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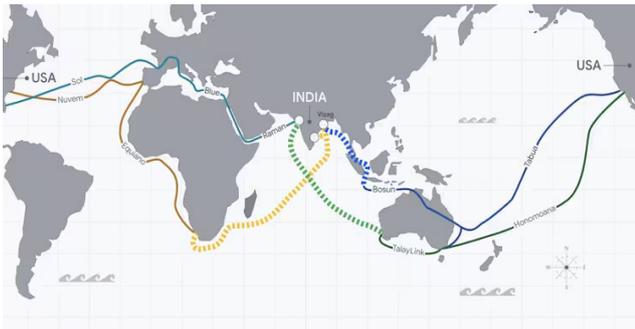
GOOGLE'S AMERICA-INDIA CONNECT INITIATIVE

Context

- At India AI Impact Summit, Google has announced that it **will connect India with the US** through **new subsea cables** as part of a 15 billion dollar investment spread over five years.

About

- Google announced the collaborative infrastructure initiative named **America-India Connect**.
- A new international subsea gateway will be established in **Vizag**.
 - It will house a **gigawatt-scale compute facility** and an international subsea cable gateway.
- Three new subsea paths connecting **India to Singapore, South Africa, and Australia**.
 - Four strategic fibre-optic routes will also be established that will link the **India, U.S. and Southern Hemisphere**.



- Google pledged \$30 million to improve public services** with AI and **another \$30 million** for scientific research.
- Google DeepMind** is also launching a new partnership with the Indian government to deploy its frontier **AI for Science models locally**.
- Google also unveiled **major skilling programs in India including**:
 - the Google AI Professional Certificate for students and early-career professionals,
 - partnerships with Karma Yogi Bharat to train 20 million public servants,
 - and generative AI support for over 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs reaching 11 million students.

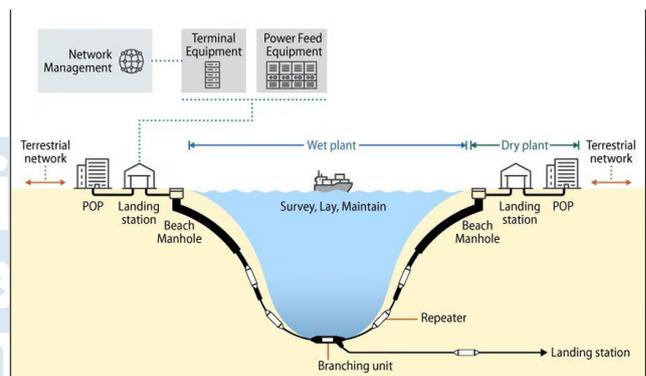
Significance

- The new infrastructure is expected to **support rising demand for cloud computing and AI services in India**, while also strengthening connections with **Africa, Australia and parts of Southeast Asia**.

- More subsea capacity typically means **cheaper, faster internet** which feeds into productivity and economic growth at scale.

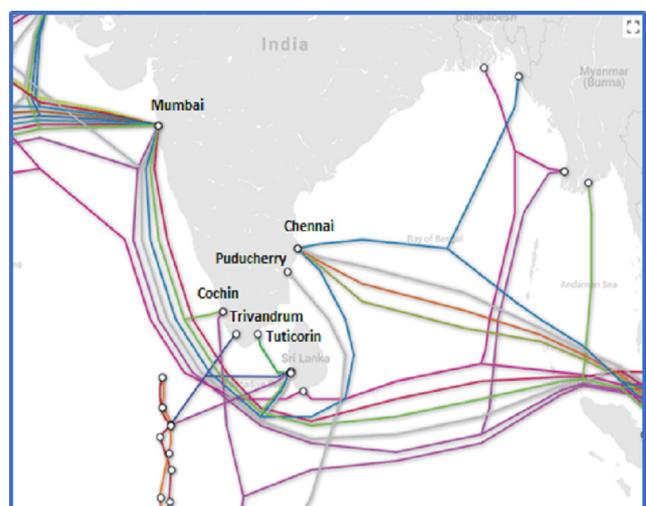
What Are Undersea Cables?

