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Beyond the Fence: OECMs and the Case for a National Conservation Estate

 **THE HINDU**

3 August 2026

ENVIRONMENT**GS3**

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 The Hindu

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GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Recognising a sacred grove or a van panchayat forest as an OECM brings it into a national conservation accounting system. What is the risk that formal recognition changes the community's relationship with the land it has conserved informally for generations, and how would you guard against it?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A tiger reserve with a highway on either side is not a reserve; it is a very well-managed island. The conservation question of this decade is what happens in the space between the islands, and almost none of that space is inside a fence.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

OECMs sit at the intersection of the Kunming-Montreal framework, India's protected-area architecture and community forest rights, which makes them unusually productive for GS3. They are also newly prominent enough that most candidates will not have the vocabulary, so getting the definition precisely right is a genuine differentiator.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation; biodiversity; [environmental impact assessment](#).

For **Prelims**, the OECM definition, the 30x30 target and India's protected-area categories are all directly testable.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
OECM	A geographically defined area outside a protected area, governed and managed in ways achieving sustained, effective in-situ biodiversity conservation, whether or not conservation is the primary management objective. The outcome must be actual and sustained, not merely incidental	The newly central category; the “not a protected area but achieving conservation” definition is the testable part, and the “outcome must be real” qualifier is where most candidates get it wrong
Kunming-Montreal GBF Target 3 (30x30)	Conserve at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas by 2030	The numerical commitment that makes OECMs necessary
India's PA categories	National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves, Community Reserves, under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972	Conservation and Community Reserves were added by the 2002 amendment, and are the categories closest to OECMs
Ecological corridor	A habitat linkage permitting movement of species between larger habitat patches	The connectivity concept underlying the landscape-scale argument

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's protected area network comprises **1,014 protected areas**, made up of 106 National Parks, 573 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 115 Conservation Reserves and 220 Community Reserves under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, together covering 1,75,169 sq km, or **5.32 per cent** of the country's geographical area. Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves, introduced by the 2002 amendment to the Act, which inserted Chapter IV-A, were themselves an early acknowledgement that conservation outside strictly protected land needed a legal category.

India's OECM identification work has proceeded through the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change alongside the National Biodiversity Authority, with UNDP support, producing *A Compendium of OECMs in India* and *Criteria and Guidelines for Identifying OECMs in India*, both 2022, which set out a fourteen-category classification clustered under terrestrial, waterbodies and marine.

Globally, roughly **7,500 sites** covering about **1.3 per cent of the Earth's surface** have been reported to the World Database on OECMs since reporting began in 2019, with Canada accounting for a large share. But they come from only **17 of 196 parties** to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and India is not among them. The framework exists; the accounting has barely begun.

CANDIDATE OECM CATEGORY IN INDIA	ILLUSTRATION
Sacred groves	Community-protected forest patches conserved under religious sanction; roughly 14,000 are documented, though expert estimates of the true number run to 100,000 to 150,000
Van panchayat forests	11,217 forest panchayats in Uttarakhand managing 4.52 lakh hectares under village-level institutions
Elephant corridors	150 corridors across 15 states (<i>Elephant Corridors of India 2023</i>), a 40 per cent rise since 2010, of which 126 lie within a single state; identified and mapped but largely lacking legal protection
Coastal and wetland commons	Community-managed fisheries and wetlands delivering biodiversity outcomes alongside livelihood use
Institutional lands	Defence establishments, industrial estates and campuses whose access restrictions incidentally conserve habitat

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The arithmetic that forces the question

Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework commits parties to conserving 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of coastal and marine areas, by 2030. India is at 5.32 per cent in formal protected areas. There is no realistic pathway from 5 to 30 through protected-area expansion alone, because each new protected area in India carries costs that are political and human rather than merely financial: displacement, restriction of forest-dependent livelihoods, and conflict with rights recognised under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. OECMs offer area that is already delivering conservation without requiring any of that.

The ecology that makes it more than accounting

Even if the 30 per cent figure did not exist, the case would hold. Conservation biology is unambiguous that in a fragmenting landscape, connectivity between habitat patches determines population viability more than the quality of management within any single patch. Isolated populations lose genetic diversity, cannot recolonise after local extinction, and cannot shift range as climate alters habitat suitability. India's expanding highway and railway networks cut precisely across this connective geography. A conservation strategy confined to reserves is therefore not merely insufficient in area; it is addressing the wrong variable.

Why OECMs are politically feasible where protected areas are not

The decisive feature of an OECM designation is what it does **not** do: it does not change ownership, it does not displace, and it does not require the primary land use to become conservation. A sacred grove remains a sacred grove; a van panchayat forest remains under its panchayat. Recognition documents an existing conservation outcome rather than imposing a new restriction. That is why this is achievable at scale in a country where creating a new national park is a multi-year contest.

The risk that has to be designed against

There is a real danger, and a good answer should state it plainly. Many candidate OECMs have been conserved for generations precisely because they lay outside state administration, governed by community norms and religious sanction. Formal recognition brings them into a national accounting framework and, potentially, into the regulatory attention that accompanies it. If designation eventually brings conditionality, permissions or restrictions, it may weaken the community authority that produced the conservation in the first place, and the recognition will have destroyed what it recorded.

