

Wildlife Watching and Recreational Experience of Visitors in Kaziranga National Park

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ABSTRACT: *Wildlife viewing is one of the most sought after recreational activity for visitors to Kaziranga National Park which is a World Heritage Site. The research paper attempts to identify and examine the travel motivations of visitors and their participation in various leisure activities in the park. The study is based on primary surveys conducted during the year 2019 by using structured questionnaires to capture visitors' trip motivation, recreational activity and perceived wildlife watching experiences in the park. A review of earlier studies on wildlife tourism is made to understand the attributes fundamental to an exciting wildlife viewing experience in national parks. A sample of 106 visitors who were mostly first time visitors to KNP is taken using convenience sampling method. The study revealed a high level of wildlife watching activity of visitors who were primarily motivated to visit KNP for viewing rare species of wild animals and birds in their natural habitat along with experiencing natural beauty and wilderness. A majority of visitors had exciting wildlife encounters inside the park while undertaking jeep and elephant safaris. Visitors' sighting of wild animals in close proximity inside the park was identified as the essence of an optimal wildlife viewing experience.*

KEYWORDS: *Wildlife watching, Kaziranga National Park, recreational activity, trip motivation, visitor experience.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The human motive to explore nature and its myriad attractions has induced a tourist preference to undertake recreational activity in national parks. This kind of travel provides a unique opportunity to visitors seeking to experience a change from the usual home environment and reconnect with nature. The natural environment is considered to be crucial to the attractiveness of almost every travel destination and recreational area (Farrell & Runyan, 1991). Tourism offerings that provide opportunities for direct contact with nature has become increasingly popular in recent years. From the tourists' point of view, there is a rapidly increasing desire for interaction with the natural environment in a range of ways including the experience of viewing wildlife populations (Jenner & Smith, 1992). For centuries, people have been captivated and fascinated by animals and in recent years tourists have developed an increasing desire to see wildlife in their natural environment. This desire has led to the emergence of a distinct subset of nature-based tourism which is based on wildlife attractions (Duffus & Dearden, 1990; Reynolds & Braithwaite, 2001). Such experiences are important in today's society, where increasing urbanization and mechanization have led to a situation where many people feel disconnected from nature (Forestell, 1993). In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on alternative tourism practices which includes providing opportunities for visitors to travel to pristine natural areas. Wildlife tourism has thus emerged as a distinct subset of nature tourism which focuses on tours giving the opportunity to observe wild animals in their natural environment. This type of tourism has experienced rapid growth in recent years around the world and is closely tailored to the eco-tourism and sustainable tourism. Wildlife tourism can be broadly viewed as any tourist activity having wildlife as its primary focus of attraction (Catlin, Jones, & Jones, 2011). The term 'wildlife tourism' may also be applied to relate tourism experiences and products which feature wildlife as a component of a travel package. Essentially, this is about increasing the probability of positive encounters with wildlife for visitors whilst protecting the wildlife resource. These interactions can occur in either the animals' natural environment or in captivity. However, nowadays, many tourists prefer to view and encounter wild species in their natural habitats (Shackley, 1996). Governments and private commercial entities promote wildlife tourism as sustainable use of the environment that can benefit local people and protected areas whilst raising tourist interest in, awareness of and general support for conservation (Chin et al., 2000; Kiss, 2004; Ballantyne et al., 2009).

II. STUDY BACKGROUND

National parks, by their very nature, are important places for the protection of ecological systems and natural resources and play a significant role in the provision of recreational opportunities to experience and enjoy nature (Weiler, Moore & Moyle, 2013). Wildlife tourism in nature reserves and protected areas is a growing enterprise, particularly in developing and emerging economies (Goodwin, 1996; Gossling, 1999; Balmford et al., 2009; Karanth & DeFries, 2011). National parks in particular have become primary destinations for nature-based tourism activities which provide visitors opportunities to see a wide range of wildlife in non-captive settings. Tourism in National Parks not only promotes protection and conservation of biodiversity but also provides alternative sustainable livelihoods for local people (Rugendyke & Son, 2005). Tourism in Assam is principally nature based as the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the state attract a large section of nature lovers and animal lovers to see rare wildlife in their natural habitat. There are presently five National Parks and fifteen wildlife and bird sanctuaries for the protection and conservation of wildlife in the state. Recognized as a World Heritage Site by the UNESCO, the Kaziranga National Park is a popular tourist destination in the state which attracts a wide range of visitors from nature-lovers and wildlife enthusiasts to overnight visitors seeking fun and outdoor recreation. The impetus of the study is based on probing the nature of wildlife watching activities in the Kaziranga National park and attempts to understand the key motivating elements driving the recreational activities of park visitors.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the light of the above background the specific objectives of the paper are as follows -

