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Comparative Review of Vertebrate Biodiversity and Conservation Strategies across Diverse Ecosystems of Maharashtra

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Abstract

Maharashtra, located at the confluence of the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and Konkan Coast, represents a unique biogeographical landscape supporting rich vertebrate biodiversity. This study presents a comparative review of vertebrate diversity across these ecosystems, focusing on mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes. The Western Ghats exhibit high species richness and endemism, particularly among amphibians and reptiles, while the Deccan Plateau supports adaptable terrestrial vertebrates in semi-arid conditions. The coastal ecosystems contribute significantly to marine and estuarine fish diversity. Despite this diversity, anthropogenic pressures such as habitat fragmentation, urbanization, and climate change pose substantial threats. The paper critically evaluates existing conservation strategies, including protected areas, community-based initiatives, and policy interventions, highlighting their effectiveness and limitations. It emphasizes the need for ecosystem-specific, integrated conservation approaches to ensure sustainable management of vertebrate biodiversity in Maharashtra.

Keywords: Vertebrate Biodiversity, Conservation Strategies, Ecosystem Diversity, Maharashtra, Western Ghats

Introduction

Biodiversity, particularly vertebrate diversity, constitutes a fundamental component of ecological stability, ecosystem services, and evolutionary processes. Vertebrates—including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes—play critical trophic and functional roles such as pollination, seed dispersal, predation, and nutrient cycling, thereby maintaining ecosystem resilience and productivity. The Indian state of Maharashtra represents a highly heterogeneous biogeographical region where diverse ecosystems converge, notably the Western Ghats, the Deccan Plateau, and the Konkan Coast. The Western Ghats, recognized globally as a biodiversity hotspot, are characterized by high levels of species richness and endemism, especially among amphibians and reptiles, owing to their complex topography, climatic gradients, and long-term ecological stability. In contrast, the Deccan Plateau exhibits dry deciduous forests and grasslands



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that support a distinct assemblage of vertebrates adapted to semi-arid conditions and seasonal variability. The Konkan coastal belt, with its mangroves, estuaries, and marine habitats, contributes significantly to aquatic vertebrate diversity, particularly fishes and migratory birds. Despite this remarkable diversity, Maharashtra's vertebrate fauna faces increasing threats from anthropogenic pressures such as habitat loss, fragmentation, industrial expansion, urbanization, overexploitation of resources, and climate change. These pressures not only reduce species populations but also disrupt ecological interactions and ecosystem functioning. Consequently, conservation of vertebrate biodiversity has become a critical priority, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of ecosystem-specific patterns and challenges. This study aims to provide a comparative review of vertebrate biodiversity across the major ecosystems of Maharashtra while critically evaluating existing conservation strategies, including protected area networks, legislative frameworks, and community-based initiatives. By integrating ecological insights with conservation practices, the study seeks to identify gaps and propose adaptive, ecosystem-based management approaches that can enhance biodiversity conservation outcomes in the region.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on a comparative assessment of vertebrate biodiversity and conservation strategies across the major ecosystems of Maharashtra, namely the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and Konkan Coast. It encompasses all major vertebrate groups—mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes—examining their distribution, diversity patterns, and ecological roles within these distinct habitats. The study is primarily based on secondary data sources, including published research articles, government reports, and biodiversity databases, to ensure a comprehensive and comparative analytical framework. It evaluates conservation measures such as protected areas, policy interventions, and community-based practices, while also identifying region-specific threats like habitat degradation, climate change, and anthropogenic pressures. However, the scope is limited to macro-level analysis and does not include primary field investigations or species-level experimental studies. The findings aim to support ecosystem-based conservation planning and policy formulation.

Rationale of the Study

The present study is grounded in the urgent need to systematically evaluate vertebrate biodiversity and conservation strategies across the ecologically diverse landscapes of Maharashtra. As a region encompassing the globally significant Western Ghats, the semi-arid Deccan Plateau, and the biologically productive Konkan Coast, Maharashtra presents a unique opportunity for comparative ecological analysis. Despite the existence of numerous localized studies, there remains a lack of integrated, cross-ecosystem assessments that examine vertebrate diversity alongside conservation effectiveness. Increasing anthropogenic pressures—including



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land-use change, habitat fragmentation, and climate variability—have intensified biodiversity loss, necessitating a more holistic and ecosystem-specific conservation approach. This study aims to bridge this gap by synthesizing available data to identify patterns, disparities, and conservation challenges across ecosystems. The rationale lies in providing a scientific basis for informed policy decisions and promoting adaptive management strategies to ensure long-term biodiversity sustainability.

