan cliffs. In Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh it is locally called "**Karth**".

Feature	Key facts
Family	Bovidae (wild goats, sheep, cattle and antelopes)
Animal group	Even-toed ungulate (hoofed mammal)
Native range	Himalayas of India, Nepal, southern Tibet (China) and Bhutan
Indian distribution	Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Sikkim
Habitat	Rugged cliffs, rocky slopes, oak–conifer forests and alpine meadows; roughly 2,500–5,000 m , moving lower in winter
Diet	Herbivore: grasses, sedges, herbs and shrubs
Social behaviour	Lives in herds; males form separate herds in spring and rejoin females in autumn
IUCN Red List	Near Threatened





Feature	Key facts
Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972	Schedule I (highest legal protection in India)

Important Adaptations

- **Sexual dimorphism:** Males are much larger than females and have bigger horns.
- **Backward-curving horns:** Both sexes have horns; males' horns can reach about 46 cm.
- **Dense coat:** A thick reddish-brown coat protects against cold; males grow a long mane in winter.
- **Climbing hooves:** Rubber-like pads with hard rims give grip on steep, rocky surfaces.

Ecological Role

The tahr shapes the plant cover of alpine meadows through grazing, and it is an important prey species for the **snow leopard** and other large predators. A decline in tahr numbers can therefore affect the whole high-altitude food chain.

Prelims Point: *Near Threatened* is **not** a "threatened" category. The IUCN's three threatened categories are **Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered**. A species can be Near Threatened globally and still have the highest legal protection (Schedule I) in India.

Point of difference	Himalayan Tahr	Nilgiri Tahr
Scientific name	<i>Hemitragus jemlahicus</i>	<i>Nilgiritragus hylocrius</i>
Region	Himalayas	Western Ghats (Tamil Nadu and Kerala)
IUCN status	Near Threatened	Endangered
Key fact	Found in Kedarnath WLS, Great Himalayan NP	State animal of Tamil Nadu; Eravikulam NP is its stronghold

Common exam trap: both are called "tahr", but they belong to different genera and have different IUCN status.

Why is Feeding Wild Animals Harmful?

1. Changes Natural Foraging Behaviour

Repeated feeding teaches animals to seek food from people instead of grazing in their natural habitat. Animals start linking people, vehicles or campsites with food.

2. Reduces Fear of Humans

Frequent close contact makes animals less cautious around people. This brings them onto roads, trails and village edges, where accidents and conflict become more likely.

3. Creates Health and Safety Risks

Salty, sugary or processed human food does not suit a grazing animal's digestion. Plastic wrappers and packets eaten along with food scraps can block the stomach. Close contact with livestock and people at waste sites can also spread disease.





Careless waste disposal works like deliberate feeding. Even when no one hands food to an animal, an open dump teaches the same habit.

CONCEPT BOX: Food Conditioning vs Habituation

Food conditioning	Habituation
The animal learns that people mean food . It starts approaching humans, vehicles or camps to get food.	The animal loses its natural fear of humans after repeated contact that has no bad result.
<i>Example:</i> tahrs waiting near a food stall on the Tungnath route.	<i>Example:</i> tahrs grazing calmly a few metres from a crowd of trekkers.
Both often occur together, but they are different. A habituated animal is not always food-conditioned; a food-conditioned animal is usually habituated.	

Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary: Key Facts

Aspect	Details
Location	Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts, Uttarakhand
Also known as	Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary
Established	1972
Area	About 975 sq km , one of Uttarakhand's largest protected areas
Main purpose	Protection of the musk deer and other Himalayan wildlife
River catchments	Upper catchments of the Alaknanda and Mandakini
Altitude	About 1,160–7,068 m
Biogeographic zone	West Himalaya (Palearctic realm)
Pilgrim and trek sites	Tungnath and Rudranath (Panch Kedar), Chopta and Deoria Tal lie in or near the sanctuary

- **Vegetation:** Chir pine at lower levels, oak and conifer forests, birch and rhododendron near the treeline, then alpine meadows.
- **Wildlife:** Musk deer, Himalayan tahr, Himalayan goral, Himalayan black bear and snow leopard.
- **Birds:** Himalayan monal (state bird of Uttarakhand), koklass pheasant and other high-altitude birds.

Because the sanctuary is also a busy pilgrimage and trekking landscape, its main challenge is to manage **people**, not only to protect animals.

What are Bugyals?

Bugyals are high-altitude alpine meadows of Uttarakhand, found above the treeline (roughly 3,000–4,000 m). In summer they are covered with grasses, herbs and flowers; in winter they lie under snow. Well-known examples are **Bedni, Ali, Dayara and Auli Bugyal**.





- **Ecological value:** Summer feeding ground for tahr, musk deer and other wildlife; home to medicinal herbs; soil cover protects the upper catchments of rivers.
- **Livelihood value:** Traditional summer grazing for herders, and income from trekking and tourism.
- **Fragility:** The growing season is short, so damage from trampling, camping, litter and overgrazing takes many years to heal.