1. To understand the trip motivation of visitors and their preference for recreational activity in Kaziranga National Park.
2. To study the travel behavior and socio-demographic profile of visitors to Kaziranga National Park.
3. To examine the overall recreational experience of visitors based on specific park attributes.

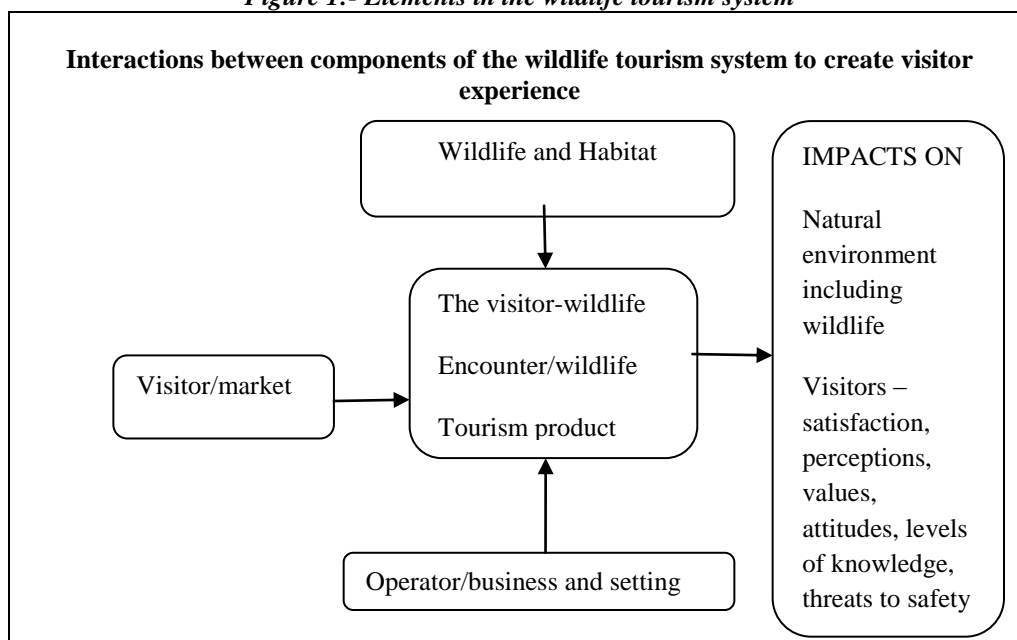
IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Past studies have revealed that motivation is one of the most important variables in understanding tourists' pre-visit and on-site behaviour. Travel motivation also plays an important role in destination choice of visitors. Assessing tourist motivation enables tourism planners to understand their choices, preferences, desires and needs (Bansal and Eiselt, 2004). By understanding tourists' motives, tourism marketers can effectively implement plans with regard to market segmentation, product development, service quality evaluation, image development and promotional activities (Fodness, 1994; Kozak, 2001). Tourists' motivation is regarded as the combination of needs and desires that affects the propensity to travel in a general sense (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003). It not only includes the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination. According to Nguyen (2008), the 'push-pull framework' provides a simple and intuitive approach for explaining the motivations underlying tourists' behaviour and explains why certain tourists select one destination over another. The push factors are viewed as relating to the needs and wants of a traveller, such as the desire for escape from their mundane home environment, relaxation, nostalgia, rest, prestige, knowledge, experience and social interaction (Dann, 1981). Referred to as destination attributes and expectation, the pull factors such as natural beauty & landscape, culture, price, service, climate, etc can pull visitors to the supply components in the destination (Klenosky, 2002). According to the literature, the examination of push and pull factors provide a useful framework to better understand tourists' motivations to visit a particular destination. Knowing what motivates people to travel (push factors) by offering the products (pull factors) that match those needs will enable destination marketers to better satisfy travellers' needs and wants (Cha et al. 1995; Zhang et al., 2004; Jang & Wu, 2006).

