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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Plants the World Forgets: CITES PC28 and the Overlooked Trade

 DOWN TO EARTH

13 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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The Plants the World Forgets: CITES PC28 and the Overlooked Trade

Down to Earth 13 July 2026 **GS3**

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THE LIFT LINE

The tiger commands the headlines and the treaty summits, but it is the orchid, the sandalwood log and the sliver of agarwood that move in the largest and quietest volumes, and a convention that watches only the animals is guarding half the house.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The twenty-eighth meeting of the CITES Plants Committee, PC28, is meeting in Geneva from 17 to 23 July 2026, the first Plants Committee session of a new three-year cycle running toward the twenty-first Conference of the Parties, CoP21, expected in Panama City in late 2028. The committee sets the scientific and trade rules for plant species in international commerce, timber, orchids, agarwood, medicinal species and more, and for the first time treats fungi as a distinct agenda item rather than folding them into the plant discussion. The meeting matters because plant and fungal trade, though far larger in volume than the trade in charismatic animals, receives a fraction of the attention, the enforcement and the conservation funding. PC28 is a chance to correct that imbalance at the level where trade rules are actually written.

GS Paper 3: conservation, environmental pollution and degradation; the protection of biodiversity; and the international conventions and institutions that govern the wildlife trade.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, CITES, adopted in Washington in 1973 and in force from 1975, with its Secretariat administered by the United Nations Environment Programme in Geneva; its three Appendices, Appendix I listing species threatened with extinction and banning commercial trade, Appendix II listing species that may become threatened and requiring permits, and Appendix III listing species protected at the request of a single country; the Plants Committee as one of the convention's scientific bodies; the Conference of the Parties as its supreme decision-making organ; India-relevant listed species such as red sanders, agarwood or agar, and orchids; the

Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, India's nodal enforcement body against illegal wildlife trade; and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 (<https://ujjayanti.com/terms/biological-diversity-act/>), which governs access to India's biological resources. For **Mains**, argue that conservation policy must give traded plants and fungi the same scientific and enforcement attention it gives animals, while reconciling protective listings with the livelihoods of communities that harvest these resources.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

CITES works by regulating international trade rather than domestic use. A species listed in Appendix I cannot be traded commercially across borders; a species in Appendix II can be, but only under a permit system that certifies the trade will not damage the wild population, the “non-detriment finding”. The scientific committees, of which the Plants Committee is one, do the technical work of reviewing species, assessing trade levels and advising on listings between the big political meetings of the Conference of the Parties.

For most of the convention's life, the political and public energy has flowed to animals, the elephant, the rhino, the pangolin, the big cats. Yet by volume and by number of species, the trade in plants dwarfs the trade in animals. Timber alone moves in enormous quantities; orchids are among the most heavily traded groups of listed species; and specialised commodities such as agarwood, the resinous heartwood prized for perfume and incense, sustain a large and partly illicit global market. Fungi, long neglected entirely, are only now being recognised as a distinct kingdom deserving their own conservation attention, which is what makes their appearance as a separate PC28 item notable.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The attention gap is a conservation risk

DIMENSION	TRADED ANIMALS	TRADED PLANTS AND FUNGI
Public and media attention	High, charismatic species	Low, seen as commodities
Volume of trade	Large but narrower	Very large across many species
Enforcement focus	Well resourced	Thinly resourced
Scientific capacity	Mature	Uneven, non-detriment findings hard
India-relevant species	Tiger, pangolin, star tortoise	Red sanders, agarwood, orchids

The gap is not benign. Where enforcement and science are thin, illegal harvesting flourishes and even legal trade can outrun what the wild population can bear, because the non-detriment finding, the certification that trade will not harm the species, is hardest to make for the plants and fungi that have been least studied.

India sits at the centre of this trade

India is a range State for several heavily traded listed plants. Red sanders, a slow-growing hardwood of the Eastern Ghats prized in East Asian markets, is a chronic target of smuggling; agarwood-producing trees are harvested for the perfume trade; and India is rich in orchid diversity, much of it collected from the wild. Enforcement rests with the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau and with the framework of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, which asserts sovereign control over the country's biological resources. Strengthening the science and the policing of plant trade is therefore not an abstract international duty for India but a direct interest in protecting its own threatened flora.

The livelihood tension is real and must be managed, not ignored

A protective listing can restrict trade that communities depend on. Agarwood and many medicinal plants are harvested by forest-dependent people for whom the resource is income, not luxury. A conservation policy that simply bans without providing for sustainable, certified, community-based harvesting risks pushing the trade underground and turning the people closest to the resource into adversaries of its protection. The better path pairs listings with sustainable-use frameworks, cultivation and benefit-sharing, so that protection and livelihood pull in the same direction.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Judge a conservation regime by what it protects least, not by what it protects best. It is easy to guard the charismatic animal that everyone wants to save; the test is whether the system also guards the orchid and the log that no one photographs. Ask of any listing or enforcement effort: does it match the scientific and policing attention to the actual volume and **vulnerability** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/vulnerability/>) of the trade, and does it reconcile protection with the livelihoods of those who harvest? The transferable rule for your GS3 answers: effective conservation is comprehensive rather than charismatic, and durable protection works with the communities that use a resource rather than against them.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

CITES regulates cross-border wildlife trade via three Appendices -> scientific work done by committees between CoP meetings -> attention flows to charismatic animals -> plants and fungi traded in far larger volume get less science, funding and enforcement -> thin non-detriment findings let harvesting outrun wild populations -> India's red sanders, agarwood and orchids at risk, policed by WCCB under the Biodiversity Act -> PC28 in Geneva (17 to 23 July 2026) opens the cycle to CoP21 Panama 2028 -> fungi treated as a distinct item for the first time -> pair listings with sustainable community harvesting -> outcome: comprehensive conservation that protects the overlooked and the livelihoods tied to it

WAY FORWARD

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- ① **Close the attention and enforcement gap.** Direct scientific capacity and enforcement resources toward high-volume plant and fungal trade in proportion to its scale, so that timber, orchids and agarwood receive the scrutiny long reserved for animals.
- ② **Strengthen non-detriment science for plants.** Build the population and trade data needed to make sound non-detriment findings for listed plants, since a certification system is only as good as the science behind it.
- ③ **Pair protection with sustainable livelihoods.** Combine CITES listings with cultivation, certified sustainable harvesting and benefit-sharing under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, so that forest-dependent communities become partners in conservation rather than its casualties.
- ④ **Guard India's flagship traded flora.** Reinforce the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau's action against red sanders and agarwood smuggling and support India's positions at PC28, so that domestic enforcement and international rule-making reinforce each other.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about international environmental conventions, the illegal wildlife trade, and the balance between conservation and community rights. This editorial links a specific treaty meeting to the larger theme of comprehensive, livelihood-sensitive conservation.

Practice question: “The global wildlife trade regime watches animals closely and plants poorly.” Examine the challenges of regulating the international trade in plants and fungi, with reference to India's interests and the CITES framework. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: Down To Earth (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>), *CITES* (<https://cites.org/>)

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