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International Day of the Markhor 2026: Pir Panjal Population Crisis

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International Day of the Markhor 2026: Pir Panjal Population Crisis

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WHY IN NEWS:

May 24, 2026 marks the third observance of the **International Day of the Markhor**, proclaimed by UN General Assembly Resolution **A/RES/78/278** (adopted May 2, 2024). India's **Pir Panjal Markhor** (*Capra falconeri cashmiriensis*) population in Jammu & Kashmir has crashed from around **55 individuals (2004)** to a handful in recent surveys, raising fears of local extinction in its only Indian range.

ABOUT THE MARKHOR

The Markhor is a large wild goat of the *Capra* genus, instantly recognisable by its spectacular spiralled corkscrew horns.

- **Scientific name:** *Capra falconeri*
- **Meaning of "Markhor":** From Persian — *mar* (snake) + *khori* (eater) = **"snake-eater"**. The name refers either to the goat's reputed ability to kill snakes, or to its corkscrew horns that resemble coiled snakes.
- **Habitat:** Sparse alpine and sub-alpine forests, rocky crags, and steep mountain slopes between 600 m and 3,600 m elevation.
- **Diet:** Grasses, leaves, shrubs; browses on tree foliage in winter.

The Six Subspecies

Taxonomists recognise six subspecies of the Markhor, distributed across the high mountains of Central and South Asia:

- 1 **Astor Markhor** (*C.f. falconeri*)
- 2 **Bukharan / Tadjik / Heptner's Markhor** (*C.f. heptneri*)
- 3 **Kabul Markhor** (*C.f. megaceros*)
- 4 **Suleiman Markhor** (*C.f. jerdoni*)
- 5 **Kashmir / Pir Panjal Markhor** (*C.f. cashmiriensis*) — India's only subspecies
- 6 **Chiltan Markhor** (*C.f. chiltanensis*)

THE PIR PANJAL (KASHMIRI) MARKHOR

India's only Markhor population survives in a thin sliver of the southwestern Pir Panjal range in Jammu & Kashmir, east of the Banihal Pass.

- **Distribution:** Narrow belt across the **Hirpora–Tatakutti–Kazinag** tract in J&K.
- **Peak population:** Around **155 individuals in 1947**.
- **Decline:** Fell to **30–40 by early 2000s**; surveys in 2004 estimated ~55 individuals; recent counts indicate a critically low population.
- **Drivers of decline:** Decades of **insurgency-era** access restrictions, livestock grazing competition, poaching, and habitat fragmentation by highway corridors.

Conservation Status — A Snapshot

FRAMEWORK	STATUS
IUCN Red List (2015 assessment)	Near Threatened (~5,800 globally)
CITES	Appendix I
Wildlife Protection Act, 1972	Schedule I (highest protection)
CMS (Bonn Convention)	Appendix II
National Animal of Pakistan	Declared 1975

Range Countries

The Markhor's six subspecies together range across six nations: **Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan**.

Protected Areas in India

All Indian Markhor habitat lies within Jammu & Kashmir:

PROTECTED AREA	YEAR / NOTE
Hirpora Wildlife Sanctuary	Primary Pir Panjal Markhor habitat
Tatakutti Wildlife Sanctuary	Notified specifically for Pir Panjal Markhor
Kazinag National Park	Declared 2007

UN OBSERVANCE — HOW MAY 24 WAS CHOSEN

- **Resolution:** UNGA A/RES/78/278, adopted **May 2, 2024**.
- **Sponsor:** Pakistan, with eight co-sponsors including **Tajikistan**.
- **Facilitating agency:** United Nations Environment Programme (**UNEP**).
- **Date logic:** May 24 was selected to align with the wider biodiversity awareness calendar, coming days after the International Day for Biological Diversity (May 22).

CONSERVATION CONTRAST — INDIA VS PAKISTAN

A striking case-study in conservation philosophy emerges from comparing the two largest Markhor range states.

Pakistan's Torghar Conservancy Model

- Launched in **1985** in Balochistan's Toba-Kakar range.
- Community-based **sustainable trophy hunting programme** issuing a tightly limited number of permits each season.
- Permit fees (commonly cited at \$100,000–150,000 each) channelled directly to local communities and conservation work.
- Outcome: Suleiman Markhor population recovered from **fewer than 50** to **over 1,500** within two decades — frequently cited as one of South Asia's most successful conservation turnarounds.

India's Strict-Protection Approach

- Schedule I listing under WPA 1972 prohibits hunting absolutely.
- No incentive flows to the Gujjar–Bakerwal pastoralists who share Markhor habitat.
- Population has continued to decline despite three protected areas.

The Wider Debate

The Markhor case has become a touchstone in the global debate between **incentive-based conservation** (community ownership, regulated extraction, benefit-sharing) and the **preservationist model** (strict protection, no extractive use). The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act framework rules out trophy hunting, making any future policy shift politically and legally complex.

THREATS TO THE PIR PANJAL MARKHOR

- **Livestock grazing pressure** in alpine pastures from Gujjar–Bakerwal transhumance.
- **Poaching** for horns (traditional medicine markets and trophies).

- **Habitat fragmentation** by infrastructure — especially the **NH-44 Banihal–Srinagar** corridor and associated tunnel works.
- **Climate change** — shrinking alpine ranges and shifting treelines.
- **Legacy of insurgency** — decades of access restrictions stymied systematic conservation, monitoring, and anti-poaching patrols.

WAY FORWARD

- **Community stewardship** around Hirpora–Tatakutti, modelled on Project Tiger’s buffer-zone learnings.
- **Livestock-free corridors** to reduce grazing competition during the kidding season.
- **Transboundary cooperation** under the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), with Pakistan and Afghanistan.
- Integration with **Project Snow Leopard (launched 2009)** landscape-level planning, since both species share the high-altitude habitat.
- **Carrying-capacity studies** to assess whether incentive-based harvest models could be adapted to the Indian legal framework.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, biodiversity, environment — endangered species, international conventions (CITES, CMS), IUCN categories, Wildlife Protection Act 1972 schedules. The Markhor case offers a clean comparative lens on conservation philosophy.

FACTS CORNER

International Day of the Markhor: May 24 (annually since 2024)

UNGA Resolution: A/RES/78/278 (adopted May 2, 2024)

Scientific name: *Capra falconeri*

Name meaning: Persian “snake-eater” (*mar + khor*)

IUCN status: Near Threatened; CITES: Appendix I

WPA 1972: Schedule I

Indian subspecies: Pir Panjal Markhor (*Capra falconeri cashmiriensis*)

National Animal of Pakistan: Markhor (since 1975)

Number of subspecies: 6

Indian habitat: Hirpora WLS, Tatakutti WLS, Kazinag NP (all J&K)

Project Snow Leopard: Launched 2009

Global Markhor population (IUCN 2015): ~5,800

Sources: [UN](#), [MoEFCC](#), [WTI](#)

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