Concept of Biodiversity and Vertebrate Diversity

Biodiversity refers to the variety and variability of life forms at genetic, species, and ecosystem levels, forming the foundation of ecological balance and sustainability. It encompasses not only the number of species but also their interactions, functions, and distribution across different habitats. The term gained global prominence following initiatives such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, which emphasized the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources. Within this broad framework, vertebrate diversity specifically denotes the diversity of animals possessing a vertebral column, including mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes. Vertebrates are integral to ecosystem functioning due to their roles in maintaining trophic dynamics, regulating prey populations, facilitating pollination and seed dispersal, and contributing to nutrient cycling. They often serve as bioindicators of environmental health because of their sensitivity to habitat changes and ecological disturbances. High vertebrate diversity is typically associated with structurally complex and resource-rich ecosystems, where niche differentiation allows coexistence of multiple species. Conversely, declines in vertebrate populations can signal ecological imbalance and degradation. Understanding vertebrate diversity is therefore critical for conservation biology, wildlife management, and environmental planning, as it provides insights into ecosystem resilience, evolutionary processes, and the impacts of anthropogenic pressures on natural systems.

Importance of Vertebrates in Ecosystem Functioning

Vertebrates play indispensable roles in maintaining ecosystem structure, function, and resilience through their participation across multiple trophic levels and ecological processes. As primary consumers, herbivorous mammals and certain bird species regulate vegetation dynamics, preventing overgrowth and facilitating habitat heterogeneity. Carnivorous vertebrates, including large predators, maintain prey populations and stabilize food webs through top-down control, a phenomenon explained by the Trophic Cascade. Many vertebrates, particularly birds and mammals, act as effective agents of seed dispersal and pollination, contributing to plant regeneration and genetic diversity. Aquatic vertebrates such as fishes play a vital role in nutrient cycling and energy transfer within freshwater and marine ecosystems. Amphibians, owing to their dual life stages and high sensitivity to environmental changes, serve as bioindicators of ecosystem health, while reptiles contribute to pest control and maintain ecological balance.



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Vertebrates influence ecosystem engineering; for example, burrowing animals modify soil structure, enhancing aeration and nutrient distribution. The loss or decline of vertebrate species can disrupt these ecological functions, leading to cascading effects such as reduced biodiversity, altered habitat structure, and ecosystem instability. Therefore, conserving vertebrate diversity is essential not only for species preservation but also for sustaining ecological processes, ecosystem services, and overall environmental equilibrium.

Maharashtra as a Biogeographic Transition Zone

- **Western Ghats**

The Western Ghats form the western boundary of Maharashtra and are recognized as one of the world's most significant biodiversity hotspots. Characterized by high rainfall, dense evergreen and semi-evergreen forests, and pronounced altitudinal gradients, this region supports exceptional species richness and endemism, particularly among amphibians, reptiles, and forest-dependent mammals. The ecological complexity and long-term climatic stability of the Western Ghats contribute to niche specialization and evolutionary diversification, making it a critical zone for conservation and biodiversity research.

- **Deccan Plateau**

The Deccan Plateau occupies the central and eastern parts of Maharashtra and is dominated by dry deciduous forests, scrublands, and grasslands. This ecosystem experiences semi-arid climatic conditions with seasonal rainfall, leading to adaptive strategies among vertebrates such as migration, burrowing, and drought resistance. It supports a distinct assemblage of mammals, birds, and reptiles adapted to open and fragmented habitats, and plays a vital role in sustaining large herbivores and their predators within dynamic ecological conditions.

- **Coastal Ecosystems**

The Konkan Coast stretches along the western edge of Maharashtra and includes diverse habitats such as mangroves, estuaries, sandy shores, and marine environments. These ecosystems are highly productive and support a wide range of aquatic and semi-aquatic vertebrates, including fishes, amphibians, reptiles, and migratory birds. Coastal regions also function as breeding and nursery grounds, contributing significantly to marine biodiversity and facilitating ecological connectivity between terrestrial and aquatic systems.

