

TOURISM IN NORTH EAST INDIA PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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ECOTOURISM IN ASSAM: AN ANALYSIS OF PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF **Kaziranga National Park**

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ABSTRACT:

In the context of globally growing sector like tourism, Assam with both physical and human diversities is one of the most promising states of the country in respect of tourism promotion. Assam has an immense natural resources and great potentialities for ecotourism destination. Ecotourism is a new form of tourism based on the idea of sustainability. It is a preserving travel to natural areas by not disturbing the integrity of the ecosystem. It is a conservation tool and a community based tourism strategy. Among the ecotourism destination, Kaziranga National Park enjoys special status since it is endowed with a large number of bio-spots or natural ecosystem where there is immense potential for ecotourism to flourish. It is currently recognized as the fastest growing segment of the

tourism market [Yadav 2002]. presently ecotourism comprises 15-20% of international tourism. The growth rate of ecotourism and nature based activities is higher than most of the other tourism segments [Kundari and Chandra, 2004]. Its market is growing at an annual rate of 30% [Whelan, 1991]. This paper argues that Assam is rich in ecotourism resources but is lacking in infrastructure and a strategic outlook. The small share of the state in the tourism market is disproportionate to its potential. This paper is an attempt to study the opportunities and challenges being faced by Kaziranga National Park.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Sustainability, Ecosystem, Potentialities.

INTRODUCTION:

The term 'eco' on tourism comes from the Greek word 'oikos' meaning 'house'. The term tourism 'eco-tourism' simply means, 'ecologically sound tourism' or 'ecologically sensitive tourism'. The word Eco-tourism first came into existence at a place known as Belize in Central America, which is famous for many natural beautiful places and scenarios.

One of the first to use the term appears to have been Hetzer (1965) who identified 'four pillars' or principles of responsible tourism- minimizing environmental impacts, respecting local cultures, maximizing the benefits to local people and tourists satisfaction. The first of these was held to be the most distinguishing characteristics of ecological tourism.

Hector Ceballos-Lascurian was the first to coin the phrase in early 1983. The term was used to describe the nature based travel with emphasis on education, management and development of sustainable tourism product and activity.

Eco- tourism began to have its prominence in 2002, when the United Nations celebrated the International Year of Eco-tourism. A world summit was organized in Quebec in Canada from 19th to 22nd May 2002, in connection with the International Year of Eco- Tourism. One important aspect of International Year of Eco-tourism was to analyze and promote eco-tourism potential to improve the environmental performance of tourism.

The summit was an initiative of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). It was hosted by Tourism Quebec and the Canadian Tourism Commission. The purpose of the summit was to bring together Governments, International Agencies, NGO's, Communities, Academic Institutions and Individuals with an interest in eco-tourism and enable them to learn from each other and identify some agreed principles and priorities for the future development and management of eco-tourism.

Eco-tourism has emerged as a platform to establish partnership and to jointly guide the path of tourists seeking to experience and learn about natural areas and diverse culture. The declaration of the Year of Eco-tourism has provided an impetus to the Government and provides entrepreneurs to initiate a plan of action for eco-tourism development both in the protected areas and other nature-based areas with direct support and participation of the local community.

DEFINITION OF ECO-TOURISM:

According to International Ecotourism Society, "Ecotourism is a responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and improves the well-being of the

local people" (TIES, 1990). Eco tourism reduces the adverse effect of tourism on nature and environment. It appreciates the natural and cultural heritage of an area. Eco tourism focuses on recycling, energy efficiency, water conservation, socially responsible travel and creation of economic opportunities for local communities. It is based on the two objectives of conserving environment and improving the welfare of local people.

Ceballos Lascurain (1987) defines it as "traveling to relatively undisturbed or un contaminated natural areas with specific objectives of studying, admiring, enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas". This definition was used subsequently by Boo (1990) and Lindberg (1991).

In 1992, Elizabeth Boo forwarded her latest definition where she identified sustainable development effort as an important element of ecotourism. Another definition by Valentine (1993) that states the characteristics of ecotourism is: "Ecotourism is restricted to that kind of tourism which is

- Based on relatively undisturbed natural areas;
- Non-damaging, non-degrading, ecologically sustainable;
- A direct contributor to the continued protection and management of
- The natural areas; and
- Subject to an adequate and appropriate management regime."

