

P2. NATIONAL



Elephant Corridors in India. - Understanding India's elephant corridors, their role in ecological connectivity, and the challenge of balancing conservation with human development.

P3 NATIONAL



Can SHANTI Act override court on compensation for nuclear disasters, asks SC - Examining the SHANTI Act's nuclear liability framework and the debate over operator accountability, victim compensation and regulatory independence.

P4. WORLD



Trump orders scaling back of joint military exercises with South Korea - Examining the proposed reduction of U.S.-South Korea military drills and its implications for diplomacy, deterrence and stability on the Korean Peninsula.

P7. ECONOMICS



The road to E20 is not without bumps - Decoding India's shift to E20 petrol, including its energy rationale, vehicle adaptation, fuel-quality concerns and consumer challenges.

Editor's Note

In this edition of the Pala Civil Times, we explore a diverse set of issues spanning governance, economics, world affairs and ecology, with a focus on their relevance to UPSC preparation. We begin with India's elephant corridors, examining their ecological significance and the challenges of balancing wildlife conservation with developmental priorities. We then turn to the SHANTI Act and nuclear liability, followed by the implications of black money for electoral integrity and democratic processes. Our Decoded Editorials examine two pressing themes: the gap between India's forest-conservation objectives and outcomes, and the evolving U.S.-Iran stalemate and its wider implications, including for India. We also examine India's accelerating E20 ethanol transition, exploring its policy objectives, technological adaptations, fuel-quality concerns and the challenges faced by consumers and policymakers. Together, these topics offer important factual, analytical and interconnected perspectives for UPSC preparation. We hope this edition helps you understand not just what is happening, but also why it matters. Happy learning, and we hope you have a rewarding read!

Editorials Decoded



Losing forest for trees



Assessing the gap between India's forest-restoration ambitions and ground-level outcomes, with lessons from the Aravallis and changing forest-cover patterns.



60 days later, a US-Iran stalemate, a disturbing new normal



Analysing the collapse of the U.S.-Iran peace framework, the risks of prolonged regional conflict and the implications for India's energy security.

Elephant Corridors in India

On August 17, 2026, the Supreme Court directed the Centre to conduct a nationwide survey of elephant corridors and take steps to ensure the free movement of wild elephant herds through their traditional routes across States. The Court emphasised that elephant movement is not confined by State boundaries. Therefore, one State cannot obstruct a traditional elephant route merely because elephants moving through it cause crop damage or human-elephant conflict.

Elephant corridors are landscape linkages that connect fragmented elephant habitats and enable elephants to move between different parts of their natural range. Habitat fragmentation caused by forms of human development can isolate elephant populations. Corridors help maintain ecological connectivity by allowing elephants to move between feeding, breeding and seasonal habitats.

Why are Elephant Corridors Important?

Habitat connectivity: Connect fragmented forest and elephant habitats.

Safe movement: Allow elephants to follow traditional movement routes.

Population viability: Reduce isolation and support long-term survival of populations.

Genetic diversity: Movement between populations facilitates gene flow.

