

Knowledge Magazine



GEF-UNDP ECOTOURISM PROJECT
“Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation
into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan”



BHUTAN
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Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*) is a rare bird of the temperate zone in the Himalayas, from Sikkim to Arunachal Pradesh, and reaching north Myanmar, Yunnan (China) and north Vietnam. BirdLife International classifies the species as Near Threatened, having recently removed it from the globally threatened list on the basis of new information, particularly from Bhutan. Threats include habitat loss due to shifting cultivation and logging. Its habitat is broadleaf forest. In Bhutan Ward's Trogon is an

uncommon resident, found in central, eastern and western valleys. The species is highly specific in its habitat requirements, mature broadleaf forest characteristic by the presence of climbers and an intact canopy. It calls year-round, but activity peaks in April.

This picture was taken in Bhutan in April, 2022.

Photograph contributed by **Chencho Wangdi**, a birder and photographer from Paro, Bhutan. You can contact him at drukunity@gmail.com

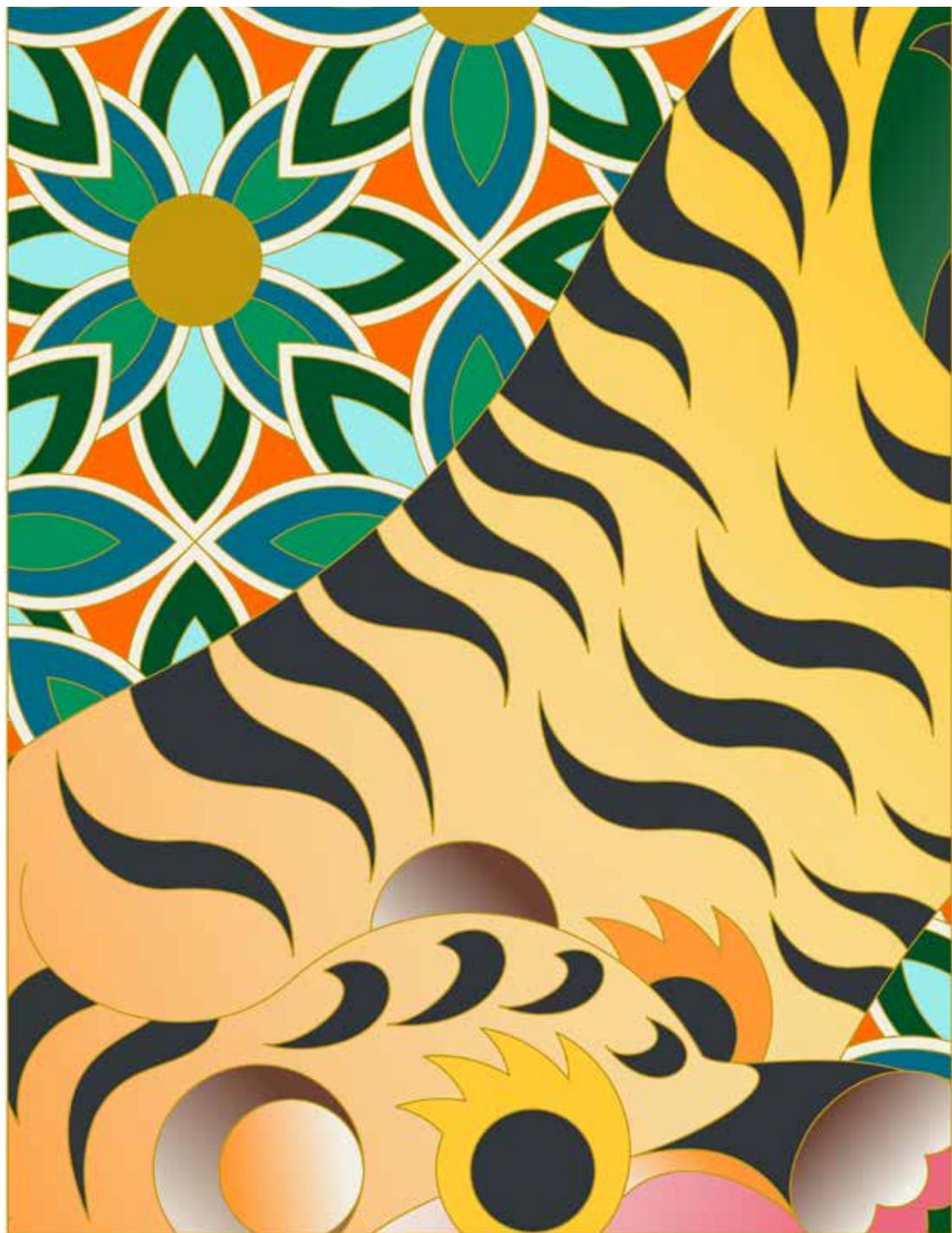




BHUTAN
Believe



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BHUTAN

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Introduction

“Our country is a global leader in environmental conservation, and we sit on this enormous natural capital potential. A global study on ecosystem valuation pitched Bhutan’s tourism values to the tune of \$2.4 billion a year - precisely at par with our national GDP as it stands today!”

Ngawang Gyeltshen, formerly with UNDP Bhutan, was the Project Lead to conceptualise and design the Project. He currently advocates conservation finance, is passionate about ecotourism, and regularly keeps in touch with the Project Team.



An old Asian saying aptly warns: “Tourism is like fire; you can either use it to cook your food or burn your house down.” Indeed, our tourism policy of High Value, Low Volume endorses this philosophy, premised on finding a delicate balance between the costs and benefits of tourism. Our visionary Monarchs have always placed a particular emphasis on tourism development and environmental conservation. The tourism industry, therefore, saw impressive growth in the last few decades while using the environment as an asset for tourism and development.

