



UPSC & STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · UJIYARI.COM

EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Not Wasteland: India Finally Names Its Open Natural Ecosystems

 DOWN TO EARTH

31 August 2026 ·

ENVIRONMENT

GEOGRAPHY

GS3

GS1

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

ALSO FROM THE CREATOR

BharatNotesFree UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com → ADVERTISE**Advertise with Ujiyari**

Reach thousands of UPSC aspirants daily.

 epicbharat@gmail.com

Not Wasteland: India Finally Names Its Open Natural Ecosystems



Down to Earth

31 August 2026

GS3

GS1



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A grassland without trees is not a degraded forest. If planting trees can itself be ecological damage, how should India redesign afforestation targets and green-cover metrics?"

Source: [Original editorial ↗](#)

Down to Earth



Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Environment answers reward tree-planting by reflex: afforestation appears as a solution in everything from climate mitigation to land degradation. This piece is the corrective, and it is a rich one, because it arms you against the exam's own favourite trap.

The Great Indian Bustard question, a Prelims regular, is usually about Project GIB or overhead power lines. The sharper fact this piece supplies is that **afforestation itself threatens the bustard**, because the bird is an obligate open-habitat species. More broadly, the piece converts "wasteland" from a neutral land-use term into an analytical target: a colonial-era revenue category that still decides where plantations and solar parks land. For GS1 geography, the ONE typology is a ready-made map answer; for GS3, the soil-carbon argument upgrades any climate answer beyond tree cover.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The trigger. On August 17, 2026, at the **17th Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD COP17) at Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia**, India launched its first **Guide to Grasslands and Other Open Natural Ecosystems of India**. Union Environment Minister **Bhupender Yadav**, speaking virtually, recalled growing up in Ajmer among grazing lands dismissed by outsiders as wasteland while local communities ran them through **oran and gauchar** commons systems.

Who built it. The guide comes from the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change**, with the **Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE)**, **IUCN**, the **Centre of Excellence on Sustainable Land Management**, the **Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE)** and the **Space Applications Centre of ISRO**.

What it covers. India's **Open Natural Ecosystems (ONEs)**: **Himalayan and Terai grasslands**, the **Thar desert**, the **Banni grasslands of Gujarat**, **Deccan savannas**, **Aravalli scrublands**, the **Yamuna-Chambal ravines**, **rocky plateaus of the Western Ghats**, **grasslands of the central Nicobar Islands** and **Tamil Nadu's Theri Kaadu scrub**. It reads them through geography, soils, hydrology, **fire regimes**, carbon storage and **pastoralism**, treating fire, grazing and seasonal movement as ecological processes rather than disturbances.

The gap it fills. A **2018 government committee report on grasslands** had acknowledged that India possessed **no working national inventory** and no comprehensive conservation framework for these ecosystems. Without knowing what exists, it is difficult to protect it.

THE ANALYSIS

The label was never neutral. "Wasteland" has appeared in revenue records, land-use maps and government documents for decades, reducing ecologically rich, socially productive landscapes to land considered empty **simply because it does not have trees**. The classification did work in the world: it **helped push tree plantations, solar parks and development projects** into landscapes that were never barren.

The question the guide changes. India's restoration reflex asks: **where are the trees?** The guide's question is: **what is this landscape already doing?** That substitution is the whole intellectual event. A scrubland is not land waiting for a plantation; it is an operating system of plants, animals, soils, water cycles and human communities.

When planting trees becomes the problem. For the **Great Indian Bustard**, a plantation in the wrong place is not restoration; it removes the open habitat the species requires. Afforestation targets, green-cover ambitions and carbon-focused programmes **create an incentive to put trees wherever land is perceived as degraded**, and wasteland-labelled commons are the path of least resistance.

The invisible carbon. Forests wear their carbon where accounting can see it, in trees. Grasslands hold theirs **below ground, in roots and soils**, locked away for long periods. Disturbing an established grassland for plantation can therefore destroy stored carbon in the name of sequestering it, a loss **not captured by counting trees planted**. The authors' conclusion: a landscape should not be considered climate-friendly merely because it has acquired tree cover.