- Undersea cables **connect global internet networks**, providing vast data transfer capacity via fiber optic strands.
 - These cables land at **designated points and are linked to terrestrial networks**.
 - They **connect internet service providers and telecom operators** everywhere with those in other countries.
 - These cables are a **few inches thick and are heavily padded** to withstand the hostile environment of the sea floor.
- Importance of Undersea Cables:** About 90% of global data, 80% of world trade, and key financial and government transactions rely on undersea cables.



India's Cable Infrastructure

- India has two main cable hubs, **Mumbai and Chennai**, with 17 cable systems landing there.
- India also has two domestic cable systems** — the **Chennai Andaman and Nicobar Islands (CANI) cable** to provide high-speed connectivity to the islands, and the Kochi Lakshadweep Islands project.



International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience

- **The International Telecommunication Union (ITU)** and the **International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC)** jointly launched the International Advisory Body for Submarine Cable Resilience in 2024.
 - ♦ This initiative aims to **strengthen the resilience of submarine cables**.
- The Advisory Body provides **strategic guidance** to address challenges related to **increasing traffic, aging infrastructure, and growing environmental threats** to submarine cables.

International Cable Protection Committee (ICPC)

- ICPC, **founded in 1958**, is a global forum for governments and commercial entities involved in the submarine cable industry.
- **Its primary mission** is to enhance the security of undersea cables by providing a platform for exchanging technical, legal, and environmental information.

Source: AIR

SC QUESTIONS STATES OVER INDISCRIMINATE DISTRIBUTION OF FREEBIES

Context

- Recently, the Supreme Court **questioned State governments for distributing freebies** and expressed concern that such measures, particularly ahead of elections, resemble an **'appeasement' policy** that disregards the health of the public exchequer.

What Are 'Freebies'?

- These refer to **goods, services, or financial benefits** distributed by governments **at no direct cost** to beneficiaries.
- These may include free electricity, water, farm loan waivers, laptops, scooters, cash transfers, free bus travel, or subsidised food grains.

Types of Freebies in India

- **Universal Freebies:** Benefits provided broadly without strict income-based targeting.
 - ♦ Free electricity up to a certain limit;
 - ♦ Free bus rides for women;
 - ♦ Distribution of consumer goods (TVs, laptops, scooters).

- **Targeted Welfare Schemes:** Designed for specific vulnerable groups.
 - ♦ Free ration under the Public Distribution System (PDS)
 - ♦ Scholarships for economically weaker students
 - ♦ Housing schemes for low-income families.
- **Loan Waivers:** Agricultural loan waivers; MSME relief packages;
 - ♦ Loan waivers are among the most debated forms of freebies due to their high fiscal impact.

Constitutional and Legal Basis

- **India's Constitution** envisions a **welfare state**. The governments are encouraged to promote social justice, reduce inequality, and ensure access to education, healthcare, and livelihood under the **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP)**.
 - ♦ Articles 38, 39, 41, and 47 call upon the State to promote social and economic justice.
- **RP Act, 1951 (Section 123):** It deals with **'corrupt practices'**, if any gift, offer or promise of gratification is made to voters directly or indirectly by a candidate or his agent or any other person acting on their consent.

Supreme Court (SC) Observations

- **S. Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu (2013):** The Supreme Court held that freebies promised in election manifestos **are NOT 'corrupt practice'** under the **Representation of the People Act, 1951**, but they may affect **free and fair elections**.
 - ♦ The Court directed the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** to frame guidelines for manifestos.
- **Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay v. Union of India (2022):** Court said freebies create serious **economic and fiscal impact**, and referred the matter to a **3-judge bench**.
 - ♦ The court suggested forming an expert body including NITI Aayog, RBI, and Finance Commission.
 - ♦ It distinguished between **Welfare schemes** (education, food, health) and **Freebies for political gain**.
- **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam v. State of Tamil Nadu (2023):** Matter referred to a **larger bench** to reconsider the Supreme Court's 2013 judgment.
 - ♦ The issue remains constitutionally significant and under judicial consideration.

Arguments in Favour of Freebies

- **Social Justice and Equity:** India has high income inequality. Free or subsidised access to essential services can improve living standards for vulnerable populations.
- **Human Capital Development:** Providing free education tools, healthcare, and nutrition can yield long-term economic benefits.
- **Economic Stimulus:** Cash transfers and subsidies may increase consumption, boosting local economies.
- **Political Accountability:** In a democracy, voters choose governments based on promised benefits. Welfare commitments can be seen as a legitimate part of electoral competition.

