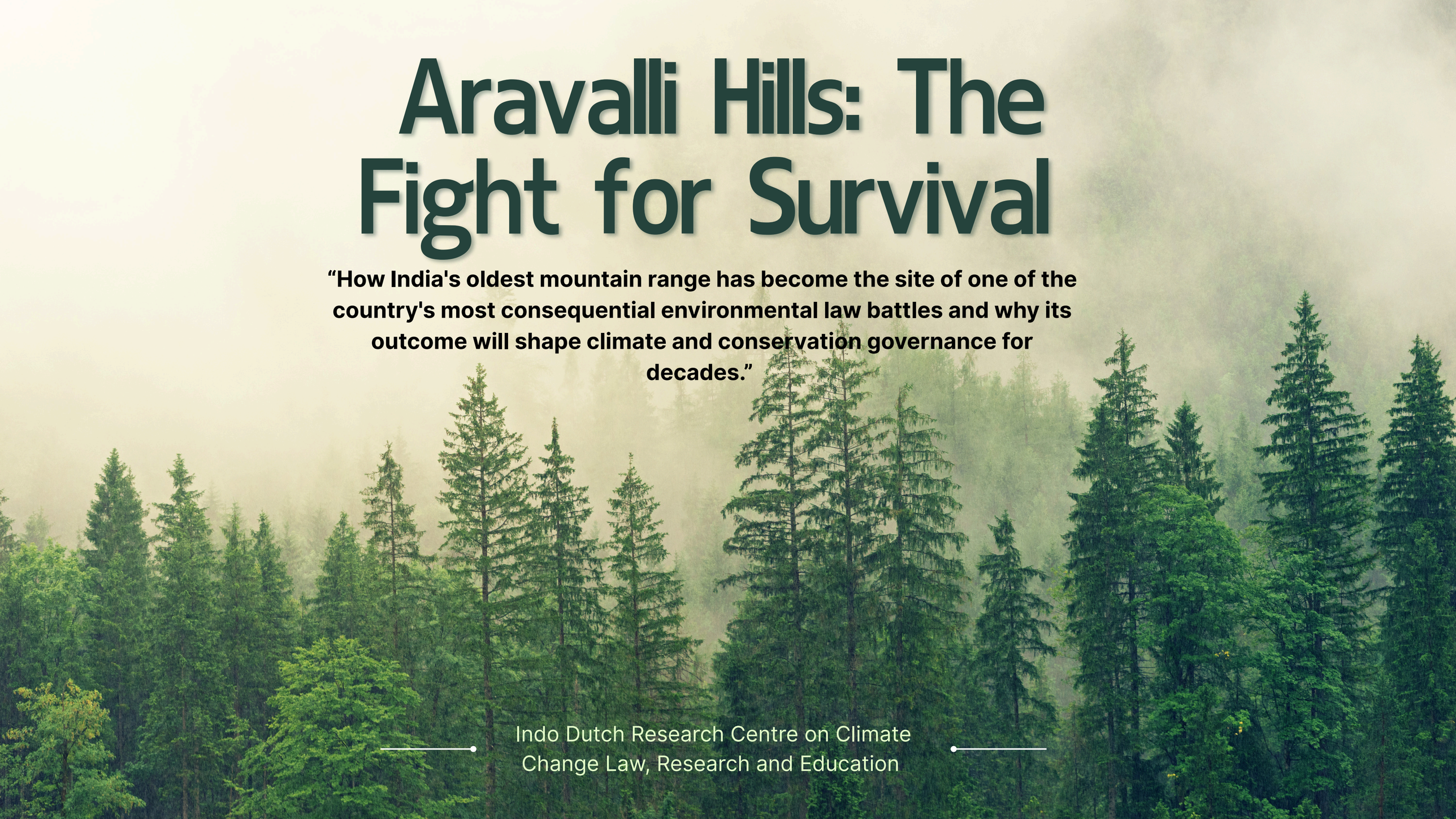
Aravalli Hills: The Fight for Survival

“How India's oldest mountain range has become the site of one of the country's most consequential environmental law battles and why its outcome will shape climate and conservation governance for decades.”



Indo Dutch Research Centre on Climate Change Law, Research and Education

What are the Aravallis?

The Aravalli Mountain Range is an approximately 670 km long mountain range starting from Delhi, passing through southern Haryana and Rajasthan and ending in Gujarat. It is the oldest fold mountain range in the world, dating back over 2.5 billion years. Guru Shikhar (1,722 meters or 5,650 feet), located in the Arbuda Mountains near Mount Abu is the highest peak in the Aravalli Range.

It is known as one of India’s oldest mineral belts containing significant deposits of copper, lead, zinc, and marble. Interestingly, the Khetri region features evidence of copper mining dating back to ancient times.



Why do the Aravallis Matter?