The people who kept these lands alive. India's rangelands support millions of pastoralists, the **Raikas of Rajasthan**, **Dhangars of Maharashtra**, **Gujjars and Bakarwals of the Himalayas**, whose institutions governed grazing, fire and movement long before modern conservation law. Formal land administration has often recorded that stewardship as **encroachment**. The guide does not solve that, but it **changes the starting point**: the policy question becomes whether the state can learn from community management rather than how to exclude it.

The honest limit. A guide is not protection. Forests have statutory diversion procedures and wildlife protections; **no comparable framework exists for open ecosystems**, so the piece asks the unanswered question directly: what happens when a mapped ecosystem meets a development proposal?

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

THE LAUNCH:

India's first Guide to Grasslands and Other Open Natural Ecosystems was launched on August 17, 2026.

The launch took place at UNCCD COP17 at Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

The guide is from MoEFCC with ATREE, IUCN, the CoE on Sustainable Land Management, ICFRE and ISRO's Space Applications Centre.

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav spoke virtually at the launch.

A 2018 government committee had found India lacked a national grassland inventory.

THE ECOSYSTEMS:

ONEs include Himalayan and Terai grasslands, the Thar desert and Gujarat's Banni grasslands.

They also include Deccan savannas, Aravalli scrublands and the Yamuna-Chambal ravines.

Rocky plateaus of the Western Ghats, central Nicobar grasslands and Tamil Nadu's Theri Kaadu are covered.

Obligate open-habitat species include the Great Indian Bustard, Lesser Florican, Bengal Florican, Indian wolf and blackbuck.

The Great Indian Bustard is critically endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Grasslands store much of their carbon below ground, in roots and soils.

THE PEOPLE AND THE LAW:

Orans and gauchars are community-managed commons of Rajasthan's grazing systems.

Major pastoral communities include the Raikas, Dhangars, and the Gujjars and Bakarwals.

India's Land Degradation Neutrality commitments arise under the UNCCD.

India hosted UNCCD COP14 at New Delhi in 2019; COP16 was held at Riyadh in 2024.

No statutory framework comparable to forest law currently protects open natural ecosystems.

There are **three Rio Conventions** and each has its own COP series running on its own count: the **UNFCCC** (climate), the **CBD** (biodiversity) and the **UNCCD** (desertification). COP17 at **Ulaanbaatar in 2026 is a UNCCD COP**; it is not a climate COP, and mixing the series is a standard Prelims elimination trick. India's hosting record also differs by convention: **UNCCD COP14** at New Delhi in 2019.

THE DEBATE

Recognition will cascade. Inventories precede rights everywhere in environmental law; forests got protection only after they got records. The guide gives litigants, researchers and communities an official document to cite, ISRO mapping gives it spatial teeth, and the LDN framework gives it an implementation vehicle. Names change what bureaucracies can see, and what they can see they can eventually protect.

Recognition without incentives is a pamphlet. Land records still say wasteland, and revenue categories, not ecological guides, decide where projects land. Afforestation and carbon programmes still pay for visible trees, so the economic gradient against grasslands is untouched. And with no diversion procedure for open ecosystems, a mapped savanna meeting a solar park still loses. On this reading the guide documents the patient without treating it.

Where the truth likely sits. Both are right about sequence: the guide is necessary and insufficient, and the authors say as much. The real test is administrative, the unglamorous work of amending state revenue records, and metrical, whether carbon accounting learns to count soil. The piece's own standard is the correct one: success is measured not in landscapes mapped but in whether "wasteland" disappears from records where it is wrong, whether bustard habitat stays open and connected, and whether pastoral knowledge enters law.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