Arguments Against Freebies

- **Fiscal Burden:** Many States operate under significant fiscal deficits. Large-scale giveaways increase debt and reduce fiscal space for infrastructure.
 - ◆ Several Indian States have debt-to-GSDP ratios exceeding recommended limits. Freebie-driven expenditure can worsen fiscal stress.
 - ◆ Free or highly subsidised electricity, especially in agriculture, has led to mounting losses for State electricity boards.
 - ◆ Borrowing to fund current consumption shifts the financial burden to future taxpayers.
- **Crowding Out Development:** Excess spending on short-term benefits may reduce investment in roads, irrigation, public hospitals, schools, and power infrastructure.
- **Lack of Targeting:** Benefits often reach affluent groups who do not require assistance, reducing efficiency.
- **Electoral Populism:** Schemes are sometimes announced close to elections, raising concerns about vote-buying tendencies.

Distinguishing Welfare From Populism	
Welfare	Populism
Targeted to vulnerable groups	Universal without income checks
Improves long-term productivity	Short-term consumption boost
Financially sustainable	Debt-financed without repayment plan
Transparent funding source	Unclear fiscal roadmap

Way Forward

- **Targeted Delivery Mechanisms:** Use income data, Aadhaar linkage, and direct benefit transfer (DBT) systems.
- **Fiscal Responsibility:** Adhere to Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) norms.
- **Outcome-Based Evaluation:** Assess schemes based on measurable social and economic outcomes.
- **Transparent Funding Plans:** Governments should disclose funding sources and long-term financial implications.
- **Balancing Welfare and Growth:** Allocate sufficient resources to infrastructure, healthcare, and education while protecting vulnerable populations.

Source: TH

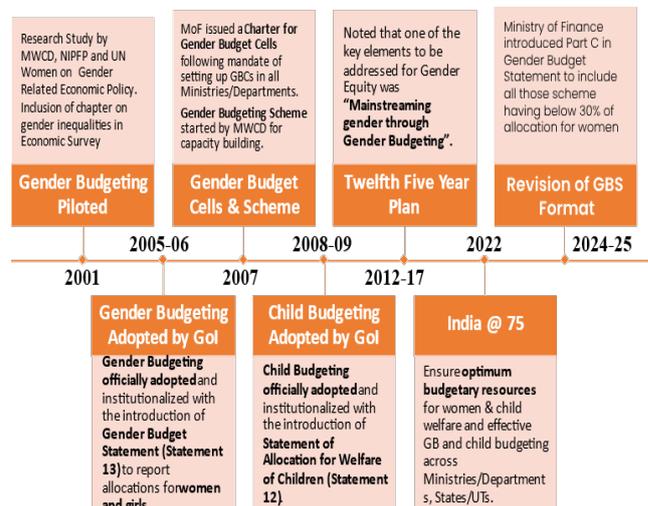
GENDER BUDGET ALLOCATION RISES IN UNION BUDGET 2026-27

Context

- An allocation of 5.01 lakh crore rupees has been earmarked for the **welfare of women and girls** in the **Gender Budget Statement for the current financial year**.
 - ◆ This is an increase of Rs. 11.55% over the GBS allocation of Rs. 4.49 lakh crore in FY 2025-26.

What is Gender Budgeting (GB)?

- **GB** is an approach that **integrates gender equality into government's planning** and budgeting processes and analyses how budgets can **promote gender equality and the empowerment of women**.
- It was first introduced in **2005-06**.



Legal Framework for Women Empowerment in India

- The Indian Constitution guarantees gender equality through provisions in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, and Directive Principles of State Policy.
 - ♦ **Article 14** ensures equality before the law, while **Article 15** prohibits discrimination based on sex.
 - ♦ **Article 51(a)(e)** encourages citizens to renounce practices derogatory to women's dignity.
 - ♦ **The Directive Principles**, particularly Articles 39 and 42, emphasize equal livelihood opportunities, equal pay, and maternity relief.

