

## 33 Rare Swimming Camels Rescued

### Key Highlights

- In a dramatic rescue, 33 camels belonging to the rare and endangered Kharai breed, the world's only swimming camels were saved from the high tide in the Arabian Sea near Vadinar Jetty in Gujarat's Devbhumi Dwarka.
- The camels had been grazing peacefully on mangroves near Singach village when the tide turned against them. Swept by powerful currents and disoriented by the saline waters, they wandered dangerously close to the busy jetty.
- The Kharai camels, native to Gujarat's coastal belt in Kutch district, are known for their rare ability to swim across creeks to graze on mangroves but the fastmoving tide had caught them off guard.
- For hours, the animals stood vulnerable in the open waters near the jetty, threatened by exhaustion and the risk of drowning.

### Explanation of Exam Oriented Key Terms

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#### Kharai Camels

##### Unique Characteristics

- **A "Swimming Camel":** Also known as Dariyataru (sea-swimmer), this breed is uniquely capable of swimming up to 3 kilometers in seawater. This ability allows the camels to travel to small, isolated mangrove islands for grazing.
- **Dual-ecosystem survival:** The Kharai is an ecotonal breed, meaning it can thrive in both the arid, saline desert of the Rann of Kutch and the coastal mangrove ecosystems. Its name, derived from the Gujarati word "khara" (saline), reflects this adaptation.
- **Specialized diet:** Unlike other camels, the Kharai primarily survives by grazing on mangroves and other salt-tolerant plant species.
- **Adapted physiology:** The breed has developed specific physical traits, including padded feet adapted for wet, sandy coastal terrain, and a digestive system that can tolerate high-saline vegetation.

## Habitat and distribution

- **Endemic to Gujarat:** The Kharai camel is indigenous to the Kutch region of Gujarat, including coastal areas like Bhachau, Abdasa, Lakhpat, and parts of Devbhoomi Dwarka and Jamnagar.
- **Ecological role:** By grazing selectively, the camels play a crucial role in maintaining the health and balance of fragile coastal mangrove ecosystems. Research suggests their hooves can also help press mangrove seeds into the mud, aiding in germination.
- **Monsoon migration:** During the monsoon season, the camels migrate to mangrove islands where they can graze for weeks at a time.

## Cultural and community significance

- Kharai camels are traditionally managed by the local pastoralist communities, primarily the Rabari and Fakirani Jat tribes.
- These communities, also known as Maldharis, have a deep-rooted cultural and livelihood connection with the camels.
- The Kharai camel was officially recognized as a distinct Indian camel breed by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) in 2015.

## Conservation status and initiatives

- **Conservation status:** The Kharai camel is classified as an endangered domestic breed by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources (NBAGR) and the IUCN.
- **Legal action:**
  - The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has repeatedly intervened to protect the mangroves and the Kharai camel habitat.
  - In a 2019 order, the NGT directed authorities to restore mangroves and remove obstructions from creeks.
- **CAG report:** A 2023 report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) highlighted the destruction of mangroves in Kutch and urged the Gujarat government to take action to save the breed.

## Practice Questions:

1. With reference to the "Kharai Camel," a unique breed found in India, consider the following statements:

- I. It is the only breed of camel globally known for its ability to swim in seawater for long distances
- II. It primarily survives by grazing on mangrove forests and other saline-tolerant plants
- III. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has classified the Kharai camel as 'Critically Endangered'
- IV. It is found exclusively in the Kutch region of Gujarat and is not a domesticated animal

How many of the statements given above are correct?

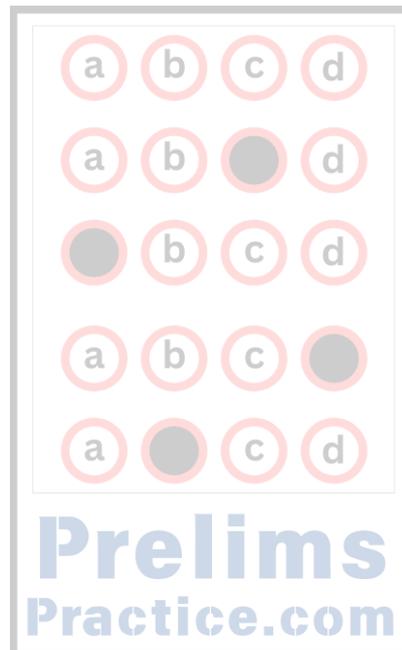
- a) Only one
- b) Only two
- c) Only three
- d) All four

**Answer: b**

**Explanation: Statement I is correct:** The Kharai camel is indeed unique for its ability to swim up to three kilometers in the sea to reach islands for grazing. It is considered one of the few, if not the only, camel breeds globally adapted to a dual ecosystem of land and coast. **Statement II is correct:** The name "Kharai" comes from the Gujarati word 'Khar', meaning saline, which reflects its unique diet of mangroves and other saline vegetation. The destruction of mangrove forests poses a major threat to this breed's existence. **Statement III is incorrect:** The Kharai camel breed is classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN, not 'Critically Endangered'. It is also recognized as a distinct and threatened animal breed by the National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources (NBAGR). **Statement IV is incorrect:** While primarily found in the Kutch and Devbhumi Dwarka coastal districts of Gujarat, they are also found in other coastal areas of the state. Furthermore, they are domesticated animals, traditionally reared by local pastoralist communities, such as the Rabari and Fakirani Jat tribes, for their milk and economic returns from male calves. They do not live solely in the wild.

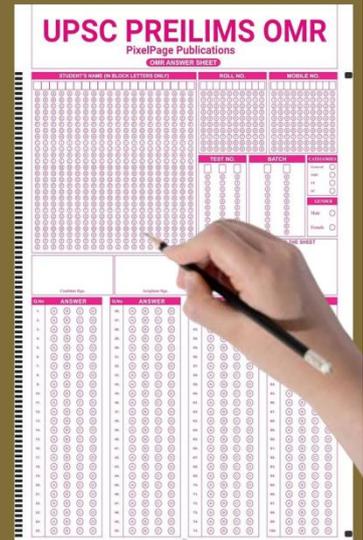
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