

Kadariya, 25, used to be a guide at Chitwan national park, one of south Asia's top wildlife sanctuaries, but when the pandemic struck and tourists stopped coming, he lost his only source of income. With few options, he borrowed about £3,600 – far more than his annual wage as a guide – to pay a recruitment agent to find him a job overseas. Now he works far from the forest, patrolling the grounds of a luxury hotel in the United Arab Emirates.

“We have to work 12 hours a day, 30 days a month. I miss my country and my profession, but I don't have any options; because of Covid, I was jobless,” says Kadariya.

The pandemic has taken a devastating toll on Nepal. Tourism is a mainstay of the impoverished country's economy, generating about 1.3m jobs and £550m a year. In the year before the pandemic, Nepal welcomed almost 1.2 million visitors – including more than 60,000 from the UK – but from April to December 2020, just 9,417 arrived.

Tourist numbers peak in spring and autumn, when the weather is at its most convivial, but the first wave wiped out both seasons. This year, as Nepal was gearing up for the spring peak, the second Covid wave struck. Now, as autumn approaches, the industry faces a fourth season without visitors.

Nepal's reputation as a world-class trekking and climbing destination is well known, but the wildlife reserves along its southern plains are equally spectacular. Chitwan national park attracted more than 142,000 foreign tourists in the year before the pandemic, as well as many thousands of Nepalese, drawn by the prospect of sightings of tigers, rhinos and elephants.

The park sustains the livelihoods of thousands; hotel staff, transport operators and guides. Rajendra Dhami, the head of the Nature Guide Association, says there are about 500 professional guides in Chitwan. When asked how many foreign visitors he has seen since April, he hesitates and then answers, “Three or four”.

Dhami says guides are turning to farming or manual labour to survive, with some like Kadariya, going overseas. “The pandemic has given us a big problem,” says Dhami. “We are losing our jobs and the government is doing nothing for us. We are not worried about the coronavirus, we are just trying to survive.”

As well as livelihoods, the pandemic has put conservation in the park at risk. As guides look for other work, vital knowledge about animal behaviour and biodiversity is being lost.

“The nature guide's skill is unexplainable, you can't find it in a book. So when tourism restarts people may not get real guides, real nature lovers,” says Dhami.

Some are calling on the government to prioritise vaccines for guides and others in the industry. “If the government can provide vaccinations, then we can open Nepal in the same way as Dubai and the Maldives,” says Dhananjay Regmi, Nepal Tourism Board's chief executive.

But vaccine rollout remains slow, with about 10% of the population fully vaccinated. Efforts to procure vaccines were hit by India's decision to halt vaccine exports. But, many blame Nepal's political leaders who, they say, have been preoccupied with the infighting that has seen a recent change of government, rather than tackling the virus.