Need for Gender Budgeting

- **Disparities:** Despite constitutional guarantees under Articles 14 and 15, women continue to face disparities in literacy, workforce participation, wages, health, and access to assets.
 - ♦ Gender budgeting helps correct these systemic imbalances.
- **Correcting Invisible Bias in Budgeting:** Gender budgeting ensures that schemes in sectors like agriculture, MSMEs, infrastructure, and transport consider women's specific needs.
- **Economic Growth & Demographic Dividend:** Enhancing women's economic participation boosts GDP growth.
 - ♦ Studies show that increasing female workforce participation can significantly raise national income levels.

Government Initiatives

- **Mission Shakti** is a women empowerment programme launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) for the period 2021-2025.
 - ♦ It aims to strengthen interventions for women's welfare, safety, and empowerment, making women equal partners in nation-building.
- **Initiatives like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram, and PM Matru Vandana Yojana** have also contributed to significant improvements in the welfare and empowerment of women and girls.
- **The Mission Saksham Anganwadi and Poshan 2.0 programmes** focus on improving women's health beyond just calorie intake and improving overall health and immunity with proper micronutrients.
- **The Women in Science and Engineering-KIRAN (WISE KIRAN) program** has supported nearly 1,962 women scientists from 2018 to 2023.

- **Nari Shakti Puraskar:** Recognizes the contributions of women in various fields, celebrating achievements and inspiring others.
- **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:** Provides for 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for women working in the private sector and government.

Source: AIR

ISA LAUNCHES GLOBAL AI-FOR-ENERGY MISSION

In News

- The **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** launched the **Global Mission on AI for Energy** at the **India AI Impact Summit 2026** to accelerate AI adoption in clean energy across 120+ member countries, emphasizing digital infrastructure like **India's Energy Stack**.

International Solar Alliance

- It is a global initiative launched in **2015 by India and France at COP21 in Paris**.
- It has over **120 member countries** and works across Africa, Asia, and island nations.
- It works with governments to improve energy access and security worldwide and promotes solar power as a sustainable transition to a clean energy future.
- ISA's evolving vision is anchored on **four strategic pillars**:
 - ♦ Catalytic Finance Hub to unlock and mobilise investments at scale
 - ♦ Global Capability Centre and Digitisation to foster innovation, digital platforms, and capacity building across Member Countries
 - ♦ Regional and Country-level Engagement to drive tailored interventions through strategic partnerships and
 - ♦ Technology Roadmap and Policy to accelerate the deployment of emerging solar technologies through actionable policy frameworks and knowledge resources.

AI-for-Energy Mission

- It places digital infrastructure and citizen-centric platforms at the centre of the energy transition.
- It aims to bring together governments, industry, financial institutions and multilateral organisations to scale digital and AI-enabled clean energy systems.

- It seeks to align policy frameworks, strengthen data infrastructure, build technical capacity and mobilise finance — moving beyond isolated pilot projects towards system-wide transformation.

Importance of the Mission

- **Global Energy Transition:** AI can optimize renewable energy integration, reduce transmission losses, and enhance forecasting of solar and wind power.
- **Citizen-Centric Systems:** By leveraging AI-driven platforms, energy delivery can become more inclusive, transparent, and efficient.
- **Policy Alignment:** The mission aims to harmonize data systems, financing, and regulatory frameworks across 120+ countries, ensuring coordinated progress.
- **Decentralised renewable energy :** AI-driven solutions could help countries bypass legacy infrastructure pathways by improving grid resilience, cutting operational costs and accelerating the deployment of decentralised renewable energy.
- **India's Leadership:** As the host and founding member of ISA, India positions itself as a leader in digital innovation for climate action, linking solar diplomacy with AI-driven governance.

Challenges

- Many developing nations **lack robust energy data infrastructure**, limiting AI's effectiveness.
- **Unequal access to digital tools** and connectivity could widen disparities between advanced and emerging economies.
- AI-driven energy systems are vulnerable to **cyberattacks**, requiring strong safeguards.
- Aligning diverse national regulations under a global framework will be complex and politically sensitive.

Conclusion

- The ISA's Global AI-for-Energy Mission aims to make energy systems resilient, inclusive, and sustainable through AI.
- It aims to scale AI-enabled energy systems, improve grid management, reduce operational costs, and accelerate decentralised renewable energy deployment.
- Its success depends on bridging data gaps, ensuring equitable access, and strong governance, potentially making it a key driver of the global clean energy transition and highlighting India's leadership in solar diplomacy and digital infrastructure.