The Aravallis have been widely recognised as the “Green Lungs of North India” owing to the following reasons:

- The Aravallis act as a natural barrier against the Thar Desert’s expansion into north - western India.
- Since the range is located in a semi - arid region receiving 500 to 700 mm of rainfall annually, the Aravalli range also functions as a major watershed with rivers from western slopes draining into the Arabian Sea and those from eastern slopes draining into the Yamuna system.
- The range allows rainwater to seep into rock crevices to recharge crucial groundwater levels.
- The Aravalli region supports dry deciduous forests, grasslands, and wetlands and features a unique mix of Saharan, Peninsular, and Oriental wildlife. The area includes 22 wildlife sanctuaries and three tiger reserves. It provides a vital habitat for endangered species like tigers, leopards, Indian wolves, sloth bears, and the Great Indian Bustard.

Decades of Degradation -

- Illegal and unregulated mining - Unregulated extraction of minerals including copper, zinc and rocks like marble and stone has caused damage to hills, weakening of ecosystems and land degradation across Rajasthan, Haryana and Gujarat
- Construction and Urban Expansion - Rapid urbanisation has caused fragmentation of the hill system thus reducing the green cover and destroying wildlife corridors in addition to accelerating desertification which affects agriculture, soil quality and local climate conditions.
- Depletion of Groundwork - Degradation of the Aravallis directly causes reduction in groundwater recharge capacity of the range. It leads to declining water tables and consequent water stress in surrounding regions.
- Loss of Biodiversity - Unregulated human activities cause increasing pressure on wetlands, forests, rivers and protected habitats within the Aravalli range while also threatening several plant and animal species.



Judicial interventions: A Timeline

In May 2024, the Supreme Court set up a committee to “define” “Aravalli Hills and Ranges” as it was noted by the apex Court that different states were using different meanings for the term “Aravalli Hills” or “Aravalli Range.” The committee suggested that any landform in the Aravalli districts that rise 100 meters or above the surrounding land should be classified as an “Aravalli Hill.” It also suggested that two or more such hills located within 500 meters of each other would be called “Aravalli Range.” It was also explained that the distance should be measured from the outer edge of the lowest contour line on both sides.

On 20 November 2025, the Supreme Court accepted the elevation - based threshold suggested by the committee hoping it would bring clarity to mining regulations across Rajasthan, Haryana, Gujarat and Delhi. It also mandated a comprehensive Sustainable Mining Management Plan for new mining activity in the region. Meanwhile, environmental groups dissented against the definition stating that it excluded the vast majority of hills mapped in the Aravalli range from protection. The definition lasted 39 days.



On December 29, 2025 the apex court stayed its own November order amid protests and legal challenges taking suo motu cognizance of “public apprehensions and misinterpretations” and placed its previous judgement in abeyance. It proposed the formation of a new expert panel to revisit the definition and issued notices to Centre, states and stakeholders.

On January 21, 2026 the Court extended the stay on its November 20, 2025 verdict. The Court called for the formation of a specialized committee of eminent environmentalists and scientists to assist the Court in examining the present case. It also directed the parties to make a comprehensive note of the legal questions involved on record.

On February 26, 2026 the Court said that a specialised committee of eminent environmentalists and scientists shall be constituted to re - examine the legal and ecological complexities involved in the matter. It explicitly stated that only lawful mining will be permitted within the region. The Court asked the Ministry of Forestry and Environment to ascertain the following:

- define the expression of Aravallis,
- its total area, C. the radius and tree logs, etc.,
- the forest cover and
- the part of the Aravallis already utilized.

On May 25, 2026 the Supreme Court directed to constitute a five - member High - Powered Expert Committee chaired by the Director General of the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE).

The members appointed were:

- Dr. Subhash Ashutosh — Ex-Director General, Forest Survey of India
- Dr. Rajendra Kumar Sharma — Retired Director, Geological Survey of India
- Mr. Brij Mohan Singh Rathore — Former Joint Secretary, MoEFCC
- Professor Ashok K. Bhatnagar — Former Head, Department of Botany, University of Delhi

In addition to these five members, two distinguished academics were designated as “Special Invitees” and a Director - rank officer of the MoEFCC was to serve as Member Secretary. To ensure participatory deliberation, the Committee was told to issue a public notice asking for input from all stakeholders. The final report is due by August 31, 2026, and the next hearing will take place on September 7, 2026.

Where Does The Matter Stand?

- Mining Status: The Court has frozen the issuance of new leases and has put a complete stay on existing licensed mining activities until the matter is fully resolved.
- Skepticism around the Committee’s Independence: There remain concerns among critics regarding how “high - powered” and “independent” the committee is as the committee is constituted by serving/retired government officials rather than independent experts.
- Livelihoods v. Ecology: The Centre and mining associations warn that prolonged freezes affect millions of dependent labourers, while conservationists warn that any dilution can lead to irreversible damage.
- Non - Mining Threats Persist: Urban construction and related infrastructure development projects continue to press on the Aravallis even though mining itself is frozen.

Conclusion

The ongoing legal battle over the Aravalli range centers on a vital conflict between economic livelihoods and ecological preservation, as the Supreme Court maintains a strict freeze on all mining activities to prevent irreversible environmental damage. Until the High-Powered Expert Committee submits its definitive scientific report by August 31, 2026. The comprehensive review, which is mandated to incorporate public and stakeholder feedback, sets up a monumental decision for the upcoming judicial hearing on September 7, 2026, that will permanently dictate the environmental and economic future of the region.



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