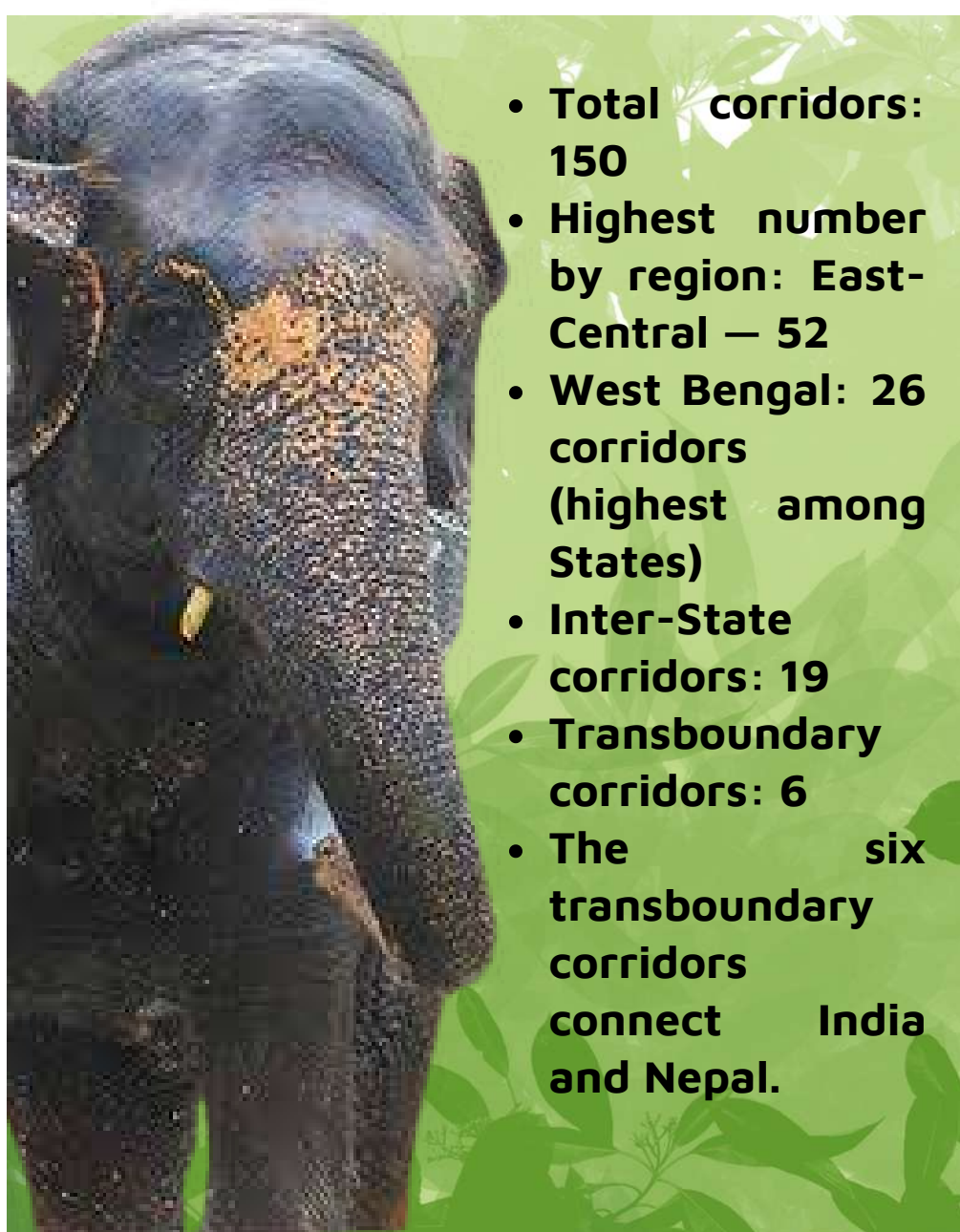
Human-elephant conflict: Maintaining natural routes can reduce the diversion of elephants into human settlements and agricultural areas.

Landscape-level conservation: Corridors allow conservation beyond the boundaries of individual protected areas.



Supreme Court Directives

- Conduct a fresh nationwide survey of elephant corridors.
- Submit a comprehensive report on the status of the corridors.
- Identify measures to prevent obstruction of elephant movement.
- Examine allegations concerning the use of fireballs, mashaals/fire-torches and spikes.
- Ensure implementation of the earlier prohibition on such methods.
- Report on the progress made, with the matter to be considered again after eight weeks.



PYQ Compass

Q. With reference to Indian elephants, consider the following statements: (2020)

1. The leader of an elephant group is a female.
 2. The maximum gestation period can be 22 months.
 3. An elephant can normally go on calving till the age of 40 years only.
 4. Among the States in India, the highest elephant population is in Kerala.
- Which of the statements given above is/are correct?
- a) 1 and 2 only
 - b) 2 and 4 only
 - c) 3 only
 - d) 1, 3 and 4 only

Black money in elections hampers democracy

What happened? The Supreme Court, in a judgment on August 17, 2026, held that eliminating the influence of black money in elections is a responsibility of the Election Commission of India (ECI). It observed that illicit money in the electoral process can compromise democracy, the rule of law and the integrity of elections.

Long-standing electoral challenge: The Court noted that the use of tainted money to influence voters is a persistent problem that has been recognised but remains unresolved.