Source :DTE

NEWS IN SHORT

VIBRANT VILLAGES PROGRAMME-II (VVP-II)

In News

- The **Vibrant Villages Programme-II (VVP-II)** is a Central Sector Scheme launched by the Union Home Minister at Nathanpur village in Assam's Cachar district.

About

- VVP-II aims to fill infrastructure gaps, reverse out-migration, and improve livelihoods in border areas, fostering secure communities aligned with **Viksit Bharat 2047**.
- It **builds on VVP-I by targeting comprehensive development** in border villages along India's international land borders (excluding northern borders covered earlier), spanning 15 states and 2 UTs with a 6,839 crore outlay until FY 2028-29.
- Evolved from the 1986-87 Border Area Development Programme (BADP), VVP-I (2023) targeted northern borders; VVP-II extends to Indo-Bangladesh, Indo-Nepal, Indo-Myanmar, Indo-Bhutan, and Indo-Pakistan frontiers with tailored strategies.

Key Features

- **Saturation approach:** Ensures all households access existing welfare schemes via convergence.
- **Core infrastructure:** Prioritizes all-weather roads (PMGSY-IV), telecom (Digital Bharat Nidhi), TV connectivity (BIND), and electrification (RDSS).
- **Livelihood focus:** Promotes value chains through cooperatives/SHGs, tourism, education (e.g., SMART classes), and cultural events.

Source: PIB

TRUMP'S BOARD OF PEACE

In News

- India participated as an observer in the recent inaugural meeting of US President Donald Trump's Board of Peace on Gaza, held in Washington DC and hosted at the Donald J Trump Institute of Peace.

About the Board

- Established in January, 2026, in Davos, the Board stems from Trump's 20-point peace plan for Gaza, endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2803, which facilitated a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas conflict.

- The Board aims to demilitarize Gaza, oversee reconstruction (estimated at \$70 billion), and stabilize the region through aid, Hamas disarmament, and Israeli troop withdrawal.

Source: TH

“BIO-AI MULANKUR” HUBS

In News

- Dr. Jitendra Singh, India's Science and Technology Minister, announced plans to establish Bio-AI Mulankur hubs during recent events tied to the India AI Impact Summit.

About

- These hubs create closed-loop platforms integrating AI predictions with lab validation and data analytics.
- They target genomics diagnostics, biomolecular design, synthetic biology, and Ayurveda research to drive scalable biotech solutions.
- The initiative supports the BioE3 Policy, promoting biotechnology for environment, economy, and employment through high-performance biomanufacturing.
- It builds on DBT's Bio-RIDE scheme, emphasizing AI-biotech convergence for health, agriculture, and environmental gains.

Source: PIB

BHARAT GI

In News

- 'Bharat GI', a national initiative to promote India's Geographical Indication-tagged products globally, was highlighted at the India AI Impact Summit 2026.

About

- Bharat GI serves as an umbrella brand showcasing unique Indian GI products like Coorg coffee and Darjeeling tea on international platforms.
- It is launched by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), Ministry of Commerce.
- It leverages digital tools, including AI-driven traceability and market analytics, to connect artisans directly with global buyers.

Source: PIB

ETFs (EXCHANGE-TRADED FUNDS) SURGED

In News

- According to data from the World Gold Council, India's gold ETFs bought a record 15.52 tonne of gold in January, almost equal to the demand seen in the previous three months combined.

ETFs (Exchange-Traded Funds)

- They are investment funds traded on stock exchanges that hold a mix of assets like stocks, bonds, or commodities.
- They let investors easily buy a diversified portfolio, track a specific index or sector, and offer cost-effective exposure to various markets, with prices fluctuating throughout the trading day.

Types

- **Equity ETFs** – invest in stocks, track indices like S&P 500 or sector-specific indices.
- **Bond ETFs** – invest in government or corporate bonds, offering stability and fixed income.
- **Commodity ETFs** – mainly gold in India, providing exposure to commodities and hedging against inflation.
- **Currency ETFs** – track specific currencies globally but limited in India.

Benefits

- ETFs offer diversification across assets, are cost-effective with lower fees
- They provide high liquidity as they trade like stocks, ensure transparency with daily disclosure of holdings
- They are generally tax-efficient compared to mutual funds.

