

1. Kaziranga's Artificial Highlands: Not The 'Real' Solution

Context: During Assam floods Images of the devastation it caused on helpless animals, was that of a group of one-horned rhinos huddled on a dry piece of land in the submerged Kaziranga National Park.

Concern:

- ▶▶ Presumably exhausted, some of the animals were lying down, even as another tried climbing up from the surrounding water.
- ▶▶ There have been many other similar pictures of helpless animals standing atop highlands created inside the national park to offer succour during the annual floods.
- ▶▶ Kaziranga has **144 artificial highlands** – of which 33 were sanctioned three years back – **to bring down animal casualty during this yearly tragedy.**

During Floods:

- ▶▶ More than 200 animals, including 18 one-horned rhinos, were killed in the floods in Kaziranga this year.
- ▶▶ An image of a tiger fleeing from the floods in KNP and taking refuge in a shop went viral on social media – indicating the animals' level of desperation.
- ▶▶ Many such animals, guided by their instinct **to climb up and survive, sought refuge on the artificial highlands.**

But are these Artificial Highlands Beneficial in the long-run, both for the National Park's Fragile Ecosystem and the Animals?

- ▶▶ Pankaj Sharma, divisional forest officer (DFO) of Nameri National Park, also in Assam, thinks that:
 - ✓ Building Artificial Highlands is not a tangible solution.
 - ✓ “Creating 33 artificial highlands, in addition to the existing 111, will lead to more erosion, more siltation in the grasslands.
 - ✓ The grasslands of Kaziranga, its wetlands are a very important part of its ecology, on which multiple animal species are dependent, including the rhino,
 - ✓ There was a time when the grass grew up to a height of 12 feet in the park. “Now that's rare,” **indicating grassland degradation.**

Experts Opinion:

- ▶▶ Erosion, siltation, and shallowing of wetlands have become the major threats to KNP.
- ▶▶ Although erosion in this case – and in most cases when threats to KNP are counted, like by UNESCO – **is river-related**, the artificial highlands further increase this threat.
- ▶▶ “These **artificial highlands may offer temporary relief, but their threat of siltation is graver to the ecology,**”
- ▶▶ Mongabay-India, Robin Sharma, research officer at Kaziranga National Park, said,
 - ❖ As a whole, artificial intervention (artificial highlands) to an ecological process is not useful.”

Ecology of Kaziranga:

- ▶▶ The 880 sq. km KNP, with a core area of 430 sq. km, is surrounded by the Brahmaputra on the north and the hills of Karbi Anglong in the south.
- ▶▶ Apart from being the world’s major stronghold of the one-horned rhino, Kaziranga is home to several globally threatened animal species like the tiger, Asiatic elephant, wild water buffalo, gaur, sambar deer, hog deer, and the hoolock gibbon.
- ▶▶ The annual floods put immense pressure on these animal species for survival.

Floods are Not the Villain:

- ▶▶ On the contrary, floods are necessary for Kaziranga.
- ▶▶ The waters wash away invasive weeds, revitalise the wetlands and replenish the grasslands on which animals, including the key species like rhinos, tigers and elephants are dependent on,”
- ▶▶ **Floods are an ecological process and animals possess a natural instinct to respond to this process – by moving towards the natural highlands**, to the hills of Karbi Anglong, as the waters rise.
- ▶▶ If you observe, the animals start moving towards the natural highland June onwards.
- ▶▶ The hog deer migrate in big numbers and elephants start moving towards the west.
- ▶▶ Hog deer are also among the biggest casualties every year during floods.

Main Concern:

- ▶▶ This seasonal migration is through specific routes – the animal corridors – that are increasingly being encroached upon by human settlements, commercial establishments, thereby blocking the animals’ natural path.
- ▶▶ Kaziranga and Karbi Anglong were once a part of the same landscape; the hills of Karbi Anglong were the natural highlands when it (Kaziranga) was flooded. There were no interruptions in the corridor. There were no establishments, blocking these corridors. But now, where do these animals go.

▶▶ **National Highway Issue:**

- ❖ Critical issue affecting Kaziranga's wildlife – the **National Highway 37 that cuts through the landscape between Kaziranga** and the hills of Karbi Anglong.
- ❖ Every year, as the national park gets flooded and the animals try and escape, they are left with no choice but to take on the speeding traffic on NH-37 while crossing over to the highland.
- ❖ This puts additional stress on the animals and despite speed limitations set for vehicles, leads to a large number of animal casualties.
- ❖ According to the flood report of the forest officer, Eastern Assam Wildlife Division, **17 animals were killed by speeding vehicles along NH-37 in this year's floods.**
- ❖ Wildlife conservationists are therefore worried over widening of the NH-37 to accommodate the rising traffic.

Solution:

- ▶▶ A tangible solution, as experts even within Kaziranga agree, lies in
- ▶▶ **Retrieving these Animal Corridors, thereby offering them access to their natural highlands.**
- ▶▶ The main way to help animals and save their lives is to free natural corridors.
- ▶▶ Ideally, artificial intervention should be as low as possible, but for temporary relief, these artificial highlands are providing relief.”
- ▶▶ The important issue here that needs to be address on a priority basis is **to conserve the corridor connecting Kaziranga to Karbi Anglong, which are the natural highlands.**
- ▶▶ In some of the functional part of these animal corridors, there have been houses and shops built. There need to be regularise this corridors.

Natural Corridors:

- ▶▶ There are nine identified animal corridors connecting KNP to the animals' natural highland in the hills.
- ▶▶ Not only is increasing human encroachment blocking these natural paths, but mining activities and stone quarries along the national park's southern boundary and in the catchment areas in the Karbi Anglong hills have disrupted the animals' natural refuge.

Supreme court:

- ▶▶ Supreme Court banned all types of mining and related activities along KNP's southern boundary as well as in the catchment areas of the rivers that originate in the Karbi Anglong hill ranges and flow into the national park.

- ▶▶ Significant move considering how mining and quarrying activities were leading to “contamination of the water flowing down to Kaziranga”, thereby affecting the wildlife and its habitat.

Highlands Issue:

- ▶▶ Creating more and more artificial highlands inside the national park to offer succour to the flood-affected animals, therefore, is not a solution enough, feel experts.
- ▶▶ In any case, said an official of the Kaziranga National Park, it is mostly rhinos who have taken refuge on these artificial highlands during the floods. Most other animals, like elephants and hog deer, have still preferred to migrate to their natural highland in Karbi Anglong.
- ▶▶ highlands were a sort of “mitigation measure”– “however unwilling we may be to the idea” – that have been put in place to deal with the human activity on the animals’ natural passage.
- ▶▶ About 70% of the 111 existing artificial highlands, were in a dilapidated condition.
- ▶▶ The 33 new ones are built along the southern boundary of Kaziranga, in the east-west direction, in the direction of the water flow.”
- ▶▶ “repairing the existing highlands, instead of building new ones” to provide a temporary solution, would have been ideal.
- ▶▶ Instead of diverting resources in creating artificial refuge spots, stress should be given by the government in clearing the Animal Corridors to their Natural Refuge.

Source: The Wire

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