BRIEF PROFILE OF KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK: (23)

Assam, the gateway of the north east region of India, is famous all over the world as the home of the Indian one-horned rhinoceros with which is almost inextricably linked the name of the Kaziranga National Park (KNP). KNP is one of the major places of tourist attraction in the North East India. The Park extends over an area of 430 sq.km with its proposed additional areas of 429.49 sq.km. up to 6th addition. It is bounded by the Karbi Anglong Hills on the South and Brahmaputra river on the North. It is said that KNP is a tourist friendly National park. Elephant safari and jeep safari are the two ways to explore the wild in the wilds. The vast open country makes KNP very accessible and wild life viewing fairly pleasurable. KNP is located on the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra River in the far North East of India, Assam. KNP is charmed with its swamps and tall thickets of elephant grass making it the ideal habitat for Indian one-Horned Rhinos. Kaziranga is a vast expanse of tall elephant grass; marshland forest crisscrossed by four major rivers, including the Brahmaputra River and has a numerous small bodies of water. KNP is now a protected area of global significance.

It was declared a forest Reserve in the year 1908, making it one of the oldest protected areas in the world. In 1916 it was declared a Game sanctuary and was opened to the visitors in 1937. Because of limitless hunting and poaching, leading to an alarming depletion in the number of Rhinos, it was declared a Wild life Sanctuary in 1950. In the year 1974 it was declared a National park. Later in 1985, the park was designated as a Natural world Heritage Site, by UNESCO on the basis of its outstanding universal value representing significant ongoing

geological processes, biological evolution and mans interaction with his natural environment and for conserving important and significant habitats where threatened species of plants and animals of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science and conservation still survive. (Mathur et al, 2005).

In 2007, the park was also given the status of Tiger Reserve Forest. The park is divided in to Central, Eastern and Western Sector, consisting of Semi evergreen forest high land, rivulets, marshes and extensive plains covered with tall elephant grass. The park is mainly famous for one horned rhinoceros. It is also the home of variety of wildlife like, Wild buffalo, Elephant, Swamp deer, Hog deer, Barking deer, Sambar, Wild boar, Tiger etc. The park has recorded 34 numbers of mammals and 480 species of birds, out of which 18 numbers of birds are globally threatened. Birds like the Egrets, Pond herons, River tern, Black necked storks, Pelican Partridges, Bengal Florican stock, Pied horn bill, Fishing eagle are found in abundance.

OBJECTIVES:

The present paper is an attempt to make an in-depth study of the prospects and potentialities in Kaziranga National Park. It also tries to highlight the inflow of both domestic and foreign tourist in the Park and emphasizes the constraints relating to the development of ecotourism and finally suggests effective measures for attaining the desired development of ecotourism in the state.

Sources of Data:

The analysis is based on secondary sources of data. The sources of data are as follows:

1. Directorate of K.N.P, Assam.
2. Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam.
3. Directorate of Tourism, Assam.
4. NEDFI

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

1. Prospects and Potentialities of Kaziranga National Park:

A: Flora

Four main types of vegetation exist in the park. These are alluvial inundated grassland, alluvial savanna woodlands, tropical moist mixed deciduous forest, and tropical semi-evergreen forests. The main characteristics of flora in Kaziranga are the dense and tall elephant grass intermixed by small swamplands left behind by the receding floodwaters of the river Brahmaputra. The marshes of Kaziranga National Park have an abundant cover of water lilies, water hyacinth, and lotus which provide a beautiful look to the surroundings of the park.

The common trees and shrubs are *Albizia procera*, *Duabanga grandiflora*, *Lagerstroemia speciosa*, *Crateva unilocularis*, *Sterculia urens*, *Grewia serrulata*, *Mallotus philippensis*, *Bridelia retusa*, *Aphania rubra*, *Leea indica*, and *Leea umbraculifera*. Common tall grasses are sugarcane, spear grass, elephant grass, and the common reed. Numerous forbs are present along with the grasses. Amidst the grasses, providing cover and shade are scattered trees- dominant species including kumbhi, Indian gooseberry, the cotton tree (in savanna woodlands), and elephant apple (in inundated grasslands).

Thick evergreen forests, near the Kanchanjhuri, Panbari, and Tamulipathar blocks, contain trees such as *Aphanamixis*

polystachya, *Talauma hodgsonii*, *Dillenia indica*, *Garcinia tinctoria*, *Ficus rumphii*, *Cinnamomum bejolghota*, and species of *Syzygium*. Tropical semi-evergreen forests are present near Baguri, Bimali, and Haldibari.