Truong & King (2009) show that attributes may be regarded as the key characteristics that define the essence of a holiday destination and may be grouped under the "Five A's model" namely, Attractions, Activities, Accessibility, Accommodation and Amenities. Tourists are primarily motivated to visit places based on these attributes and conditions. Visitors especially those in holiday mood like to enjoy their destination's natural views, beautiful scenery and unique landscape. Natural resources such as wildlife, natural beauty and landscape, flora and fauna are successfully drawing numerous visitors to nature-based destinations such as national parks and nature reserves. As such, nature-based tourism is becoming a popular form of alternative tourism practiced in a range of ways including the experience of viewing wildlife populations (Jenner & Smith, 1992). Tourism based on visitors' interaction with wild animals in captivity or natural environment is a growing phenomenon in international tourism. Such experiences are increasingly becoming a part of organized tourism which are creating economic benefits as well as conservation awareness worldwide. The concept of 'wildlife tourism' developed out of natural area tourism to better deal with any concerns and issues peculiar to wildlife which are often lost in nature-based tourism and ecotourism (Braithwaite & Reynolds, 2002). Wildlife tourism often overlaps with nature-based tourism, special interest tourism and ecotourism and the extent of overlap

depends on exactly how these terms are defined. For instance, wildlife tourism may be considered a form of ecotourism when it occurs within the context of nature-based activities that provide environmental interpretation and adopts environmentally responsible practices. Although the term ‘wildlife’ refers to both flora and fauna in common usage, the tourism industry is generally understood to mean only fauna (animals). According to Higginbottom (2004: 2) “wildlife tourism is tourism based on encounters with non-domesticated (non-human) animals”. Newsome et al., (2005: 18) define wildlife tourism as “tourism undertaken to view and/or encounter wildlife. It can take place in a range of settings, from captive, semi-captive, to in the wild and it encompasses a variety of interactions from passive observation to feeding and/or touching the species.” Wildlife tourism may include a diverse set of experiences such as viewing animals in captivity (zoos, wildlife parks/sanctuaries and aquaria), wildlife watching tourism (viewing or interacting with free-ranging animals), hunting and fishing tourism. Thus, wildlife tourism can be broadly viewed as any tourist activity having wildlife as its primary focus of attraction (Catlin, Jones & Jones, 2011). Wildlife watching is essentially a non-consumptive observational activity, although it can sometimes involve interactions with the animals being watched, such as touching or feeding them. This distinguishes wildlife watching from other forms of wildlife-based activities such as hunting and fishing which are consumptive in nature. The visitor-wildlife encounter forms the core of the wildlife tourism experience and is the result of interaction of the elements of the wildlife tourism system including the wildlife and its natural habitat, the visitor, the tourism operator, the local communities, and the setting (as shown in figure 1 below) which create unique experiences for visitors and tourists (Higginbottom, 2004). Wildlife tourism results in a complex interplay between park managers, local communities, commercial tourism enterprises and tourists (Adams & Infield, 2003; Naidoo & Ricketts, 2006). Encounters also lead to consequences for the visitor, the natural resource base (wildlife and associated habitat), the economy (from the level of individual business to that of the country as a whole) and for the host community. The consequences for the natural environment and for the host communities can be positive, neutral or negative (Budowski, 1976; Ashley & Roe, 1998). In order to understand and manage wildlife tourism in an integrated way, there is a need to consider all of these components which have interdependencies among them. In particular, many wildlife tourism operators and a growing number of industry organizations consider long-term economic sustainability, high quality experiences and ecological sustainability to be primary goals. Besides, Ritchie & Crouch (2003) noted that the competitiveness of a destination is its ability to increase tourists’ expenditure and to attract increasing number of visitors to the destination while providing them with quality services and satisfying experiences. Thus, sustainability of wildlife tourism requires simultaneous attention to visitor satisfaction, visitor education, financial viability of individual business, economic benefits to society as a whole, impacts of tourism on wildlife and habitats and social impacts on host communities. Concepts such as carrying capacity, limits of acceptable change (LAC) and precautionary principles are relevant to determining a sustainable level of activity for wildlife tourism. One of the main arguments for continuing the development of wildlife tourism attractions is to help secure a long-term conservation strategy for wildlife and habitats to sustain in their own ecosystems without having shortage of basic foods (Higginbottom 2004; Newsome et al. 2004; Reynolds and Braithwaite 2001; Wilson and Tisdell 2001).