As we move ahead, the brand ‘BHUTAN’ (with the tagline Believe) reinvigorates our tourism aspirations and builds on lessons from the pandemic. The pandemic was a stark reminder of our country’s vulnerabilities. For a country which relies heavily on tourism for its revenue, the economic crisis has been far more powerful than the public health crisis. Our GDP growth rate plunged to an all-time low of minus ten per cent in 2020, and close to 50,000 Bhutanese lost their jobs. Today, complex issues of ecosystem degradation, climate change and slower economic growth coupled with poor governance have placed the country at an ‘inflection point’. But the pandemic also taught us

several lessons. To innovate, diversify and mainstream. It reminded us of the need to increase tourism’s resilience through diversification and mainstreaming natural and social capital. During the pandemic, our domestic tourism saw a rapid rise in the form of weekend hikes and pilgrimages. Bhutanese people started enjoying hikes and treks. There was an increased local awareness of our coexistence with nature – a value we have lost in urban areas. Therefore, sustaining high economic growth and improving living standards while protecting its rich natural resources will require bold leadership and transformative policies such as ecotourism.

Our country is a global leader in environmental conservation, and we sit on this enormous natural capital potential. Coupled with a healthy forest cover and astounding biodiversity, we are part of the Himalayan global biodiversity hotspot. An international study pitched Bhutan’s total ecosystem services at around US\$ 15.5 billion per year. Tourism and recreation alone accounted for \$2.4 billion a year of it --- precisely at par with our national GDP as it stands today. A more detailed study by the Department of Forests and Park Services estimated tourism services from Bhutan’s forests to generate an economic value of \$426 million annually, almost double

gross tourism earnings in 2019. While local analysts argue these estimates, developed countries such as the United Kingdom uses natural capital valuation in economic policy decisions.

Despite valuations of the natural capital and nature being one of the two primary motivations for the visitors to Bhutan, trekking accounted for less than ten per cent of the tourist arrivals in 2019. For example, Bhutan has nearly 800 bird species, more than the entire of Europe. Yet less than one per cent of visitors chose bird watching that year. The proportion of travellers choosing nature-based activities is negligible annually. All these indicate a gap in tourism diversification and a substantial untapped prospect in the natural capital.

Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector

It was in recognition of these challenges and opportunities that we designed the Ecotourism Project. We do not intend to reinvent the wheel but to get back on track, building on 15 years of ecotourism testing in Bhutan. There are also several good examples and lessons from the past. The concept of ecotourism in parks or natural areas started four five-year plans ago. A first pilot public-private partnership approach in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park was later replicated in Merak-Sakteng. The Royal Society for Protection of Nature started an ecotourism project in Phobjikha, the largest wetland in the country. Two recent ecotourism

initiatives – the Community-based Sustainable Tourism in Haa and My Gakidh Village in Punakha – show early successes, but not without challenges. Nature tours, conventionally based on trekking, are now diversifying to include other experiences with nature.

The idea of the Project is to mainstream biodiversity conservation into tourism and generate sustainable conservation financing. Doing so will establish Bhutan as a model ecotourism destination and unpack Bhutan's ecotourism aspirations. It focuses on national standards and safeguards to ensure environmental protection and benefit rural livelihoods. It will help create livelihood opportunities, sustainable funding for landscapes within and outside protected areas, and facilitate human-wildlife coexistence. The Project can raise a more strategic campaign to attract environmentally and climate-conscious visitors using Bhutan's unique brand as a leader in nature conservation and climate action. It can mitigate the negative impacts of increasing tourism on Bhutan's socio-cultural heritage and globally significant biodiversity.

Today, solitude and clean area have become rare commodities in the world. Globally, there is a growing cadre of high-end wellness sanctuaries for busy executives and celebrities. Thailand, Indonesia, and Australia are known for high-end wellness centres. Many National Parks and wildlife tours in Africa and South America charge high fees for their improved services. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, wildlife viewing generated USD 120 billion in 2019, more significant than the wildlife trade. Bhutan can offer both nature-based and spiritual-based tourism. Globally, there has been exponential growth in wellness tourism, targeting high-end, high-paying tourists, particularly in Thailand,



Bali/Indonesia, and the west coast of Australia.

Ideas... and more ideas from the field

Our field consultations generated a plethora of ecotourism ideas. From a young economic development officer to an elderly village person, there is no shortage of ideas and zeal. With lessons in the past, we focus on an end-to-end approach to a set of select ecotourism products. The ecotourism products manifest the bold tourism aspirations of our local districts, with all stakeholders bearing individual responsibility along the product value chain. These products, however, do not restrict innovation and new ideas. Last year when we convened economic development officers, planning officers and foresters, the forum sparked creativity (See Training Workshop on Ecotourism Product

Development). They generated untested ideas such as gastronomy tourism, wellness tourism, spiritual tourism, hologram and virtual tourism, among others. Yet, they were grounded on a solid local knowledge of biodiversity and culture. This Knowledge Product and the stories are a testament to many ideas and potential from the field. Not only does it help diversify current tourism products, but it encourages domestic tourism. In many parts of the world, domestic tourism plays a significant role in the overall tourism sector. And if you read through our wonderful stories, there is much to explore in the East.

The East is home to Singye Dzong, Aja Ney, Omba Ney, and many sacred sites where our enlightened masters continue to bless and fortify the energy. Home to 7% of the World's Bird Species, Birders claim that areas such as



Yongkola easily ranks among Asia's top ten birding hotspots. A single district's (either Mongar or Zhemgang) number of bird species is more than that of an entire Europe. Zhemgang's dominant rich warm-broadleaved forest ecosystem house an incredible array of biodiversity. And despite efforts to promote ecotourism, the district receives far fewer tourists, and local experts claim that visitors avail less than six per cent of available facilities. The East houses three wildlife sanctuaries – home to our national butterfly (Ludlow's Bhutan Glory) and Yetis.

