

The Kaziranga Dilemma



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Mubina Akhtar 7 September 2012 18078 views

It was a joy ride from Darjeeling to Ghum. My co-passenger, a Mexican in his late sixties, was nodding playfully to the chug-chug of the doughty engine as the tom thumb coaches struggled uphill. His next destination, he said, would be Kaziranga. “Kaziranga! So you are visiting Assam?” — I was all ears to what he had to say about my home state.

“Assam! Where is it?”

One need not have to go through the geography of the land when it comes to Kaziranga--- I quickly tried to draw a conclusion.

Kaziranga, or more precisely the Great One-horned Rhino, made the map of Assam more prominent in the World's atlas. The pre historic pachyderm taking its trudge under the elephant grass has become symbolical of Assam to the outside world. Every visitor to the Park who romances with its beauty, is compelled to pledge for its protection. It was this pledge along with the gradual intensified measures taken by the Forest Department, that the rhino population began to recoup from a mere dozen in 1908 to 250 after 50 years and an optimum 400 in 1966.



An ideal habitat for the breeding of rhinos, Kaziranga has seen a rise in the number of the species. The animal shrugged off its 'endangered' tag and soon its population crossed the 2000 mark. The target figure is 3000 by 2020 under Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) programme 2020. The present rhino population in the Park is a little over 2,500. The increase in the number of this pre historic pachyderm has also increased poaching activities. There have been cases of rhino killing grabbing headlines every other day. Translocation of rhinos to other parts remains a daunting task as ideal rhino habitats like Pobitora, Manas and Dibru-Saikhowa are even more vulnerable. A translocated rhino in Manas had lost its life after it strayed out of the Sanctuary recently. Field level forest personnel complain of inadequate patrolling staff. With insufficient frontline staff, it is a colossal task for few people to constantly guard against human rapacity. This March forest guards on the sandbars of Majuli, keeping vigil on a straying rhino that was badly injured by a mob, found the task exhausting--they threw in the towel after chopping off the horn from the living rhino!

Although, conservation continued to be the keyword for KNP, over the years the objective seemed to loose its priority owing to tourist pressure. It is also a fact that Kaziranga earns the distinction of being that rare destination where one can see a number of species together within a short timespan. This unique abode of the one-horned rhino, as well as many rare and endemic species, has been projected more as a 'tourist destination' by the state forest department. As a result, hospitality measures found topmost priority while other infrastructure development essential for conservation purpose were sidelined. The tourist season has become longer. The Jeep Safari Association had even requested the Park authorities to start the season with the start of Puja holidays. Conservationists allege that jeep safaris were allowed inside

the park when repair of roads and bridges were still in progress. The overcrowded tourist seasons coupled with a continuous flow of researchers, experts, scholars, activists round the year has become a challenge in itself for conservation of wildlife. That Kaziranga has lost its tranquility can be studied from the behaviour of the Park inmates. There were incidents when tourists -- even forest guards -- were killed by rhinos, jumbos and wild buffaloes.



What we have to remember is that only an exclusive four per cent of our landmass has been set aside for wildlife as protected areas. The basic purpose of creation of the protected areas network of our country has to be conservation, not tourism promotion. Kaziranga, too, falls in this exclusive four percent protected area.

With the National Park was given an added Tiger Project status in 2006, protests surfaced in the World Heritage Site for the tiger project status would threaten the tourism and hospitality industry. There had been pressure from the Central Government to impose restrictions on the flow of tourists to the National Park. Bowing to the guidelines, Park authorities decided to declare a 430 sq. km. area of the Park as core area where the flow of the tourists would be restricted. But the protesters were of the view that the project would deprive the unemployed involved in the jeep safari and hotel business and also asserting that the rhino was more important for Kaziranga than the tigers.

Rhino or tiger – while that debate over Kaziranga continued -- the Supreme Court, stepping in to save the tiger, directed that there shall be no tourism activity in the core areas of tiger reserves across the country. The apex court was hearing a PIL, filed by conservationist Ajay Dubey that prompted the interim ban on commercial tourism activities on July 24, 2012.

