

26– 01 – 2024

News: Saltwater Crocodiles

- Bhitarkanika National Park in Odisha, renowned for its diverse ecosystem, has observed a slight increase in the population of saltwater crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus*) during the annual census in 2024.

Salt Water Crocodile

- Salt water crocodile is also known as **estuarine crocodile, Indo-Pacific crocodile, marine crocodile, sea crocodile or saltie**.
- It is the **largest of the 23 species of 'extant' or living crocodylians and the largest reptile in the world**. This includes 'true crocodiles', alligators and caimans.
- It prefers **Saltwater/ Brackish water from India's east coast across Southeast Asia and the Sundaic region to northern Australia and Micronesia**.
- The 'saltie' is today found in **three locations in India — the Sunderbans, Bhitarkanika National Park and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.
- It is also found in **Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Australia and the Solomon Islands**.

- Female saltwater crocodiles are smaller in size than their male counterparts, normally reaching a maximum length of 2.5 to 3 m.
- They tolerate salinity and are found mostly in coastal waters or near rivers. They are also found in freshwater near rivers and swamps.
- During antiquity the species' range extended from the Seychelles and Kerala, India in the west through to southeastern China, Palau and Vanuatu in the east.
- Recent reports show that Saltie might be extinct in Vietnam and Southern China.
- It can also tolerate saltwater in the oceans and can travel long distances over the open ocean, making use of tidal currents.
- IUCN status: Least Concern (LC).
- CITES status: Appendix I (except the populations of Australia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, which are included in Appendix II).
- Wildlife protection Act: Schedule I.
- Threats faced by Saltie include Habitat destruction, fragmentation, and transformation, fishing activities and use of crocodile parts for medicinal purposes.
- A list of animals including Salt Water Crocodile are included in the 'list of priority species to be secured' under the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG).

- Saltwater crocodiles are included in the **Indian Crocodile Conservation Project** as a target species along with **Gharials and Mugger Crocodiles**.
- Recently, UT of Andaman and Nicobar has sent a proposal to Central government to delist Salt water crocodile from Schedule I to control the number of population by listing them in Schedule V (vermin). The UT reports that increase in no. of crocodiles leads to human-animal conflict. The proposal, however, was turned down by the Union government.
- The recent annual census conducted in Bhitarkanika National Park has shown a marginal increase in the population of Salties.