Free choice of voters: Ill-gotten money can influence voter decisions through monetary gratification, inducements or misleading promises, undermining the freedom of electoral choice.

Democratic integrity: External financial influence can compromise the fairness and legitimacy of the electoral process.

Need for timely enforcement: Effective action requires prompt investigation and speedy conclusion of criminal cases involving election-related black money.

Institutional framework : The Court prescribed the following mechanisms:

Seized money/assets: The authority making a seizure must report it within 24 hours to the District Magistrate/Additional District Magistrate or competent court, along with reasons showing a prima facie link to a suspected electoral offence.

Investigation: Once an FIR is registered, the investigating officer should endeavour to complete the investigation within one year. Any delay must be explained and communicated to the ECI.

Cash above ₹10 lakh: When Static Surveillance Teams (SSTs) detect cash exceeding ₹10 lakh, the information should be forwarded to Income Tax authorities.

Speedy trials: High Courts were directed to ensure expeditious disposal of election-related black-money cases.



PYQ Compass

Q. Give out the major sources of terror funding in India and the efforts being made to curtail these sources. In the light of this, also discuss the aim and objective of the 'No Money for Terror (NMFT)' Conference recently held at New Delhi in November 2022. (GS III - 2023)

Can SHANTI Act override court on compensation for nuclear disasters, asks SC



What happened? The Supreme Court sought the Centre's response on whether liability limits under the SHANTI Act, 2025 can prevent constitutional courts from awarding suitable compensation to victims of nuclear accidents. The Court also issued notice to the Union Government and Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB).

What is the SHANTI Act, 2025? The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025 establishes the legal framework for India's nuclear-energy sector, including provisions governing the liability of nuclear operators and other entities.

What is the issue before the Supreme Court? Whether statutory liability caps under the SHANTI Act can restrict constitutional courts from awarding suitable compensation to victims of nuclear accidents. The petitioners argued that limiting or excluding liability could weaken safety incentives, potentially encouraging operators, manufacturers and suppliers to cut corners on safety.

What is the concern regarding the government's residual liability? The petitioners argued that the government's residual liability is capped at 300 million Special Drawing Rights (SDR), which they contend may be inadequate to compensate victims in the event of a major nuclear accident.

Why is the issue significant? Nuclear accidents can cause large-scale and long-term human, environmental and economic damage. The petitioners therefore argued that liability limits should not undermine victims' ability to obtain adequate compensation or weaken safety incentives.

What concern was raised about the AERB? The petitioners questioned the independence of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, arguing that government control over the appointment of its chairperson and members could create a potential conflict of interest.

Trump orders scaling back of joint military exercises with South Korea

What happened? On August 17, 2026, U.S. President Donald Trump ordered the U.S. military to substantially reduce annual military exercises with South Korea, citing their cost and arguing that they send an inappropriate and hostile signal to North Korea. South Korea expressed hope that the move could help restart U.S.–North Korea diplomacy.

What is the Ulchi Freedom Shield (UFS)? Ulchi Freedom Shield is an annual U.S.–South Korea joint military exercise designed to strengthen combined defence readiness and test joint operational capabilities. The 11-day 2026 exercise began on August 17 as scheduled, although the extent of the proposed reduction was unclear.

Why are these exercises controversial? Pyongyang considers them rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly threatened retaliation.

Why did Trump order the drills to be reduced? Trump described the exercises as costly and unnecessarily hostile, while citing his positive relationship with Kim Jong Un and signalling a willingness to create conditions for renewed engagement with North Korea.

What is the current military context? The 2026 UFS exercises involve approximately 18,000 South Korean troops and include training based on lessons from recent conflicts, including North Korea's military experience in the Russia–Ukraine war. The drills also include live-fire precision targeting, manoeuvre and wet-gap crossing exercises.

