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Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary — Eco-Sensitive Zone Notified

21 January 2026

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Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary — Eco-Sensitive Zone Notified

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WHY IN NEWS

The Centre notified a 0–1 km buffer around Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan as an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ), adding a protective ring around one of the Aravallis’ most biodiverse protected areas — home to India’s largest contiguous wolf population.

KUMBHALGARH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY — PROFILE

Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary is located in **Rajsamand district, Rajasthan**, spread across 610.5 sq. km in the southern Aravalli Range. Established in **1971**, it lies in the arid Rajasthan-Gujarat transition zone, making it ecologically distinct from most of India’s more humid sanctuaries.

The sanctuary is divided into four ranges: **Kumbhalgarh, Sadri, Desuri, and Bokhada**. The terrain is rugged — dry deciduous forest, mixed thorn forest, and open grassland characterise the landscape, which rises to over 1,000 metres in parts of the Aravallis.

FLAGSHIP SPECIES

Wolf (Indian Wolf, *Canis lupus pallipes*): Kumbhalgarh hosts one of India’s largest wolf populations, making it nationally significant for wolf conservation. Indian wolves are classified as **Endangered** on the IUCN Red List.

Other fauna: Leopard, Sloth Bear, Hyena, Sambhar, Nilgai, Chausingha (Four-Horned Antelope — India endemic), Chinkara (Indian Gazelle), Wild Boar, various raptors.

Chausingha (*Tetracerus quadricornis*) — the only four-horned bovid in the world — is found in good numbers here and is protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

RIVER HYDROLOGY

The sanctuary sits on a watershed dividing two major river systems:

Banas River (a tributary of the Chambal → Yamuna → Ganga system, flows to the Bay of Bengal) originates in the northern part of the sanctuary

Luni River (flows westward to the Rann of Kutch/Arabian Sea) receives the Sukdi, Sumer, Mithdi, and Kot tributaries from this area

This hydrological significance makes the sanctuary a critical water tower for western Rajasthan’s rivers.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The sanctuary is contiguous with the **Kumbhalgarh Fort** — a UNESCO World Heritage Site (2013, as part of the Hill Forts of Rajasthan cluster). The fort’s boundary wall, approximately **36 km long**, is often called the “Great Wall of India.” Built by Rana Kumbha in the 15th century, it was designed as a refuge when Chittorgarh was under threat.

WHAT IS AN ECO-SENSITIVE ZONE (ESZ)?

An Eco-Sensitive Zone is a protective buffer notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) around Protected Areas (National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, and Biosphere Reserves) under **Section 3(1) and 3(2)(v)** of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

LEGAL BASIS

The **Supreme Court’s ruling in T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India (2006)** directed the government to notify ESZs with a minimum 10 km buffer around all National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. However, the actual ESZ width is determined case-by-case based on ecological sensitivity — some areas have been notified with narrower buffers (0–1 km) where human settlements or infrastructure make wider buffers impractical.

WHAT AN ESZ PERMITS AND PROHIBITS

Category	Activities
Prohibited	New commercial mining; saw mills; industries with polluting discharges; establishment of major hotels/resorts; commercial use of firewood; any new hydroelectric projects
Regulated	Ongoing agricultural practices; non-polluting small industries; collection of forest produce; tourism; construction activity
Permitted	Ongoing subsistence agriculture; rain-water harvesting; organic farming; restoration of land; research/education

Rationale: ESZs are “shock absorbers” — they reduce the pressure of human activity at the boundary of the core protected area and allow for ecological gradation from Protected Area to the surrounding landscape.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NOTIFYING KUMBHALGARH’S ESZ

The Aravalli Range is one of the world’s oldest mountain systems (approximately 350 million years old — pre-dating the Himalayas). Stretching ~700 km from Gujarat to Delhi, it is the primary ecological barrier between the Thar Desert and the fertile Gangetic plains. Without the Aravallis, the Thar Desert could extend as far east

as Delhi.

However, the Aravallis face severe threats:

Illegal mining: The Supreme Court and NGT have repeatedly directed stoppage of illegal mining in the Aravallis; compliance has been partial

Encroachment: Construction along Aravalli ridge lines, especially near Gurugram and Faridabad

Fragmentation: The Aravalli-Shivalik wildlife corridor (connecting Rajasthan, Haryana, UP, and Uttarakhand) is fragmented by roads, railway lines, and settlements

The Kumbhalgarh ESZ notification strengthens the legal framework to resist mining and construction pressure at the sanctuary's boundary — a critical step given Rajasthan's mining industry.

