

KHANGCHENDZONGA BIOSPHERE RESERVE ENTERS UNESCO LIST

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The Khangchendzonga, the third highest mountain peak in the world. special arrangement

The Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve (KBR) of Sikkim, the highest biosphere reserve in the country that includes the third highest mountain peak in the world, Khangchendzonga (8,586 m), has been included in the UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR).

The decision was taken at the International Coordinating Council of Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme, UNESCO, in its 30th Session held at Palembang, Indonesia, last month, a press release by Ministry of Environment and Forest and Climate Change said.

With the inclusion of the KBR, one of the highest ecosystems in the world, reaching elevations of 1,220 m to 8,586 m above sea level, the number of biosphere reserves from the country included in World Network of Biosphere Reserves has increased to 11.

The last biosphere reserve to be included was the Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve in Kerala in 2016. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was the first reserve from the country to be included in the WNBR. India has 18 biospheres reserves, of which 11 have been included in the WNBR.

Boost to research

C.S. Rao, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Sikkim, said the inclusion of the KBR in the UNESCO list will boost the unique ecosystem of Sikkim on two counts: collaborative research and tourism.

"This development will boost international research collaboration relating to flora, fauna and ecosystem of the KBR. Sikkim, with a population of about 6 lakh, gets 15 lakh tourists annually. This will help us get more tourists," Mr. Rao said.

Explaining the importance of the KBR for Sikkim, he said the biosphere reserve comprises 41% of the entire geographical area of the mountain State. "Of the 2,931 sq km area of the KBR, 1,784 sq km is the core area of the biosphere sphere, 835 sq km buffer area and 311 sq km comprises transition area between habitation and the biosphere reserve," Mr. Rao said.

The Khangchendzonga National Park (KNP), which comprises the core area of the KBR, was inscribed as India's first "Mixed World Heritage Site" on July 17, 2016. Eighty six per cent of the core lies in the Alpine zone and the remaining portions are located in the Himalayan wet temperate and sub tropical moist deciduous forest.

Biodiversity hotspot

The Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve is one of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots that has good species diversity with high levels of endemism, with many mountains, peaks, lakes, caves, rocks, stupas (shrines) and hot springs.

According to the Sikkim Forest Department, there are 4,500 species of flowering plants in the KBR, including 424 medicinal plants and 36 rhododendrons, 60 species of primulas and 11 varieties of oaks .

The biosphere reserve has also listed 362 species of ferns.“Over 118 species of the large number of medicinal plants are found in Dzongu Valley in north Sikkim,” a press statement of the PIB said.

Mr. Rao said that many species protected under the Wildlife Protection Act have their home in the KBR. This includes the Red Panda, Snow Leopard, Himalayan Black Bear and herbivores species of Musk deer, Great Tibetan Sheep, Blue Sheep, Boral and Barking Deer. Over 500 species and sub-species of birds, including high-altitude pheasants — Monal Pheasants, Tragopan Pheasants and Blood Pheasants (the State Bird) — are also found in the reserve.

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