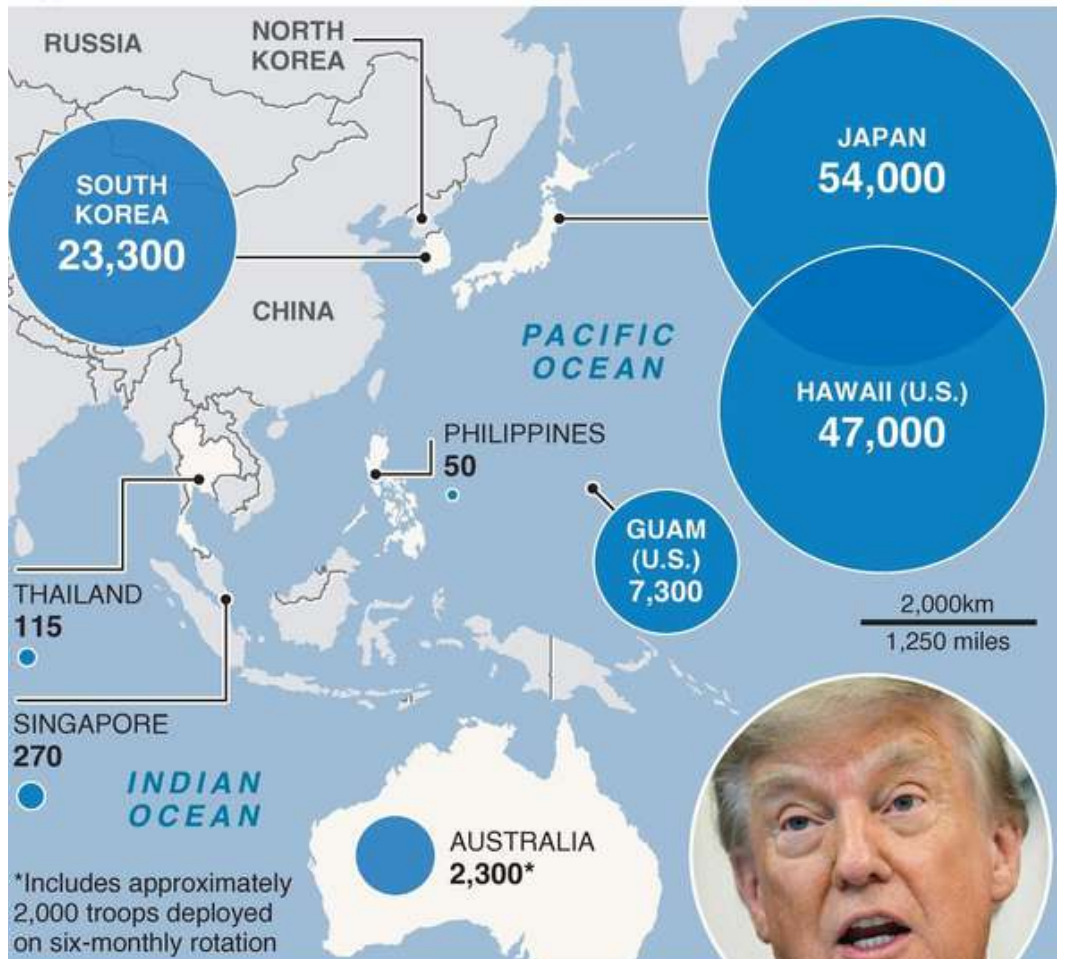
How has North Korea responded to the exercises? North Korea has condemned the drills as provocative and threatened a stronger deterrent response. It also fired two ballistic missiles into the sea earlier in August, reportedly in protest against the exercises.

Is reducing the exercises unprecedented? Following Trump's first summit with Kim Jong Un in 2018, Trump similarly announced the suspension of U.S.–South Korean summertime exercises, describing them as provocative and expensive.

Trump seeks cuts to U.S.-South Korea drills

President Donald Trump says he instructed the Pentagon to scale back joint military exercises with South Korea, raising questions about U.S. commitment to Asian allies

U.S. ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY PERSONNEL IN ASIA-PACIFIC REGION
 (approximate numbers as of Mar 31, 2026)



Trump (right) points to high cost of joint exercises, Seoul's refusal to take part in actions against Iran and his "very good relationship" with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un

Sources: BBC, Defence Manpower Data Centre, Reuters Picture: Getty Images © GRAPHIC NEWS

Broader diplomatic relations

What steps has South Korea taken towards engagement with North Korea? President Lee's government has pursued confidence-building measures, including:

- turning off front-line loudspeakers broadcasting propaganda;
- banning activists from sending propaganda leaflets by balloons into North Korea;
- offering talks to formally end the 1950–53 Korean War, which ended in an armistice rather than a peace treaty.

