

1. Himalayan Ibex

Why in News?

- A recent study by scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has proved that Himalayan Ibex is a distinct species from the Siberian Ibex.

About Himalayan IBEX:

- **Himalayan Ibex** is distributed in the trans-Himalayan ranges of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh up to the river Sutlej. **Siberian Ibex** distribution extends towards Altai, Hangai, Gobi-Altai, the HuruKh mountain ranges as well as Sayan Mountains near Russia and scattered populations in the small mountains of Trans-Altai Gobi.
- Himalayan Ibex are adapted to rocky terrain and open alpine meadows and crags, seeking out lower elevations during the winter.
- Their diet consists of alpine grasses and herbs, and it feeds in early morning and evenings.
- In India, they are found in Jammu and Kashmir – Kishtwar and Hemis National Parks.
- IUCN has designated it as the **Least Concern** in its Red list.
- **Threats:** Poaching also occurs in some areas by military personnel, road maintenance workers, and others, especially in areas accessible by vehicle.

2. Convalescent Plasma Therapy for COVID-19.

Context:

- Recently, the Food and Drug Administration of the United States has approved the use of Convalescent plasma collected from patients recovered from COVID-19, to treat seriously ill COVID-19 patients.

Background:

- The idea of using plasma from survivors, also known as convalescent-plasma therapy, dates back to the late 19th century.
- Doctors have transfused the blood of recovered patients into those still sick with the 1918 flu, measles, polio, chickenpox, SARS, and Ebola—to varying degrees of success.
- The blood of survivors is believed to contain proteins called antibodies that can neutralize the coronavirus.
- Although promising, convalescent plasma has not been shown to be effective in every disease studied.

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- Given the dearth of treatments for COVID-19, convalescent plasma has gained new prominence.

3. Agriculture-Farming and allied activities exempted from Lockdown

Why in News?

- Government has granted relaxation in the nationwide lockdown for activities related to agriculture-farming and allied activities with a view to address problems being faced by the farming community.
- This will also ensure uninterrupted harvesting of crops.

Highlights:

- The Union Home Ministry has issued second Addendum to the Guidelines related to the nationwide lockdown
- Under this Addendum, activities related to Agriculture and related products, services and such other activities have been brought under the exception categories from the 21 day lockdown. This will also allow unhindered harvesting of crops.
- Under the 2nd Addendum issued by the Union Home Ministry the following categories have been exempted from the lockdown:
 - Agencies engaged in procurement of agriculture products, including MSP operations.
 - ‘Mandis’ operated by the Agriculture Produce Market Committee or as notified by the State Government.
 - Farming operations by farmers and farm workers in the field.
 - ‘Custom Hiring Centres (CHC)’ related to farm machinery.
 - Manufacturing and packaging units of Fertilisers, pesticides and seed, and
 - Intra and Inter-State movement of harvesting and sowing related machines like combined harvester and other agriculture/horticulture implements.

4. COVID-19 National Teleconsultation Centre (CoNTeC)

Why in News?

- The Union Minister of Health & Family Welfare Dr. Harsh Vardhan launched the National Teleconsultation Centre (CoNTeC).

Highlights:

- It has been conceptualised by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and has been implemented by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.
- The CoNTeC is a Telemedicine Hub wherein expert doctors from various clinical domains will be available 24×7 to answer the multifaceted questions from specialists from all over the country.
- It is a multi-modal telecommunications hub through which 2 way audio-video and text communications can be undertaken from any part of the country as well as the world at large. The modes of communication will include simple mobile telephony as well as two way video communications, using WhatsApp, Skype and Google Duo.
- CoNTeC has been made operational at AIIMS with a view to connect the Doctors across the country to AIIMS in real time for treatment of the COVID-19 patients.
- CoNTeC has been set up in the AIIMS so that the small states should also make use of the vast experience of the Doctors at AIIMS.
- The CoNTeC is also fully integrated with the National Medical College Network (NMCN) to conduct a full-fledged Video Conference (VC) between the 50 Medical Colleges connected through the NMCN with its National Resource Centre located at SGPGI, Lucknow. The patient management advice offered will be standardized as per the national guidelines supplemented protocols developed by the team at AIIMS, nominated by the Director, AIIMS.

Significance:

- The goal of the facility is to at least connect the doctors in the country together to discuss amongst themselves the protocols undertaken and provide the best treatment accordingly.
- The telemedicine guidelines have also been notified by the Government of India and with the help of digital platform and technology, the public at large will get the benefit not only for COVID- 19 but other diseases also.

5. Artificial Intelligence Can Aid Eye Testing

Why in News?

- Artificial Intelligence has been used in a hi-tech screening tool developed by Google and an international team of researchers for detecting diabetic retinopathy a diabetic complication in the eye.

Highlights:

- Diabetic patients are normally asymptomatic when the eye is concerned until the late stages or advanced stage when treatment is difficult or not so effective. So it is important to find the patient at an early stage and help prevent loss of vision.
- A study, which screened over 3,000 patients with diabetes, has shown that the AI's performance exceeded the conventionally used manual grading method used to identify diabetic retinopathy .
- The AI had a specificity and sensitivity of around 90%. A specialised retinal fundus camera was used to take photos of the eye. Normally, to evaluate the retina, we dilate the pupil to allow more light to enter the eye and illuminate the back of the eye.
- But in this fundus photography it is not necessary as a coherent beam of light can enter the small gap (Pupil) and take an image in just two to three minutes.
- Once the images are taken, it is fed into the computer and the AI tool screens it for diabetic retinopathy. The AI tool was shown over 120,000 images of the retina and taught to identify what each lesion meant. It was also taught to grade the severity (none, mild, moderate, severe or proliferative) and give an instant report along with the recommendations. Beyond diabetic retinopathy researchers are also working on a number of other research projects using AI to tackle healthcare problems.
- Earlier, a research paper had showed that AI models can help detect breast cancer in mammography images more accurately than doctors. This research is still in the early stages, but it shows that AI can be a path forward to improve screenings for breast cancer and boost the chances of survival.