WOLF CONSERVATION IN INDIA

The Indian Wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*) is a Schedule I species under WPA 1972, but lacks the iconic status of tigers and lions — resulting in comparatively limited conservation focus:

India's total wolf population: ~3,100 individuals (last estimate), found across Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh

Key threat: Pastoral conflict (wolves preying on livestock in sheep-grazing areas near Kumbhalgarh is documented)

India has **no dedicated wolf conservation programme** analogous to Project Tiger or Project Elephant

Kumbhalgarh and the adjacent Jawai Leopard Conservation Area form the best-protected wolf landscape in Rajasthan

UPSC RELEVANCE

Kumbhalgarh WS — district (Rajsamand), area (610.5 sq. km), est. 1971, Aravalli range; Chausingha (only four-horned bovid, Schedule I); Indian Wolf IUCN (Endangered); ESZ legal basis (EP Act 1986, S.3); rivers (Banas → Bay of Bengal; Luni → Arabian Sea); Kumbhalgarh Fort (UNESCO 2013, Great Wall of India)

MAINS GS-3:

“Critically evaluate the Eco-Sensitive Zone mechanism as a tool for protecting India’s Protected Area network. Use Kumbhalgarh as an example.” | “Discuss the ecological and hydrological significance of the Aravalli Range and threats it faces.”

ESSAY:

“Mountains are not just geological features — they are the water towers and biodiversity arks that civilisations depend on.”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA
KUMBHALGARH WILDLIFE SANCTUARY:

District: Rajsamand, Rajasthan
 Area: 610.5 sq. km
 Established: 1971
 Range: Southern Aravalli (elevation 300–1,100 m)
 Ranges (4): Kumbhalgarh, Sadri, Desuri, Bokhada
 ESZ: 0–1 km buffer notified January 2026

KEY WILDLIFE:

Indian Wolf (*Canis lupus pallipes*): IUCN Endangered; largest population in Rajasthan
 Chausingha (*Tetracerus quadricornis*): Only 4-horned bovid in the world; Schedule I WPA
 Leopard, Sloth Bear, Hyena, Sambhar, Nilgai, Chinkara, Wild Boar

RIVER HYDROLOGY:

Banas River: Origin → Kumbhalgarh → Chambal → Yamuna → Ganga → Bay of Bengal
 Luni River tributaries (Sukdi, Sumer, Mithdi, Kot): originate here → Arabian Sea/Rann of Kutch

KUMBHALGARH FORT (ADJACENT):

UNESCO World Heritage Site: 2013 (Hill Forts of Rajasthan cluster — 6 forts)
 Wall length: ~36 km (called Great Wall of India)
 Built by: Rana Kumbha (15th century, Mewar dynasty)
 Birth of Rana Pratap: Kumbhalgarh Fort (1540 CE)

ECO-SENSITIVE ZONE (ESZ):

Legal basis: Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, Section 3(1) and 3(2)(v)
 SC direction: T.N. Godavarman case (2006) — minimum 10 km buffer
 Kumbhalgarh ESZ: 0–1 km (narrower because of surrounding settlements)
 Prohibited in ESZ: Mining, saw mills, polluting industries, large hotels, hydroelectric projects

ARAVALLI RANGE:

Age: ~350 million years (Precambrian — world's oldest fold mountains)
 Length: ~700 km (Gujarat to Delhi/Haryana)
 Ecological role: Barrier between Thar Desert and Gangetic plains; Aravalli-Shivalik wildlife corridor

INDIAN WOLF:

Total population: ~3,100 individuals
 States: Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, AP, Karnataka, MP
 Schedule: Schedule I WPA 1972 (highest protection)
 No dedicated Project Wolf equivalent (unlike Project Tiger, Project Elephant)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Jawai Leopard Conservation Area: Adjacent to Kumbhalgarh; unique “coexistence” model with Rabari shepherds
 NGT and Aravallis: Multiple NGT/SC orders directing stoppage of illegal mining in Aravallis

Haryana and Rajasthan Aravalli: Gurugram/Faridabad development pressure on Aravalli ridge

Luni River: India's only significant river flowing into the Rann of Kutch; saline in lower reaches

Sources: Insights on India, MoEFCC notifications, Vajiramandravi

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