Figure 1:- Elements in the wildlife tourism system



Source: Higginbottom et al., 2001

Research suggests that wildlife tourism covers a broad sweep of experiences that includes all of the aspects of the tourism genre with the distinguishing feature of animals as the primary attraction. Such experiences may involve aquatic or terrestrial animals, indigenous, endemic or feral animals as well as captive or non-captive animals (Burns & Howard, 2003). Green et al., (1999) stated that the important components required for the popularity of a wildlife tourism experience include the perceived charisma of certain species; vulnerability; uniqueness and the ease of viewing the species of interest. Commonly, rare and difficult to find wildlife can present a lucrative tourism market that is generally accessible only to those with the time and money (Shackley, 1996). Wildlife that presents difficulties in viewing may also appeal to a narrow audience of enthusiasts and professional interests more than the 'mass market' given the patience and dedication often required for a successful viewing experience. As wildlife tourism demand is apparently directly related to the rarity of species (Moscardo et al., 1999), removal of accessibility barriers such as difficulty of viewing may open the experience to a broader audience. Moreover, tourists visiting natural areas and wildlife reserves may have different motives and expectations. Duffus and Dearden (1990), point out that 'tourists cannot be considered a homogeneous population; even tourists that may primarily be motivated by the same stimulus, such as wildlife viewing'. Actually, the motivations among tourists visiting wildlife tourism destinations vary in terms of intensity from the expert / specialist or a dedicated wildlife enthusiast to the novice / generalist who has relatively lower level of involvement and is satisfied with comparatively superficial interaction with wildlife species. In this context, Reynolds and Braithwaite (2001) conclude that the domain of wildlife tourism should comprise a wide range of activities that cater to the wide ranging needs of various tourists in a variety of ways. These include: "nature-based tourism with wildlife component"; "locations with good wildlife opportunities"; "artificial attractions based on wildlife"; "specialist animal watching"; "habitat specific tours"; "thrill-offering tours"; and "hunting/ fishing tours". In addition to estimates of levels of overall demand for wildlife viewing activities, it is also necessary to measure and profile different market segments or types of visitors. There is indeed a need to recognize some basic characteristics of visitors to specific wildlife activities or attractions. Many of the published studies that are available have been concerned with using specialization as a core dimension for categorizing and describing different visitors in wildlife situations. Duffus and Dearden (1990) were the first to adapt this concept from leisure activities in general to non-consumptive wildlife activities. They made a distinction between experts/specialists and novices/generalists. This basic distinction has been used in a number of studies (Manfredo & Larsen, 1993; McFarlane, 1994; Martin, 1997; Cole & Scott, 1999). In general more specialist wildlife watchers: (i) use a wider range of information sources (ii) seek a wider range of species to view (iii) are more interested in interpretation/education (iv) are more interested in rare species and (v) have higher levels of physical activity. Additionally, a growing number of research studies has also investigated satisfaction with wildlife tourism opportunities. Factors found across several studies to be related to overall satisfaction include: (i) The variety of animals seen; (ii) Particular features of the animals; (iii) Being able to get close to the wildlife; (iv) Seeing large, rare or new species; (v) The natural setting itself; and (vi) Being able to learn about the wildlife or the setting.

