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CURRENT AFFAIRS

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ASIAN ELEPHANT POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY ESTIMATES

This article covers "Daily Current Affairs" and the topic details "Asian Elephant Population and Demography Estimates". The topic "Asian Elephant Population and Demography Estimates" has relevance in the "Environment" section of the UPSC CSE exam.

For Prelims:

What are the important facts about the Asian Elephant?

What is Project Elephant?

For Mains:

GS3: Ecology and Environment

Why in the news?

An interim report on Asian Elephant Population and Demography Estimates for 2023 reveals an augmentation in the elephant count within Karnataka.

Asian Elephant

- The Asian elephant, scientifically known as *Elephas maximus*, holds the title of the largest land mammal in Asia. Its distribution spans the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia.
- **Habitat:**
 - **Adaptability to Diverse Habitats:** The Asian elephant is adaptable to a variety of habitats, ranging from wet tropical evergreen forests to semi-arid thorn and scrub forests.
 - **Geographical Range and Habitat Diversity:** The Asian elephant's habitat extends across 13 range countries in South and Southeast Asia, encompassing dry to wet forest and grassland environments.
 - **Diverse Food Preferences and Adaptation:** Their food preferences may differ based on the region, showcasing their adaptability. It's important to note that these "mega-herbivores" need extensive forest and grassland territories teeming with food and water resources for survival.
 - In India, the Asian elephant was once widely distributed, including in states like Punjab and Gujarat. However, their present distribution is confined to fragmented populations in the southern, northern, central, and northeastern parts of the country.

- **Appearance:**

- Notably, the species can be identified by its distinct features, including rounded ears, a hump on the back, a double-domed head with two humps, and a single “finger” on the trunk for grasping.
- Asian elephants are smaller than their African counterparts. Their unique appearance, featuring rounded ears, a distinctive hump on their back, a double-domed head with two humps, and a singular “finger” on their trunk, sets them apart.
- The species encompasses three recognized subspecies: the Sri Lankan, the Indian, and the Sumatran elephants. These subspecies exhibit variations in distribution and traits.

- **Characteristics :**

- Asian elephants are highly social creatures that live in herds of six to seven related females, led by the oldest female, who is known as the matriarch.
- Occasionally, these groups join with others to create larger herds, although these gatherings are short-lived compared to their African counterparts.
- Elephants communicate over long distances using low-frequency sounds that are inaudible to humans. These powerful infrasonic rumbles include specific messages that can be heard and understood by other elephants more than 2 miles away.
- Their foraging habits are diverse, with more than two-thirds of their day spent consuming grasses, alongside significant portions of tree bark, roots, leaves, and small stems.
- They even indulge in cultivated crops such as bananas, rice, and sugarcane. To sustain their diet, they remain in close proximity to a reliable source of freshwater, as they require daily drinking.

- **IUCN Status: Endangered**

- **Wildlife Protection Act 1972: Schedule I** (Greatest protection level)

- **CITES: Appendix I** (Species that are at risk of becoming extinct are only allowed to be traded in exceptional circumstances.)

- **Threats:**

- Habitat loss
- Human-animal conflict
- Illegal Wildlife trade

Elephant Population in India:

- India harbours the majority, accounting for 60 percent, of the worldwide Asian elephant population.
- Present estimations of elephant numbers suggest that there are approximately 50,000 to 60,000 Asian elephants globally, with nearly 30,000 of them residing in India.

Government Initiatives

- **Project Elephant:**

- Commemorating three decades, Project Elephant was initiated as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme to bolster conservation endeavours aimed at safeguarding elephants in India.
- Introduced during 1991-1992, its primary objective has been the preservation of elephants, their migratory routes, and their natural habitats.
- **World Elephant Day:**
 - On August 12, the globe observes World Elephant Day, an occasion that underscores the significance of these “gentle giants” in the global ecosystem.
 - Established in 2012, this day accentuates the pressing challenges that elephants face, including poaching, habitat depletion, human-elephant conflicts, and maltreatment in captivity.
- **Dedicated Elephant Corridors:**
 - The Ministry extends financial support to States/Union Territories under the ‘Project Elephant’ Centrally Sponsored Schemes, aimed at the conservation of wildlife and their habitats nationwide.
 - Additionally, the government offers crop insurance to farmers through the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana to mitigate losses incurred due to wildlife-induced crop damage.

More about the news

- Ahead of the observance of World Elephant Day on August 12, the report was unveiled by the Forest Minister of Karnataka.
 - The report has been meticulously compiled following a coordinated elephant census, a collaborative effort between the Forest Department of Karnataka and its neighboring states: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Goa.
- The population of elephants in Karnataka has increased by 346 since 2017, from an estimated 6,049 to 6,395. This is the highest number of elephants in any Indian state. The elephant population in Karnataka has fluctuated over the years, rising from 5,740 in 2010 to 6,072 in 2012.
- Karnataka is followed by Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in terms of population of Asian Elephants. Nearly 44% of all elephants in India live in the four South Indian states of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu.
- Nevertheless, in the latest census, there has been a remarkable increase of 346 elephants. Consequently, the total number of these majestic animals in the state has surged by 655 since 2010.

Sources:

Number of elephants in Karnataka has gone up by 346 – The Hindu

Q1. With reference to the Asian Elephant, consider the following statements:

1. The Asian elephant holds the title of the largest land mammal in the world.

2. Elephants use high-pitched sounds that are beyond the range of human hearing to communicate over long distances.
3. Asian elephants are smaller than African elephants.