The second risk is accounting rather than ecological: a country under pressure to report 30 per cent has an obvious incentive to designate generously and monitor loosely. Area reported without outcome monitoring is a number, not a conservation gain.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

When a target is expressed in area and the mechanism is expressed in outcomes, watch for the substitution of the former for the latter. Percentage-of-territory targets are politically legible and easy to report, which is why they are adopted; but the thing that matters ecologically is whether biodiversity is actually being conserved on that territory, which is harder to measure and easier to leave unmeasured. Whenever policy sets a quantitative coverage target, ask what outcome the coverage is a **proxy** for, and whether that outcome is being measured independently. The same logic applies to forest-cover targets, renewable-capacity targets and financial-inclusion account numbers.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture India's conservation map as a scattering of dark, well-defended islands, the protected areas, covering about a twentieth of the surface. Between them runs a vast intermediate terrain, mostly shaded rather than dark: farmland with tree cover, sacred groves, community forests, canal banks, defence land, temple tanks, and corridors along which elephants still move. Conventional policy sees only the islands and asks how to make them bigger. The OECM argument is that the shading between them already carries much of the biodiversity load, invisibly and unrecorded, and that the first task is not to create more dark islands but to stop the shaded terrain from being cut through, and to give it a name in the national accounts.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Build OECM recognition on free, prior and informed consent**, with the governing community retaining decision-making authority rather than transferring it to a forest department.
- 2 **Ensure recognition confers support, not restriction**, through funding, technical assistance and secure tenure, so that designation is something communities seek rather than resist.
- 3 **Pair every reported OECM with outcome monitoring**, so that the national conservation estate measures biodiversity actually conserved rather than territory counted toward a target.
- 4 **Give legal protection to identified ecological corridors**, since connectivity is the specific function that protected areas cannot perform and infrastructure most directly threatens.
- 5 **Integrate OECM mapping with infrastructure planning**, so that highway and railway alignment decisions carry the conservation estate as a constraint rather than discovering it afterwards.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly tested protected-area categories, the Wildlife Protection Act, community conservation and India's international biodiversity commitments; OECMs connect all four and supply current vocabulary for what would otherwise be a familiar answer.

Practice question: "A conservation strategy confined to protected areas addresses the wrong variable in a fragmenting landscape." Examine this claim with reference to Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures and India's 30x30 commitment. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: Recognising a sacred grove or a van panchayat forest as an OECM brings it into a national conservation accounting system. What is the risk that formal recognition changes the community's relationship with the land it has conserved informally for generations, and how would you guard against it?

Sources: The Hindu, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Convention on Biological Diversity

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● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

India's formal protected area network, covering roughly 5 per cent of its geographical area, cannot by itself deliver landscape-scale conservation against habitat fragmentation and climate-driven range shifts, and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures, which recognise sites delivering effective long-term biodiversity conservation outside formal protected-area designation, are the necessary complement if India is to approach the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's 30x30 target.



SUPPORTING

- Conservation value in India is substantially distributed outside protected areas already, in sacred groves, van panchayat forests, community-managed commons, elephant corridors, wetlands and even the grounds of industrial estates and defence installations, and recognising this existing conservation is cheaper and less socially disruptive than creating new protected areas.
- Species persistence at landscape scale depends on connectivity rather than on the size of individual reserves, and India's expanding highway and railway networks fragment habitat in ways that a network of isolated protected islands cannot address regardless of how well each is managed.
- An OECM designation does not change ownership or primary land use, which makes it politically feasible in a country where creating new protected areas typically means displacement, litigation and conflict with forest-dwelling communities.



COUNTER

Formal recognition carries real risk of unintended harm: many candidate sites have been conserved precisely because they lay outside the state's administrative gaze, and bringing them into a national accounting framework may attract regulatory attention, conditionality or eventual restriction that erodes the community authority which produced the conservation outcome; there is also a genuine danger that OECMs become an accounting device to reach 30 per cent on paper without additional conservation effort.



WAY FORWARD

Build the OECM framework on free, prior and informed consent with community-held governance rights, ensure recognition confers support rather than restriction, and require that reported OECM area be accompanied by outcome monitoring so the designation reflects conservation actually delivered rather than territory merely counted.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

India's protected area network covers roughly 5 per cent of its geographical area. Examine the role of Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures in meeting landscape-scale conservation objectives and the 30x30 target under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's formal protected area network covers roughly 5 per cent of its geographical area, a figure that cannot support landscape-scale conservation in an era of infrastructure expansion, habitat fragmentation and climate-driven species range shifts, which is why Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures have moved to the centre of the conservation policy conversation.

BODY

An OECM is a geographically defined area, outside formal protected-area designation, that is governed and managed in ways achieving sustained and effective in-situ conservation of biodiversity, where conservation need not be the primary management objective, though the biodiversity outcome must be actual and sustained rather than merely incidental. The category matters for two reasons.

First, arithmetic: the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's Target 3 commits parties to conserving 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of coastal and marine areas, by 2030, and no plausible expansion of India's protected area network reaches that figure, particularly given that new protected areas typically entail displacement, litigation and conflict with forest-dwelling communities whose rights are protected under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Second, ecology: species persistence at landscape scale depends on connectivity between habitat patches rather than on the integrity of individual reserves, and India's elephant corridors, riparian strips and community forests provide exactly the connective tissue that a network of isolated reserves lacks.

India already holds substantial candidate area, in roughly 14,000 documented sacred groves against expert estimates running far higher, 11,217 van panchayat forests in Uttarakhand managing 4.52 lakh hectares, 150 identified elephant corridors across fifteen states, coastal and wetland commons, and institutional lands. The serious risk is that recognition changes the relationship that produced the conservation: many such sites survived because they were governed by community norms outside state administration, and formal designation may substitute regulatory conditionality for community authority.

CONCLUSION

The OECM framework will succeed only if recognition confers support and secure governance rights rather than restriction, is built on free, prior and informed consent, and is paired with outcome monitoring, so that the national conservation estate measures conservation delivered rather than area counted toward a target.

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