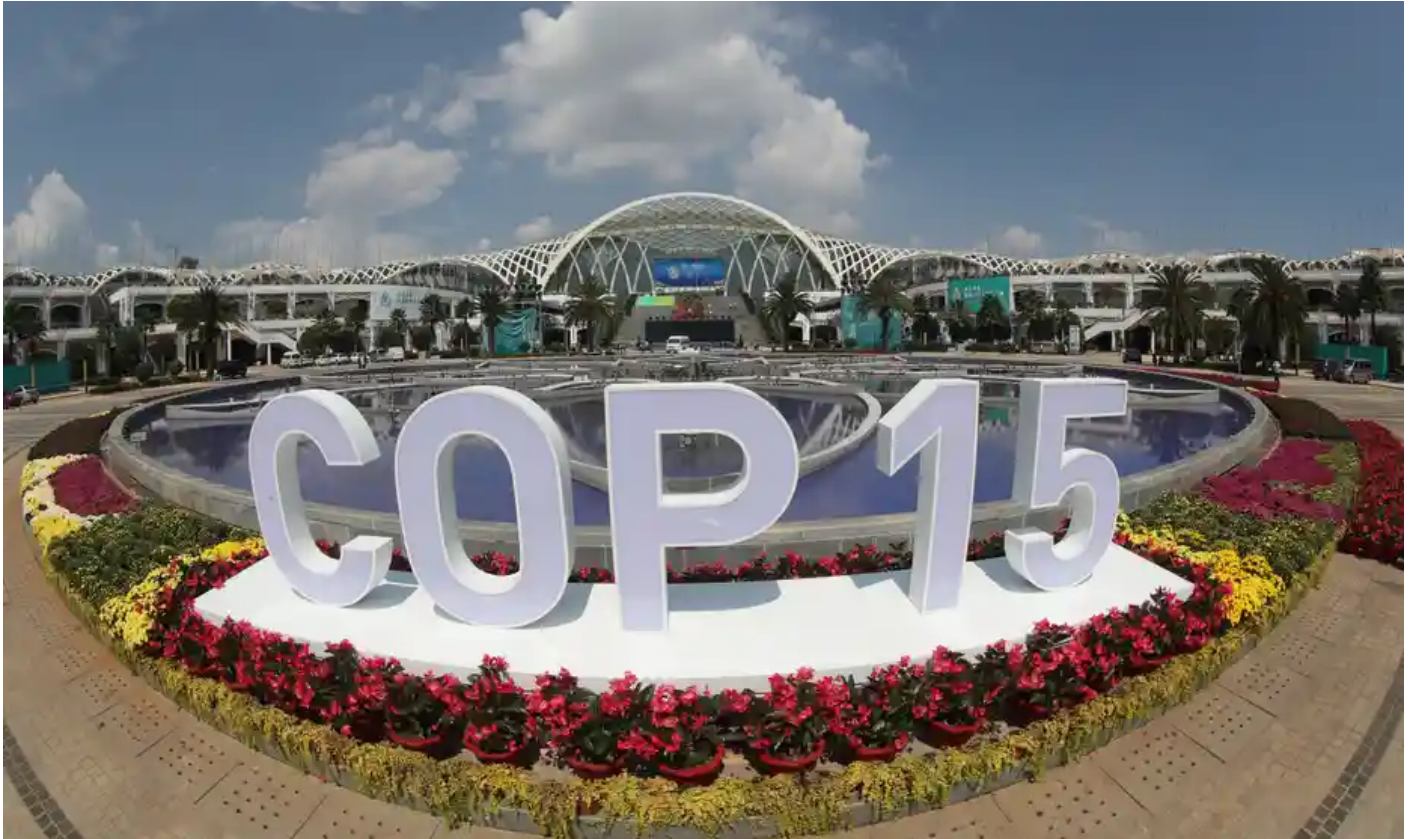


Include wetland conservation in upcoming CoP15, CoP27: Experts

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

Why in news?

- Experts from the Wetlands International, a global non-profit, in a new white paper suggested five global, science-based conservation efforts to protect and restore wetlands.
- The suggestions come in the run up to the **15th Conference of Parties (CoP15)** to the Convention on Biological Diversity to be held in Montreal, Canada and the **27th Conference of Parties (CoP27) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change** in Egypt in 2022.



