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# Gangotri National Park — Himalayan Ecology and the Ganga's Source

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# Gangotri National Park — Himalayan Ecology and the Ganga's Source

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## WHY IN NEWS

**Gangotri National Park** in Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand, reopened its gates on April 1, 2026 after a six-month winter closure, allowing tourists and trekkers to access Kedartal, Bhaironghati, Gartang Gali, and the Gangotri Glacier — a primary source of the Ganga river system.

## KEY FACTS ABOUT GANGOTRI NATIONAL PARK

FEATURE	DETAIL
Location	Uttarkashi district, Uttarakhand
Area	2,390.02 sq. km
Established	1989
Altitude	1,800 m to 7,083 m (Jaonli peak)
International boundary	Northeast borders Tibet (China)
Adjacent parks	Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary, Govind National Park
UNESCO status	Part of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve cluster (proposed)

## THE GANGOTRI GLACIER

The **Gangotri Glacier** is one of the largest glaciers in the Himalayas and a primary source of the **Bhagirathi River** — which, along with the Alaknanda, forms the **Ganga** at Devprayag.

PARAMETER	DATA
Length	~30 km
Width	0.5–2.5 km
Area	~143 sq. km
Retreat rate	~22 metres/year (accelerating due to climate change)
Snout (terminus)	Gaumukh (at ~3,892 m altitude) — the “cow’s mouth” from which Bhagirathi flows

## Climate Change and Glacier Retreat

The Gangotri Glacier has been retreating at an accelerating rate:

- **1780–1971:** ~1.5 km total retreat
- **1971–2001:** ~850 m retreat (much faster pace)
- **2001–2025:** Retreat has accelerated further

This threatens the long-term flow of the Ganga — which sustains ~500 million people in the Indo-Gangetic Plain.

## BIODIVERSITY

### Fauna

SPECIES	STATUS
<b>Snow Leopard</b>	Endangered (IUCN); estimated 35 individuals in park
Brown Bear	Least Concern; present in alpine zones
Himalayan Black Bear	Vulnerable
Blue Sheep (Bharal)	Least Concern; key snow leopard prey
Musk Deer	Endangered; harvested illegally for musk pod
Himalayan Tahr	Near Threatened
Serow	Vulnerable
Golden Eagle	Least Concern

### Flora

- **Subalpine conifer forests:** Deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), West Himalayan fir (*Abies pindrow*), Spruce, Oak
- **Alpine meadows (bugyals):** Rhododendron, juniper shrubs
- **High altitude:** Sparse cushion plants, mosses, lichens above the treeline (~3,800 m+)

## SNOW LEOPARD TOURISM

Uttarakhand government is piloting a **Snow Leopard Tourism** project in Gangotri National Park — modelled on successful tiger tourism — to:

- Generate eco-tourism revenue for local communities
- Reduce human-wildlife conflict
- Create economic incentive for snow leopard conservation

## GARTANG GALI

A historic **cliff-face wooden walkway** built during the medieval period (likely 17th–18th century) along the Jadh Ganga river — used by traders on the old salt trade route between India and Tibet. It was restored and reopened in 2021 after lying abandoned for 50+ years.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

### GS Paper 1 — Geography:

- Origin and course of the Ganga river system; Himalayan glaciers as perennial water sources
- Difference between Himalayan rivers (glacial-fed, perennial) and Peninsular rivers (rain-fed, seasonal)

### GS Paper 3 — Environment:

- Snow leopard conservation; Project Snow Leopard (launched 2009)
- Himalayan glacial retreat — causes, consequences for water security and downstream agriculture
- National Park vs. Wildlife Sanctuary vs. Biosphere Reserve — distinction

## UPSC RELEVANCE

“The accelerating retreat of Himalayan glaciers threatens the perennial character of northern India’s rivers — a crisis that demands both aggressive climate action and adaptation planning for water-scarce futures.”

## FACTS CORNER

- **Gaumukh:** Literal meaning “cow’s mouth”; the glacier snout from which the Bhagirathi emerges — one of Hinduism’s holiest sites
- **Devprayag:** Confluence of Bhagirathi (from Gangotri) + Alaknanda (from Badrinath) = Ganga
- **Project Snow Leopard:** Launched 2009 by MoEFCC; covers Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh
- **Snow Leopard population:** ~400–700 in India; ~4,000–6,500 globally; India has the third-largest population after China and Mongolia
- **Musk Deer:** Males have a musk pod (used in perfumery) worth more than gold by weight — driving illegal poaching

- **Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary:** Adjacent to Gangotri NP; UNESCO World Heritage nomination for a combined “Gangotri-Kedarnath-Govind” complex was proposed but not yet approved
- **Himalayan rivers classified as:** “Antecedent rivers” — they existed before the Himalayas rose and cut through them (superimposed drainage)

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