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India Calls for Community-Led Rangeland Restoration at UNCCD COP17

27 August 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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India Calls for Community-Led Rangeland Restoration at UNCCD COP17

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

At the 17th Conference of Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav urged science-based, community-led rangeland restoration that recognises pastoralists as custodians rather than beneficiaries. A USD 1.3 billion package for restoring the world's rangelands was launched at the COP.

THE CONVENTION

UNCCD is one of the three **Rio Conventions**, alongside the **UNFCCC** and the **Convention on Biological Diversity**, all emerging from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Adopted	1994
Entered into force	1996
Secretariat	Bonn, Germany
COP17 dates	August 17 to 28, 2026 , Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia
COP17 theme	“Restoring Land. Restoring Hope”
Focus	Desertification, land degradation and drought, particularly in drylands

It is the **only legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management.**

COP History Relevant to India

COP	YEAR AND VENUE
COP14	New Delhi, India, 2019
COP16	Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2024
COP17	Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2026

At **COP14 in New Delhi**, India raised its land-restoration pledge to **26 million hectares by 2030**.

Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) is **Sustainable Development Goal target 15.3**.

WHY RANGELANDS, AND WHY NOW

2026 is the United Nations International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP), which is why rangelands are the organising theme of this COP.

India's intervention cited:

- Grassland restoration work already under way
- The **cheetah reintroduction** programme and its proposed expansion into grasslands such as **Banni in Gujarat**
- India's roughly **10 million hectares** of permanent pastures and grazing lands
- A demand for **predictable global green finance**

Banni is Asia's largest tropical grassland, in **Kachchh, Gujarat**, where the **Maldhari** pastoralists hold community forest rights.

THE ARGUMENT ABOUT CUSTODIANS VERSUS BENEFICIARIES

The distinction India pressed is not rhetorical. It determines programme design.

FRAMING	CONSEQUENCE
Pastoralists as beneficiaries	They receive compensation, alternative livelihoods or resettlement; the restoration is done to the landscape by an external agency
Pastoralists as custodians	Their grazing practice is itself the management regime; restoration works through them rather than around them

The ecological basis for the second framing is that **moderate, mobile grazing maintains grassland systems**. Grasslands co-evolved with large herbivores. Removing grazing entirely can accelerate woody encroachment and biomass accumulation, degrading the grassland it was meant to protect.

THE INDIAN BLIND SPOT: GRASSLANDS AS “WASTELAND”

This is the sharpest UPSC angle available on this topic.

Indian revenue classification has historically treated grasslands, scrublands and pastures as “**wasteland**”, meaning land not under productive use. Two consequences follow directly:

- **Afforestation targets get met on ecologically intact grasslands.** Planting trees on a grassland is recorded as an environmental gain and is in fact an ecological loss, since it destroys a distinct biome and its specialist species.
- **Grassland species are systematically under-protected.** The Great Indian Bustard, the lesser florican, the Indian wolf, the caracal and the blackbuck are grassland specialists, and grasslands have very poor representation in India’s protected-area network relative to forests.

The **Forest Rights Act, 2006** provides for **Community Forest Resource** rights, which is the legal instrument through which pastoralist custodianship can actually be recognised.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Terminology drives policy, and “wasteland” is the problem. As long as a grassland is classified as unproductive land awaiting improvement, every incentive points toward converting it. Reclassification is not a semantic reform; it changes what counts as degradation and what counts as restoration.

Mobility is the feature, not the problem. Pastoral systems work through seasonal movement across large areas. Sedentarisation policies, land fragmentation and the enclosure of common grazing land destroy the mechanism that made the system sustainable, and then the resulting overgrazing on the remaining land is cited as evidence that pastoralism degrades grassland.

The cheetah argument cuts both ways. Using cheetah reintroduction to justify grassland restoration is strategically shrewd, since a charismatic species mobilises funding that grass never will. The counter is that it subordinates habitat conservation to a single species programme whose own success is contested, and that grasslands deserve protection on their own ecological merits.

Finance predictability is the developing-country ask. India’s demand is for **grant-based, non-debt-creating** desertification finance. Land restoration produces **diffuse** public benefits over long horizons, which is exactly the profile private capital will not fund and debt instruments burden.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3 (Environment): Conservation; environmental degradation; international conventions and agreements.

GS Paper 2: Important international institutions and fora; India's positions in global negotiations.

Prelims focus: UNCCD's adoption and entry-into-force years and its Bonn secretariat; the three Rio Conventions; COP14 New Delhi 2019 and India's 26 million hectare pledge; SDG 15.3 as Land Degradation Neutrality; 2026 as the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists; Banni as Asia's largest tropical grassland.

Mains angle: Argue that **India's grassland problem is a classification problem before it is a conservation problem**. The "wasteland" category converts an intact ecosystem into land awaiting improvement, and afforestation on grassland is then recorded as an environmental gain. Link this to pastoralist rights under the Forest Rights Act.

Way forward: Reclassify grasslands and pastures out of the "wasteland" category in revenue records; recognise **Community Forest Resource** rights for pastoralist communities; exclude ecologically intact grasslands from afforestation and **compensatory afforestation** targets; expand protected-area coverage of grassland biomes; and press at UNCCD for grant-based rather than debt-creating restoration finance.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

UNCCD:

Adopted 1994, entered into force 1996; secretariat at Bonn, Germany

One of the three Rio Conventions, with the UNFCCC and the CBD

The only legally binding international agreement linking environment and development to sustainable land management

COP17:

Held at Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2026

India represented by Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav

USD 1.3 billion package launched for restoring the world's rangelands

COP14 was New Delhi, 2019; COP16 was Riyadh, 2024

INDIA'S COMMITMENTS AND CONTEXT:

Land restoration pledge raised at COP14 to 26 million hectares by 2030

Roughly 10 million hectares of permanent pastures and grazing lands

Land Degradation Neutrality is SDG target 15.3

2026 is the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists

BANNI:

Asia's largest tropical grassland, in Kachchh, Gujarat

Home to the Maldhari pastoralists, who hold community forest rights

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Grassland specialist species include the Great Indian Bustard, lesser florican, Indian wolf, caracal and blackbuck

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 provides for Community Forest Resource rights

Indian revenue records have historically classified grasslands as "wasteland"

Sources: UNCCD, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

Source: India Calls for Community-Led Rangeland Restoration at UNCCD COP17 — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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