

## **PROBLEMS AND PROSPECT OF ECO-TOURISM IN KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK OF ASSAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

India is recognized as one of the twelve biodiversity centers in the world comprising two “Hot Spot” regions namely the Western Ghats and the Eastern Himalayas. The rich and diverse flora and fauna of India is a reflection of the country’s wide range of environmental regimes. The country harbours around 5.2 percent of the world’s known plants and animal species. India has already established more than 500 protected areas and National Parks covering around 4.5 percent of the total land area.

One potential benefit, which arises from protected areas, is that of eco-tourism. It is a non-consumptive and non-marketable direct use of natural resources and it is growing at around 10-15 percent per annum globally. Most of the eco-tourism destinations are natural areas in tropical countries. In India, most of the protected areas have not been fully utilized the potential benefits from the emerging global eco-tourism. In many areas, visits to these places are basically local in nature.

The Kaziranga National Park is situated in both Nagaon and Golaghat districts of Assam. It is basically a flood plain ecosystem in which grasslands predominate. The original park area covers around 430sq. k.m. The park contains about 15 species of Indian threatened (Schedule I) mammals. It harbours the world’s largest population of Indian rhinoceros, which has increased from few dozen in 1908 to 1855 in 2006. It is also famous for its sizeable population of exotic and rare birds. In 1985, the original core area of 428sq. km was declared as World Heritage Site by UNESCO. A large number of tourists (both domestic and foreign) visit the park every year. In this paper, an attempt will be made to find out the problems and prospects of eco-tourism in Kaziranga National Park of Assam.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism has become a major economic activity within developing countries in terms of contribution towards foreign exchange earning, generation of national income and creation of gainful employment opportunities. Thus, increase in specialization in tourism would at first sight appear to be beneficial to developing countries which are well endowed with environmental resources demanded by tourist from high income nations.

India is recognized as one of the twelve biodiversity centers in the world. The rich and diverse flora and fauna of India is a reflection of the country’s wide range of environmental regimes. The country harbours around 5.2% of the world’s known plants and animal species. India’s rain forests hold a high concentration of the nation’s total plants and include many species, which are endemic. A network of protected areas with active participation of local communities is considered as one of the best forms of the conservation of biodiversity. India has already established more than 500 protected areas and National Parks covering around 4.5% of the total land area.

Assam is rich in forest resources and biodiversity. As per the data based on satellite imagery, around 30.20% of land is covered under forests. The state has enormous potentiality with naturally gifted wildlife sanctuaries and important religious and historical sites of interests but

it is yet to develop its tourism-based resources to make it a sustainable source of revenue earning.

**ECO-TOURISM**

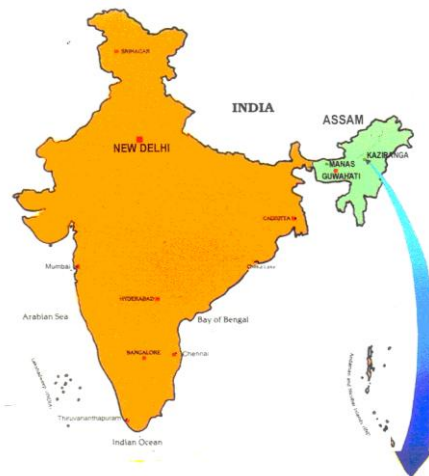
Eco-tourism is also a new concept, developed around the idea of traveling to places of natural beauty, moving around and staying with the places of nature for a couple of days. It has the twin objectives of conserving environment and improving the welfare of the local people. One potential benefit, which arises from protected areas, is that of eco-tourism. It is a non-consumptive and non-marketable direct use of natural resources and it is growing at around 10%-15% per annum globally. Most of the eco-tourism destinations are natural areas in tropical countries. Countries like Costa Rica, Greece, Kenya, South Africa have already successfully promoted eco-tourism. Kerala presents a unique success story of eco-tourism in our country. On this similar line, Assam has immense scope for eco-tourism, as its natural scenario and climatic condition resemble those in Kerala. The State is virtually free from industrial pollution. Its green forests, blue hills, enchanting rivers are the bases on which an eco-friendly tourism can be developed.

