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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Do Not Tamper With Kaziranga's Buffer

 **ECONOMIC TIMES**

25 August 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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Do Not Tamper With Kaziranga's Buffer

 The Economic Times

25 August 2026

GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Kaziranga's animals survive the annual flood by walking uphill out of the park. If the land they walk across is deregulated, has the park itself been protected or merely fenced?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

The Economic Times

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A park whose animals must walk out of it every monsoon is not protected by its boundary. It is protected by what lies beyond the boundary.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Eco-sensitive zones, protected-area law and human-wildlife conflict are recurring GS3 themes, and Kaziranga is among the most examinable single sites in the syllabus.

GS Paper 3: Conservation; environmental pollution and degradation; environmental impact assessment; biodiversity.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ)	A regulated belt around a protected area, notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986	The instrument proposed to be shrunk
Animal corridor	An identified route allowing wildlife movement between habitat patches	The specific function the buffer serves at Kaziranga
Flood-pulse ecology	An ecosystem whose productivity depends on regular inundation	Why Kaziranga's floods are a process, not a disaster

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Kaziranga

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Location	Assam, spanning Golaghat, Nagaon, Sonitpur and Biswanath districts, with additions in Karbi Anglong
Reserve forest	1905
National park	1974
UNESCO World Heritage Site	1985
Tiger Reserve	2006
Setting	Brahmaputra floodplain
Highway	National Highway 715 (formerly NH-37) along the southern boundary
Designated animal corridors	Several, crossing the highway

Kaziranga holds roughly **two-thirds of the world's population of the greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*)**, listed as **Vulnerable** on the IUCN Red List and placed in **Schedule I** of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. It is known for its **Big Five**: the one-horned rhinoceros, the tiger, the Asian elephant, the wild water buffalo and the swamp deer (barasingha). It also records among the **highest tiger densities** of any protected area in the world.

The Eco-Sensitive Zone Framework

Eco-sensitive zones are notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under **Section 3(2)(v) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**, drawing on the **National Wildlife Action Plan** and subsequent ministry guidelines. Activities within an ESZ fall into three categories: **prohibited** (such as commercial mining and polluting industry), **regulated** (such as construction, tree felling and commercial establishments), and **permitted** (such as ongoing agriculture and rainwater harvesting).

The judicial position has moved:

YEAR	POSITION
June 2022	The Supreme Court directed a minimum one-kilometre eco-sensitive zone around every protected area
April 2023	The Court modified this, recognising that a rigid uniform buffer could harm settled villages and permitting flexibility

Clearance for activities affecting protected areas and corridors involves the **National Board for Wild Life** and, for tiger reserves, the **National Tiger Conservation Authority**.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. Kaziranga's flooding is a process, not an emergency.** The annual Brahmaputra inundation sustains the park's grasslands and wetlands and is the reason its productivity supports such large herbivore populations. Any framing that treats the flood as a problem to be engineered away misunderstands the ecosystem. The animals' adaptation is not to resist the flood but to leave.
- 2. The buffer is the escape route, which is what makes this case unusual.** In most protected areas an ESZ dilutes edge effects: noise, light, [encroachment](#), pollution. At Kaziranga it does something more specific. It keeps open the southward path to the **Karbi Anglong** highlands that the park's mammals take when the water rises. The land outside the boundary is functionally part of the habitat rather than adjacent to it.
- 3. Islanding is the precise risk.** If the migration route is built over, a protected area surrounded by development becomes an ecological island. Island populations lose genetic exchange, cannot recolonise after local die-offs, and in a flood-pulse system face a periodic mortality event with no escape. The park would retain its boundary and lose its function.
- 4. The highway is the pinch point.** NH-715 runs along the southern boundary, and the designated corridors cross it. Removing this stretch from regulation would eliminate the basis for speed restriction, construction control and the elevated corridors intended to let animals pass. Roadkill during flood-time crossings, already a recurring problem, would rise sharply at exactly the moment animals are most stressed and most numerous on the road.
- 5. The livelihood objection is legitimate and must be engaged, not dismissed.** ESZ restrictions concentrate costs on people living near protected areas, who are frequently among the poorest, while the benefits are [diffuse](#) and national. The Supreme Court's own move from a rigid one-kilometre rule in 2022 to a flexible standard in 2023 reflects this. The correct response is not to defend every hectare of buffer uniformly but to distinguish land whose regulation serves a specific ecological function from land where it merely restricts village life.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Kaziranga: reserve forest 1905, national park 1974, UNESCO World Heritage Site 1985, Tiger Reserve 2006.

Holds roughly two-thirds of the world's greater one-horned rhinoceros population; *Rhinoceros unicornis*, IUCN Vulnerable, WLP Schedule I.