The five suggested targets to be achieved by 2030 include:

- a) Remaining, undrained peatland carbon stores should be kept intact and 10 million hectares of drained peatlands need should be restored
- b) Global mangrove cover of 20 per cent
- c) Preservation of free-flowing rivers and flood plains, along with enhancement of restoring floodplain ecosystem and its function in the area
- d) 10 per cent increase of west African river Volta in tidal flats area
- e) Identification of 50 per cent of the 7,000 critically important sites along the flyways to be brought under favourable management.

Concerns:

- The actions are especially urgent since CoP15 was delayed four times and the planet is facing an ecological emergency with global destruction of biodiversity.
- At present the protection and restoration of wetlands remains unaccounted for in the global nature and climate agreements of the Global Biodiversity Framework, 2002.

Significance of wetlands:

- Wetlands are disappearing three times faster than forests. The wetlands account for just six per cent of the plant but are home to 40 per cent of world's plant and animals.

- Every year, 200 new species are found in freshwater wetlands and are responsible for sequestering almost one third of the global soil carbon.

Roadmap for CoP15 to the Convention on Biological Diversity:

- The Convention on Biological Diversity must affirm specific targets on these ecosystems, to ensure affirmative actions are taken to restore and maintain the biodiversity.
- Negotiations at CoP15 will focus on achieving global biodiversity targets coinciding to protect 30 per cent land and sea,.
- The conventional discussions over landscape conservation revolve around reducing deforestation for carbon sequestration. The conservation efforts extend to the oceans for the same purpose. But such discussions fail to recognise the unique significance of wetlands that interface between the two, to mitigate carbon emissions.

Climate crisis mitigation:

- Destruction of mangrove forests results in 10 per cent of global CO₂ emissions, but they still receive less attention than tropical forests.
- Similarly, peatlands which comprise just 3 per cent of the global land surface, hold 30 per cent of the total carbon stored on land, which is roughly twice the amount stored in the world's forests. Hence, wetlands play a key role in climate crisis mitigation globally.

Way Forward:

- The wetlands may comprise a minor portion of the planet, but are crucial parts of the ecosystem and are under tremendous pressure.

Cement carbon dioxide emissions quietly double

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

Why in news?

- **Heat trapping carbon dioxide emissions from making cement**, a less talked about but major source of carbon pollution; have **doubled in the last 20 years**, new global data shows.



Global data:

- In 2021, worldwide emissions from making cement for buildings, roads and other infrastructure hit nearly 2.9 billion tons (2.6 billion metric tons) of carbon dioxide, which is **more than 7% of the global carbon emissions**, according to Norway's CICERO Center for International Climate Research and the Global Carbon Project.
- Twenty years ago, in 2002, cement emissions were some 1.4 billion tons (1.2 billion metric tons) of carbon dioxide.
- **China is key because it produced more than half of the world's cement emissions** in 2021, with **India a distant second at about 9%**.
- The United States spewed 2.5% of the emissions from cement, ranking fifth behind Vietnam and Turkey.

Global cement emissions by China:

- **Driven by China**, global cement emissions globally have **more than tripled since 1992**, recently growing at a rate of 2.6% a year.
- It's not just that more cement is being made and used. At a time when all industries are supposed to be cleaning up their processes, cement has actually been going in the opposite direction.
- The carbon intensity of cement has increased 9.3% from 2015 to 2020, primarily because of China.

Emissions released during cement manufacturing:

- Cement is unusual compared to other major materials, such as steel, because not only does it require a lot of heat to make, which causes emissions, but the **chemical process of making cement itself produces a lot of carbon dioxide**, the major human-caused long-term heat-trapping gas.
- The recipe for cement **requires lots of a key ingredient called clinker**, the crumbly binding agent in the entire mixture.
- Clinker is made when limestone, calcium carbonate, is taken out of the ground and heated to 2700 to 2800 degrees (1480 to 1540 degrees Celsius) to turn it into calcium oxide. But that process strips carbon dioxide out of the limestone and it goes into the air.

Cement consumption:

- Cement, which is the key ingredient in concrete, is in buildings, roads and bridges.
- Each person on the planet is consuming on average more than a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of cement per day.

What needs to be done?

