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SC-NBWL Clears RhoDIS Rhino DNA Strategy and Pygmy Hog Recovery

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ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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SC-NBWL Clears RhoDIS Rhino DNA Strategy and Pygmy Hog Recovery

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WHY IN NEWS

The , held on **July 9, 2026** at **CASFOS, Coimbatore** and chaired by Union Environment Minister **Bhupender Yadav**, approved a long-term conservation strategy for the **Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros** built on the **Rhino DNA Index System (RhoDIS)**. The meeting also cleared a future conservation strategy for the **Great Indian Bustard**, added the **pygmy hog** to the **Species Recovery Programme**, and reviewed **118 infrastructure, defence and conservation proposals** in and around protected areas.

THE INSTITUTION: WHAT THE SC-NBWL IS

The **National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)** is constituted under **Section 5A of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** (<https://ujjari.com/legislation/wildlife-protection-act-1972/>) and is **chaired by the Prime Minister**. Because the full Board is a large body that meets rarely, the Act provides for a **Standing Committee, chaired by the Union Environment Minister**, which does the working business of the Board.

That business is of two kinds, and the tension between them defines the institution. On one side, the Standing Committee is the country's **apex** (<https://ujjari.com/vocab/apex/>) advisory body on **wildlife conservation policy**. On the other, it is the clearing house through which any project seeking land inside a **National Park, Wildlife Sanctuary** or an **eco-sensitive zone** must pass. The 91st meeting shows both faces at once: a genuinely scientific rhino strategy sitting on the same agenda as a stack of **118 proposals** awaiting clearance.

RHODIS: FORENSICS AS CONSERVATION

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What It Is

The **Rhino DNA Index System (RhoDIS)** is a **forensic database of individual rhino genetic fingerprints**. Every rhino from which a sample is drawn, whether during a translocation, a veterinary intervention, or from a carcass or a dung sample, yields a unique DNA profile stored in the index. **RhoDIS India** is anchored with the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun**.

Why It Changes Enforcement

Rhino poaching prosecutions historically collapsed on a simple evidentiary problem: a seized horn is an anonymous object. A defendant could claim it was old stock, or came from elsewhere, and the case would fail. RhoDIS answers this by **matching the DNA of a seized horn to the DNA of a specific poached animal**, converting a possession charge into a demonstrable link to a specific crime scene.

Its second use is scientific rather than legal. The index maps **population genetics**, revealing inbreeding, genetic bottlenecks and the degree of relatedness within isolated populations. That data tells managers **which animals to translocate** to restore genetic diversity, rather than moving animals by convenience.

The long-term strategy approved on July 9 makes this database the backbone of national rhino management.

The Species

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Species	Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros (<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>)
IUCN status	Vulnerable
CITES	Appendix I
Wildlife (Protection) Act	Schedule I
Key habitats (Assam)	Kaziranga, Orang, Pobitora, Manas
West Bengal	Jaldapara, Gorumara
Uttar Pradesh	Dudhwa

THE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD STRATEGY

The Committee also cleared a **future conservation strategy** for the **Great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*)**, listed as **Critically Endangered** on the IUCN Red List and among the most imperilled birds in the world. Its population survives in fragments of the grassland and scrub of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The bird's central threat is instructive because it is an infrastructure threat: **collision with overhead power transmission lines** crossing its habitat. The GIB has **restricted frontal vision** and poor manoeuvrability in flight, and does not see the wires until too late. A conservation strategy for this species is therefore inseparable from decisions about **undergrounding cables and bird diverters**, which is to say, from exactly the kind of infrastructure clearance the same Committee grants.

THE PYGMY HOG ENTERS THE SPECIES RECOVERY PROGRAMME

The inclusion of the **pygmy hog (*Porcula salvania*)** under the **Species Recovery Programme** is the quiet but significant decision of the meeting.

- It is the **world's smallest wild pig**, standing roughly 25 cm at the shoulder.
- **IUCN status: Endangered.**
- It is now **confined to the grasslands of Manas** in Assam, having once ranged across the Himalayan foothill terai.
- It is a **grassland indicator species**: the pygmy hog survives only where tall, undisturbed alluvial grassland survives, so protecting it protects the entire habitat on which the rhino, the hispid hare and the Bengal florican also depend.