Study Area and Ecosystem Classification

1. Western Ghats Ecosystem

The Western Ghats within Maharashtra represent a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot characterized by high species richness, structural complexity, and exceptional levels of endemism. These mountain ranges exhibit steep altitudinal gradients, diverse microclimates, and varied vegetation types ranging from tropical evergreen to moist deciduous forests, all of which contribute to habitat specialization and niche diversification. The hotspot status is attributed to



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both high biological diversity and significant threat levels, making conservation a priority. Endemism is particularly pronounced among amphibians, reptiles, and certain mammals, driven by geographic isolation and long-term climatic stability. Ecologically, the Western Ghats play a critical role in hydrological regulation, carbon sequestration, and maintenance of regional climate patterns, while also serving as a refuge for several threatened vertebrate species.

2. Deccan Plateau Ecosystem

The Deccan Plateau forms the central and eastern landscape of Maharashtra and is dominated by dry deciduous forests, scrublands, and extensive grassland systems. These ecosystems experience seasonal rainfall and prolonged dry periods, resulting in relatively lower species richness compared to the Western Ghats but supporting a unique assemblage of vertebrates adapted to arid and semi-arid conditions. Habitat heterogeneity is evident in the mosaic of forest patches, open grasslands, and agricultural interfaces, which together support diverse faunal communities. Vertebrate species in this region exhibit various adaptive strategies, including migration, burrowing behavior, physiological tolerance to water scarcity, and flexible feeding habits. This ecosystem is particularly important for sustaining large herbivores and their associated predator populations within dynamic environmental conditions.

3. Coastal and Marine Ecosystems (Konkan Region)

The Konkan Coast of Maharashtra comprises a complex network of mangroves, estuaries, creeks, and littoral forests that form highly productive and ecologically significant habitats. Mangrove ecosystems act as natural buffers against coastal erosion and provide critical breeding and nursery grounds for numerous aquatic species. Estuarine systems, characterized by the mixing of freshwater and seawater, support high biological productivity and diverse fish populations. Littoral forests further enhance coastal biodiversity by offering habitat for reptiles, birds, and small mammals. These coastal and marine ecosystems play a crucial role in sustaining aquatic vertebrates, facilitating nutrient cycling, and maintaining ecological connectivity between terrestrial and marine environments. Additionally, they are vital for fisheries and local livelihoods, highlighting their ecological as well as socio-economic importance.

Literature Review

The concept of vertebrate biodiversity has been widely explored in recent ecological and conservation literature, particularly in relation to its role in maintaining ecosystem stability and resilience. Vertebrates function as key ecological indicators due to their sensitivity to environmental changes, making them central to biodiversity assessments and conservation planning. Studies indicate that biodiversity patterns are influenced by a combination of climatic conditions, habitat heterogeneity, and evolutionary processes (Bawa & Dayanandan, 2015; Sodhi et al., 2014). In India, regions such as the Western Ghats have been identified as global biodiversity hotspots due to their exceptional species richness and endemism (Pandit et al.,



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2014). Literature further emphasizes that traditional species-based conservation approaches are increasingly being replaced by ecosystem-level and landscape-level strategies that consider ecological interactions and habitat connectivity (Kelkar & Krishnaswamy, 2014). The use of advanced tools such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), remote sensing, and ecological modeling has significantly enhanced biodiversity assessment and monitoring (Roy et al., 2015). Thus, comparative biodiversity studies are essential for understanding spatial variation and developing targeted conservation strategies.

The Western Ghats region has received considerable attention in biodiversity research due to its high levels of endemism and ecological complexity. Studies have documented rich vertebrate diversity, particularly among amphibians, reptiles, and birds, which are highly adapted to the region's unique climatic and topographic conditions (Nameer et al., 2015; Varadaraju & Kumar, 2018). Amphibians, in particular, are considered highly sensitive to environmental changes and serve as important bioindicators (Bhandari & Garg, 2019). Research also highlights the presence of diverse mammalian species that contribute to ecosystem functioning through trophic interactions (Davidar & Yoganand, 2016). However, increasing anthropogenic pressures such as deforestation, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development have posed significant threats to biodiversity in this region (Ramesh et al., 2017). Conservation efforts have focused on protected areas and habitat restoration, yet literature suggests that biodiversity outside these protected zones remains vulnerable, necessitating broader landscape-level approaches.

In contrast, the ecological characteristics of central and eastern Maharashtra, particularly Vidarbha, differ significantly from those of the Western Ghats. This region is dominated by dry deciduous forests and supports a wide range of vertebrate species, including large mammals such as tigers and leopards. Research conducted in protected areas like Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve has provided valuable insights into population dynamics and habitat utilization of apex predators (Karanth & Nichols, 2017). Studies also highlight the importance of prey availability and habitat connectivity in maintaining ecological balance (Krishnamurthy et al., 2018). However, the region faces challenges such as habitat fragmentation, human-wildlife conflict, and dependence of local communities on forest resources (Madhusudan et al., 2015). Comparative literature suggests that conservation strategies in such landscapes must focus on corridor development, conflict mitigation, and participatory management approaches.