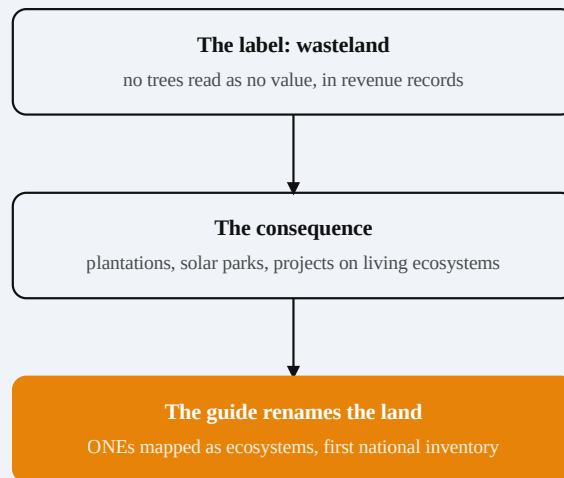
Three transferable moves sit in this piece.

Interrogate the category, not just the policy. "Wasteland" is a revenue label doing ecological work. Ask who defined a category, when, and what incentives it now silently steers. The same move works on "degraded forest", "encroacher" and "barren land".

Follow the metric. If policy rewards visible tree biomass, land use will maximise visible tree biomass, including where that destroys value. Fixing the metric, counting soil carbon, is upstream of fixing the outcome.

Locate the missing legal layer. Mapping, recognition and statutory protection are three different things. An answer that identifies which layer a new document occupies, and which layer is still empty, demonstrates exactly the institutional literacy examiners reward.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



Still needed: records

Still needed: a legal layer

Still needed: soil carbon

The guide breaks the chain at its first link, the name, but the two lower links, incentives and law, still run on the old label. Protection arrives only when all three are converted.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A grassland without trees is not a degraded forest, and a plantation in the wrong place is not restoration.

Guide to Grasslands and Other Open Natural Ecosystems launched August 17, 2026 at UNCCD COP17, Ulaanbaatar; MoEFCC with ATREE, IUCN, ICFRE, CoE-SLM and ISRO's Space Applications Centre; ONE types from Banni and Thar to Deccan savannas, Chambal ravines and Theri Kaadu; obligate open-habitat species GIB, Lesser and Bengal Floricans, Indian wolf, blackbuck; orans and gauchars; Raikas, Dhangars, Gujjars, Bakarwals; LDN under UNCCD; India hosted UNCCD COP14, New Delhi 2019.

Recognition needs three conversions to bite: revenue records purged of the wasteland label, a statutory layer for open ecosystems comparable to forest law, and carbon accounting that counts soil and below-ground carbon so intact grasslands stop losing to plantations. Community institutions strengthened as managers, not displaced as encroachers.

If green-cover targets can incentivise ecological damage, what single metric would you replace them with, and what would it cost to measure?

Sources: *Down To Earth, MoEFCC, PIB*

Source: Not Wasteland: India Finally Names Its Open Natural Ecosystems — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in Down To Earth, Santosh Pathak and Manish Subba argue that India's first Guide to Grasslands and Other Open Natural Ecosystems, launched at UNCCD COP17 at Ulaanbaatar on August 17, 2026, corrects a long-standing bureaucratic insult, the wasteland label, by recognising grasslands, savannas, deserts, scrublands, ravines and rocky plateaus as ecosystems in their own right, but that a guide is not yet protection: land records, a legal framework and carbon accounting must change for the recognition to bite.



SUPPORTING

- The wasteland classification has had real consequences: it pushed tree plantations, solar parks and development projects into landscapes that were never barren, and a 2018 government committee had acknowledged that India lacked even a working national inventory of its grasslands.
- Open ecosystems hold their value below the canopy: significant carbon in roots and soils rather than visible tree biomass, habitat for species that need openness, the Great Indian Bustard, Lesser Florican, Bengal Florican, Indian wolf and blackbuck, and livelihoods for millions of pastoralists.
- The guide treats fire, grazing and seasonal movement as part of the ecological process rather than as disturbances, and recognises community institutions, orans and gauchars, and pastoral communities, the Raikas, Dhangars, Gujjars and Bakarwals, as managers rather than encroachers.
- Tree-centric restoration can be the damage, not the cure: for a bird like the Great Indian Bustard a plantation in the wrong place removes the open habitat the species needs, so afforestation targets and green-cover ambitions create incentives to plant wherever land is labelled degraded.