Why has U.S.–North Korea diplomacy remained stalled? High-level diplomacy broke down in 2019. Since then, North Korea has expanded its nuclear and missile capabilities and strengthened ties with Russia and China. Kim has indicated that talks would require the U.S. to abandon what he calls its "obsession" with North Korean denuclearisation.



PYQ Compass

Q. Subsequent to the Nuclear Suppliers' Group (NSG) waiver in 2008, what are the agreements on nuclear energy that India has signed with different countries? (GS II – 2011)

Losing forest for trees (The Hindu : 18-08-2026)

A recent performance audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) found significant gaps between GIM's intended objectives and its actual implementation.

What is the Green India Mission?

The Green India Mission (GIM) is a flagship initiative of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) aimed at protecting, restoring and enhancing India's forest and ecosystem resources.

- Launched in 2015–16, it is one of the eight missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC).
- The mission goes beyond simply increasing the number of trees.
- Its objectives include improving forest quality, increasing forest and tree cover, restoring degraded ecosystems, enhancing ecological services and strengthening climate resilience.
- GIM also contributes to India's climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, including the target of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5–3 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030.
- As of March 2026, ₹1,019.26 crore had been released to States under the mission.

What did the CAG Audit Find?

Proposed Target: Improve forest quality across 1.4 million hectares.

Real-time achievement: Only 0.11 million hectares

Expansion of forest cover also achieved only about 4% of the targeted level.

Weak convergence : GIM focused on programmes like CAMPA and MGNREGA that could support afforestation and restoration.

CAMPA provides funds generated from the diversion of forest land for compensatory afforestation.

MGNREGA/VB-G RAM G can support plantation and land-restoration activities through rural employment.

However, The audit pointed to weak convergence between GIM and programmes like CAMPA and MGNREGA that could support afforestation and restoration.



Major Challenges

Plantation-centric measurement : Visible plantation numbers can become a substitute for measuring actual ecosystem recovery.

Degradation of existing forests : An increase in overall green cover can coexist with deterioration in the quality of existing natural forests.

Habitat fragmentation : Planting trees in isolated patches may increase tree cover without restoring landscape-level ecological connectivity.

Invasive species : Plantation using unsuitable or non-native species can undermine native biodiversity and ecological resilience.

Weak institutional convergence : The potential synergy between GIM, CAMPA and MGNREGA/VB-G RAM G has not been fully realised.

Monitoring limitations : Area-based indicators may show how much vegetation exists, but not necessarily how ecologically functional that vegetation is.

PYQ COMPASS



Q. Which of following statements is/are correct? (2016)

Proper design and effective implementation of UN REDD+ Programme can significantly contribute to

1. Protection of biodiversity
2. Resilience of forest ecosystems
3. Poverty reduction

Select the correct answer using the code given below

- a) 1 and 2 only b) 3 Only c) 2 and 3 only d) 1, 2 and 3

60 days later, a US-Iran stalemate, a disturbing new normal (I.E : 18-08-2026)

The 60-day period given to the U.S. and Iran to negotiate a long-term peace framework expired on 17th August 2026, without producing a lasting settlement. The framework had already begun to unravel as both sides exchanged military strikes during late June and July.

Why did the peace framework fail?

The framework weakened mainly because of disagreements over the interpretation of its terms and failed to produce a durable cessation of hostilities or reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

What is the significance of the Strait of Hormuz in the conflict?

Iran has effectively restricted passage through the Strait of Hormuz since the Israel-U.S. attack in late February, prompting a U.S. counterblockade. The disruption threatens a major global energy trade route and has wider consequences for countries dependent on Gulf energy supplies.

How did the conflict evolve during the 60-day period?

Instead of reducing hostilities, the conflict widened geographically. The Houthis and Saudi Arabia also exchanged attacks, while the Yemen-based Houthis imposed a partial blockade affecting the Bab el-Mandeb.

Why are the U.S. and Iran shifting towards economic warfare?

Both sides increasingly recognise the limitations of military action:

- U.S.: Military strikes have not displaced Iran's hardline regime, while Washington faces constraints on its munitions stockpiles.
- Iran: Missile attacks against U.S. bases or Israel have not forced the U.S. to withdraw from the region.



