Biosphere Reserves – India's 18, UNESCO's 13 and Tamil Nadu's three

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Why in news: The International Day for Biosphere Reserves was observed on 3 November 2026. India has 18 biosphere reserves, 13 of them in UNESCO's World Network – the latest, the Cold Desert Biosphere Reserve of Himachal Pradesh, joined in September 2025.

Key points

- Concept: biosphere reserves come from UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme (1971) – areas that combine conservation of ecosystems with sustainable use by local people, plus research and education.
- Three zones: the core zone is legally protected and kept largely undisturbed; the buffer zone around it allows research, education and other regulated activities; the outer transition zone holds villages, farms and sustainable economic activity.
- India: 18 biosphere reserves have been notified; 13 are in UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (1986) was the first; the Great Rann of Kutch (Gujarat) is the largest. A biosphere reserve is a programme designation – it is not a category under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, though its core zone usually contains national parks or sanctuaries.
- Tamil Nadu has three, all in UNESCO's network: Nilgiri (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka; UNESCO 2000), Gulf of Mannar (marine, between India and Sri Lanka; notified 1989, UNESCO 2001) and Agasthyamalai (Tamil Nadu and Kerala; notified 2001, UNESCO 2016).
- Worldwide: after UNESCO added 14 new sites in June 2026, the World Network has 797 biosphere reserves in 145 countries. The International Day (3 November) was proclaimed by UNESCO's General Conference in 2021 and first observed in 2022.

In the exam: TNPSC – the three biosphere reserves of Tamil Nadu and the States they span, India's first biosphere reserve, the marine Gulf of Mannar reserve; UPSC Prelims – statement-type questions on the core, buffer and transition zones, which Indian reserves are in UNESCO's World Network, the MAB Programme, and how a biosphere reserve differs from a national park or tiger reserve.

Questions

1. Which of the following biosphere reserves lies in Tamil Nadu and Kerala only?

A. Nilgiri
B. Agasthyamalai
C. Gulf of Mannar
D. Seshachalam

2. Consider the following statements about the International Day for Biosphere Reserves:
1. It is observed on 3 November.
2. It was first observed in 2022.
3. It was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly.
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

Answers with explanations

1. **B) Agasthyamalai** – Agasthyamalai (notified 2001; UNESCO 2016) lies in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Nilgiri spans three States (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka); Gulf of Mannar is in Tamil Nadu alone; Seshachalam is in Andhra Pradesh.

2. **B) 1 and 2 only** – Statement 3 is wrong: the Day was proclaimed by UNESCO's General Conference (2021), not by the UN General Assembly. It falls on 3 November and was first observed in 2022.

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