- Even though there are greener ways to make cement, cutting its emissions dramatically is so difficult and requires such a massive change in infrastructure and the way of doing business, the International Energy Agency doesn't envision the cement industry getting to zero carbon emissions by 2050.
- Instead there will still be emissions from cement, steel and aviation that need to be balanced out with negative emissions elsewhere.
- One of several ways to **make greener cement is to mix in fly ash**, which is a waste product from burning coal, in place of some of the clinker and he said there's more than enough fly ash available even with coal use reductions.

Towards a single low tax regime

(GS Paper 3, Economy)

Context:

- In December 2018, the late Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, announced that the 28% GST slab, which he called the "dying slab", would be phased out, except for luxury items. India would eventually have just two slabs: 5% and a standard rate between 12% and 18% (apart from exempt items).
- The **introduction of a uniform GST was a watershed moment in India** since the country's earlier regime of taxes and cesses, both at the Centre and the States, was a big barrier to free trade and economic growth and was a cesspool of corruption.

Scope for KISS concept:

- However, GST is still a complicated tax regime with different slabs. It is not easy to comprehend or comply with, and is open to interpretation, harassment and avoidable litigation. To simplify it, Finance Ministry officials must be reminded of KISS.
- **KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid)** is a well-known acronym and an accepted credo in business. **Attributed to Lockheed aircraft engineer Kelly Johnson**, it was meant to urge engineers to keep aircraft design so simple that even a stupid person would be able to repair the aircraft with ordinary tools on the combat field.



Tax regime in India:

- Empirical data from across the world on the benefits of a unified single tax cannot be denied. So, an unambiguous directive to the bureaucracy is necessary from the ruling dispensation to come up with just two categories: goods eligible for zero tax and goods that will fall under a single rate, say 10% or 12%. That means everything except those specifically exempt, is taxed.
- This needs bold and clear reformist thinking at the political level. Imposing a high GST in some areas does not make sense.

Case of five-star hotels:

- **'Sin' taxes**, for instance, are at **cross purposes with the government's policy of generating growth and creating jobs** under 'Make in India'.
- A typical 300-room five-star hotel **generates direct employment for around 500 people** of whom 90% are waiters, housekeeping staff, front desk staff, security and concierge staff, besides cooks, financial and clerical staff. There are a host of others employed in associated services such as the spa, gift shops and swimming pool.
- The hotel also **generates indirect employment in ancillary areas**: it buys bed linen, furnishings, rugs and carpets, air conditioners, cutlery, electrical fittings and furniture, and consumes enormous quantities of food produce.
- All these generate jobs and income for farmers, construction contractors, artisans and other manufacturers. Five-star hotels also **generate foreign exchange by attracting rich tourists and visitors**. So, it's unwise to tax these hotels to death.

Case of luxury items:

- Similarly, high taxes on air-conditioners, air conditioned restaurants, chocolates and luxury cars create an **economic ripple effect downstream**, in a complex web of businesses that have symbiotic relationships. The effect finally reaches down to the bottom of the employment pyramid.
- The plan must be to figure out how to rev up the economy by making the rich and upper middle class spend and move more people up the value chain in order that more chocolates and ACs and automobiles are bought by them, instead of designing a tax system that keeps these products out of the new consumer class's reach.

Stark confusions in India's current tax regime:

- At an Iyengar Bakery, GST on bread is zero, but the vegetable sandwich is in the 5% tax slab, hitting the vegetable grower directly.
- The GST on buns is zero, but buns with a few raisins fall in the 5% slab.
- The GST on masala peanuts, murukku and namkeen is 12%. And the GST on cakes and chocolates is 18%.
- The same lack of logic applies to taxes on wine, rum and beer, which generate large-scale employment and are the backbone of grape and sugarcane farming and the cocoa industry.
- The ancient art of toddy tapping in villages, a large employment generator and income booster in rural areas, was replaced with Indian-made foreign liquor.
- In the automobile sector, the GST on electric cars, tractors, cycles, bikes, low-end and luxury cars ranges anywhere from 5% to 50%.
- The sale of automobiles is the barometer of an economy.

Items exempted from GST:

- There are items that are exempt from GST. Petrol, diesel, aviation turbine fuel are not under the purview of GST, but come under Central excise and State taxes.
- Central excise duties and varying State taxes contribute over 50% of the retail price of petrol and diesel, probably the highest in the world barring banana republics. There is distrust between the States and the Centre on revenue sharing.
- There is also anger at the Centre for riding roughshod over the States' autonomy and disregarding the federal structure of the Constitution.