What is the broader strategic problem?

Neither side appears capable of securing a decisive military or political victory. The resulting strategic deadlock risks turning the conflict into a prolonged regional crisis with global economic and energy consequences.

How could a prolonged stalemate affect India?

- energy security through disruption of oil supplies and Gulf shipping routes;
- economic stability through higher energy and transportation costs;
- strategic interests in the Gulf and wider West Asia;
- access to critical maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb.

What should India do to reduce its vulnerability?

India should pursue a multi-pronged strategy:

- reducing its imported crude oil dependence
- expanding Strategic Petroleum Reserves
- accelerating investment in alternative and renewable energy
- strengthening energy-source and supply-route diversification.

PYQ Compass



Q. Ships from which of the following countries have to cross the Strait of Hormuz to reach out to the Indian Ocean?

1. Bahrain
2. Syria
3. Qatar
4. Egypt

Select the answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 and 4

E20 Ethanol-Blended Petrol in India : Challenges and ambitions

The Government of India notified on February 17, 2026, that, effective April 1, 2026, all States and Union Territories must sell petrol blended with up to 20% ethanol and a minimum Research Octane Number (RON) of 95. It replaces the earlier 2021 notification that permitted blending of up to 10% ethanol.

Why is the Government promoting E20?

- Energy security:** Reduces reliance on imported crude oil and diversifies the transport-fuel mix.
- Foreign-exchange savings:** Greater domestic ethanol use can reduce petroleum imports and associated foreign-exchange outflows.
- Climate & air quality:** Ethanol is a renewable fuel when biomass-derived; blending can reduce certain emissions, although its overall climate benefit depends on feedstock, production and land-use practices.
- Agricultural & rural economy:** Creates additional demand for ethanol feedstocks such as sugarcane and grains, supporting associated rural economic activity.

Vehicle Adaptation

- E20-compatible vehicles manufactured for the new regime incorporate:
 - Ethanol-resistant materials:** Fluorinated rubber (FKM/Viton) for seals and hoses.
 - Upgraded fuel-system components:** Ethanol-compatible fuel-pump seals and related components.
 - Engine calibration:** Powertrain Control Modules (PCMs) calibrated for E20.
 - Emission control:** Systems designed to meet applicable Real Driving Emissions (RDE) requirements with the relevant fuel specification.
- The Legacy Fleet :** Vehicles manufactured before the transition may have been designed and calibrated for E5/E10 rather than E20.

A fleet in transition

Around 70 million newer vehicles are E-20-compatible, while 240 million legacy vehicles were built for lower ethanol blends

Vehicle category	BS 6 Phase 2 compliant (post-April 2023)	Non-compliant / legacy (pre-April 2023)	Total estimated fleet (approx)
Two-Wheelers (Motorcycles & scooters)	55 million to 60 million	200 million to 210 million	260 million
Four-Wheelers (Passenger cars & SUVs)	12 million to 15 million	35 million to 38 million	50 million
Combined fleet (approx.)	70 million	240 million	310 million
Combined fleet % share	23%	77%	100%

Infrastructure concern

- Fuel-system materials:** Conventional NBR hoses, O-rings and pump components may be less resistant to higher ethanol concentrations.
- Fuel-system durability:** Older pumps, seals, injectors and tanks may experience greater wear under unsuitable conditions.
- Engine calibration:** Engines designed around lower ethanol blends may experience changes in fuel economy and combustion performance.
- Vehicle choice:** Owners of older vehicles may face difficulties if lower-ethanol or unblended petrol is unavailable.

Fuel Quality concern

- Water contamination:** Ethanol's water affinity can increase the risk of moisture-related fuel problems.
- Chemical contamination:** Chlorides and other contaminants can cause fuel-system corrosion.
- Storage & transportation:** Requires appropriate handling across distilleries, terminals, tankers and retail outlets.
- Quality monitoring:** Regular testing of ethanol, water, chlorides and other contaminants is essential.