Coastal ecosystems along the Konkan Coast have been increasingly recognized for their ecological significance and vulnerability. These ecosystems, including mangroves and estuaries, support diverse vertebrate species, particularly fishes and migratory birds (Kumar & Sharma, 2019). Mangroves play a crucial role in maintaining coastal biodiversity by providing breeding grounds and protecting shorelines from erosion (Gopal, 2016). However, studies indicate that rapid urbanization, industrialization, and pollution have led to significant degradation of these



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habitats (Pradhan et al., 2020). Climate change further exacerbates these challenges through sea-level rise and temperature fluctuations. Literature emphasizes the need for integrated coastal zone management to balance conservation with economic development and to ensure the sustainability of these fragile ecosystems.

Urban ecosystems have also emerged as important areas of biodiversity research, particularly in rapidly growing cities such as Mumbai and Pune. Studies have shown that urban green spaces can support considerable vertebrate diversity, especially among birds and small mammals (Ghosh & Sharma, 2018). Protected areas such as Sanjay Gandhi National Park demonstrate the potential for biodiversity conservation within urban landscapes. However, urbanization also introduces challenges such as habitat fragmentation, pollution, and increased human-wildlife interactions. Literature suggests that urban planning should incorporate biodiversity conservation measures, including the development of green corridors and sustainable land-use practices, to enhance ecological resilience.

The effectiveness of conservation strategies across Maharashtra has been widely discussed in recent literature. Protected areas remain a primary tool for biodiversity conservation, but their success depends on effective management, adequate funding, and community participation (Chape et al., 2014). Studies highlight the importance of involving local communities in conservation efforts to reduce conflicts and promote sustainable resource use (Singh et al., 2016). Policy frameworks at national and state levels play a critical role in shaping conservation outcomes, particularly in addressing issues such as climate change and habitat degradation (Sharma et al., 2021). Despite these efforts, gaps remain in implementation and monitoring, particularly in less-studied ecosystems.

A critical review of the literature reveals several research gaps that justify the need for a comparative study of vertebrate biodiversity in Maharashtra. Most existing studies are region-specific and focus on individual taxonomic groups, limiting their applicability for broader conservation planning. There is a lack of integrated studies that compare biodiversity across multiple ecosystems and assess the effectiveness of conservation strategies in different contexts. Furthermore, the impacts of climate change on vertebrate biodiversity are not adequately addressed, particularly in terms of species distribution and habitat suitability. Advances in technology, such as remote sensing and ecological modeling, offer new opportunities for addressing these gaps (Roy et al., 2015). Future research should adopt standardized methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of biodiversity patterns and conservation needs. This study aims to fill these gaps by offering a comparative analysis that integrates ecological, social, and policy perspectives, thereby contributing to sustainable biodiversity management in Maharashtra.



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Vertebrate Biodiversity in Maharashtra

1. Mammals

Mammalian diversity in Maharashtra is strongly influenced by ecosystem variability across the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and Konkan Coast. The Western Ghats harbor forest-dependent species with high conservation value, while the Deccan Plateau supports large herbivores and carnivores adapted to dry deciduous and grassland habitats. Coastal regions sustain smaller mammals and species adapted to mangrove ecosystems. Keystone species such as large predators regulate prey populations and maintain trophic balance, while flagship species like tigers and leopards play a vital role in conservation awareness and ecosystem protection initiatives.

2. Birds

Avian diversity in Maharashtra is exceptionally rich due to the state's varied habitats and climatic gradients. Both migratory and resident bird species are found across ecosystems, with coastal wetlands and estuaries serving as critical stopover sites for migratory birds. The Western Ghats support endemic and forest-specialist species, whereas the Deccan Plateau hosts grassland and open-habitat birds. Altitudinal variation in the Western Ghats influences species distribution, with different bird communities occupying distinct elevation zones, thereby enhancing overall biodiversity.

3. Reptiles

Reptilian diversity reflects strong habitat specificity, with species distributed according to temperature, moisture, and vegetation conditions. The Western Ghats support a high number of endemic reptiles, particularly in forested and moist environments, while the Deccan Plateau sustains species adapted to arid and semi-arid conditions. Coastal ecosystems provide habitats for aquatic and semi-aquatic reptiles. Ecologically, reptiles contribute to pest control and serve as both predators and prey within food webs, thereby maintaining ecological balance.