B. Fauna

KNP is universally acknowledged for its importance as one of the most recent intact habitat of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros. It is just because of the efforts taken by the conservation that in 2009 domiciles 2,048 rhinoceros, about 70% of the world's total wild population. Apart from rhinoceros, it also acts as a home to world's largest population of Asiatic Wild Buffalo. The rare swamp deer is also found here in Kaziranga. According to a recent census conducted in the year 2011 Kaziranga contained as many as 1163 wild Indian elephants. There are also near about 479 species of wetland, grassland, and woodland birds, of which 18 are globally threatened. KNP has the rare distinction of being one of the very few places in the world which contain breeding populations of three different species of tiger outside Africa namely the Royal Bengal Tiger, the Indian Leopard, and the Clouded Leopard. KNP had a population of around 40 Royal Bengal Tigers during the 1978 census, which grew 265% to 106 in the 2010 census, distinguishing Kaziranga with the highest ecological density of tiger in the world. The population of Asiatic wild buffalo in KNP was 610 in 1978 census, which grew 218% to 1937 in 2008 census, and it is the largest population of Asiatic wild buffalo in the world. KNP had also a population of 773 wild elephants in 1978, which also grew 50.45% to 1163 in 2011 census. KNP is also home to the last surviving population of

eastern swamp deer. According to the 1978 census the population of the eastern swamp deer were 697 which falls 44.19% to 389 in 1999 census and further grew 75% to 681 in 2007 census in comparison with 1999. The decrease in the swamp deer population may be reflection of the increasing tiger population.

Other significant population of large herbivores in KNP includes Gaur and Sambar. Smaller herbivores include Indian Muntjak, Hog Deer, Barking Deer, and Wild Boar. KNP is also home to Sloth Bears, Jungle Cat, Fishing Cat, and Leopard Cat. There are some other mammals like Hispid Hare, Indian Gray Mongoose, Small Indian Mongoose, and Large Indian Civet, Small Indian Civets, Bengal Fox, Golden Jackal, Chinese Pangolin, Indian Pangolin, Hog Badger, Chinese Ferret Badger, Parti-coloured Flying Squirrel and bats are also found in the park. The census report of five major species of KNP is given in Table:

Year	Species				
	Rhinoceros	Tiger	Swamp	Elephant	Wild Buffalo
1978	938	40	697	773	610
1984	1080	527	756	523	677
1991	1129	-	-	-	-
1993	1164	72	-	1094	-
1997	-	80	-	945	-
1999	1552	-	389	-	1192
2000	-	86	486	-	-
2001	-	-	-	-	1431
2002	-	-	-	1048	-
2005	-	-	-	1246	-
2006	1855	-	-	1293	-
2007	-	-	681	-	1048
2008	-	-	-	1293	1937
2009	2048	-	-	-	-
2010	-	106	-	-	-
2011	-	-	1165	1163	-

Source: Director, KNP & Environment & Forest Department, Govt. of Assam.

2. Inflow of both Domestic and Foreign Tourists in the KNP:

KNP is open for the visitors from November to December and from January to April every year. In this period Kaziranga witness an unprecedented rush of tourists. The number of visitors and revenue collection in KNP is shown in table:

Year	No. of Visitors		Total Visitors	Total Revenue (Rs)
	Indian	Foreigner		
1986-1987	61207	403	61610	224493
1987-1988	65273	614	65887	303914
1988-1989	52160	841	53001	285686
1989-1990	50021	454	50475	275381
1990-1991	22704	463	23167	310298
1991-1992	26827	526	27553	613811
1992-1993	27943	659	28602	849428
1993-1994	55560	892	56452	799583
1994-1995	53243	1392	54635	880951
1995-1996	24897	3199	28088	880951
1996-1997	16715	1677	18382	170062
1997-1998	17117	2408	19523	2197068
1998-1999	18157	1091	19248	1802856
1999-2000	37496	1623	39319	2229291
2000-2001	50498	1838	52336	3038258
2001-2002	44162	2144	46306	3494084
2002-2003	59811	2055	61866	5360425
2003-2004	57864	3772	61636	6138657
2004-2005	68412	5147	73559	6675037
2005-2006	49116	5210	54326	7615169
2006-2007	67968	5748	73716	7980949
2007-2008	53640	6106	59746	8734185
2008-2009	100384	5767	106051	11220698
2009-2010	105264	7580	112844	12167974
2010-2011	112392	7447	119839	13673482

Source: Director KNP

From the above table we can summarize that the tourism industry plays an important role in Assam's economy. Therefore it is very essential to take necessary steps for the improvement of this industry.

