

Kaziranga ESZ Controversy – A Multidimensional Analysis

1. Background & Context

- Kaziranga National Park (KNP), a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is a biodiversity hotspot known for the one-horned rhinoceros, tigers, elephants, and migratory birds.
 - In May 2024, the Assam government proposed an integrated Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) of 3,600 sq km covering 8 protected areas (PAs) including Kaziranga and its 10 Additions.
 - In April 2025, the proposal was withdrawn, citing unresolved boundary issues, rights of forest-dwelling communities, and development concerns for around 5 lakh residents across 340 villages.
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2. Legal and Constitutional Dimensions

- Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) are notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 following a 2011 SC directive to buffer Protected Areas.
 - The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (Amended 2022) mandates strict regulation of human activity in and around National Parks and Sanctuaries.
 - The Forest Rights Act (2006) ensures tenurial security and livelihood rights of Scheduled Tribes and traditional forest dwellers.
 - Article 48A (Directive Principles) and Article 51A(g) (Fundamental Duties) emphasize environmental protection.
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3. Conservation and Ecological Significance

- The Ninth and Tenth Additions (especially the 10th with high biodiversity and no human settlements) are ecologically vital.

- Reports of potential denotification or downgrading to Reserved Forest (RF) raise alarms of habitat fragmentation and weakening conservation efforts.
 - Fishing permits issued in Sixth Addition areas violate the WLPA, 1972, risking rhino poaching and ecological degradation.
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4. Socio-Economic and Political Dimensions

- Assam govt cited concerns over:
 - Pending boundary demarcation (since 1985).
 - Unsettled community rights.
 - Risk of displacement of marginalized populations (SCs, STs, EWS).
 - Potential obstruction to infrastructure development (roads, housing, tourism).
 - Conservationists allege political pressure from resort and real estate interests near protected areas.
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5. Implications and Critique

Positive Aspects of Govt's Approach:

- Recognition of unresolved community rights.
- Willingness to resubmit area-specific ESZ proposals based on local context.

Criticism:

- Reflects a piecemeal and fragmented conservation strategy.
 - Undermines long-term ecological integrity and landscape-level planning.
 - Delays and possible denotification of additions with rich flora and fauna can erode buffer zones and increase human-wildlife conflict.
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6. Broader Ethical and Policy Reflections

- Is the state prioritizing short-term political gains over intergenerational ecological justice?
 - How can India balance development goals with constitutional and moral obligations towards biodiversity?
 - Should economic viability trump the ecological irreversibility of habitat degradation?
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7. International Commitments and National Vision

- Contradicts India's obligations under:
 - Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).
 - UN SDG-15 (Life on Land).
 - Paris Agreement (carbon sinks).
 - Weakens India's case for green financing, eco-tourism, and carbon credits.
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8. Model APSC Mains Question (GS V):

Q. Critically examine the implications of Assam government's decision to withdraw the integrated Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) proposal around Kaziranga. How can ecological protection be reconciled with local community rights and development goals?

Model Points for Answer:

- Explain what ESZs are and rationale behind integrated planning.
 - Analyze socio-political and ecological trade-offs.
 - Suggest solutions: participatory conservation, eco-development zones, transparent land-use mapping, rights recognition before ESZ declaration.
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9. Prelims-Oriented MCQ Sample:

Q. With reference to Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) in India, consider the following statements:

1. They are notified under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
2. They act as buffer zones to protected areas.
3. The Supreme Court has mandated a minimum 10 km buffer zone for all National Parks and Sanctuaries.

Which of the above are correct?

- a) 2 only
- b) 1 and 2 only
- c) 1 and 3 only
- d) 2 and 3 only

Answer: (a)

(Statement 1 is incorrect – ESZs are under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
Statement 3 is incorrect – no fixed 10 km rule; it's case-specific as per SC directives.)