In India, most of the protected areas have not fully utilized the potential benefits from the emerging global eco-tourism. In many areas, visits to these places are basically local in nature. Globalization has opened up new vistas for the movement of people in the regional and international context. In this paper, an attempt has been made to find out the problems and prospects of eco-tourism in Kaziranga National Park (KNP) of Assam.

**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK**

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) is situated in both Nagaon and Golaghat districts. The park is located in the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River and at the foot of the Mikir Hills (Map-1). It is basically a flood plain ecosystem in which grasslands predominate. About 70 per cent of the park area is covered with ‘elephant grass’, which grow up to a height of five meters during the rainy season. In the western range, these grasslands dominate, with shorter varieties of grass growing around the water bodies, which are locally known as ‘beels’. The ‘beels’ are recharged each year by the floodwaters of the Brahmaputra.

**MAP 1: MAP OF KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK**





The park contains about 15 species of Indian threatened (Scheduled I) mammals. It harbours the world's largest population of Indian rhinoceros, which has increased from few dozen in 1908 to 1855 in 2006. The rhino, the most attractive animal of the tourists is mostly seen around swampy areas with extensive grasslands, as grass is its main food. The park has also elephant, wild buffalo, swamp deer, hog deer, barking deer, sambar, hollock gibbon, gour, leopard, otter, pythons, civet cat, wild boar, tiger, capped langur etc. Around thirty-four numbers of mammals are found in the park.

KNP is also famous for its sizable population of exotic and rare birds. In fact, the birds in the park and its surrounding exceed 500 species, which is one of the highest in the country. Migratory birds visit the park especially the eastern range during winter and some of them establish breeding colonies. KNP has twenty-five globally threatened and twenty-one near-threatened bird species. The twenty five globally threatened species include the swamp francolin (*Francolinus gularis*), the lesser white-fronted goose (*Anser erythropus*), Baer's pochard (*A. Baeri*), Blyth's kingfisher (*Alcedo Hercules*), the pale-capped pigeon (*Columba punicea*), the Bengal florican, the Nordmann's greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*), the black-bellied tern (*Sterna acuticauda*), Pallas's fishing eagle (*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*), the greater spotted eagle (*Aquila clanga*), the imperial eagle (*A. Heliaca*), the lesser kestrel (*Falco naumanni*), the white-bellied heron (*Ardea insingns*), the spot-bellied pelican (*Pelecanus phillippensis*), the Dalmatian pelican. Moreover, around nineteen main species of fish are found in water body of Kaziranga.

If we go through the history of KNP we find that Lady Curzon first heard about rhino of Kaziranga from her British tea planter friends when she came to Assam in winter of 1904. Although she could not see the animals, but she could spot hoof prints with three toes. Alarmed by the fact that the rhinos in Kaziranga was heading for extension, she convinced her husband Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy of India, to take measure to save the unique animal. Under the initiative of Lord Curzon, a preliminary notification announcing the intention of the

Government to declare 57, 273, 60 acres of Kaziranga as a reserve forest was issued. Finally Kaziranga was declared as reserve forest in January 1908 with the primary objective of preserving the rhinoceros and other large mammals. Subsequently KNP was declared as a Game Sanctuary in 1916. Gradually, the sanctuary began as a nucleus encompassing a small area, expanded to its present size. Finally, in 1974, it was declared as Kaziranga National Park. In 1985, the original core area of 428 sq km was declared as World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

**PROSPECT OF ECO-TOURISM IN KAZIRANGA**

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) has enormous potential for attracting tourists. Now it (KNP) has become one of the renowned recreational sites for wildlife observation in India. The peak tourist’s season in KNP starts from October when the rainy season comes to an end to April when the park is closed due to rain and other accompanying problems.

