



Livelihood dependence on tourism: A study in Kaziranga National Park

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Abstract

Tourism has emerged as one of the fastest-growing service sectors in both national and international economies, generating extensive livelihood opportunities for host communities. In the context of Kaziranga National Park (KNP), the expansion of tourism infrastructure and the rising inflow of domestic and international visitors have significantly influenced the socio-economic conditions of the surrounding population. Local residents increasingly depend on tourism-linked occupations such as tour guiding, driving, cooking, souvenir vending, and hospitality services, which collectively contribute to income generation and employment diversification. This study aims to examine and document the processes through which tourism fosters livelihood creation in and around KNP. The research is based on a mixed-method approach, incorporating both primary data collected from field surveys and interviews, and secondary data obtained from published reports, government documents, and relevant literature. Findings reveal that tourism plays a crucial role in supporting rural households by providing multiple income avenues. However, the sustainability of these livelihoods is challenged by the seasonal concentration of tourist arrivals, recurrent flooding, and other environmental uncertainties, which often disrupt revenue flows. The study underscores the need for developing alternative and supplementary livelihood strategies to ensure economic stability and resilience among the dependent communities.

Keywords: Livelihood creation, socio-economic issues, sustainability

Introduction

Tourism has evolved into one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding industries worldwide, exerting a profound influence on economic, social and cultural transformation. As one of the key drivers of globalization, it generates employment, stimulates entrepreneurship and fosters intercultural understanding. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as a multi-dimensional activity that involves travel, service and experience, creating linkages among various sectors such as transportation, hospitality, crafts and communication. The ripple effects of tourism can be observed at both macro and micro levels from national GDP growth to livelihood enhancement among rural communities. In developing economies like India, tourism plays a pivotal role in rural development, poverty alleviation and cultural preservation. India's diverse geography and cultural heritage make it one of the most attractive destinations in Asia. From the Himalayan peaks to the coastal stretches and from ancient monuments to wildlife sanctuaries, the country offers a wide range of tourism experiences. The Indian tourism industry contributes significantly to foreign exchange earnings, regional employment and the preservation of traditional arts and crafts. Among India's many natural and cultural treasures, Kaziranga National Park in Assam occupies a distinguished position. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985, Kaziranga is celebrated for its exceptional biodiversity and as the home of the world's largest population of the One-Horned Rhinoceros. Spread across approximately 430 square kilometers along the Brahmaputra River, it is not only a wildlife haven but also a lifeline for thousands of local residents who depend on tourism-related activities for their livelihood. The tourism industry surrounding Kaziranga has experienced consistent growth over the years. Every year, thousands of visitors from India and abroad flock to the park for its safaris, scenic

beauty and cultural experiences. This influx of tourists creates opportunities for local entrepreneurship, especially for Jeep Safari Drivers, Handicrafts Sellers and Homestay Owners. These three groups represent the most visible and essential components of Kaziranga's tourism ecosystem. The Jeep Safari Drivers connect tourists to the park's natural wonders; the Handicrafts Sellers introduce visitors to local artistry and Assamese heritage; and the Homestay Owners offer authentic experiences of rural hospitality. However, tourism is not merely an economic phenomenon; it is an intricate system involving environmental, cultural and social dimensions. The same forces that generate income and employment can also create disparities, competition and ecological stress. Hence, understanding the comparative impact of tourism on different local business groups is essential for ensuring balanced and sustainable growth. In Kaziranga, tourism acts as the principal livelihood source for numerous households. During the tourist season, typically between September/November and April/May, the villages around the park witness increased economic activity. Jeep safaris, local food stalls, souvenir shops and homestays thrive as tourists arrive in large numbers. However, this economic boom is short-lived. With the onset of the monsoon and the temporary closure of the park, many local businesses face drastic income reductions. The resulting seasonal dependency creates uncertainty, pushing locals to find temporary alternatives such as farming, labor work or migration. This cyclic pattern of prosperity and struggle characterizes many nature-based tourist destinations. While tourism creates employment and promotes social mobility, it can also lead to vulnerability when not supported by sustainable practices and long-term planning. Hence, a comparative understanding of how different business categories experience, adapt to and benefit from tourism becomes vital for policy formulation and developmental planning in Kaziranga. Kalita (2023) [6]

stated that only sustainable farming can assure a steady supply of fibre in the near future. Global environmental consciousness is opening up new opportunities for this natural and renewable fibre. It is crucial to strengthen the production and add value through product diversity at the grower level in order to seize these opportunities. Kalita (2024) [5] stated that the strength of an economy lies on its capacity to maintain sustainable and better livelihood through the creation of income opportunities. Kalita (2025) [4] stated that primary markets serve a decisive role in determining the commercial value of agricultural surpluses and in sustaining the livelihoods of rural farming families.