6. Biological Weapons Convention

Why in News?

- Recently, March 26 marked the 45th anniversary of the entry into force of the Biological Weapons Convention.

About Biological Weapons Convention:

- It is a convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction is usually referred to as the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) or Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC).

- It is a legally binding treaty that outlaws biological arms.
- It is the first multilateral disarmament treaty to ban an entire category of weapons of mass destruction.
- It opened for signature in 1972, and entered into force in 1975.
- It currently has 183 states-parties, including Palestine, and four signatories. Ten states have neither signed nor ratified the BWC.
- **It bans the development, stockpiling, acquisition, retention, and production of:**
 1. Biological agents and toxins "of types and in quantities that have no justification for prophylactic, protective or other peaceful purposes;"
 2. Weapons, equipment, and delivery vehicles "designed to use such agents or toxins for hostile purposes or in armed conflict."
 3. The transfer of or assistance with acquiring the agents, toxins, weapons, equipment, and delivery vehicles described above.
- It **does not** ban the use of biological and toxin weapons but reaffirms the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which prohibits such use. It also does not ban biodefense programs.
- India has ratified the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and pledges to abide by its obligations.

7. Earth Hour 2020

Why in News?

- Recently, Earth Hour 2020 was held on March 28, from 8:30 pm to 9:30 pm.

About Earth Hour:

- It is a global grassroots movement uniting people to take action on environmental issues and protect the planet.
- It is organized by **World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)**.
- It was started as a lights out event in Sydney, Australia in 2007.
- It is an annual light out event is held worldwide toward the end of March to encourage individuals, households, communities and businesses to turn off their non-essential lights for one hour as a symbol for their commitment to the planet.
- During the second-to-last and last weekend of March is around the time of the Spring and Autumn equinoxes in the northern and southern hemispheres occurs, which allows for

near coincidental sunset times in both hemispheres, thereby ensuring the greatest visual impact for a global 'lights out' event.

- Its logo was 60 (60 symbolizes 60 minutes) earlier. But since 2011 it is 60+. Here + represents the commitment to go beyond the earth hour (i.e. switching off non – essential lights in day to day life).

About World Wildlife Fund:

- It is an international non-governmental organization founded in 1961, working in the field of wilderness preservation, and the reduction of humanity's footprint on the environment.
- It was formerly named the World Wildlife Fund, which remains its official name in Canada and the United States.
- **Its Headquarter is located at in Gland, Switzerland.**
- Its mission is "to stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature".

8. Employees Provident Fund Scheme, 2020

Why in News?

- Recently, Ministry of Labour and Employment has amended the EPF Scheme 1952. It allows withdrawal of non-refundable advance by EPF members in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

About Employees Provident Fund (Amendment) Scheme, 2020:

- The amended scheme Employees Provident Fund (Amendment) scheme, 2020 has come into force from 28th March, 2020.
- It permits withdrawal not exceeding the basic wages and dearness allowance for three months or upto 75 per cent of the amount standing to member's credit in the EPF account in the event of outbreak of epidemic or pandemic.
- The employees working in establishments and factories across entire India, who are members of the EPF Scheme, 1952 are eligible for the benefits of non-refundable advance.

About Employees Pension Scheme (EPS):

- It is a social security scheme that was launched in 1995 and is facilitated by EPFO.
- It makes provisions for pensions for the employees in the organized sector after retirement at the age of 58 years. Employees who are members of EPFO automatically become eligible for EPS.

- Both employer and employee contribute 12% of employee's monthly salary (basic wages plus dearness allowance) to the Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) scheme.
- It is mandatory for employees who draw a basic wage of Rs. 15,000 per month. Of the employer's share of 12 %, 8.33 % is diverted towards the EPS.

9. Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)

Context:

- Recently, the Vice President of India has contributed a sum equivalent to a month's salary to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) to strengthen the government's efforts in combating COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

About PMNRF:

- It was established in 1948 by then Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, 1948, with public contributions to assist displaced persons from Pakistan.
- Its resources are now utilized primarily to render immediate relief to families of those killed in natural calamities like floods, cyclones and earthquakes, etc. and to the victims of the major accidents and riots.
- It also rendered, to partially defray the expenses for medical treatment like heart surgeries, kidney transplantation, cancer treatment, etc.

Highlights:

- Its Disbursements are made with the approval of the Prime Minister.
- It has not been constituted by the Parliament. It is exempt under Income Tax Act.
- It is recognized as a Trust under the Income Tax Act and the same is managed by Prime Minister or multiple delegates for national causes.
- Its chairman is Prime Minister and is assisted by Officers/ Staff on honorary basis.
- Its contributions also qualify as CSR (corporate social responsibility) spend for companies, making it more attractive in terms of tax exemptions.

About Contributions Accepted in PMNRF:

- It accepts only voluntary donations by individuals and institutions.
- Its Contributions flowing out of budgetary sources of Government or from the balance sheets of the public sector undertakings are not accepted.
- The balance of the funds invested in various forms with scheduled commercial banks and other agencies to ensure long term sustainability.