COUNTER

The cautionary reading is that the guide changes descriptions, not incentives. Forests have a statutory apparatus, forest diversion procedures and wildlife protections; open ecosystems have no comparable framework, so when a mapped grassland meets a development proposal, the proposal still wins.

Revenue records across states still say wasteland, afforestation and carbon programmes still

reward visible tree biomass, and a document launched at a conference of parties does not by itself amend a single land record.



WAY FORWARD

Convert recognition into governance: purge the wasteland label from revenue and land-use records where it misdescribes functioning ecosystems, build a legal framework for open natural ecosystems comparable to the forest apparatus, make carbon accounting count soil and below-ground carbon so intact grasslands stop losing to plantations, plan restoration at landscape level under India's Land Degradation Neutrality commitments, and strengthen rather than displace the community institutions that have managed these lands for generations.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

India's open natural ecosystems have long been classified as wastelands, with consequences for biodiversity, carbon accounting and pastoral livelihoods. Discuss the significance of recognising these ecosystems, and the legal and policy changes such recognition requires. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's grasslands, savannas, scrublands, ravines and deserts have been carried in revenue records as wastelands, a category inherited from colonial land administration that treats the absence of trees as the absence of value. The first national Guide to Grasslands and Other Open Natural Ecosystems, launched at UNCCD COP17 in August 2026, is the first official correction of that premise.

BODY

The significance runs along four lines. Ecologically, open natural ecosystems are not degraded forests: they support obligate open-habitat species, including the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard and the Lesser Florican, whose survival is threatened as much by ill-placed plantations as by encroachment. Climatically, grasslands store carbon below ground in roots and soils, which is durable but invisible to accounting that rewards standing tree biomass; converting an intact grassland to plantation can therefore be carbon-negative in effect while carbon-positive on paper. Socially, these landscapes sustain millions of pastoralists, the Raikas, Dhangars, Gujjars and Bakarwals, whose commons institutions, orans and gauchars, governed grazing, fire and movement long before conservation law, yet whose customary use is often recorded as encroachment.

Administratively, the wasteland label has channelled plantations, solar parks and industry onto living ecosystems, and a 2018 committee conceded India had no working national inventory. Recognition therefore demands consequential change: correction of land records; a statutory framework for open ecosystems comparable to the forest apparatus, since a mapped grassland currently has no legal answer to a development proposal; carbon accounting that counts soil carbon; landscape-level planning under India's Land Degradation Neutrality commitments; and community institutions strengthened as managers rather than displaced as squatters.

CONCLUSION

The guide moves India from ignorance to inventory; the harder move is from inventory to entitlement. Its success will be measured in amended land records, bustard habitat that stays open, and pastoral knowledge reflected in law, not in the number of landscapes mapped.


RELATED DAILY ARTICLES

30 Aug **The Rasuwa Disaster Was Not a GLOF: What the Science...**

29 Aug **Current Affairs Today, August 29, 2026, Complete News...**

29 Aug **The Rasuwa Disaster: A Rock and Ice Collapse, a Barrier...**

29 Aug **Tamil Nadu Notifies Three Elephant Corridors Linking...**



CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[📖 Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/editorials/2026/08/dte-wastelands-open-natural-ecosystems-2026/>

ALSO FROM THE CREATOR

BharatNotes

Free UPSC study platform — subject-wise notes across all 4 GS papers, Prelims MCQs, Mains answer frameworks, PYQ analysis & progress tracking. **100% Free • No Login Required.**

[Start Preparing → bharatnotes.com](#)

🚀 OPPORTUNITY

Advertise with Ujiyari

Reach **thousands of serious UPSC & State PCS aspirants** daily through our PDFs, website, and social channels.

Ideal for: Coaching institutes • EdTech platforms • Book publishers • Exam prep apps

[✉ epicbharat@gmail.com](mailto:epicbharat@gmail.com)

Write to us for rates & media kit

Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs · ujiyari.com · bharatnotes.com