If ecotourism is the answer, what really is the question today?

It is in our interest to uphold and advance the country's global reputation as a development leader through tourism development and bold ideas. Today, despite our



conservation status, we receive significantly fewer nature-based tourists. On the other hand, mass tourism can irreversibly damage the country's biodiversity and ecosystems if not pursued sustainably. Looking back to look ahead, several questions arise: what does success look like for Bhutan's tourism vis-à-vis ecotourism? Is it an effective pro-poor development strategy, and can it offset human-wildlife conflicts as intended? Will it uphold sustainability and ecological conservation principles and support protected area management? Will the local residents benefit equitably, and will they have access and control over decision-making involving tourism activities and access to natural resources?

Experiences from Bhutan and elsewhere show that the political nature of tourism, characterised by complex and often competing stakeholder interests, leads to tensions over the unequal distribution of economic benefits and opportunities. Lessons on ecotourism across the globe show that it is not unusual to confront challenges and issues in the early stages. But with 15 years of experience in the field, significant changes to the system and meaningful investments in the tourism sector can transform Bhutan into a model ecotourism and carbon-neu-

tral destination. And sustained investment and collaboration are required. For our districts, ecotourism holds tremendous potential and presents opportunities to enhance local economies and livelihoods. Collaborative efforts across sectors can ensure that we better implement and support the ideas generated from the field and packaged through the Project. As our Expert remarks, 'Tourism is not a single sector responsibility – as it used to be perceived – but a multi-dimensional concept which requires constant communications, collaboration, and partnerships'.

Fast forward: if end-to-end approaches (from policy support and leadership to product development, capacities, markets, and local engagement) are made right, we see ecotourism flourishing in Bhutan through this Project. High-end Mahseer flyfishing along the Yangbari-Manas river on a raft, high-end birding with birding decks in Mongar and Zhemgang, domestic pilgrimage tours in Lhuentse, a unique butterfly tour in Tashiyangtse are some of the high-end ecotourism products. And we are designing a Biodiversity Run – a Snowman Race equivalent in the East. We welcome you to Explore the East. We welcome you to support and invest.



Picture courtesy: Pawo Choyning Dorji

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche, also known as Khyentse Norbu, is a much-revered Bhutanese lama, filmmaker, and writer. His four major films are *The Cup* (1999), *Travellers and Magicians* (2003), *Vara: A Blessing* (2013) and, most recently, *Hema Hema: Sing Me a Song While I Wait* (2017). He is the author of the books *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*; *Not for Happiness: A Guide to the So-Called Preliminary Practices*; *The Guru Drinks Bourbon*; *Best Foot Forward: A Pilgrim's Guide to the Sacred Sites of the Buddha*; and *Poison is Medicine*.

An interview by Sonam Dema, Advocacy and Behavior Change Officer from GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project "Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan".

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche on **Biodiversity Conservation and Illegal wildlife trade in Asia**

The most quoted line in all Buddhist teachings is that everything is conditioned and that there is nothing that is not a condition or conditioned. Among all this conditioning, the most important is the conditioning of mind. So, having the right mindset to save biodiversity, not just for the survival of human beings but for all beings, is paramount.

According to science, biodiversity is most important for human survival and the world to function. What is Buddhist's perspective on biodiversity in general?

I can say with confidence that the Buddha is the first being on this earth who realized and showed us the dependent nature of all phenomena. And this was 2,500 years ago, long before human psychology even conceived the modern concepts of biodiversity and conservation.

The Buddha's understanding is the very root and essence of biodiver-

“... And yet, I see hardly anyone fighting to protect our fragile ecology. With the possible exception of The Guardian, how much ongoing front-page news reporting on ecology do we see in the mainstream media? What country is sanctioned because it is destroying its ecology? What country suffers from a trade embargo because it is wiping out its wildlife? How many words to save our ecology and wildlife are regularly uttered by the political leaders of the world’s most powerful nations?

sity. Thus, the very survival and existence not just of humans but of all beings depends entirely on causes and conditions. This is not something lofty or moralistic, and it has not only about good or bad deeds. Rather, the Buddha taught that we’re not separate and independent beings and species but that everything is dependent on everything. So of course, we’re not separate from other species and beings.