Objective

1. To assess the economic impact of tourism on local business owners in and around Kaziranga National Park

Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed approach using both primary and secondary data sources to ensure the reliability and comprehensiveness of findings. Primary data were collected directly from respondents through structured questionnaires and personal interviews conducted with 30 selected participants, including 10 jeep safari drivers/owners, 10 handicraft sellers, and 10 homestay owners. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative information related to income patterns, employment opportunities, working conditions, seasonal variations, challenges faced, and perceptions regarding the impact of tourism. Efforts were made to maintain simple and clear language in the questionnaire to facilitate respondent understanding. Secondary data were gathered from various published and unpublished sources such as government reports, tourism department publications, academic journals, books, research articles, online resources, and reports from Kaziranga National Park authorities and NGOs working in the region. Together, these sources aided in strengthening the analysis and supporting the interpretation of primary data.

Analysis and discussion

1. **Experience of the stakeholders:** Analysis of the distribution of respondents based on their years of experience in tourism-related occupations reveals that, the majority of participants (66.6%) have over six years of involvement in tourism activities, indicating that the sector has offered sustained employment opportunities in the study area. Notably, 33.3% of respondents have been engaged for more than 10 years, reflecting long-term economic dependence on tourism. Another 33.3% have experience ranging from 6 to 10 years, suggesting a stable and moderately experienced workforce. Meanwhile, 30% of respondents fall within the 2–5 years’ experience category, implying that tourism continues to attract new participants. Only one respondent (3.3%) has less than two years of experience, indicating limited recent entry into the sector. Overall, the findings reveal that tourism has emerged as a long-standing livelihood option, fostering both stability and gradual expansion among local stakeholders in Kaziranga.
2. **Income level:** Analysis of primary data indicates the variation in monthly income among respondents during

the peak tourism season. A significant portion (33.3%) of the respondents earn between ₹20,001 and ₹30,000, suggesting this as the most common income bracket. Another 30% earn between ₹30,001 and ₹40,000, reflecting comparatively higher earning potential, especially among homestay owners and jeep safari drivers. About 26.7% fall within the ₹10,000–₹20,000 range, showing that a considerable number still earn modest incomes despite high tourist inflow. Only 6.7% of respondents, all from the homestay category, earn above ₹40,000, indicating that income significantly varies depending on the nature of tourism-related activities. Meanwhile, just one respondent (3.3%) earns below ₹10,000, highlighting that low income during peak season is relatively uncommon. Overall, the earnings structure demonstrates that tourism serves as a substantial income source, though disparities exist across different occupational groups.

3. **Inflow of tourist:** 83.3% of respondents reported an increase in the flow of tourist over the past five years.

Table 1: Perception regarding tourism

No	Perceptual Statement	(%)
1	Tourism has improved my living standards.	87
2	Tourism has created more employment opportunities.	83
3	Tourism has helped preserve local culture and traditions.	70
4	Tourism has made life more competitive.	75
5	Tourism has increased cost of living.	60

Source: Field Survey

The responses in Table 1 reflect a predominantly positive perception of tourism among the respondents. A large majority (87%) believe that tourism has improved their standard of living, indicating its direct contribution to income enhancement and livelihood security. Similarly, 83% agree that tourism has generated employment opportunities, suggesting that the sector is seen as an important source of economic activity in the region. Cultural impacts are also perceived positively, with 70% acknowledging that tourism plays a role in preserving local culture and traditions, likely through cultural exchange, handicraft promotion, and traditional hospitality practices. At the same time, respondents also recognized certain challenges associated with tourism. About 75% feel that tourism has intensified competition, indicating growing participation in tourism-based livelihoods and the need for skill development or service improvement. Additionally, 60% agree that tourism has increased the cost of living, reflecting rising prices of goods and services in tourist areas. Overall, the perception reveals a balanced view where economic benefits are highly valued, yet accompanied by socio-economic pressures.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the significant economic role that tourism plays in the livelihoods of local business owners in and around Kaziranga National Park. The findings reveal that tourism acts as a major source of income and employment, with a substantial portion of respondents demonstrating long-term involvement in tourism-related occupations. The presence of experienced stakeholders indicates both the stability and maturity of tourism as an economic activity in the region. Income data

further confirm tourism's importance, showing that a majority of respondents earn sufficient income during the peak season, although disparities exist between different categories of service providers such as jeep safari drivers, homestay owners, and handicraft sellers. The increasing inflow of tourists in recent years has contributed positively to these livelihood patterns, strengthening local economic resilience.

The perception analysis reflects that tourism is widely regarded as a beneficial force for improving living standards, generating employment, and preserving cultural identity. However, the study also uncovers emerging challenges, particularly in relation to rising competition and an increased cost of living. These factors suggest that while tourism provides substantial benefits, it also introduces new pressures that demand careful management to ensure equitable and sustainable development.

Overall, tourism in Kaziranga demonstrates a dual character—while it fosters economic advancement and livelihood opportunities, it simultaneously presents socio-economic vulnerabilities, especially due to seasonality and market dependency. To sustain and enhance the positive impacts of tourism, strategic interventions such as skill development, income diversification, improved infrastructure, and regulated tourism practices are essential. With proper planning and inclusive policy support, tourism can continue to serve as a transformative force for the local communities while safeguarding the ecological and cultural heritage of Kaziranga National Park.

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