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**News:** Gharials to return to Orang National Park

- Orang, on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river, is strategic to the Kaziranga Orang Riverine Landscape. Tigers and rhinos are known to use the islands in this riverine landscape, about 180 km long, to hop between Orang and Kaziranga.
- But what has enthused wildlife experts is the prospect of reintroducing the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) in the area to be added to Orang.
- The Gangetic dolphin is also expected to be a beneficiary of the final notification of the addition to Orang, expected to take at least three months after the rights and claims are settled.

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## **Orang National Park**

- Orang National Park or **Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park**, which is also known as the **mini Kaziranga National Park**, is located in the Darrang and Sonitpur districts of the state of **Assam** at a distance of approx 100 km from the Kaziranga National Park.

- The Orang National Park is sprawl over an area of 78.81 square kilometers, lies on the **north bank of the River Brahmaputra**.
- The whole area of the park is divided into Water body, Eastern Himalayan Moist Deciduous Forest, Eastern Wet Alluvial Grassland, Eastern Seasonal Swamp Forest, Savannah Grasslands, Degraded Grassland, Moist Sandy area and Dry Sandy area.
- It was established as a wildlife sanctuary in 1985 but was declared as National Park in 1999. It is also **49<sup>th</sup> Tiger Reserve of the country, being notified in 2016**.
- It is the only stronghold of rhinoceros on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river.
- As per the latest round of Tiger estimation carried by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) between January to March 2017, **Orang's tiger density is 35.44 tigers per 100 sq km and thus can replace 'Kaziranga National Park' as a park with highest Tiger density in the country**.

## **Gharial**

- Gharial is found in the **fresh waters of northern part of India** mainly in Chambal and Ghaghara rivers.

- Gharials, sometimes called gavials, are a type of Asian crocodilian distinguished by their long, thin snouts which resembles a pot (ghara in Hindi).
- Gharial prefers deep fast flowing rivers, however adult gharial have also been observed in still water branches (jheel) of rivers and in comparatively velocity-free aquatic environments of deep holes (kunds) at river bends and confluences.
- Population of Gharials indicate the presence of clean river water.
- Unlike other crocodiles, the gharials feed on warm-blooded species and even the largest gharial adults feed exclusively on fish, which they catch between the pointed interlocking teeth of their long jaws.
- It is also the most aquatic of all crocodilians, for it never moves far from the water.
- Females lay their eggs in steep, sandy river-banks.
- Historically, gharial were found in the river system of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and southern part of Bhutan and Nepal. Today they survive only in the waters of India and Nepal.
- The surviving population can be found within the tributaries of the Ganges river system: Girwa (Uttar Pradesh), Son (Madhya Pradesh), Ramganga (Uttarakhand), Gandak (Bihar), Chambal (Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) and Mahanadi (Orissa).
- The Rapti – Naryani River in Nepal also hosts the Gharials.

- IUCN Status of Gharials is **Critically Endangered**.
- It is also enlisted in Schedule I of Wildlife Protection act and Appendix I of **CITES Convention**.
- A list of animals including Gharials are included in the '**list of priority species to be secured**' under the **National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG)**.
- Gharials are **included in the Indian Crocodile Conservation Project** as a target species along with **Saltwater and Mugger Crocodiles**.
- In comparison to Crocodiles, **Gharials are very shy and unarmful species**.
- Gharial **eggs need incubation for 70 days**, and the hatchlings stay with their mothers for several weeks or even months.
- With the introduction of gharials in 1975, **Odisha had become the only state to have all the three species of the reptile —freshwater gharials, muggers and saltwater crocodiles**. The first hatching of Gharial eggs was seen after 45 years from introduction in 2021.
- Breeding Centres of **Kukrail Gharial Rehabilitation Centre in Lucknow**, Uttar Pradesh, **National Chambal Sanctuary (Gharial Eco Park, Madhya Pradesh)** are constituted to conserve the Gharials.

## Threats faced by Gharials

- Gharials prefer sandbanks as suitable habitats. Wild animals as well as humans often destroy their eggs.
- Increased river pollution, dam construction, massive-scale fishing operations and floods.
- Illegal sand mining and poaching.