The most quoted line in all Buddhist teachings is that everything is conditioned and that there is nothing that is not a condition or conditioned. Among all this conditioning, the most important is the conditioning of mind. So, having the right mindset to save biodiversity, not just for the survival of human beings but for all beings, is paramount.

Buddhists believe in various realms of gods, human, animals and spirits. Does being born as an animal (example, tiger, golden langur or a fish) mean it is their past ‘bad’ karma?

Buddhists do believe in different realms, but that is not like Christian ideas of heaven and hell. For example, the different realms are often taught psychologically, which means one person can actually go through all the different realms in a day – sometimes experiencing godly pride, and at other times human greed, hellish aggression, the miserliness of the hungry

ghost realm, and so on.

As well, “bad” and “good” are completely relative. So, what you call bad karma or good karma is also entirely subjective and relative. It could be argued that some human births are much worse karma than being born an animal.

Buddhists often cite the notion of “precious human birth” to show that the human body, if used properly, can be a precious vessel. That view is based purely on humans having the capacity to feel sadness and awkwardness and therefore yearning for the highest truth. And it means they have a chance or opportunity to acquire that truth, which most animals don’t have simply because they are so busy just surviving.

As human beings, are we superior to animals? Does this also mean this gives us the right and freedom to mistreat animals (domestic or wild)?

As I just said, that supposed superiority does not apply to all human beings. Only those who seek the truth have what we call a precious human body. The great poet and saint Milarepa sang a song to a hunter expressing his realization that not all human beings have a precious human body.

You also ask about “right and freedom.” But these seem to be very monotheistic concepts that we find in Abrahamic or Christian traditions. In Buddhism, no one has authority to bestow rights or the right to give someone happiness or unhappiness. So, no one has the right to mistreat or harm anyone. People still do so, but that’s because they are ignorant, not because they have any right to do it.

People in general have some ill-feeling towards snakes irrespective of whether they are venomous or non-venomous. Snakes are also cited as destructive or with bad examples in many of our stories. Could these be some of the reasons why we have generated a common dislike for snakes and other wild animals?

Those feelings come from people’s culture, not from Buddhism. Very many of the Buddha’s disciples were nagas, and some of the most generous patrons of the Buddhadharmā were naga kings and queens. So, if snakes, spiders, and scorpions make many people uncomfortable, I think that’s more like racism, and has nothing to do with Buddhism.

Illegal wildlife trades are rampant, especially, in Asian countries, most of which are again Buddhist countries. Your comments on this.

We need to think here about demand as well as supply. For reasons we don’t have time to examine here, many Buddhist countries are very poor. But many of today’s so-called rich countries got rich by robbing those

poor countries for centuries. So, responsibility for the wildlife trade is at least as much on those who use the product as on those who supply it.

In any case, this has nothing to do with Buddhism, and being a Buddhist country certainly doesn't create more opportunity for illegal wildlife trade.

Ivory is most prized and also considered sacred with its presence in the chosum (altars) in Buddhist temples. Does the presence of ivory in chosum bring more merit?

Again, seeing ivory as a prized commodity is purely cultural and has nothing to do with Buddhism or with merit. After Ashoka had offered gold coins to thousands of monks, an old beggar lady one day offered some water to monks who were thirsty. When Ashoka asked the chief monk about merit, the monk responded that the old lady had accumulated more merit than was gained from all Ashoka's gold coins.

In Buddhism, merit depends completely on motivation. With the most profound right motivation, giving even a dead leaf could accumulate lots of merit. With wrong motivation, building a whole castle out of ivory will just cause suffering to animals and achieve nothing.