Which of the statements given above is/are **NOT** correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) None

Answer: (a)

Q2. Consider the following :

1. Project Elephant was launched as a central sector scheme to support conservation efforts aimed at protecting elephants in India.
2. India is home to the majority of the worldwide Asian elephant population.
3. Karnataka has the highest number of Asian elephants, followed by Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

How many of the abovementioned statements are correct ?

- (a) Only one
- (b) Only two
- (c) All three
- (d) None

Answer: (a)

Q3. The human-elephant conflict poses a serious challenge to both rural communities and Asian elephant populations. Analyse the factors contributing to this conflict and propose holistic strategies that can mitigate its impact.

Gaurav Nikumbh

MISUSE OF FUNDS IN NATIONAL SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMME (NSAP)

This article covers "Daily Current Affairs" and the topic details "Misuse of Funds in National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)". The topic "Misuse of Funds in National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)" has relevance in the Social Justice/Governance section of the UPSC CSE exam.

For Prelims:

About Misuse of Pension Funds?

For Mains:

GS 2: Social Justice/Governance

About the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)?

About Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)?

Why in the news:

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has revealed that the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) redirected funds meant for the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), encompassing old age pension schemes, towards promoting various other schemes.

About Misuse of Pension Funds

The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), launched in 1995, aims to provide support to vulnerable individuals in below-poverty-line households. However, recent findings by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) highlight instances of fund diversion and discrepancies in the implementation of NSAP.

Misuse of Pension Funds for Publicity:

- The Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) diverted funds allocated for NSAP towards publicity campaigns for other ministry schemes.
- Funds intended for pension disbursement and administrative expenses were diverted for non-designated purposes. The diversion of funds was identified both at the ministry level and within state/UT governments.
- In 2017, the MoRD initiated a publicity campaign through hoardings to promote various programs. Approximately Rs 39.15 lakh was approved for hoardings, while around Rs 2.44 crore was approved for campaigns across multiple states.
- The funds designated for the campaign were originally intended to be obtained from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme; however, they were eventually sourced from NSAP schemes.

Advertisement Discrepancies:

- The CAG report highlighted discrepancies in advertisement work orders related to NSAP schemes. Despite being funded from NSAP resources, the advertisements emphasized schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin (PMAY-G) and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gramin Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), not related to NSAP.

States Implicated in Fund Diversion:

- The funds initially meant to be acquired from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for the campaign were eventually derived from NSAP schemes.
- These diversions raised concerns about the proper utilization of resources for their intended beneficiaries.

Implications and Beneficiary Impact:

- The diversion of funds led to adverse implications for the planned Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities under NSAP. An amount of Rs 2.83 crore, originally earmarked for NSAP Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities, was utilized for the promotion of other ministry schemes.
- This diversion compromised the intended outreach and support for the beneficiaries of NSAP.

About National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP):

Initiated on the 15th of August, 1995, as a scheme with central sponsorship. Aims to provide social assistance to individuals and families in below-poverty-line households.

Components of National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP):

- **Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS):** Provides a monthly pension of Rs. 200/- to BPL individuals aged 60 or above, which increases to Rs. 500/- for those aged 80 and above.
- **Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS):** Offers a monthly pension of Rs. 200/- to BPL widows aged 40-59.

- **Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS):** Grants a monthly pension of Rs. 200/- to BPL individuals aged 18-59 with severe and multiple disabilities.
- **National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS):** Provides a lump sum amount of Rs. 10,000/- to BPL families on the death of a primary breadwinner aged 18-64.



Implementation:

- Executed by the Ministry of Rural Development in collaboration with state/UT governments.
- Utilizes the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) mode for fund disbursement to beneficiaries' bank accounts or postal accounts.
- Features a web portal offering information on guidelines, circulars, grievance redressal, etc.

Impact:

- Contributed to poverty reduction, improved living standards, and empowerment of beneficiaries.
- Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to poverty eradication, social protection, and inclusion.
- Between 2017 and 2021, approximately 4.65 crore beneficiaries relied on old age, widow, disability pensions, and family benefits.

Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG): Role and Authority

CAG is an independent constitutional authority established to ensure transparency and accountability in public finances.

Responsibilities:

- Ensures accountability of government and public authorities to Parliament and State Legislatures.
- Assures proper utilization of public funds and resources.
- CAG conducts audit of expenditure on behalf of the Parliament.
- He acts as a guide to the Public Accounts Committee.
- He submits audit reports to the president.

CAG's Independence:

- Article 148 of the Constitution establishes an independent office for the CAG.
- After the tenure, the CAG is not eligible for any further government office.

Relevance in Constitution:

- Articles 149-151 outline the Duties & Powers, Form of Accounts, and Audit Reports.
- Article 279 details calculations of net proceeds.
- The Third Schedule and Sixth Schedule pertain to the Oath or Affirmation and the Administration of Tribal Areas in certain States, respectively.

SOURCE:

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/cag-govt-diverted-funds-of-pension-schemes-for-publicity-of-other-schemes-8885049/>

Q.1 Which of the following are the components of the National Social Assistance Programme?

1. Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme
2. National Family Benefit Scheme
3. Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS)

Choose the correct answer from below:

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

Answer: A

Q.2 Consider the following statements regarding Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG):

1. No funds can be accessed from the public exchequer without the authorization of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG).
2. He serves at the pleasure of the President.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: D

Q.3 Discuss the role and significance of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in ensuring financial accountability and transparency in government expenditure.

Rishabh