Earlier, a court order had asked the reserves to notify buffer zones, a 10-km stretch around the core area that could be permitted for tourism. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) noted that the high profile tourist facilities around wildlife areas in recent years has led to exploitation, degradation, disturbance and misuse of fragile ecosystems and ensuring “further alienation of local people”.

According to experts, big cat needs a wide home range that requires a sizable ecologically undisturbed area to breed. The requirement being 800 to 1200 km for every 20 tiger. The Supreme Court is simply enforcing these Project Tiger guidelines. On the other hand, tour operators as well as a section of conservationists are opposing the ban saying that not too many animals are sighted in the buffer areas. This would dishearten tourists. Keeping tourists out of the core areas means lesser tourist footfalls that would go against the interest of local people as well as the protection of the tiger itself!



The Supreme Court ban on “commercial tourism” in core areas of tiger reserves has largely been welcomed by conservationists. Of late, the tiger tourism business has been in the eye of the storm as the hospitality industry--involving big names--were raking in the moolah using ‘public property’ after securing the traditional rights of the forest fringe community. It is now expected that, as per guidelines, the state governments would be required to set up local advisory committees that would monitor the implementation of state-level eco-tourism strategy in the national parks and sanctuaries as well as monitor tourist facilities within 5km of the wildlife areas.

Kaziranga boasts of having the highest density of tigers in the world. A census carried on by a local NGO found 70 tigers on camera trapping in about half the area of the National Park. The Park area has almost doubled with several extensions and stands at 860 sq km. KNP, with its elevation to a tiger reserve, started receiving huge funds from national and international sources directed to its tiger project along with its regular quota of central and state funds. Assam was given a total of Rs 1368.451 lakh as a first installment of central funds to its three tiger projects (Kaziranga, Manas and Nameri) during 2004-05 to 2008-09. KNP received the second installment of Rs 1441.106 lakh in 2010-2011. Another Rs 426.168 lakh were sanctioned for the project during the 2011-12 fiscal year. Funds are also pouring from national agencies like Integrated Development of Wildlife habitats. Recently, the Central Government has increased its fund quota to the tiger project. Earlier it was fifty percent by the state government and fifty percent by the Centre. The new ratio is 90:10.

Project Tiger has given Rs 4.27 crore in the last financial year to KNP for initiating protection measures during floods.

While funds came pouring in, news of fund misappropriation and

rampant corruption in the department continued to hit the headlines. Infrastructure development for conservation activities inside the park took a backseat. On May 30, 2012, the state forest and environment department published a full page advertisement of department's achievements in the last eleven years. Under the head of infrastructure development the department has shown 718 km road construction inside forest areas, repair of 685 km of road, 450 bridges, construction of 355 different buildings and a new headquarter building for the department in Guwahati, 70 forest camps, purchase of 181 motor cars, two hundred wireless sets, 300 cell phones, 648 fire arms, 101 computers, 105 GPS etc. Few people in this region will disagree that it is not construction of buildings for the top ranking officials of the state forest department, what was needed inside the park was high raised platforms for the animals to take shelter during the floods. It is not computers but essentially boats that are needed for rescue parties in the far reaches of the parks.

Flood is not a new phenomenon for the Kaziranga National Park. In fact, grasslands and savannahs occur in riparian flats inundated by the floodwater of the Brahmaputra. These grasslands are unique natural vegetation and the combination of these grasslands, swamp forests and marsh form the ideal habitat for rhinoceroses, elephants, swamp deers and the Asiatic Buffaloes.

However, this year, flood left a trail of disaster quite unmatched. It also brought out an array of questions for the state forest department. Why have they failed to take up precautionary measures even after receiving Rs 4.27 crore in the last financial year for initiating protection measures during floods by Project Tiger? Why hospitality measures gained priority inside the KNP than conservation measures? Where are the frontline staff the department claimed to have filled up?