The **Species Recovery Programme** is a component of the centrally sponsored scheme **Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (IDWH)**. Adding a species to it unlocks dedicated central funding and a formal recovery plan, which for a species this narrowly distributed is decisive.

THE 118 PROPOSALS: THE STANDING CRITIQUE

Alongside these strategies, the Committee reviewed **118 infrastructure, defence and conservation proposals** in and around protected areas. This number is the substance of the long-standing critique of the SC-NBWL: that it functions in practice **less as a conservation board and more as a project-clearance body**, approving the overwhelming majority of what comes before it, in meetings where each proposal can receive only minutes of attention.

Two reforms are repeatedly urged:

- **Cumulative impact assessment.** Each road, transmission line or mine is judged in isolation, so a landscape can be fragmented by a series of individually "minor" clearances. Assessment must be at the level of the landscape, not the project.
- **Mandatory wildlife-crossing structures.** Underpasses, overpasses and viaducts should be a **non-negotiable condition** of linear infrastructure through wildlife corridors, designed to species-specific standards rather than retrofitted.

WAY FORWARD

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The July 9 decisions are genuinely forward-looking: DNA-based forensics for rhinos, a strategy for a bird on the edge of extinction, and recovery funding for a tiny hog that indexes the health of an entire grassland. The credibility of these gains, however, will be measured against the fate of the 118 proposals reviewed in the same room. A board that builds a world-class rhino genetics database while fragmenting the grassland the rhino lives in has not conserved anything.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, biodiversity, environmental institutions, wildlife forensics, [environmental impact assessment](https://ujjayanti.com/terms/environmental-impact-assessment/) (<https://ujjayanti.com/terms/environmental-impact-assessment/>), protected-area governance.

Prelims pointers:

- The **NBWL** is constituted under **Section 5A of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** and is **chaired by the Prime Minister**; its **Standing Committee** is chaired by the **Union Environment Minister**.
- **RhoDIS India** is anchored with the **Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun**.
- **Greater One-Horned Rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*):** IUCN **Vulnerable**, **CITES Appendix I, WPA Schedule I**; found in Kaziranga, Orang, Pobitora, Manas (Assam), Jaldapara and Gorumara (West Bengal), Dudhwa (Uttar Pradesh).
- **Great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*):** IUCN **Critically Endangered**.
- **Pygmy hog (*Porcula salvania*):** IUCN **Endangered**, world's smallest wild pig, confined to **Manas grasslands, Assam**.
- The **Species Recovery Programme** is a component of the **Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats** scheme.
- The 91st SC-NBWL meeting was held on **July 9, 2026** at **CASFOS, Coimbatore**.

Mains question: “Technology-led wildlife forensics such as the Rhino DNA Index System can transform the prosecution of wildlife crime, yet India’s apex wildlife body is criticised for functioning largely as a project-clearance authority. Examine this tension and suggest reforms in cumulative impact assessment and protected-area governance.” (15 marks, 250 words)

FACTS CORNER

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91st SC-NBWL: July 9, 2026, CASFOS Coimbatore, chaired by Bhupender Yadav; reviewed 118 infrastructure, defence and conservation proposals.

NBWL: Section 5A, Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; full Board chaired by the Prime Minister, Standing Committee by the Union Environment Minister.

RhoDIS: Rhino DNA Index System, a forensic database of individual rhino genetic fingerprints; links seized horn to a poached animal and maps population genetics; anchored with WII, Dehradun.

Greater One-Horned Rhino: *Rhinoceros unicornis*, IUCN Vulnerable, CITES Appendix I, WPA Schedule I.

Great Indian Bustard: *Ardeotis nigricaps*, IUCN Critically Endangered; power-line collision is the main threat.

Pygmy hog: *Porcula salvania*, IUCN Endangered, world's smallest wild pig, confined to Manas grasslands; added to the Species Recovery Programme (a component of the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats scheme).

Sources: Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (<https://moef.gov.in/>), Wildlife Institute of India (<https://wii.gov.in/>), Press Information Bureau (<https://pib.gov.in/>)

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