PYQ Compass



Q. According to India’s National Policy on Biofuels, which of the following can be used as raw materials for the production of biofuels? (2020)
1. Cassava 2. Damaged wheat grains 3. Groundnut seeds
4. Horse gram 5. Rotten potatoes 6. Sugar beet
Select the correct answer using the code given below:
a) 1,2,5 and 6 only b) 1,3,4 and 6 only c) 2,3,4 and 5 only d) 1,2,3,4,5 and 6

PYQ Compass



Q. With reference to Indian elephants, consider the following statements: (2020)

1. The leader of an elephant group is a female.
 2. The maximum gestation period can be 22 months.
 3. An elephant can normally go on calving till the age of 40 years only.
 4. Among the States in India, the highest elephant population is in Kerala.
- Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) 1 and 2 only
- b) 2 and 4 only
- c) 3 only
- d) 1, 3 and 4 only

Ans : a

1. The leader of an elephant group is a female. This is correct. In elephant herds, the leader is usually the oldest female, also known as the matriarch. She is responsible for guiding the herd.
2. The maximum gestation period can be 22 months. This is correct. The gestation period of an elephant is the longest of any land mammal, ranging up to 22 months.
3. An elephant can normally go on calving till the age of 40 years only. This is incorrect. Elephants can calve for much longer, typically up to 50 years, depending on the individual elephant's health and environmental factors.
4. Among the States in India, the highest elephant population is in Kerala. This is incorrect. The highest elephant population in India is found in Karnataka, not Kerala.

Q. Which of following statements is/are correct? (2016)

Proper design and effective implementation of UN REDD+ Programme can significantly contribute to

1. Protection of biodiversity
2. Resilience of forest ecosystems
3. Poverty reduction

Select the correct answer using the code given below

- a) 1 and 2 only
- b) 3 Only
- c) 2 and 3 only
- d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a

The UN-REDD+ Programme (United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) is aimed at reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries. It also seeks to enhance forest carbon stocks and help protect biodiversity and ecosystems.

PYQ Compass



Q. Ships from which of the following countries have to cross the Strait of Hormuz to reach out to the Indian Ocean? (2026)

1. Bahrain
2. Syria
3. Qatar
4. Egypt

Select the answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 and 2
- (b) 1 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) 3 and 4

Ans : b

The Strait of Hormuz connects the Persian Gulf → Gulf of Oman → Arabian Sea → Indian Ocean. So, any country located inside the Persian Gulf must pass through Hormuz to reach the Indian Ocean. Hence option 1 and 3 are correct.

Q. According to India's National Policy on Biofuels, which of the following can be used as raw materials for the production of biofuels? (2020)

1. Cassava
2. Damaged wheat grains
3. Groundnut seeds
4. Horse gram
5. Rotten potatoes
6. Sugar beet

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- a) 1,2,5 and 6 only
- b) 1,3,4 and 6 only
- c) 2,3,4 and 5 only
- d) 1,2,3,4,5 and 6

Ans : a

According to India's National Policy on Biofuels, the following raw materials can be used for the production of biofuels:

1. Cassava – A starch-rich root crop used for bioethanol production.
2. Damaged wheat grains – used as a feedstock for bioethanol production.
3. Rotten potatoes – used for bioethanol production as they contain starch that can be fermented.
4. Sugar beet – Rich in sugar, it is used for bioethanol production.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

Q. With reference to the Green India Mission (GIM), consider the following statements:

- 1.It is one of the eight missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change.
- 2.It seeks to enhance ecosystem services and improve forest quality, rather than merely increase tree plantations.
- 3.It was launched as part of India's commitment to create an additional carbon sink under the Paris Agreement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (d)

The Green India Mission (GIM) is one of the eight missions under the National Action Plan on Climate Change. It focuses on improving forest quality, ecosystem services and ecological resilience, while contributing to India's climate commitments, including the creation of an additional 2.5–3 billion tonnes carbon sink by 2030.

Q. Consider the following statements regarding elephant corridors in India:

- 1.They facilitate movement between fragmented elephant habitats.
- 2.They can help reduce human–elephant conflict by maintaining ecological connectivity.
- 3.Elephant corridors are necessarily confined within the administrative boundaries of a single State.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (b)

Elephant corridors connect fragmented habitats and enable elephants to move safely between them, supporting ecological connectivity and reducing human–elephant conflict. They can cross State and international boundaries, reflecting the wide-ranging movement of elephant herds. Hence, treating corridors as State-specific can obstruct traditional elephant pathways and conservation efforts.