Issues

- ETFs can incur trading costs like commissions, carry an overtrading risk due to ease of buying and selling,
- They may experience tracking errors, where their performance slightly deviates from the underlying index.

Developments

- Rising gold and silver ETF investments in January pushed India's goods trade deficit to \$35 billion, as households, still wary of formal savings, turned to metals amid volatility and geopolitical uncertainty.
- Earlier Sovereign Gold Bonds helped curb imports but were discontinued in 2024 due to high costs, prompting calls for a new scheme for gold, silver, and other metals.

Source: IE

INDIA-UK OFFSHORE WIND TASKFORCE

In News

- India and the United Kingdom launched the **India-UK Offshore Wind Taskforce**.

India–UK Offshore Wind Taskforce

- It has been constituted under **Vision 2035 and the fourth India–UK Energy Dialogue** to provide strategic leadership and coordination for building India's offshore wind ecosystem.
- It is aimed at accelerating cooperation in offshore wind development as part of their broader clean energy partnership under Vision 2035.
- Focus areas for cooperation are ecosystem planning and market design, including seabed leasing frameworks and revenue certainty mechanisms.

Importance

- Offshore wind can supply high-quality renewable power to coastal industrial and green hydrogen clusters, strengthening industrial competitiveness and energy security.
- India–UK Offshore Wind Taskforce reflects mutual confidence between India and the UK to address execution challenges in offshore wind development.
 - ♦ The UK brings experience in scaling offshore wind and developing mature supply chains, India offers scale, long-term demand and a rapidly expanding clean energy market

Do you know?

- India's installed non-fossil fuel capacity has crossed 272 GW, including over 141 GW of solar and 55 GW of wind capacity.
- During the current financial year, India has added more than 35 GW of solar and 4.61 GW of wind capacity.
- India is leading the Hydrogen Breakthrough Goal under the international Breakthrough Agenda and has achieved globally competitive benchmarks under the National Green Hydrogen Mission, with green hydrogen prices falling to a historic low of 279 per kg (approximately £2.65 per kg) and green ammonia prices reaching 49.75 per kg (approximately £0.47 per kg).

Source :PIB

BIHAR'S BAN ON OPEN SALE OF MEAT

Context

- The Bihar government announced a ban on **open-air and unlicensed meat sales in urban areas**.

About

- It prohibits the sale of meat and fish in open spaces, such as roadsides, weekly markets or

public thoroughfares, within urban municipal areas.

- ♦ **Sales** are now restricted to licenced shops that comply with hygiene standards such as proper waste disposal.
- **Violations** can attract penalties under the Bihar Municipal Act, 2007, including fines, seizure of goods and shop closures.
- **Rational:** Open-air vending poses serious public health risks, particularly in Bihar's humid climate.
 - ♦ Unrefrigerated meat attracts flies, dust and pests, increasing contamination by pathogens like salmonella, E. coli, and listeria.
 - ♦ Waste such as blood, feathers and offal often clogs drains.
- **Legality:** The Bihar Municipal Act, 2007, empowers municipalities to impose conditions on hygiene, waste management, location and supervision.
- **Other States:** Many states have regulations calling for licensed and enclosed sale of meat and fish.
 - ♦ These states include Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Jharkhand.
 - ♦ States such as Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra have imposed localised restrictions, such as near temples during festivals or in pilgrim towns.

Source: IE

LOGGERHEAD TURTLES

Context

- According to a recent study, warmer oceans and declining food availability are affecting the reproductive and migratory patterns of **loggerhead turtles**.

Loggerhead Turtles (*Caretta caretta*)

- The loggerhead turtle is named for its large head, which supports powerful jaw muscles that enable them to feed on hard-shelled prey, such as whelks and conch.
- They are found across the Caribbean region, Atlantic Ocean, the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean and the North and South Pacific Oceans.
- The Loggerhead sea turtle is a large **omnivorous marine reptile** recognized as one of the seven extant species of sea turtles.
- They can live up to 80 years or more.
- **Threats include** bycatch in fishing gear, direct harvest of turtles and eggs, loss and degradation of nesting habitat, and changing environmental conditions.

- **They are** classified as Vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).



Source: TH

