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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Kaziranga's Elevated Corridor — A Template for Infrastructure-Conservation Reconciliation

DOWN TO EARTH

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Down to Earth 17 January 2026 GS3

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"The Kaziranga Elevated Corridor costs Rs 6,956 crore and imposes 34 NBWL conditions. Is this the right model for handling infrastructure-wildlife conflicts? Or does the real solution require that highways be rerouted entirely away from Protected Areas?"

WHY IN NEWS

The Kaziranga Elevated Wildlife Corridor project (34.5 km elevated section on NH-715, Assam) moved toward construction with 18 contractor bids received in January 2026. NHIDCL implements the Rs 6,956-crore project, approved by the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) with 34 specific conditions. The project is the most ambitious attempt in India to engineer a solution to the fundamental conflict between highway expansion and wildlife migration.

TWO IMPERATIVES IN COLLISION

India faces two simultaneous and genuine imperatives that are in spatial conflict at Kaziranga.

Imperative 1 — Connectivity: NH-715 is Assam's economic lifeline, connecting Guwahati (Assam's commercial capital) with Jorhat, Dibrugarh, and the tea-growing heartland of Upper Assam. Heavy goods vehicles, oil tankers (Duliajan and Naharkatiya have significant petroleum operations), and passenger traffic depend on this corridor. Assam's economic growth requires better road capacity.

Imperative 2 — Conservation: Kaziranga is irreplaceable. It hosts 70% of the world's one-horned rhinos — not by chance, but through six decades of concentrated protection investment. NH-715, bisecting the park, killed 63 large mammals in a single year according to WII research. Each dead rhino or elephant represents a permanent loss from a globally significant population.

These imperatives cannot be resolved by choosing one over the other. Both are legitimate. The question is whether the engineering solution — the elevated corridor — genuinely resolves the conflict, or merely displaces it.

THE ELEVATED CORRIDOR — A GENUINE INNOVATION

The 34.5 km elevated section of NH-715 is, architecturally, a sensible response to a clearly-diagnosed problem. The problems with surface-level highways through wildlife habitats are structural:

- Animals cannot predict traffic; vehicles cannot predict animals
- Speed differentials between wildlife crossing speed and vehicle approach speed make avoidance impossible
- Fencing to prevent crossings redirects animals — which must still migrate — to bottlenecks where risk concentrates
- Speed limits are routinely ignored; enforcement is difficult across a 39-km highway stretch inside a national park at night

An elevated road with 4–6 metre clearance below addresses all these simultaneously. Animals cannot reach the road surface. Vehicles cannot reach the animals. The crossing corridor remains functionally open 24 hours. If built correctly, this is not a compromise — it is a solution.

The **34 NBWL conditions** attached to the approval are equally important: they address construction-phase disturbance (seasonal restrictions), operational-phase speed limits, mandatory wildlife crossing approach corridors (vegetated channels leading animals to the underpasses), and monitoring requirements. Conditions-based approval is far preferable to the historic pattern of either blanket rejection (which then gets judicially overridden under development pressure) or blanket approval without safeguards.

WHAT THE CRITICS MISS — AND WHAT THEY DON'T

The critique of elevated corridors:

- Some ecologists argue that the fundamental problem is that the highway passes through a national park at all — that the solution is rerouting, not elevation
- Rerouting NH-715 entirely around Kaziranga was studied but would require 80+ km of new road, displacement of multiple villages, and acquisition of agricultural land at costs exceeding the elevated corridor itself
- The elevation option retains the existing right-of-way; rerouting creates new environmental footprints

The legitimate concern:

The 34 NBWL conditions are valuable only if enforced. India's track record on post-clearance condition enforcement is poor. The NBWL grants clearances with conditions; the enforcement responsibility falls to state forest departments and district administrations that often lack capacity, resources, or political will

Who monitors compliance with speed limits at 3 am on NH-715 during monsoon months? The conditions require quarterly monitoring reports — but reporting is not the same as enforcement

Construction-phase disturbance may be underestimated: heavy equipment, vibration, worker camps near wildlife habitat, and forest clearing for access roads all disturb animals during the 36-month build

The systemic lesson: The Kaziranga corridor would not have been necessary if India's environmental impact assessment (EIA) process had incorporated cumulative wildlife impact analysis when NH-715 was first upgraded in the 1990s and 2000s. The current Rs 6,956 crore bill is, in part, the cost of earlier decisions made without adequate environmental foresight.

THE NBWL GOVERNANCE QUESTION

The **National Board for Wildlife** is constitutionally India's highest wildlife governance body — chaired by the Prime Minister, with mandatory representation from scientists, NGOs, and state governments. In practice, NBWL meetings are infrequent and the Standing Committee (SCNBWL), chaired by the Environment Minister, handles most clearances.