Bhitarkanika National Park

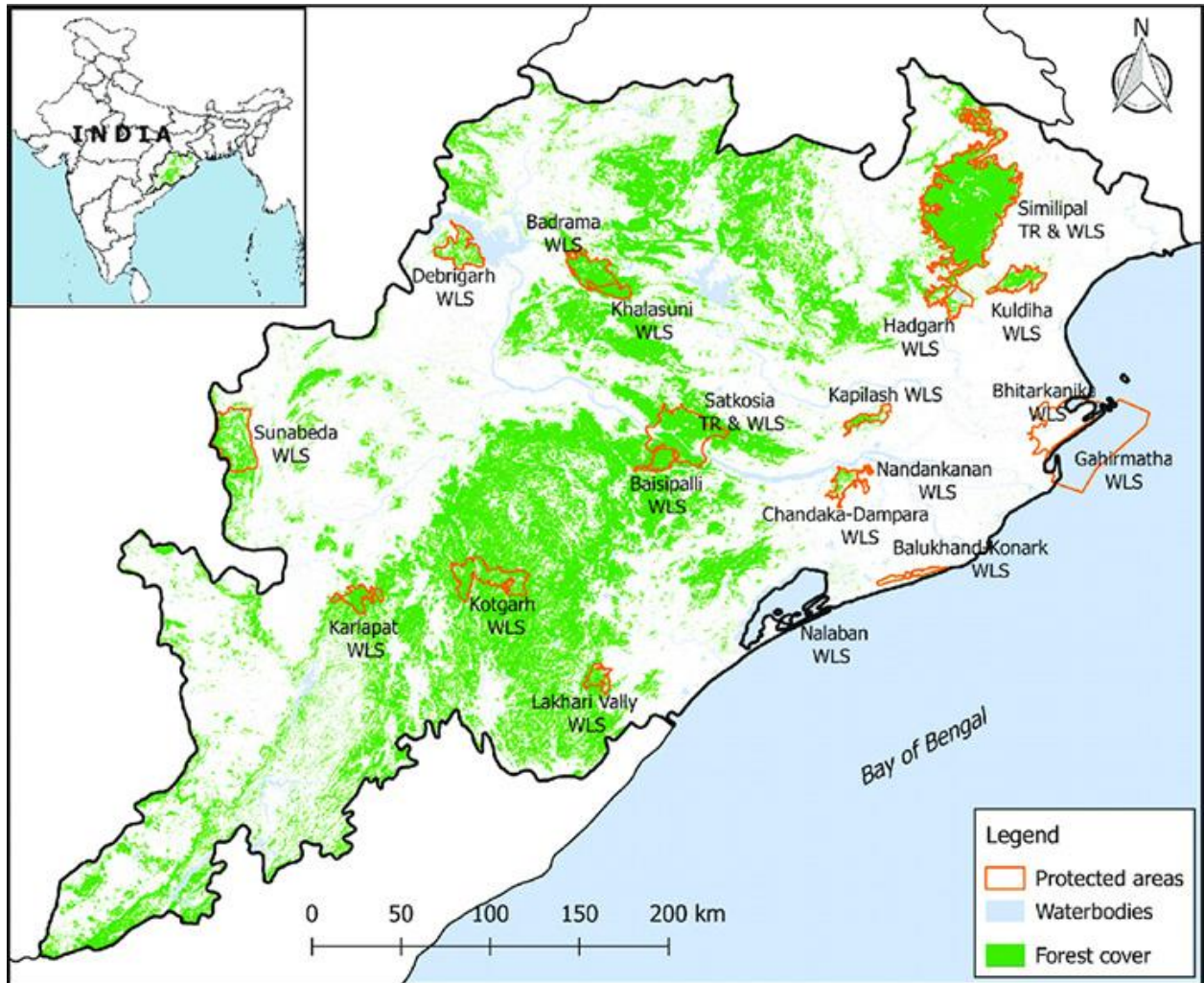
- Bhitarkanika National Park is located in the **Kendrapara district of Odisha**.
- It is **one of the 37 Ramsar sites** in India.
- Important animal protected is **saltwater crocodile**.
- **Presence of Mangrove forest** is also an attraction of Bhitarkanika NP. The sanctuary is the second largest mangrove ecosystem in India.
- The National Park is **surrounded by the Bhitarkanika Wildlife Sanctuary**.
- The national park and wildlife sanctuary is inundated by a number of rivers – **Brahmani, Baitarni, Dhamra, and Pathsala**.

- It is said to house 70% of the country's estuarine or saltwater crocodiles, conservation of which was started way back in 1975.
- The National Park was affected by the Tropical Cyclone Yaas which originated in Bay of Bengal.
- Recently, there was a planned diversion of water from Bhitarkanika River to industrial sites, which is flagged by environmentalists. It is said to affect the ecosystem services provided by Bhitarkanika National Park.

Concerns about the diversion of water from Brahmani River

- Excess water allocation for industries, which is likely to reduce fresh water discharge to the sea.
- The lack of normal flow of fresh water would increase saline ingression upstream; it would affect the local flora and fauna as well as the livelihoods of the farmers and fishermen dependent upon the Brahmani and the Kharasrota (tributary of the Brahmani).
- There could be a quantum increase in the man-crocodile conflict since the estuarine crocodiles would leave the core sanctuary area and migrate upstream once salinity increases.
- The reduction in water discharge will reduce the mangroves and without the mangroves, the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary will become a marine desert.

- Nutrients from Bhitarkanika are flushed out to the Gahirmatha Marine Sanctuary, which attracts the world's largest population of Olive Ridley sea turtles for congregation and nesting.



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