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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Development vs Conservation: The Case Against Shrinking Kaziranga's Buffer

 BUSINESS STANDARD

24 August 2026 ·

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Development vs Conservation: The Case Against Shrinking Kaziranga's Buffer

 **Business Standard**

24 August 2026

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Kaziranga earns record tourism revenue precisely because it is protected. If conservation is what makes the asset valuable, on what economic theory does shrinking its buffer count as development?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

Business Standard

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

Kaziranga's tourism revenue hit a record in 2024. It did so because the park is protected. A proposal that treats protection as the obstacle to prosperity has the causation backwards.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Eco-sensitive zones are among the most reliably examined topics in GS3 environment, and this is a live, well-documented case with hard numbers on both the ecological and the economic side. It also pairs with a second editorial on the same subject in a different newspaper the following day, which is unusual and useful.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, [environmental impact assessment](#), biodiversity. **GS Paper 2:** Centre-state relations in environmental clearance, and the role of the Supreme Court in ESZ determination.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

An **Eco-Sensitive Zone** is a regulated buffer notified around a National Park or Wildlife Sanctuary by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**. It is not a no-activity zone. It is a graded regulation zone: some activities are prohibited, some regulated, most permitted.

Assam's proposal is to ask the Centre to reduce Kaziranga's ESZ from **10 km to between 1 and 3 km**. Chief Minister **Himanta Biswa Sarma** has defended it as necessary for civic and urban growth in the towns bordering the park.

THE ANALYSIS

Why the buffer is not peripheral to the park

Kaziranga's ecology is organised around **annual inundation by the Brahmaputra**. When the park floods, the survival response of its large mammals is to **move south, across National Highway 715, into the higher ground of the Karbi Anglong hills**.

That means the land outside the notified park boundary is not a courtesy margin. It is **functionally part of the park** for the weeks each year when the park itself is under water. Deregulating it does not protect a smaller Kaziranga; it produces an **ecological island** that its own wildlife cannot leave when it must.

What the buffer is already failing to prevent

The editorial's sharpest point is that the ESZ is not currently holding. Construction, mining, quarrying and stonecutting are already occurring, polluting water bodies and obstructing transit routes. The honest reading is uncomfortable for both sides: the buffer is under-enforced, and the proposal responds to under-enforcement by removing the rule rather than enforcing it.

The economics run the other way

MEASURE	FIGURE
Kaziranga tourism revenue, 2024	All-time high of about Rs 8.8 crore
One-horned rhinoceros	2,613 , about two-thirds of the world population
Tigers	148 , among the highest densities in the world
Elephants	a shifting population of over 1,550

The development-versus-conservation framing assumes the two pull apart. Here they do not. The visitors come for the rhinos, and the rhinos are there because of the protection regime.

The alternative already funded

A **Rs 6,957-crore, 35-km elevated corridor** addresses the connectivity problem directly: traffic moves, animals pass underneath, and the regulatory protection stays. That is the reconciliation, and it is already on the table.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Assam's proposal: reduce Kaziranga's ESZ from 10 km to 1-3 km; defended by CM Himanta Biswa Sarma on civic and urban growth grounds.

Kaziranga tourism revenue: all-time high of about Rs 8.8 crore in 2024.

2,613 one-horned rhinoceros, about two-thirds of the world population; 148 tigers; over 1,550 elephants.

Proposed alternative: a Rs 6,957-crore, 35-km elevated corridor.

Eco-Sensitive Zones are notified by MoEFCC under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. They are graded regulation zones, not no-activity zones.

National Highway 715 runs along the park's southern edge; animals cross it to reach the Karbi Anglong hills during the annual Brahmaputra floods.

Kaziranga was declared a National Park in 1974, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985, and a Tiger Reserve in 2006.

It is also an Important Bird Area designated by BirdLife International.

The one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

*an **Eco-Sensitive Zone is not a buffer zone of a Tiger Reserve**, and the two are separate concepts under separate statutes. ESZs are notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986; a tiger reserve's **core and buffer areas** are notified under **Section 38V of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**. Kaziranga has both, and conflating them is a common error.*

THE DEBATE

For the reduction: towns bordering the park face genuine restrictions on construction and civic infrastructure; residents did not choose to live beside a World Heritage Site; a 10 km buffer around a long, narrow park covers a large populated area.

Against: the flood-time migration makes the southern land functionally part of the park; the activities the buffer restricts are precisely those already damaging it; and the economic case for protection is stronger than the economic case against it.

The honest middle: the strongest version of the reduction argument is about **enforcement quality, not zone width**. A narrower, genuinely enforced zone might protect more than a wide, ignored one. That argument deserves engagement rather than dismissal, and it is not the argument being made.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable frame is that **a protected area's boundary is a legal line, not an ecological one.** Ecosystems are defined by processes — flooding, migration, hydrology — that do not stop at a notification. Wherever you find a conservation conflict, ask first which ecological process crosses the boundary, because that is usually where the real dispute is.

Apply it to Kaziranga and the flood migration is the answer. Apply it to a river sanctuary and it is the **catchment**. Apply it to an elephant reserve and it is the corridor.

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Enforce the existing zone before revising it.** Mining, quarrying and stonecutting inside a notified ESZ are already regulated; the proposal responds to a failure of enforcement.
- ❷ **Complete the elevated corridor**, which resolves the connectivity constraint the reduction is meant to address.
- ❸ **Assess the zone by ecological function, not uniform distance.** A 10 km radius is a crude instrument; the southern migration corridors need more protection than a 10 km arc elsewhere may need.
- ❹ **Publish the flood-time movement data** so any revision is argued against evidence rather than against assertion.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

Links to standing themes on **protected area management**, **human-wildlife conflict**, and **environmental clearance federalism**. Practice question: *“An eco-sensitive zone protects an ecological process, not a perimeter. Discuss with reference to a national park of your choice.”*

Source: Development vs Conservation: The Case Against Shrinking Kaziranga's Buffer — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Business Standard argues that Assam's proposal to ask the Centre to shrink the eco-sensitive zone around Kaziranga National Park from 10 km to between 1 and 3 km, defended by the Chief Minister as necessary for civic and urban growth in neighbouring towns, is a specious argument, because the park already faces encroachment from construction, mining, quarrying and stonecutting that pollutes water bodies and blocks monsoon wildlife transit routes, and because conservation is itself the source of the region's economic value.



SUPPORTING

- The threats the buffer exists to regulate are already materialising inside it: construction, mining, quarrying and stonecutting pollute water bodies and obstruct the transit routes animals use during the annual floods, so shrinking the zone would deregulate precisely the activity causing the damage.
- Conservation pays in cash terms, with Kaziranga tourism revenue reaching an all-time high of about Rs 8.8 crore in 2024, which means the park's protected status is not a drag on the local economy but the reason the local economy has a tourism sector at all.
- A better instrument already exists in the Rs 6,957-crore, 35-km elevated corridor, which addresses the connectivity problem the buffer reduction is supposed to solve without removing the regulatory protection.



MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

QUESTION

Eco-sensitive zones are frequently presented as a constraint on local development. Examine that framing with reference to Kaziranga, and discuss the process by which an eco-sensitive zone is notified and revised. (250 words)

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