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6. Short News

Nilgiri Tahr

Context – Tamil Nadu's 2026 synchronised survey estimated the Nilgiri Tahr population at 1,364, reflecting continued gains under Project Nilgiri Tahr.

About Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*)

1. The Nilgiri Tahr is an endangered mountain ungulate endemic to the Western Ghats of India.
 1. It is the only mountain ungulate found in southern India and serves as a flagship species of high-altitude ecosystems.
2. Habitat and Distribution – The species inhabits montane grasslands and shola forests at elevations ranging from about 1,200 to 2,600 metres.
 1. It is endemic to the southern Western Ghats, occurring in parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala from the Nilgiri Hills to the Agasthyamalai landscape.
3. State Animal – The Nilgiri Tahr is the State Animal of Tamil Nadu.

Key Features –

1. It possesses a stocky body, coarse fur and backward-curving horns, which are present in both sexes.
2. Adult males develop a distinctive grey saddle-shaped patch, earning them the name "saddlebacks".
3. It acts as an indicator species for the health of the fragile shola–grassland ecosystem.

Conservation Status

4. IUCN Red List – Endangered.
5. Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 – Schedule I (highest legal protection).

Major Threats

6. Habitat loss due to plantation expansion and infrastructure development.
7. Spread of invasive species such as *Lantana camara* and wattle.
8. Climate change impacts on high-altitude ecosystems and competition from livestock grazing.

Key Conservation Efforts

9. Project Nilgiri Tahr – Tamil Nadu launched Project Nilgiri Tahr (2022–23) for scientific population estimation, habitat restoration and long-term conservation planning.
10. Synchronised Population Surveys – Tamil Nadu and Kerala conduct coordinated surveys using modern tools such as the 'VARUDAI' mobile application for real-time data collection and monitoring.
11. Habitat Protection and Restoration – It focuses on protecting high-altitude grasslands, controlling invasive species, reducing habitat fragmentation and preventing forest fires.

Key Protected Regions known for Nilgiris Tahr (UPSC CSE 2010)

12. Ernakulam National Park (Kerala)
13. Meurthe National Park (Tamil Nadu)
14. Annamalai Tiger Reserve (Tamil Nadu)
15. Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (Tamil Nadu)

4. Current Status and Population Trends – Total Population in Tamil Nadu rose to 1,364 showing a 4.68 per cent increase from last year's count of 1,303 and an overall rise of more than 32 per cent compared to 2024. Annamalai Hills account for 44.87 per cent of Tamil Nadu's total Nilgiris Tahr population.

E85 Fuel Rollout in India

Context – On World Environment Day 2026, the Government has launched E85 fuel marking a major step towards cleaner mobility.

1. The initial rollout starts across 48 public sector oil marketing retail outlets with plans to expand to 500 outlets by 2026 and 5,000 by 2027.

What is E85 Fuel?

1. E85 is a high-ethanol blended automotive fuel containing 80–85% ethanol and 14–19% petrol.
2. Vehicle Compatibility – It is used only in Flex-Fuel Vehicles (FFVs), which can run on ethanol blends ranging from E20 to E100.
3. India's ethanol blending increased from 1.53% (2014) to 20% (2025), saving over ₹1.84 lakh crore in foreign exchange and replacing 302 lakh metric tonnes of crude oil imports.

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Key Benefits of E85 Fuel

1. Lower Cost – It is priced significantly lower than conventional petrol (roughly ₹20 per litre cheaper) to incentivize adoption and pass economic savings directly to drivers.
2. Eco-Friendly – Reduces lifecycle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by approximately 61% compared to standard petrol, while producing near-zero particulate matter to improve urban air quality.
3. High Performance – It features a high Research Octane Number (RON of ~108). This excellent knock resistance allows optimized engine ignition timing.

Research Octane Number – RON measures a fuel's resistance to engine knocking (premature combustion); a higher RON indicates better performance and allows engines to operate at higher compression ratios.

4. Macro-Economic Growth – By replacing imported crude oil with home-grown ethanol, it helps save massive amounts of foreign exchange and directly boosts income for local farmers.

Hydrogen Fuel Cell vs Flex Fuels (E85)

1. Fuel Source – Hydrogen fuel cells use hydrogen gas, whereas flex-fuel vehicles use ethanol-petrol blends (E20–E100).
2. Emissions – Hydrogen fuel cells emit only water vapour, whereas E85 vehicles emit lower but non-zero CO₂ emissions.
3. Infrastructure – Hydrogen requires new refuelling and storage infrastructure, whereas E85 can largely use the existing fuel distribution network.
4. Cost – Hydrogen vehicles are costlier and less commercially mature, whereas flex-fuel vehicles are cheaper and readily deployable.
5. Indian Relevance – Hydrogen is promoted under the National Green Hydrogen Mission, whereas E85 supports the Ethanol Blending Programme, reducing crude oil imports and boosting farmer incomes.

Philippines Earthquake 2026

Context – Recently, a magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck off the coast of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, triggering tsunami warnings and causing casualties and damage across the region.

Reasons for the High Earthquake Vulnerability of the Philippines

1. Location on the Pacific Ring of Fire – The Philippines is situated along the Pacific Ring of Fire, a zone of intense tectonic and volcanic activity.
2. Active Tectonic Plate Interactions – Frequent movement and interaction of the Philippine Sea Plate, Eurasian Plate, and other tectonic plates generate earthquakes and volcanic activity.
3. Subduction Zones – Ongoing subduction along trenches such as the Philippine Trench and Manila Trench triggers powerful earthquakes and tsunamis.

Natural Gas Discovered in Andaman

Context – Oil India Limited (OIL) recently reported its second natural gas discovery in the Andaman offshore block at Vijayapuram.

1. An offshore oil block is a designated geographic area in a body of water (such as an ocean, sea, or gulf) for the exploration and extraction of petroleum resources

About the Vijayapuram-3 Exploratory Well

1. The Vijayapuram-3 exploratory well is located in the Andaman shallow offshore block (AN-OSHP-2018/1) under the Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP) and is operated by Oil India Limited (OIL).
2. Key Features
 1. Strategic Offshore Location – The well is situated about 15 km off the east coast of the Andaman Islands at a water depth of approximately 355 metres.
 2. Natural Gas Discovery – Production testing in the Eocene-age reservoir confirmed the presence of natural gas through continuous flaring and pressure build-up after perforation.
 3. Exploration Potential – It is the second successful hydrocarbon discovery in the block after Vijayapuram-2 (2025), indicating promising petroleum prospects in the Andaman Basin.

About Natural Gas

1. Natural gas is a naturally occurring fossil fuel found in underground reservoirs, often associated with crude oil deposits and sedimentary basins.
2. Composition – Natural gas primarily consists of methane (CH₄).
 1. It also contains smaller quantities of ethane, propane, butane, carbon dioxide, nitrogen and trace gases.

Applications

2. Energy Generation – Natural gas is widely used for electricity generation due to its relatively lower carbon emissions compared to coal.
3. Industrial Feedstock – It serves as a key raw material in the production of fertilizers, petrochemicals, plastics and hydrogen.
4. Domestic and Transport Use – It is supplied as Piped Natural Gas (PNG) for households and as Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) for cleaner transportation.

Significance

1. Natural gas serves as a transition fuel supporting energy security, industrial growth and India's shift toward a lower-carbon economy.