Absence of infrastructure facilities and insufficient manpower brought doom for a sizable wildlife population in Kaziranga. Since June 26, reports of casualty figures poured in alarmingly. While the flood level of the Brahmaputra, flowing through the north of the KNP crossed the danger level at Dhansirimukh, 90 percent of the Park got inundated. With rising water level most of the existing highlands inside park were submerged and animals including elephants, buffaloes, rhinos, deer, wild boars were seen crossing the NH 37 to take shelter on the Karbi Anglong Hills in the south. But in the process quite a number of wildlife got killed or injured by speeding vehicles on the highway. On the other hand, the marooned wildlife taking shelter near human settlements got killed indiscriminately. Carcasses of rhinos were recovered with their horns cut off. The body of a 3/4 month old baby rhino was rescued from Haldibari area. Forest guards shot dead a charging buffalo. The guards complained of inadequate frontline staff as well as a minimal number of boats that stalled rescue operations.

The state forest department put the number of animals died in KNP at 559. The casualties include 14 rhinos, one elephant, 10 swamp deer, 30 wild boar, five porcupines, two hog badgers, two gaurs, and one fox.

Species	No of deaths	Total population	Death (%)
Buffalo	1	-	-
Jackal	1	-	-
Elephant	2	1165	0.17
Hog badger	2	-	-

Python	2	—	—
Porcupines	5	—	—
Swamp deer	10	1169	0.86
Sambar	15	—	-
Rhino	17	2290	0.74
Wild boar	28	—	—
Hog deer	512	40000	1.28

Two days later, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest while reviewing the flood situation in Kaziranga National Park advised the state government to declare the adjoining Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary as a Tiger Reserve to enable adequate protection.

The Union Ministry (MoEF) report while confirming the death of 612 wild animals in the floods, also claimed that only three rhinos have fallen prey to poachers, while the rest 14 have died due to old age. On the contrary investigations showed it was not old age but acute flood crisis inside the park during the deluge that claimed the lives of a number of adult rhinos. Kaziranga is said to be the jewel in the crown of Assam's green assets. However, the current wave of floods worked as an eye opener that brought out the real picture of the conservation status inside the KNP. It is important to note here that the World Heritage Committee in 2009, sought a report on the state of conservation by the state forest department on the Kaziranga National Park. The Central Government was to inform the heritage committee that operational and financial arrangements are in place. The report, it is believed, must include the 'pressures' like floods, commercial activities, climate change, change in land-use patterns and development of roadways. It is not known whether the report on conservation status of Kaziranga reached the Heritage Committee.

The forest department has not been able to induct new blood in the services since 1991 as fresh requirements are banned. The ageing staff with limited capacity to work hard and cope up with the heavy pressure of the varied class of duties has created management problems. The staff has to work round the clock as most of the forest offenders and poachers operate during the night hours. The excessive pressure and lack of basic amenities and living conditions particularly in the fur-flung remote areas have resulted in a lot of frustration. The most critical factor leading to frustration and general empathetic attitude of the frontline staff is the general neglect and limited avenues of promotion. The situation is further aggravated by the political interference on transfers and posting and there are no fixed tenure for the frontline staff to man difficult situations.

The threats to the park has been envisaged in the setting up of industries within or adjacent to the park as well as quarrying and mining activities in the 'No Development Zone' around Kaziranga and Karbi Anglong Elephant Reserve. Equally disturbing is the aggressive organized encroachment by illegal migrants with political backing. Encroachment by tea gardens, coupled with illegal logging have eroded vast stretches of the prime wildlife habitat. Unchecked growth of the hospitality industry in close confines of the park is destroying the once placid pristine ambience.

A joint paper by UNESCO and United Nations Foundation 'Opportunities and Challenges for Kaziranga National Park over the Next Fifty Years', in 2005 had already warned about the future threats to the park. The paper said that the continued survival of KNP over the next century and consolidation of the conservation successes achieved in the last hundred years will depend, to a largely on what happens beyond the Park's boundaries and also on ensuring that management options elsewhere, in the river and in the surrounding landscape do not undermine the ecology and integrity of the park.

Photograph courtesy: Asomiya Pratidin.

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BY MUBINA AKHTAR

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