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Assam's Borjuli Wetland: India's First Biodiversity Heritage Site for Wild Rice

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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WHY IN NEWS

Around July 2 to 3, 2026, the Borjuli wild-rice habitat in Sonitpur district, Assam, was notified as a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS), becoming India's first BHS dedicated to wild rice and Assam's third such site.

THE SITE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The **Borjuli wild-rice habitat**, spread over a mere **0.41 hectares** inside a private tea estate in **Sonitpur district, Assam**, sits within the flood-prone plains of the Brahmaputra valley. Despite its tiny size, it holds outsized importance: it is **India's first Biodiversity Heritage Site declared specifically to conserve wild rice**, and Assam's third BHS overall. The site was notified by the Assam State Government on the recommendation of the **Assam State Biodiversity Board (ASBB)** and with recognition by the **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)**.

At the heart of the site is **Oryza rufipogon**, the wild progenitor (ancestor) of cultivated rice, **Oryza sativa**. This wild relative is naturally resistant to many pests and diseases and can tolerate flooding and saline conditions. These traits make it a living **genetic reservoir** for breeding climate-resilient rice varieties, a matter of direct national importance as rice feeds a majority of Indians and faces mounting climate stress.

Crop Wild Relatives and Genetic Security

A **crop wild relative** is a wild plant closely related to a domesticated crop. Over centuries of cultivation, farmed rice has lost much of the genetic diversity that its wild ancestors still carry, including genes for disease resistance, submergence tolerance and salinity tolerance. Conserving *Oryza rufipogon* in the very landscape where it evolved keeps this genetic toolkit available to plant breeders. This is why agro-biodiversity conservation is treated as a pillar of long-term food and climate security, not a niche ecological concern.

THE CONSERVATION PROJECT BEHIND IT

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The BHS status is the outcome of the project “**In-situ Conservation and Management of Wild Rice (*Oryza rufipogon*) in Sonitpur District of Assam,**” running since **2022**. It is funded by the **National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA)** under the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, and executed by **ICAR-NBPGR (National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources)** in partnership with the Assam State Biodiversity Board.

ELEMENT	DETAIL
Site	Borjuli wild-rice habitat, Sonitpur district, Assam
Area	About 0.41 hectares
Species conserved	<i>Oryza rufipogon</i> (wild progenitor of cultivated rice)
Project	In-situ Conservation and Management of Wild Rice, since 2022
Funding	National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA), Ministry of Agriculture
Executing agency	ICAR-NBPGR with Assam State Biodiversity Board
Legal basis	Section 37, Biological Diversity Act, 2002 (https://ujjiyari.com/terms/biological-diversity-act/)

In-Situ Versus Ex-Situ Conservation

The Borjuli approach is **in-situ** conservation, protecting the species in its natural habitat where it continues to evolve and adapt. This complements **ex-situ** conservation, where genetic material such as seeds is stored away from the wild, for example in a gene bank like the NBPGR’s national seed vault. In-situ conservation of a crop wild relative is especially valuable because the plant keeps interacting with local pests, pathogens and climate, continually generating and preserving useful adaptive traits.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A **Biodiversity Heritage Site is declared by State Governments under Section 37 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002**, in consultation with local bodies. The Act created a **three-tier institutional structure** for biodiversity governance in India:

- **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)** at the central level, based in Chennai.
- **State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs)** at the state level, such as the Assam State Biodiversity Board.
- **Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs)** at the local level, in every local body.

India now has around 55 Biodiversity Heritage Sites in total, of which Borjuli is one, and it is distinctive as the first devoted to a crop wild relative.

ANALYSIS AND WAY FORWARD

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The declaration reframes conservation policy in an important way. Biodiversity Heritage Sites are often associated with sacred groves, unique ecosystems or charismatic species. Borjuli extends the concept to **agro-biodiversity**, recognising that a humble patch of wild rice can be as strategically valuable as a tiger reserve when viewed through the lens of food and climate security. It also demonstrates a working model of convergence (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/convergence/>): an agriculture-ministry research body (ICAR-NBPGR), a rainfed-area funding authority (NRAA) and the state biodiversity machinery acting together on a single site.

The way forward lies in scaling this model. India is a Vavilovian centre of crop diversity, and many other crop wild relatives, such as wild relatives of pulses, millets and vegetables, remain unprotected and are threatened by habitat loss and monoculture (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/monoculture/>). Mapping and notifying more such micro-sites, empowering local Biodiversity Management Committees to steward them, and linking in-situ sites to ex-situ gene banks would build a genuinely resilient national safety net for future crop breeding.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation; biodiversity and its conservation; issues relating to agriculture, food security and climate-resilient crops; institutional and legal frameworks for biodiversity.

Prelims pointers:

- Borjuli (Sonitpur district, Assam), about 0.41 hectares, is India's first Biodiversity Heritage Site dedicated to wild rice and Assam's third BHS.
- Species conserved: *Oryza rufipogon*, the wild progenitor of cultivated rice (*Oryza sativa*); resistant to pests and diseases and tolerant of flooding and salinity.
- Biodiversity Heritage Sites are declared by State Governments under Section 37 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002.
- The Biological Diversity Act, 2002 has a three-tier structure: National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), State Biodiversity Boards and Biodiversity Management Committees.
- The conservation project (since 2022) is funded by the National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA) and executed by ICAR-NBPGR with the Assam State Biodiversity Board.
- India has around 55 Biodiversity Heritage Sites in total.

Mains question: "Crop wild relatives are a strategic genetic resource for climate-resilient agriculture." In this light, discuss the significance of India's first Biodiversity Heritage Site for wild rice and the framework of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNERUjyari Current Affairs - ujyari.com - Free Daily Current Affairs for UPSC & State PCS**FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGEEDIA**

Event: Around July 2 to 3, 2026, the Borjuli wild-rice habitat in Sonitpur district, Assam, was declared a Biodiversity Heritage Site (BHS).

First of its kind: India's first BHS dedicated to wild rice; Assam's third BHS. Area about 0.41 hectares.

Species: *Oryza rufipogon*, the wild progenitor of cultivated rice (*Oryza sativa*), resistant to pests and diseases and tolerant of flooding and saline conditions, a reservoir for climate-resilient breeding.

Project: "In-situ Conservation and Management of Wild Rice," running since 2022.

Funding and execution: Funded by the National Rainfed Area Authority (NRAA) under the Ministry of Agriculture; executed by ICAR-NBPGR (National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources) with the Assam State Biodiversity Board.

Legal basis: A Biodiversity Heritage Site is declared by State Governments under Section 37 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002.

Three-tier structure: National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), State Biodiversity Boards (SBBs) and Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs).

Total: India has around 55 Biodiversity Heritage Sites.

Sources: *DD News* (<https://ddnews.gov.in/>), *National Biodiversity Authority* (<https://nbaindia.org/>), *ICAR-NBPGR* (<https://www.nbpgr.ernet.in/>), *Assam State Biodiversity Board* (<https://www.asbb.gov.in/>)

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