The Big Five: one-horned rhinoceros, tiger, Asian elephant, wild water buffalo, swamp deer (barasingha).

National Highway 715, formerly NH-37, runs along the southern boundary; designated animal corridors cross it.

Animals migrate south to the Karbi Anglong hills during monsoon floods.

ESZs are notified under Section 3(2)(v) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986; activities are prohibited, regulated or permitted.

Supreme Court: June 2022 minimum 1 km ESZ directive; April 2023 modification permitting flexibility.

*Kaziranga is a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, not a Ramsar site. Assam's Ramsar site is **Deepor Beel**. Also note that Kaziranga's flooding is ecologically **necessary**; describing it purely as a threat is a common and costly error in answers.*

THE DEBATE

FOR (do not shrink the buffer): The eco-sensitive zone at Kaziranga performs a corridor function, not merely an edge-effect function. Shrinking it, and especially deregulating the highway stretch, risks islanding the park and severing the flood-time escape route. Tourism revenue and ecosystem services would also decline, so even on narrow economic grounds the case is weak.

AGAINST (rationalisation is legitimate): Buffer restrictions impose concentrated costs on local residents while benefits are diffuse. A uniform belt drawn without regard to actual land use sterilises settled villages and existing livelihoods. The Supreme Court has itself moved away from a rigid minimum, and revising a zone is a normal exercise of policy discretion rather than an ecological retreat.

Balanced verdict: The dispute dissolves once the buffer is disaggregated by function. Regulation that merely constrains ordinary village activity in areas with no corridor value can and probably should be rationalised, and doing so builds the local support on which long-term conservation depends. Regulation over the **identified animal corridors and the flood-time migration routes** is categorically different,

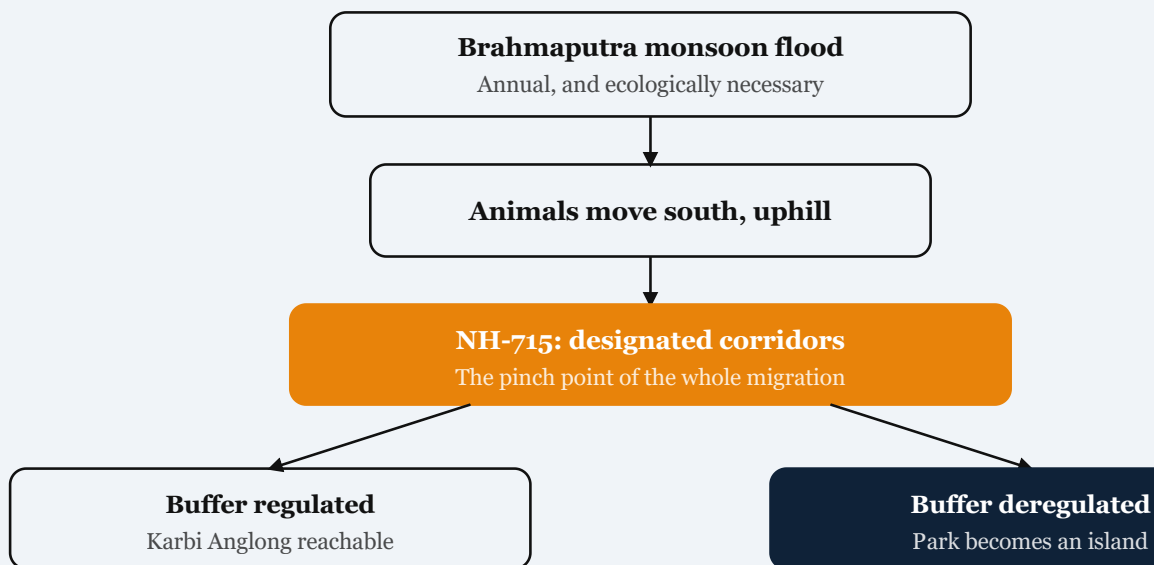
because its purpose is to keep land passable rather than empty. The sequencing also matters: elevated highway corridors should be complete before any highway-linked restriction is eased, and any boundary change should rest on a published expert committee assessment and genuine public consultation.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

When a protective regulation is proposed for reduction, ask what specific function each part of it performs, rather than treating the regulation as a single object to defend or dismantle.

A buffer zone is not one thing. Some of it dilutes edge effects, some of it prevents encroachment, and some of it, as here, keeps a migration route physically open. These functions have different ecological weights and different local costs. A conservation position that defends all of it equally will lose political support and eventually lose the whole; a rationalisation that treats it all as interchangeable will remove the part that actually mattered. Disaggregating by function is what allows both the ecology and the livelihood claim to be answered honestly.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



Everything above the highway happens inside the park; everything that saves the animals happens beyond it. That is why this buffer is not interchangeable with an ordinary one.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A park whose animals must walk out of it every monsoon is not protected by its boundary. It is protected by what lies beyond the boundary.