There are a range of stakeholders involved in the wildlife tourism system. These include host communities, operators, managers, tourists, government agencies concerned with tourism planning and management including local government, travel and trade associations, non-government organizations concerned with animal welfare and conservation, wildlife and other groups and organizations associated with wildlife tourism (Higginbottom, 2004; Liu & Var, 1986; Newsome et al., 2005). Kuvan and Akan (2012) have categorized wildlife tourism stakeholders as local residents and managers of tourism facilities. Liu and Bao (2004) stated that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be valuable partners which can provide technical and financial assistance to some extent. Scientists and researchers are important stakeholders who explore the information through various studies. All of these stakeholders are inseparable parts of the wildlife tourism system. These various stakeholders have different types of roles, involvement and impacts on wildlife tourism. For instance, local communities might be involved in wildlife tourism by demonstrating cultural exchanges, hosting tourists and welcoming them. Business enterprises and service providers can take financial benefits by selling their products and services. Integrated efforts and contributions of all these stakeholders can make tourism more beneficial and sustainable. The support of all stakeholders for developing higher levels of communication and cooperation and for a coordinated and strategic approach to sustainable development of wildlife tourism is most essential.

V. STUDY METHODOLOGY:

For the purpose of the present study, the Kaziranga National Park is selected as it the most visited national park in the state of Assam. The park declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985 extends over an area of 430 sq. km and is bounded by the Karbi Anglong Hills on the south and the Brahmaputra river

on the North. In 2007, the park was also given the status of Tiger Reserve' and has been recognized as a 'Biodiversity Hotspot' for its unique floral and faunal diversity. The park is mainly famous for the one horned Indian rhinoceros and is also home to a variety of wildlife species. The park with its rich biodiversity resources is a favored tourist destination in the state which draws tourists from all over the country and world. It offers a variety of services and facilities to its visitors mainly in the form of outdoor recreation and physical activity. Kaziranga is divided into four ranges, namely, the Western Range (Baguri), the Central Range (Kohora), the Eastern Range (Agaratoli) and the Burapahar Range at Ghorakati which serve as the point of entry for park visitors. The purpose of the study was to identify and examine the travel motivations of visitors to Kaziranga National Park and their participation in various recreational activities. The study also attempts to understand the various wildlife-based experiences sought by visitors during their stay in KNP. Based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, the research questions were framed and a primary survey was conducted in KNP to collect information on visitors' trip motivation, participation in various recreational activities and their wildlife watching encounters. The survey was conducted by administering a structured questionnaire and conducting interviews with park visitors in the year 2019. The research instrument (questionnaire) consisted of three sections to seek information from visitors to the park with reference to the stated objectives. Section A of the questionnaire comprised socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, education, occupation, etc of visitors as well as questions relating to visitors' trip characteristics such as choice of accommodation, duration of stay, group composition, etc during their visit to the park. Section B of the questionnaire was designed to capture information relating to visitors' travel motivation and their participation in various recreational activities in the park. Section C comprised of close ended questions on various attributes of visitors' experience related to wildlife watching inside the park. The dimensions of visitor experience specific to national park and wildlife watching were included in the questionnaire. These were namely, physical facilities and accessibility, natural environment and scenic beauty, visitors' encounters with wildlife and wildlife information and quality of interpretation about wildlife. The respondents were asked to rate their opinion about the various attributes shaping their wildlife watching experience in the park on a "1 to 5" scale. A convenience sampling method of survey was adopted for data collection and sampling sites were selected in consultation with park employees. Questionnaires were distributed to 130 park visitors who visited KNP during the months of November and December in the year 2019. However, only 106 questionnaires completed by visitors were found to be usable. Hence, the sample size of park visitors for the present study is 106 respondents. Information was collected from visitor respondents in the Kohora (central) range and Bagori (western) range of the Kaziranga National Park. Thus, the sample size of visitors and sampling sites chosen for the survey may not be representative of the entire population of park visitors during the period.