Way Forward:

- The Finance Minister should take a cue from the Prime Minister, who hinted at major reforms in the aftermath of COVID-19, and do away with all the confusing tax slabs in one fell swoop. She can then usher in a truly single low tax regime along with a list of exempt items.
- That will ensure compliance, widen the tax net, improve ease of doing business, boost the economy, create jobs, increase tax collections and reduce corruption as witnessed in many countries – a move that will be both populist and well-regarded by economists.

“Heal by India” initiative

(GS Paper 3, Health)

Context:

- Bolstering health human resources has been a prime focus of many of the Union government's recent initiatives and policy pronouncements.
- The Union health Budget 2022 is in line with the Fifteenth Finance Commission's recommendations which laid a conspicuous emphasis on utilising existing capacities at the district and sub-district levels to train different cadres of health-care personnel.
- The Health Ministry recently released a set of implementation guidelines for a long over-due Indian public health cadre.

“Heal by India” initiative:

- A more recent announcement, however, raises concerns over the coherence of India's vision with respect to health human resources.
- The Centre under the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission and the “Heal by India” initiative is reportedly developing an **exhaustive online repository of all categories of health-care professionals** in the country.

Though such an innovation is much needed because of the currently fragmented nature of such data, one of its proposed primary purposes is to aid external stakeholders, viz. foreign employers and patients in finding a right Indian match for their respective needs.

- It is a primitive return to the widely shunned principles of liberalisation in health care, which is not only unnecessary today but also menacing.



WHO forecast for India:

- The concerns are legitimised by the current estimates and future projections of health manpower in India.
- A World Health Organization (WHO) 2020 report projected a **requirement of nearly two million more doctors and nursing professionals for India** in order to attain the minimum threshold ratio of health-care professionals to the population.
- As per a study by WHO and the Public Health Foundation of India, over and above a veritable shortage of health-care personnel and their skewed skill-mix across a number of States, their current pace of growth is unlikely to result in any significant improvement in the density or skill-mix of health-care professionals by 2030.
- Such inadequacies are further compounded by the legions of health-care professionals who remain inactive and outside the labour force.
- In the face of these colossal challenges, the current measure which aims to subtly reinforce medical tourism and worsen the out-migration of health-care professionals from the country is utterly counter-intuitive.

Soft power projection:

- In the mid-1990s, the **General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)** aimed to create an unprecedented scope for cross-border trade in medical and health-care services.
- While the health equity implications of GATS have been widely criticised, health care particularly in the post-COVID-19 era has been a fertile ground for countries to project soft power, at times even at the expense of the nation's own health interests. A crucial distinction must always be drawn between exporting products such as vaccines and that of health-care professionals.
- The **training health-care manpower entails large subsidies** (even a fraction of which is hardly recovered through remittances and skill transfers), thus entailing a **net drain of resources** from the native country.
- A similar draw on scarce national health-care resources is laid through medical tourism which is almost always to the detriment of health equity, particularly in developing settings such as India.

- The magnitude of these could be somewhat attenuated by the use of telemedicine and virtual platforms, though the larger concerns shall persist.
- While neither medical tourism nor out-migration can or need to be dispensed with in their entirety, to pursue them actively when the country is reeling under acute shortages in an aspirational decade for health care is least warranted.

India needs a registry:

- It is also hard to justify an immediate need for this measure. While an online health-care professionals repository will certainly aid foreign stakeholders in finding their right choices, there is neither a strong demand-side desperation nor a significant supply-side scarcity preventing a market to function well in its absence.
- For instance, a recruiter from a developed country willing to hire Indian nurses and remunerate them handsomely will not be hard pressed to find suitable candidates regardless of the assistance rendered by an online repository, and the latter would only be marginally helpful.
- Rather, it is at the national and sub-national levels that such an exhaustive and updated registry of health-care professionals is the need of the hour, for addressing the many challenges and disparities in health manpower availability, distribution, and skill mix.
- This would also come to strongly complement measures such as an integrated public health cadre and the initiatives to train, deploy and retain more local manpower.

Way Forward:

- In health care, which is characterised by perennially scarce resources and huge challenges, everything revolves around identifying the priorities right.
- And no amount of political or geopolitical expediency should be allowed to undercut national health interests. It is time to go all out to address national health-care workforce challenges and heal the nation before embarking on a healing cruise of the world.