During the past decade, tourist arrivals at KNP, the home of one-horned rhinoceros, have fluctuated due to political unrest. However, the situation has improved in recent years. The following Table-1 shows tourists arrivals in KNP in various years.

**TABLE-1:  
ANNUAL NUMBER OF TOURIST ARRIVALS IN KNP, 1996-97 TO 2004-05**

Year	Foreign Tourists	Domestic Tourists	Total Tourists	Tourist Arrivals to KNP as Percentage of Total Tourist Arrivals in Assam
1996-1997	1677	16715	18392	5.24
1997-1998	2408	17117	19525	5.86
1998-1999	1091	18157	19248	2.27
1999-2000	1623	37696	39319	4.17
2000-2001	1838	50498	52336	5.32
2001-2002	1050	42992	44042	2.60
2002-2003	2055	59811	61866	2.86
2003-2004	3773	57864	61637	2.69
2004-2005	5154	67719	72873	2.94

Source: Directorate of Tourism, Kaziranga National Park, 2006

Table - 1 shows that there is a tremendous increase of arrivals of both domestic and foreign tourists. For example, the domestic tourist arrivals increased by 4.1 times and the foreign tourist arrivals increased by 3.1 times from 1996-97 to 2004-05. However, the share of tourist arrivals of KNP to that of Assam was reduced from 5.24 per cent in 1996-97 to 2.94 per cent in 2004-05.

In view of immense potentiality of tourism, the Government of Assam and many corporations as well as private organizations have made tremendous efforts during the last two decades to harness the tourism potential. However, the role of State Government in building infrastructure for promotion of tourism is of singular importance.

The State Government has taken various steps for the development of tourism infrastructure in Kaziranga National Park. The tourism infrastructure project for up gradation and expansion of tourist facilities in Kaziranga is completed. The Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) in association with private participation has taken the luxury vessel project between

Kaziranga and Guwahati. In fact, the ATDC has made serious efforts for providing good means of transport as well as comfortable accommodation facilities by taking over many of tourist lodges and guest houses in order to market tourism in the State. The central Government has sanctioned of Rs. 200.00 lakh as project cost of Luxury Cruise vessel project. Kaziranga is also included in Eco-Tourism Circuit under the integrated development of Tourism Circuit Scheme. The central Government has also developed tourist village in Kaziranga. Durgapur village, near the park has been announced as a tourist village where a tourist can enjoy the traditional culture and custom of an Assamese village. In January 2007, the Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) and Cane and Bamboo Technology Centre first inaugurated bamboo based Eco-tourism cottage at Kaziranga. The Golaghat district administration has also set up a medicinal plant park. The central Government has given financial assistance through various schemes for the development of Kaziranga National Park. In 2002-03 the total fund utilized is Rs. 54.38 lakh against the sanctioned amount Rs. 85.16 lakh in 2001-02. In the annual budget 2007-08, Assam Government had given priority to the tourism sector of the State.

In the State Government sector, the Assam Tourism Department and Assam Tourism Development Corporation have their own lodges in Kaziranga. Moreover, an encouraging number of private entrepreneurs have established a good number of lodges near the park.

The recreational value of an outdoor site is reflected in a visitor's willingness to pay for the visit. This can be estimated as the consumer surplus under the demand curve of the site by travel cost methodology. On the basis of 305 surveyed data in 2004-05, the consumer surplus has estimated from the semi-log form of function relating the visitation rate to local travel cost and it was Rs.4,682.68 per visit of tourist. With tourist number estimated an average of 65,459 during the years 2002-05, consumer surplus yields a minimum value of Rs.30.65 million per year. A substantial part of it could be taxed or visitor charges could be increased to yield additional benefits for the park.