We also use high-quality peacock feathers for Bumpa in our chosum in Bhutan. Is it essential? Is there a better substitute?

Peacock feathers are not even mentioned in any tantric text. The most appropriate and correct substance for the vase or bumpa is actually kusha grass or leaves. As I keep saying, all this is cultural baggage and has nothing to do with Buddhism.

Bhutanese traditional medicines require some animal parts as ingredient such as bear bile. Is this attuned with Buddhist beliefs of not harming any animals?

Again, Bhutanese traditional medicine has nothing to do with Buddhism. A healing art is a healing art. Buddhism is the dharma that teaches truths like impermanence, dukkha, and the emptiness of phenomena. From a Buddhist point of view, forget bear bile. If a lavender herb is plucked with the wrong motivation, it goes against Buddhist principles.

Can we say there is an urgent need to stop poaching and wildlife trades and rather work towards protection of wildlife or biodiversity in general?

Absolutely. There's a very urgent need to stop poaching and wildlife trades and protect wildlife and biodiversity. I am not a scientist, but I understand that protecting wildlife, biodiversity, ecology and the environment



are paramount.

But who is making that effort? I don't see many people doing it. If what scientists and ecologists say is true, we will soon have no fresh water to drink, no fresh air to breathe, and catastrophic global warming. Just within my own lifetime, changes in climate are very obvious and visible everywhere.

And yet, I see hardly anyone fighting to protect our fragile ecology. With the possible exception of The Guardian, how much ongoing front-page news reporting on ecology do we see in the mainstream media? What country is sanctioned because it is destroying its ecology? What country suffers from a trade embargo because it is wiping out its wildlife? How many words to save our ecology and wildlife are regularly uttered by the political leaders of the world's most powerful nations?

But if the scientific evidence is correct, what is the use of pluralism, universal suffrage, freedom



of speech, and all the other values we supposedly treasure so dearly? They are totally useless. Led by the U.S., so many wars are supposedly being fought for freedom and democracy. I really want to wake up one morning and read in the newspaper that the United States and NATO are fighting some country for not protecting the environment or conserve biodiversity.

Human-wildlife conflict is a growing concern in Bhutan. Farmers blame conservation policies and wild animals (like tigers, wild boars, monkeys, birds) when they lose their crops or livestock to wild animals. What does Buddhism say about Human-Wildlife conflicts?

Humans vs wildlife, humans vs humans, humans vs machines. There is no end to conflict. A hundred years from now, when Bhutanese are having conflicts with artificial intelligence, we will have different kinds of concerns.

Can humans and animals coexist in harmony? What does Buddhism say about human-wildlife coexistence?

In some pockets, yes, animals and humans can coexist harmoniously, like with pet dogs. But thinking that humans, wildlife, and all other phenomena for that matter, will coexist and live happily ever after that is not how Buddhists think.

As a Buddhist master, what is your advice for our readers on biodiversity conservation for Bhutan and for the world?

Who am I to give such advice? Perhaps my answers here reflect some of my thoughts about conservation. But if you insist that I say something, I would say that capitalism must die.





Blyth's tragopan (Photo: Thinley Wangchuk)

Bhutan is Home to 7% of the World's Bird Species

The world birding community considers Bhutan as one of the prime birding destinations in the world.

Yeshey Dorji is a professional photographer and author of several books on birds in Bhutan. He is passionate about birdwatching, trekking, fishing and humanitarian services. He blogs at yesheydorji.blogspot.com.



The Guinness Book of World Records 2012 features an extremely rare bird photographed in Bhutan – that of the White-bellied Heron (*Ardea insignis*). It is listed as the rarest of the Heron species. The bird, whose global population is estimated between 50 to 200 individuals, is so rare that Professor Peter

Frederic PhD, a world-renowned heron expert at the University of Florida, USA had never seen it before, until his coming to Bhutan in 2006. Since then, for a number of years, he visited Bhutan every year and has greatly contributed to the study of the bird's biology and ecology, spear-headed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), few years back.