Table I: Socio-demographic profile of visitors to KNP and their trip characteristics:

Socio-demographic characteristics		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	59	55.66 %
	Female	47	44.33%
Marital status	Married	83	78.3%
	Unmarried	23	21.69%
Age	Below 20 years	07	6.6%
	20 – 29 years	21	19.81%
	30 – 39 years	22	20.75%
	40 – 49 years	34	32.07%
	50 – 59 years	18	16.98%
	60 years and above	04	3.77%
Educational qualification	Under graduate	16	15.09%
	Graduate	44	41.5%
	Post Graduate & above	46	43.39%
Occupation	Government employee	24	22.64%
	Private employee	31	29.24%
	Self employed	14	13.2%
	Home maker	22	20.75%
	Student	11	10.37%
	Retired	04	3.77%
Visitor origin	West Bengal	48	45.28%
	Assam	22	20.75%
	Delhi – NCR	14	13.2%
	Maharashtra	09	8.49%

	Other states/country	13	12.26%
Duration of stay	Two nights	82	77.35%
	Three nights	22	20.75%
	Four nights	02	1.88%
Choice of accommodation	Government lodge	56	52.83%
	Luxury resort	18	16.98%
	Private lodge/Home stay	32	30.18%
Mode of travel	Tourist cab	63	59.43%
	Public transport	25	23.58%
	Own vehicle	18	16.98%
Visits	First time visit	91	85.84%
	Repeaters	15	14.15%
Group composition	Travelling with friends/colleagues	55	51.88%
	Travelling with family	29	27.35%
	Travelling with spouse/partner	18	16.98%
	Travelling alone	04	3.77%
Sources of pre-visit information	Travel & tourism websites	37	34.9%
	Social media	08	7.54%
	Newspaper & magazines	16	15.09%
	Word of mouth (family & friends)	45	42.45%

Source: computed from field survey at KNP

Table II: Travel motivation of the sample respondents:

Primary motive for visit to KNP	Mean scores*
Watching rare species of animals & birds	3.54
Experiencing natural beauty & wilderness	3.02
Spending time with family & friends	2.72
Opportunity to enhance knowledge about wildlife	2.26
Rest & relaxation	1.93
Escape from daily routine	1.62

Source: computed from field survey at KNP

*Based on a scale where 1 = never important, 2 = sometimes important, 3 = often important and 4 = always important during the trip.

Table III: Main activities participated in by the respondents:

Stated main activity	Total Sample (N = 106)	
	Frequency	%
Wildlife watching (Jeep & elephant safari)	72	67.92%
Trekking	10	9.43%
Picnic and outdoor recreation	08	7.54%
Photography & filming	06	5.66%
Visiting nearby villages/local attractions like tea gardens, souvenir shops, etc	06	5.66%
Enjoying ethnic and cultural events	04	3.77%
Total	106	100 %

Source: computed from field survey at KNP

Table IV: Dimensions of visitor experience at Kaziranga National Park:

Visitor experience with specific attributes	Rating	Frequency	Percentage
Physical facilities & accessibility (includes condition of roads, safari vehicles, signboards, safety equipment, rest room, cleanliness, etc)	Very low	0	0%
	Low	04	3.77%
	Average	51	48.11%
	Good	43	40.56%
	Very good	08	7.54%

Natural environment & scenic beauty (including landscape attractiveness, condition of vegetation inside the park, climate, etc)	Very low	0	0%
	Low	03	2.83%
	Average	21	19.81%
	Good	38	35.84%
	Very good	44	41.5%
Visitors' interaction with wildlife (wildlife encounters in close proximity, variety of species sightings, chance to take photograph, etc)	Very low	0	0%
	Low	0	0%
	Average	26	24.52%
	Good	59	55.66%
	Very good	21	19.81%
Wildlife information/Interpretation (display of wildlife species information, answering visitor queries about wildlife)	Very low	0	0%
	Low	08	7.54%
	Average	62	58.49%
	Good	27	25.47%
	Very good	09	8.49%