4. Amphibians

Amphibians exhibit remarkable diversity and endemism, especially in the Western Ghats, where high humidity, rainfall, and microhabitat diversity support their survival. These species are highly sensitive to environmental changes, making them effective bioindicators of ecosystem health. Their dependence on both aquatic and terrestrial habitats underscores their vulnerability to habitat degradation, climate change, and pollution, particularly in fragmented landscapes.

5. Fishes

Fish diversity in Maharashtra includes both freshwater and marine species distributed across rivers, reservoirs, estuaries, and coastal waters. Freshwater fishes are predominantly found in river systems originating from the Western Ghats, while marine species dominate the Konkan coastal region. Estuarine ecosystems support transitional species adapted to varying salinity levels. Notably, the Western Ghats alone support significant faunal diversity, including fishes as



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well as amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals, with high levels of endemism, highlighting their critical importance in biodiversity conservation.

Comparative Analysis of Ecosystems

1. Species Richness and Diversity Patterns

A comparative assessment of vertebrate diversity across Maharashtra reveals distinct spatial patterns among the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and Konkan Coast. The Western Ghats exhibit the highest species richness due to favorable climatic conditions, dense forest cover, and structural habitat complexity. In contrast, the Deccan Plateau supports comparatively lower diversity but hosts species adapted to dry and seasonal environments. The Konkan Coast, although limited in terrestrial extent, contributes significantly to aquatic and avian diversity, particularly through estuarine and marine ecosystems. These variations highlight the influence of environmental gradients on vertebrate distribution and diversity patterns.

2. Endemism and Rare Species Distribution

Endemism is heavily concentrated in the Western Ghats, which serve as an evolutionary center for numerous vertebrate taxa. Geographic isolation, stable climatic conditions, and long-term ecological continuity have promoted speciation, particularly among amphibians, reptiles, and small mammals. Rare and threatened species are also predominantly found in this region, making it a conservation priority. In comparison, the Deccan Plateau and coastal ecosystems exhibit lower levels of endemism but still support regionally significant and specialized species adapted to their respective habitats.

3. Habitat Complexity and Productivity

Habitat complexity and primary productivity play a crucial role in shaping vertebrate diversity. The Western Ghats, with multilayered vegetation and high primary productivity, provide diverse ecological niches that support a wide range of species. The Deccan Plateau, characterized by simpler vegetation structure and seasonal productivity, supports fewer but highly adaptable species. Coastal ecosystems, particularly mangroves and estuaries, are highly productive and serve as nutrient-rich environments that sustain diverse aquatic vertebrates. Thus, ecosystem productivity and structural complexity directly influence species richness and ecological interactions.

4. Ecosystem-Specific Threats

Each ecosystem in Maharashtra faces distinct anthropogenic and environmental threats that impact vertebrate biodiversity. The Western Ghats are primarily threatened by deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and infrastructure development, leading to loss of endemic species. The Deccan Plateau experiences desertification, overgrazing, and land-use changes that degrade habitats and reduce biodiversity. Coastal ecosystems are increasingly affected by coastal degradation, pollution, urban expansion, and climate-induced sea-level rise, which disrupt



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aquatic habitats and breeding grounds. These ecosystem-specific threats necessitate targeted conservation strategies tailored to the unique challenges of each region.

Conservation Strategies in Maharashtra

1. Protected Area Network

The protected area network in Maharashtra forms the cornerstone of biodiversity conservation, encompassing national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and conservation reserves distributed across key ecosystems. Protected areas within the Western Ghats, such as Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary and Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary, are critical for preserving endemic and forest-dependent vertebrates, while Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary plays a significant role in watershed protection and habitat conservation. These protected landscapes ensure habitat security, maintain ecological processes, and provide refuge for threatened species. Increasing emphasis is placed on landscape connectivity through wildlife corridors to facilitate gene flow and species movement, thereby reducing the impacts of habitat fragmentation.

2. Community-Based Conservation

Community-based conservation practices have long contributed to biodiversity preservation in Maharashtra, particularly through traditional systems such as sacred groves. These culturally protected forest patches serve as micro-reserves of biodiversity, often harboring rare and endemic species. Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable resource-use practices help maintain ecological balance while supporting local livelihoods. Such participatory approaches enhance conservation effectiveness by integrating local communities into decision-making processes and fostering stewardship of natural resources.