### **PROBLEMS OF ECO-TOURISM IN KAZIRANGA**

There is enormous potential of eco-tourism in Assam, in general and KNP in particular. However, there are certain important constraints of tourism development of Assam in general and KNP in particular. The main constraint has been the lack of awareness of the potentials of tourism among the policy makers and the bureaucrats (Assam Vision 2020-25). The other major factor has been the image of the State and the North Eastern Region with regard to the safety factors. The growing violence and insurgent activities have, no doubt, disrupted the development of tourism in Assam.

At the same time the infrastructure and the services required have not been developed to the extent required. The infrastructure development has been haphazard and in many places the Government has constructed lodges and way side amenities without proper assessment of tourist arrivals and potentialities. The transport and communication bottlenecks to and from KNP acted as a discouraging factor for willing visitors.

The strategy and approach of the tourism development has been faulty. There is no coordination among various Government departments which are dealing with tourism. The participation of private sector in tourism development is low and the State Government has not come forward with a clear intensive policy. The budgetary provision for tourism sector has been inadequate and there is a huge gap between the amount sanctioned and the amount released.

There has also been no integrated development and management of tourist circuits and adequate attention has not been given to product diversification to attract tourists. There has also been over concentration on certain tourist attractions where the capacity to handle tourists has its own limits. At the same time, KNP the study area, suffers from certain peculiar problems. For example, most of the tourists used to visit KNP to watch wild animals and birds specially one-horned rhino. However, in this park around 583 rhinos were killed within a period of twenty-seven years (The Assam Tribune, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2007). The forest guards failed to protect the rhinos which were the main source of attraction for tourists. The foresters and the task force, deployed to detect the poachers, were able to recover sixty-two rhino horns from the poachers during the last twenty years (The Assam Tribune, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 2007). Further, they do not have proper arms and ammunitions to fight against the poachers. These are some important problems associated with eco-tourism in Kaziranga.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

To overcome the problems and for the development of tourism in Kaziranga, both the Government and public should take necessary actions.

Public-private partnership should be treated as an essential ingredient of the policy for promotion of tourism in KNP. The Government can build up the infrastructural facilities for tourism but the private sector is best suited for the management and delivering of the services.

It was found that after the elephant rides or jeep safari, the tourists have little options for recreation in KNP. Therefore, there is need to provide additional recreational facilities in KNP. This would mean greater investment in activities like trekking, hiking, angling etc. in the nearby areas along with fascinating cultural activities. This would encourage the tourists to stay in KNP for longer periods.

In order to attract more tourists, it is necessary to develop integrated tourist circuits covering the areas close by. For example, there are a number of tea gardens near by KNP. There are around ten golf courses located mostly within the compact areas of tea gardens in upper Assam. It offers a unique opportunity to integrate with eco-tourism in KNP with tea tourism as well as golf tourism.

The participation of local people should be encouraged. For example, it may be possible to provide a unique experience to the tourists by building low-cost infrastructure in the villages adjoining KNP, by using local materials and local design inputs and providing local food at a normal price tag. This will create employment opportunity among the locals.

The Government should develop an interactive and properly managed website for KNP which should have links with national websites, websites of private industries, service providers etc

All the developmental activities, particularly infrastructure for facilitating tourism in KNP should be planned with futuristic view on environmental sustainability. The tourists visiting KNP should be instructed to carry food items or essential items in biodegradable packages in order to reduce the problem of solid waste accommodation. In fact, the tourists waste disposal is the major environmental problem faced in Sikkim and Nepal.

The State Forest Department finds itself ill-equipped to fight against the poachers and smugglers and contain this menace due to the limited resources available with it for protection

of wild animals. Therefore, there is an urgent need to modernize the forest guards in order to protect these wild animals from the poachers and encroachers.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is clear from above analysis that though there is a vast scope for development of eco-tourism in Kaziranga National Park of Assam, we can't deny it's limitations. If the above-mentioned suggestions and guidelines are planned and implemented properly, there is no doubt that sustainable eco-tourism can be achieved successfully in KNP.

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