

# Ratnagiri's prehistoric rock art

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**In news**– Experts and conservationists have raised concerns over the proposed location for a mega oil refinery in Barsu village of Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district. They claim that the refinery might damage prehistoric geoglyphs found in the area.

## **Significance of Ratnagiri's prehistoric rock art-**

- The sites are protected by the state archaeology department and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).
- In April, these sites in the Konkan region were **added to a tentative list of UNESCO's world heritage sites**. While the **UNESCO listing dates these sites to be over 12,000 years old**, some experts have claimed that these sites might go as far back as 20,000 years, and that this can be ascertained through carbon and geological dating.
- **Clusters of geoglyphs are spread across the Konkan coastline in Maharashtra and Goa, spanning around 900 km. Porous laterite rock**, which lends itself to such carving, is found on a large scale across the entire region.
- **Ratnagiri district has more than 1,500 pieces of such art, also called "Katal shilpa,"** spread across 70 sites.
- **UNESCO's tentative world heritage list mentions seven sites with petroglyphs in Ratnagiri district** – Ukshi, Jambharun, Kasheli, Rundhe Tali, Devihsol, Barsu and Devache Gothane, one in Sindhudurg district –Kudopi village, and nine sites at Phansamal in Goa.
- According to UNESCO, "rock art in India is one of oldest material evidence of the country's early human

creativity.”

- **Ratnagiri's rock art is evidence of the continued existence of human settlements from the Mesolithic (middle stone age) to the early historic era. The geoglyphs also show the existence of certain types of fauna that are no longer present in the region today.**
- Ratnagiri's prehistoric sites are among three Indian attractions that may soon become World Heritage Sites. The other two include Jingkieng Jri, the living root bridge in Meghalaya, and Sri Veerabhadra Temple in Andhra Pradesh's Lepakshi.

### **What does the imagery in these sites tell us?**

- Imagery from these sites shows **how people adapted to ephemeral wetlands in a dry-arid plateau having shallow rock pools**, streams and watercourses. Experts say that the **discovery of geoglyphs has added to ongoing research on human resilience and adaptation** to extreme fluctuations in climates.
- **The geoglyph clusters also are examples of advanced artistic skills**, showing the evolution of techniques of etching and scooping in rock art.
- **The figures depicted in the geoglyphs include humans and animals** such as deer, elephant, tiger, monkey, wild boar, rhinoceros, hippopotamus, cattle, pig, rabbit, and monkey.
- Moreover, they also include a **high number of reptilian and amphibian creatures** such as tortoises and alligators, aquatic animals such as sharks and sting rays, and birds like peacocks.
- Some clusters have one or two standalone figures of larger-than-life scale, while others show multiple figures gathered together, seemingly for a purpose.
- **The largest rock engraving or geoglyph in India is at Kasheli in the Ratnagiri district, which has a large figure of an elephant with dimensions of 18X13 metres.**

- The iconography, content, scale and composition record faunal, especially marine and large mammals that have become extinct in the Indian subcontinent over 30,000 years.

### **What are geoglyphs?**

- Geoglyphs are **a form of prehistoric rock art, created on the surface of laterite plateaus (Sada in Marathi).**
- **They are made by removing a part of the rock surface through an incision, picking, carving or abrading.**
- They can be in the form of rock paintings, etchings, cup marks and ring marks.
- The UNESCO listing mentions “Konkan geoglyphs.” However, elsewhere, the term petroglyph (literally, “rock symbol/character”) is also used.
- **As per the UNESCO listing, petroglyphs and geoglyphs share similarities as both require the skills of removing parts** or engraving a symbol on the rock surface.