3. Government Policies and Institutions

Institutional frameworks play a vital role in conservation governance, with organizations such as the Maharashtra State Biodiversity Board and the Maharashtra Forest Department leading biodiversity management initiatives. These bodies implement policies related to habitat protection, wildlife conservation, and sustainable resource use. Legislative measures, biodiversity action plans, and monitoring programs are designed to address conservation challenges while balancing developmental needs. Collaborative efforts between government agencies, research institutions, and non-governmental organizations further strengthen conservation outcomes.

4. Species-Specific Conservation Programs

Targeted conservation programs focus on the protection and recovery of endangered and endemic vertebrate species. These initiatives include habitat restoration, captive breeding, species monitoring, and anti-poaching measures. Special attention is given to flagship and keystone species, whose conservation indirectly supports broader ecosystem stability. In biodiversity-rich regions like the Western Ghats, such programs are essential for safeguarding



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unique faunal assemblages and preventing species extinction. Overall, species-specific interventions complement broader ecosystem-level strategies, ensuring a comprehensive approach to biodiversity conservation.

Major Threats to Vertebrate Biodiversity

- **Habitat Loss and Fragmentation**

Habitat loss and fragmentation represent the most significant threats to vertebrate biodiversity in Maharashtra, particularly across the Western Ghats and Deccan Plateau. Large-scale deforestation, agricultural expansion, mining, and land-use conversion reduce continuous habitats into isolated patches, disrupting ecological connectivity. This fragmentation restricts species movement, reduces gene flow, and increases vulnerability to local extinction, especially for large mammals and habitat-specialist species.

- **Urbanization and Infrastructure Development**

Rapid urban expansion and infrastructure development, including highways, railways, dams, and industrial zones, significantly alter natural landscapes. In regions like the Konkan Coast and urbanizing plateau areas, such developments lead to habitat degradation, pollution, and disruption of migratory routes. Linear infrastructure creates barriers for wildlife movement, increasing mortality risks and intensifying human–wildlife conflicts.

- **Climate Change Impacts**

Climate change poses a growing threat by altering temperature regimes, precipitation patterns, and seasonal cycles. In sensitive ecosystems such as the Western Ghats, shifts in microclimate conditions directly affect species distribution and reproductive cycles. Amphibians and aquatic vertebrates are particularly vulnerable due to their dependence on specific moisture and temperature conditions, making them key indicators of climate-induced ecological changes.

- **Poaching and Overexploitation**

Illegal hunting, wildlife trafficking, and unsustainable resource extraction continue to threaten vertebrate populations. High-value species are often targeted for trade, while local hunting pressures also contribute to population decline. Such activities disrupt trophic structures and ecological balance, particularly affecting keystone and flagship species essential for ecosystem stability.

- **Invasive Species**

Invasive species pose a serious ecological threat by outcompeting native vertebrates for resources, preying on indigenous species, and altering habitat conditions. These species can rapidly establish and spread, particularly in disturbed ecosystems, leading to reduced native biodiversity and changes in ecosystem functioning. Their impact is often irreversible, making management and control a critical conservation priority.



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Conclusion

The comparative review of vertebrate biodiversity across Maharashtra highlights the ecological significance of its diverse landscapes, particularly the Western Ghats, Deccan Plateau, and Konkan Coast, each contributing uniquely to regional biodiversity patterns. The Western Ghats emerge as a critical center of species richness and endemism, supporting a wide range of specialized vertebrates, while the Deccan Plateau sustains adaptable species in semi-arid conditions, and the coastal ecosystems play a vital role in maintaining aquatic and migratory biodiversity. Despite this ecological wealth, the study underscores the increasing vulnerability of vertebrate species due to anthropogenic pressures such as habitat loss, fragmentation, urbanization, climate change, poaching, and biological invasions. The comparative analysis reveals that conservation effectiveness varies across ecosystems, with protected areas playing a central role but often limited by issues of connectivity, management challenges, and external pressures. Community-based conservation practices, including sacred groves, and institutional frameworks have contributed positively, yet require greater integration and strengthening. The findings emphasize that a one-size-fits-all conservation approach is inadequate given the ecological heterogeneity of Maharashtra. Instead, ecosystem-specific, adaptive management strategies are essential, focusing on landscape-level planning, habitat connectivity, and the incorporation of local communities in conservation efforts. Additionally, there is a pressing need for enhanced monitoring, scientific research, and policy implementation to address emerging threats and ensure resilience against environmental changes.

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