The NBWL clearance process for Kaziranga generated two concerns:

1. The 34 conditions precedent problem: Granting clearance with 34 conditions implies the project is approvable in principle but requires substantial modification in practice. If even 10 of the 34 conditions are inadequately implemented, the ecological value of the elevated design is undermined. NBWL should — but currently cannot — revoke clearances for condition non-compliance without a protracted legal process.

2. Cumulative impact assessment: The Kaziranga landscape faces multiple infrastructure pressures simultaneously — the highway corridor, railway line expansion, township development in Bokakhat, and tourism infrastructure. NBWL evaluates projects individually rather than assessing cumulative landscape-level impact.

India's environmental governance framework needs to evolve from **project-level clearances** to **landscape-level planning** — particularly for UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Priority Tiger Habitats where cumulative pressures can degrade the ecosystem even when no individual project crosses the threshold for individual rejection.

THE REPLICABILITY QUESTION

Is the Kaziranga model — elevated highway through wildlife migration corridor, NBWL conditions, NHIDCL implementation — a template for similar conflicts?

Candidate corridors where the model could apply:

Pench Tiger Reserve — NH-44: One of India's busiest highways transects the Pench-Kanha wildlife corridor in Madhya Pradesh; roadkill documented

Bandipur-Mudumalai — NH-212 (now NH-67): The Mysore-Ooty highway at Bandipur has been the subject of a Supreme Court night-time ban (partially upheld) and has documented tiger and elephant kills

Ranthambhore — NH-52: The Sawai Madhopur-Kota highway bisects connectivity zones

Where the model won't work:

Linear infrastructure that cuts across animal home ranges rather than crossing a single migration corridor is harder to solve through elevation — animals need habitat, not just crossing points

Tiger corridors between multiple forest patches require landscape-level conservation planning, not engineering solutions at a single chokepoint

The honest assessment: the Kaziranga elevated corridor is a high-cost solution to a problem that shouldn't exist — a highway that should never have been routed through a World Heritage wildlife zone. Building the solution is necessary. Preventing future Kazirangas through better upfront EIA requires political will that engineering cannot substitute for.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: NBWL (National Board for Wildlife; PM chairs; Environment Minister chairs SCNBWL); NHIDCL (Northeast + border states; under MoRTH); Kaziranga NP (Assam; UNESCO 1985; Golaghat + Nagaon; one-horned rhino; 70% world population); WII (Wildlife Institute of India; Dehradun; MoEFCC); Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA Notification 2006; MoEFCC; 4 categories A/B1/B2).

Mains GS-3: Environmental governance in infrastructure projects — EIA to NBWL clearance | Cumulative impact assessment: gaps in India's environmental regulatory framework | Human-wildlife conflict: engineering vs. policy solutions | Wildlife corridor policy: 32 critical corridors (2022) and implementation gap | UNESCO World Heritage Sites in India — governance and protection challenges.

📌 FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

NBWL (NATIONAL BOARD FOR WILDLIFE):

Established: Wildlife Protection Amendment Act 2002 (amended 2006)

Chairperson: Prime Minister of India (ex-officio)

SCNBWL (Standing Committee): chaired by Union Environment Minister

Function: Approves projects in/near Protected Areas; reviews wildlife conservation policies

Clearance required: Within 10 km of PA buffer = SCNBWL; within PA core = NBWL full board

Strength: 47 members (including wildlife experts, NGO representatives, state govt)

EIA (ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT) — INDIA:

Governed by: EIA Notification 2006 (replacing 1994 Notification); MoEFCC

Categories: A (central-level EAC); B1 (state-level, EIA mandatory); B2 (state-level, screening only)

Process: Screening → Scoping → EIA Study → Public Hearing → Appraisal → Clearance

Criticism: No cumulative impact assessment (CIA) requirement; project-by-project evaluation misses landscape effects

KEY WILDLIFE CORRIDORS (INDIA'S 2022 POLICY):

32 critical wildlife corridors identified (Centre for Wildlife Studies; Wildlife Trust of India)

Critical corridors: Kaziranga–Karbi Anglong; Corbett–Rajaji; Bandipur–Nagarhole; Pench–Kanha; Satpura–Melghat

Bottlenecks: National highways, railways, irrigation canals, urban encroachment

KAZIRANGA ONE-HORNED RHINO CONSERVATION:

1905: Victoria Memorial Fund saves last ~12 animals (Curzon proclamation)

1908: Reserved Forest declared; 1916: Game Sanctuary; 1974: National Park; 1985: UNESCO WHSite

2024 census: 2,613 rhinos

Anti-poaching: Assam state armed guards + central funding; dogs, drones deployed

Translocation: Rhinos translocated to Manas NP for population establishment

NHIDCL VS NHAI:

NHAI: National Highways Authority of India; statutory; NHAI Act 1988; national highway network

NHIDCL: Government company; 2014; border states + NE India; NHIDCL Act not needed — Companies Act

Both under: Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH)

Sources: NHIDCL, Down to Earth, MoEFCC, WII, PIB

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