CONSTRAINTS RELATING TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KNP:

A. Flood

Floods are always considered to be a dreaded period for Kaziranga National Park and its animal life but since last decade the increasing level of multi wave flood is really threatening the future of the Park and not only the Rhino. Due to various reasons, mainly deforestation in the upper catchments area of the Brahmaputra, the intensity of the flood is continuously on the rise. During flood most of the animals including the Rhinos have to migrate from the Park and take shelter on the adjacent high grounds in Karbi Anglong Hills or wherever they may find shelter. These areas are populated and protection of the animals during the period of migration from and back to the Park becomes an uphill task as enforcement network is almost non-existent in such areas. Many animals, especially the deer and particularly the young, old and infirm lose their lives by drowning, poaching or run over by vehicular traffic on the National Highway.

B. Erosion

The Brahmaputra River, along the northern boundary of KNP, is infamous for the ravaging erosion during the annual floods. The land area of the park eroded by floods has already

been reduced considerably, especially during the last three decades. The intensity of erosion is heavy near *Erasuti* and *Moklong* camp of the park.

C. Habitat Degradation

Consequent to recurrent flood, several water bodies or beels in the Park have shrunk in size due to siltation. Besides, deposition of sand in short grass areas has also degraded the suitability of such areas for the herbivores. The grasses growing in such areas have to emerge through the sandy deposits and are coarse, thick and not very palatable to the foraging animals. The invasion of weeds like water hyacinth in water bodies and mikenia, mimosa in prime grassy areas is also a serious threat to the park and its denizens. Since siltation of the water bodies is one of most, prominent contributory factors towards Habitat degradation, desiltation of the water bodies in Kaziranga National Park needs to be taken up on a priority basis.

D. Poaching

Poaching of Rhinos has been the major threat to the Kaziranga National Park and will continue to do so as the superstitious belief regarding the aphrodisiac and medicinal value attributed to the Rhino horn persists. It has been observed and experienced that the intensity of poaching increased mainly due to escalation in high value of the horn consequent to imposing ban on its trade. During 1980 to 2005, there was a report of lost of around 567 rhinos to poachers. It has been reported that at least 18 rhinos were killed in 2008 and 14 in 2009 (IANS, 2010).

E. Impact of Land use change:

Impact of the land use change due to population pressure and agricultural development is another challenge to the conservation of the Park. Increase of the land use changes around the Park increase the risk that the resident population of tigers and other animal species become genetically isolated.

F. Crop Raiding

The animal depredation on crop and property and occasional cattle lifting by large predators cause considerable hardship to the poor people who reside on the fringe of the National Park. These people depend on their crop for living and most work their land with plough animals. When their crops are destroyed by animals or their plough animals killed by predators, their economy is shattered. No amount of preaching and education on conservation can retrieve the situation. Thus it is essential for the Department to provide some material help to these people through compensation for crop losses and loss of livestock because of animal predation.

G. Threat from Numaligarh Oil Refinery

The Numaligarh refinery, situated nearby the KNP in Golaghat district has already been identified as a possible threat, being positioned upstream from the park on the *Dhansiri* River. The oil exploration activity around the park thus poses a tremendous challenge to conserving the values of this World Heritage Site.

H. Shortage of Staff and Infrastructure:

There is shortage of existing sanctioned staff and infrastructure for managing the KNP. Further, with more areas added to the KNP, additional staff and infrastructure is needed for effective control over the KNP.

The following are some of the suggestions for fostering sustainable Eco tourism development:

- i. The recurring flood and erosion of river Brahmaputra, Poaching, Mimosa Menace, Stray Rhino, Pollution of the neighbouring areas etc. are the major threats for conservation of biodiversity of this world heritage site. Priority should be given for the protection and conservation of wildlife and natural resources of this park.
- ii. In order to earn benefit of eco-tourism, infrastructure development, especially road, transport, power, accommodation should be developed and enhanced.
- iii. Stress should be given on publicity in national and international level. Advertisement and press can play a vital role in this area.
- iv. The entrepreneurs should get financial assistance from bank and other financial institutions. Proper training through government and non-government agencies will enable the entrepreneurs to introduce innovative practices in their activities.
- v. State government should take serious steps for the development of the tourism of this destination.

- vi. Co-operation between state tourism department, forest department, and N.G.Os. is needed for boosting up of tourism in this area. Forest department should strictly follow the code of conduct of eco-tourism in this sector.

CONCLUSION:

KNP is a unique place for its diverse flora and fauna and it attracts large number of tourists every year. It is an ideal tourist spot in Assam. K.N.P. needs systematic and scientific approach for long-term sustainable tourism development. The importance of conservation of KNP is related for the enhancement of agricultural production, ecological balance, mitigation of environmental pollution and natural calamities. The Kaziranga National Park has been recognized as an idea tourist destination. We need concerted effort from all section of people of the society for conservation of rich biodiversity of this world heritage site by spreading the slogan "Man and nature need each other and by hurting one we wound the other".

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