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MAGAZINE NOTES

One Planet, Three Reminders: Wildlife, Forests and the Zero-Waste Imperative in 2026

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ENVIRONMENT

SCIENCE & TECH

GS3

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One Planet, Three Reminders: Wildlife, Forests and the Zero-Waste Imperative in 2026

 **Science Reporter** · Chapter 4 · 4 min read

Source: Science Reporter, Vol. 63, No. 03, March 2026 | CSIR-NISCPR

March 2026 carries three globally significant environmental observances — each a reminder that humanity's relationship with the natural world is at a crossroads. Together, they form a coherent message: protect what sustains us, manage what we discard, and honour the forests that underpin all life.

WORLD WILDLIFE DAY — MARCH 3, 2026

Theme: *“Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods”*

Established by UNGA Resolution 68/205 (2013), World Wildlife Day has been observed annually on March 3 since 2014 — the date of adoption of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) in 1973.

Why Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs)?

The 2026 theme spotlights a largely invisible crisis: the rapid depletion of wild Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (MAPs) that underpin global healthcare, livelihoods, and cultural identity.

Global Context:

- **80%** of the world's population relies on traditional plant-based medicine as primary healthcare (WHO)
- Over **50,000 plant species** have documented medicinal uses
- The global herbal medicine market: estimated at **\$150 billion** and growing at 7% annually
- **15,000 medicinal plant species** face extinction risk (IUCN)

India's Stakes:

- India is home to **~8,000 plant species** with recorded medicinal uses
- Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, Yoga & Naturopathy (AYUSH) depend heavily on MAPs
- Annual MAP trade in India: ₹10,000+ crore
- Over-harvesting from the wild, habitat loss, and climate change are pushing many species toward extinction

- Scheduled Medicinal Plants under WPA 1972: includes *Aconitum*, *Podophyllum*, *Dioscorea* and others

Key Species Under Threat in India:

- *Nardostachys jatamansi* (Jatamansi) — roots used in Ayurveda; critically harvested in Himalayan meadows
- *Taxus baccata* (Himalayan Yew) — source of Taxol (anti-cancer drug); over-harvested
- *Coptis teeta* — used in treatment of malaria; found only in Arunachal Pradesh

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FORESTS — MARCH 21, 2026

Established: UNGA Resolution A/RES/67/200 (2012) **Observed:** March 21 annually

Forests: The Numbers

INDICATOR	VALUE
Global forest cover	4.06 billion hectares (31% of land area)
Annual deforestation	~10 million hectares/year
Forests providing livelihoods	1.6 billion people depend on forests
India's forest cover	21.76% of geographic area (ISFR 2023)
India's forest + tree cover	25.17% of geographic area
Carbon stored in global forests	662 billion tonnes

India's Forest Governance

Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023:

- Redefined “forest” to exclude land records not notified as forest — a contested amendment
- Supreme Court's 1996 *Godavarman* judgment had expanded “forest” definition to any land resembling a dictionary definition of forest
- The 2023 amendment partially reverses this, sparking ecological concern

Van Panchayats (J&K and Uttarakhand):

- Community-managed forest governance bodies
- Uttarakhand's 2024 Van Panchayat amendments: increased community rights and responsibilities

Green Credit Programme (2023):

- Incentivises voluntary tree plantation on degraded land
- Linked to carbon market mechanisms under domestic carbon trading framework

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ZERO WASTE — MARCH 30, 2026

Established: UNGA Resolution A/RES/76/179 (2022) — relatively new observance

The Waste Crisis

- Global waste generation: **2.01 billion tonnes/year** (World Bank) — projected to reach 3.4 billion by 2050
- Only **13.5%** of solid waste is recycled globally
- Plastic waste: **350 million tonnes/year**; less than **9%** recycled since plastic's invention

India's Solid Waste Policy

Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules 2016 (Amended 2024):

- Source segregation mandatory: Wet (biodegradable) | Dry (recyclable) | Hazardous
- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for plastic, e-waste, packaging
- Urban Local Bodies (ULBs): primary implementing agencies

Solid Waste Management Rules 2026:

- New amendments announced March 2026
- Strengthened EPR for FMCG companies and e-commerce platforms
- Targets 70% waste processing by 2028
- Mandates Decentralised Composting Units (DCUs) in residential societies > 200 households

Circular Economy Connection:

- Zero Waste Day links directly to India's Circular Economy push
- India-Finland collaboration on circular economy (March 2026)
- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) as the policy lever

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS3 — Environment:

- Medicinal plant conservation: CITES, CMS, CBD, Nagoya Protocol
- Forest governance: Forest Rights Act vs. Forest Conservation Act; Van Panchayats
- Waste management: SWM Rules, EPR, circular economy

- India's forest cover data (ISFR 2023): 21.76%

Key Distinctions:

- CITES ≠ CBD: CITES regulates trade in wildlife; CBD focuses on in-situ conservation and benefit-sharing
- Zero Waste ≠ Circular Economy: Zero waste is a target; circular economy is the framework to achieve it
- ISFR 2023: India's forest cover increased by 156 sq km from ISFR 2021

FACTS CORNER

- World Wildlife Day 2026 theme: "Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods"
- CITES adopted: March 3, 1973 — hence WWD on March 3
- International Day of Forests: March 21; established UNGA 2012
- Zero Waste Day: March 30; established UNGA 2022
- 80% of global population depends on MAPs for primary healthcare (WHO)
- India: ~8,000 medicinal plant species; MAP trade ₹10,000+ crore/year
- India forest cover: 21.76% (ISFR 2023); with tree cover: 25.17%
- Global waste: 2.01 billion tonnes/year; only 13.5% recycled



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