Source: computed from field survey at KNP

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

6.1 Visitor characteristics:

The survey revealed that 55.66% of respondents were males and 44.33% were females. The marital status of respondents showed 80.1% were married whereas 19.81% were unmarried visitors. A majority of respondent visitors (84.9%) were having a graduate or post graduate degree or above qualification and most of them were employees of private organizations (29.24%) followed by Government employees constituting 22.64% of sample respondents. West Bengal accounted for 45.28% of visitor respondents followed by visitors from Assam (20.75%), Delhi-NCR (13.2%) and Maharashtra (8.49%). These were the principal source markets for wildlife based tourism in Kaziranga National Park. The choice of accommodation revealed that most of the visitors preferred to stay in Government lodges (52.83%) followed by private lodge and home stays (30.18%). Visitors' mode of travel to the park were mainly by tourist cabs (59.43%) which were arranged by tour operators. Other visitors preferred public transport (23.58%) and travel by own vehicle (16.98%) who were mainly repeat visitors and visitors originating from the home state. The visitors mostly happened to visit KNP for the first time (85.84%) and a mere 14.15% were repeaters. The visitors to KNP mostly stay for 2-3 nights. The group composition of visitors showed that 51.88% of visitors were travelling to KNP with their friends and colleagues followed by visitors travelling with their family (27.35%). Information and recommendation from relatives and friends are the most important source of pre-visit information for visitors to KNP. Travel and tourism websites are also responsible for drawing a sizable number of visitors to the park.

6.2 Trip motivation of KNP visitors:

The primary motive for visiting KNP for the majority of visitors was watching rare animals and birds (e.g. the one-horned rhinoceros) with a mean score of 3.54 followed by experiencing natural beauty and wilderness (mean = 3.02). Other motives for visiting the park were spending time with family & friends (mean=2.72), opportunity to enhance knowledge about wildlife mean= 2.26), rest& relaxation (mean= 1.93) and escape from daily routine (mean= 1.62).

6.3 Main activities of visitors to KNP:

The main activities participated in by the visitors were predominantly wildlife watching by taking up jeep and elephant safaris (67.92%). Other activities of visitors included trekking, photography and filming, picnic and outdoor recreation, visiting nearby villages/local attractions and enjoying ethnic culture and events. Most of the recreational activities were arranged and facilitated by accommodation service providers like lodge and homestay owners.

6.4 Visitor experience at Kaziranga National Park:

The dimensions of wildlife watching experience in the national park were identified as physical facilities and accessibility to the park, natural environment and scenic beauty, visitors' interaction with wildlife and the quality of wildlife information/interpretation provided by staff/guides. The primary survey revealed that most of the park visitors had a favorable opinion about these specific attributes of wildlife watching. For most of the park visitors, especially first time visitors the opportunity to see wildlife in their natural environment while undertaking jeep and elephant safaris was an exciting experience. Visitors expressed that the opportunity to go close to wildlife was indeed a unique experience. Among all other attributes, the visitors felt that having a variety of wild animal sightings during their visit inside the park was the hallmark of their optimal experience. Visitors' experience of wildlife watching were found to be influenced by conditions such as the proximity to wildlife species and the length of exposure to the stimuli and the opportunity to take photographs. The visitors

also felt that other activities such as visiting local attractions such as orchid gardens, tea gardens, sightseeing and attending cultural events enhanced their experiences of visiting the park. Nonetheless, some visitors felt that overcrowding of visitors and safari jeeps in certain site areas often undermine the serenity of the park. Some visitors felt that there is a need for upgrading the physical facilities of the park and limiting the entry of safari vehicles inside the park. Visitors felt that physical facilities such as signboards, toilets/wash rooms, access routes to the park etc., need to be well maintained by the forest department. Frontline staffs who are responsible for dealing with visitors need to be trained appropriately to improve their interpretative skills for handling visitor queries.

VII. CONCLUSION

The results of the study are consistent with the notion that Kaziranga National Park attracts a wide range of visitors from varied socio-demographic backgrounds. It is the most visited national park in Assam which offers exciting wildlife viewing experiences to visitors. Nevertheless, the park also faces major challenges such as flood, erosion and animal poaching apart from other issues. In the interest of sustainable development of tourism and conservation of natural habitat and eco-system in the park, all stakeholders mainly host communities, tour operators and park authorities should make cohesive efforts to protect the park from all vices. Wildlife tourism can act as a system to create conservation awareness among visitors whilst raising funds for the self-sustainability of the national park. An upgradation of physical facilities and equipment are an imperative for achieving the same. Continuous monitoring of tourist traffic to the park through various entry points is critical to ensure optimal carrying capacity for the park. Delivering quality experiences to park visitors is equally important for the long-term economic sustainability and competitiveness of the destination. This shall require service providers to constantly appraise visitor motivation and expectations in order to tailor their products and services to create satisfying experiences.

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