Bugyals and the Courts

Year	Development
2018	The Uttarakhand High Court (21 August 2018), in a PIL filed by the Aali–Bedni–Bagji Bugyal Sanrakshan Samiti, issued 12 directions to protect bugyals, including a ban on overnight stays , a cap of 200 visitors , removal of permanent structures and control of grazing.
2026	The Supreme Court (20 July 2026) set aside the overnight-stay ban, the 200-visitor cap and the direction to consider declaring bugyals as national parks or sanctuaries. The remaining safeguards, including waste management and controls on permanent structures and grazing, continue.

Why it matters: The Court moved from a **blanket ban** to **science-based regulation**, balancing ecology with the livelihoods of mountain communities. With camping back on the meadows, the burden now shifts to **waste management and visitor discipline**, exactly the problem seen in the tahr case.

Himachal Pradesh Connection

- **Where tahr is found in HP:** Great Himalayan National Park (Kullu) and Kugti Wildlife Sanctuary (Chamba) are among its known habitats in the state.
- **Recent news:** In March 2026, the Chamba Wildlife Division recorded a rare **albino female tahr** in Kugti Wildlife Sanctuary, Bharmour. Its white coat makes it easier for predators to spot.
- **Same risk, different place:** Himachal's high-altitude routes, such as the trek to Manimahesh in the Bharmour region and popular Kullu–Lahaul treks, also face litter left by large numbers of visitors.
- **Lesson for HP:** Waste collection at base camps, a ban on feeding wildlife, and local community participation can prevent a Kedarnath-like situation before it begins.

Global Angle: Same Species, Opposite Problem

The Himalayan tahr was introduced into **New Zealand in 1904** for sport hunting. With no natural predators there, its numbers grew rapidly and it now damages native alpine plants, so the New Zealand government runs culling programmes. At home it is **Near Threatened**; abroad it is an **invasive species**.

Exam takeaway: Whether a species is “protected” or a “pest” depends on its **ecosystem**, not the species itself. This is a useful example in answers on invasive alien species.

Wider Conservation Challenges

- **Tourism pressure:** Rising pilgrim and trekker numbers on high-altitude routes bring waste, noise and trampling.





- **Weak waste systems:** Few bins, no segregation and limited staff to monitor remote trails.
- **Poaching and habitat loss:** Continue to affect tahr populations outside well-protected areas.
- **Livestock competition:** Grazing herds share pasture with tahr and can pass on diseases.
- **Climate change:** Changes in snow cover and treeline position may shrink or shift alpine habitat.
- **Livelihood balance:** Local people depend on tourism and grazing, so rules work only with their support.

Way Forward

- 1 **No-feeding rule:** Clear signboards, on-spot fines and awareness drives at trails, stalls and parking points.
- 2 **"Carry in, carry out" waste system:** Deposit-refund for plastic items, segregated bins at base camps and regular clearing of meadows.
- 3 **Carrying capacity studies:** Fix visitor numbers and campsite locations for each meadow using scientific assessment.
- 4 **Monitoring:** Continue camera-trap studies to check whether tahrs return to natural feeding after waste is removed.
- 5 **Community stewardship:** Train local guides, porters and eco-development committees as meadow caretakers, linking conservation to income.
- 6 **Habitat connectivity:** Keep seasonal movement routes between summer meadows and winter forests free of new barriers.

Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Ungulate	A hoofed mammal, e.g. tahr, deer, goral
Bugyal	High-altitude alpine meadow of Uttarakhand, above the treeline
Food conditioning	Animal learns to associate humans with food
Habituation	Animal loses natural fear of humans through repeated contact
Carrying capacity	Maximum use an ecosystem can bear without long-term damage
Invasive species	Non-native species that spreads and harms the new ecosystem
Schedule I (WPA)	Highest level of legal protection for animals in India

Conclusion

The Kedarnath case shows that the biggest threat to wildlife inside a protected area may not be a hunter but a careless visitor. A sanctuary boundary protects land; only **responsible human behaviour** protects the animals within it. Healthy habitats, scientific monitoring, disciplined tourism and community participation together offer the way forward.





Practice Corner

Prelims MCQ: Consider the following statements about the Himalayan tahr:

1. It is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List.
2. It is protected under Schedule I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.
3. It has been introduced in New Zealand, where it is treated as an invasive species.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer: (b). Statement 1 is wrong: it is *Near Threatened*, not Endangered.

Mains Practice Question (150 words)

"Wildlife conservation requires managing human behaviour as much as protecting animal habitats." Discuss with reference to the Himalayan tahr in Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary.

Mains Practice Question (250 words)

Examine the ecological significance of Himalayan alpine meadows. How far does the shift from blanket bans to regulated tourism help balance conservation with mountain livelihoods?