Kaziranga reserve forest 1905, national park 1974, World Heritage Site 1985, Tiger Reserve 2006; two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhinos; Rhinoceros unicornis, IUCN Vulnerable, WLP Schedule I; Big Five; NH-715 formerly NH-37; designated animal corridors; Karbi Anglong migration; ESZ under Section 3(2)(v) of the Environment (Protection) Act 1986; Supreme Court 2022 one-kilometre directive modified in 2023; Assam's Ramsar site is Deepor Beel, not Kaziranga.

Conservation costs are borne locally while conservation benefits are national and global. What would a fair distribution of that burden actually look like?

Connects to past UPSC Mains questions on eco-sensitive zones, on linear infrastructure through protected areas, and on human-wildlife conflict.

“An eco-sensitive zone should be assessed by the function each part of it performs, not by its uniform width.” Critically examine with reference to a protected area of your choice.

Source: Do Not Tamper With Kaziranga's Buffer — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The Economic Times argues that Assam's proposal to shrink the eco-sensitive zone around Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve risks converting the park into an ecological island by cutting off the animal movement to the Karbi Anglong hills on which its wildlife depends during the annual monsoon floods, and that de-notifying National Highway 715 from regulation would sharply raise roadkill, so no reduction should proceed without an expert committee assessment and wide public consultation.



SUPPORTING

- Kaziranga's ecology is built around annual inundation by the Brahmaputra, and the survival response of its large mammals is to move south across the highway into the higher ground of Karbi Anglong, which means the land outside the notified park boundary is not peripheral to the park but functionally part of it.
- The designated animal corridors crossing the highway are the physical points at which that migration happens, so regulatory protection of the corridor land, rather than of the park interior, is what determines whether the migration remains possible.
- De-notifying the highway stretch from regulation would remove the basis for speed restriction, elevated-corridor construction and construction control along precisely the segment where animals cross in the largest numbers and under the greatest stress.



COUNTER

The counter-view is that eco-sensitive zone restrictions impose real and concentrated costs on residents and local economic activity around protected areas, that a uniform buffer applied without regard to actual land use can sterilise settled villages and existing livelihoods, and that the Supreme Court itself has recognised this by allowing flexibility rather than insisting on a rigid minimum buffer everywhere. On this view, rationalising a zone is a legitimate exercise of policy discretion, not by itself an ecological retreat.



WAY FORWARD

The reconciliation is to make the revision evidence-led rather than uniform: retain full regulatory protection over the identified animal corridors and the flood-time migration routes regardless of any rationalisation elsewhere, complete the elevated highway corridors before easing any highway-linked restriction, base any boundary change on an expert committee

assessment with published reasoning, and route it through genuine public consultation including the communities that bear the cost.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Eco-sensitive zones are often treated as buffers that merely restrict activity around a protected area. Examine their ecological function with reference to Kaziranga, and discuss the framework governing their notification and revision. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Assam's proposal to reduce the eco-sensitive zone around Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve has drawn objection on a specific ecological ground rather than a general conservationist one. The Economic Times argues that the buffer around Kaziranga is not ordinary peripheral land but the corridor through which the park's wildlife escapes the annual flood.

BODY

Kaziranga lies on the Brahmaputra floodplain and is inundated every monsoon. That flooding is not a disaster to be prevented but the process that sustains the park's grassland ecology and its wetlands. The corresponding survival adaptation of its large mammals, including the one-horned rhinoceros, elephants, wild water buffalo and swamp deer, is seasonal movement southward to the higher ground of the Karbi Anglong hills, crossing National Highway 715, formerly NH-37, which runs along the park's southern boundary. Designated animal corridors run across this stretch precisely because it is the pinch point of that migration.

The eco-sensitive zone, notified under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 and shaped by successive Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change guidelines, regulates construction, resorts, quarrying and land-use change in this belt. Its function at Kaziranga is therefore not merely to dilute edge effects but to keep the migration route physically passable.

Shrinking it, and in particular de-notifying the highway stretch from regulation, would remove the legal basis for speed restrictions, construction control and the elevated corridors ordered to allow animals to pass beneath the road. The counter-argument has genuine substance: eco-sensitive zone restrictions concentrate costs on nearby residents, and the Supreme Court, having directed a minimum one-kilometre buffer around protected areas in 2022, itself modified that position in 2023 to permit flexibility where rigid application would harm settled populations.

CONCLUSION

A balanced answer should reject the framing of buffer versus livelihood and argue for differentiation by function. Land whose regulation serves only to restrict ordinary village activity can reasonably be rationalised; land that constitutes an identified animal corridor or flood-time migration route cannot, because its ecological value lies in remaining passable rather than in remaining empty.

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