Although the presence of this bird is reported in a number of other countries such as Burma, China and India, Bhutan is the only country where it can be seen without much difficulty. As of this year, 21 individuals have been enumerated in Bhutan. Most significantly, Bhutan is the only country where the birds can be sighted easily - along the Punakha Phochu/Mochu Rivers and around the Berti/Mangdechu areas in Zhemgang. It is for this reason that American diplomat and one of the world's top birders - Mr. Peter G. Kaestner (ranked #3 in the world at 9,685 bird species sighted as of July 2022), choose to come to Bhutan, in April, 2009, to sight two of his life birds - the White-bellied Heron (*Ardea insignis*) and the Fulvous Parrotbill (*Paradoxornis fulvifrons*).

Among Bhutan's famous birds are the Satyr Tragopan (*Tragopan satyra*), which ranks as the 10th most colorful bird in the world.

Another bird that is the delight of most of the birders who visit Bhutan is the unusually Ibisbill



(*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*) – ranked as the 21st most beautiful bird of the world.

The world birding community considers Bhutan as one of the prime birding destinations in the world. Besides the White-bellied Herons, Bhutan is home to a large number of other globally endangered bird species, such as the Ward's Trogon (*Harpactes wardi*), Beautiful Nuthatch (*Sitta formosa*), Rufous-necked Hornbill (*Buceros hydrocorax*), Pallas's Fish Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucoryphus*), Blyth's Tragopan (*Tragopan blythii*), Chestnut-breasted Partridge (*Arborophila mandellii*), Himalayan Monal (*Lophophorus impejanus*), Wood Snipe (*Gallinago nemoricola*) etc., to name a few.

The diversity of Bhutan's avifauna is stunning. At 783 bird species as of 2022, Bhutan is home to approximately 7% of total global bird species. The country's wide altitudinal range produces suitable climactic conditions that help support Bhutan's enviable biodiversity. However, its conservation is the

result of the progressive environmental policies of Bhutan's successive monarchs and the people who, being mainly Buddhists, revere and respect all natural elements. Bhutan is perhaps the only country in the world that has made a constitutional commitment to maintain a forest cover of 60% for all times. It is no wonder then that Bhutan has been the recipient of prestigious international awards such as the UNEP's Champion of the Earth Award as well as the coveted J. Paul Getty Conservation Award. More recently, His Majesty the 4th Druk Gyalpo was awarded the Blue Planet Prize for his contribution to the protection and conservation of the environment.

Bhutan has gained prominence on the world stage as the country that propounded the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). While it may take a while for world leaders and economists and planners to adjust to the paradigm shift, a few thousand birders around the world have been finding their Gross Personal Happiness (GPH) at a short



Satyr Tragopan (Photo: Yeshey Dorji)



Ward's Trogon Photo: (Chencho Wangdi)

stretch of forest in Eastern Bhutan that offers an unmatched variety of avifauna. Birders around the world have declared that short stretch of broad-leaved forest between Sengore and Yongkola in Mongar Dzongkhag as the "Birding Capital of the World."

For some inexplicable reason the bird-rich areas of Chhukha Dzongkhag has so far been off-limits for the global bird watching community. But efforts are now underway to open up the area for birding. If this happens, Chhukha will become the next birding capital of the world simply because the diversity of birdlife in these areas is second to none. The added advantage with Chhukha is its proximity to Paro international airport – which translates into shorter duration needed to spend birding in Bhutan – a sure-shot crowd-puller for the passion-driven birdwatchers of the world.





Human-wildlife conflict is a major concern in Bhutan

Human-wildlife conflict: Did we forget livelihood for conservation?

It has been 14 years since the HWC strategy document was published, and the wild pig problem appears to be increasing. Our conservationists appear to be taking a cautious approach to the wild pig problem. But the economic loss brought about by crop loss undoubtedly discourages our farmers from continuing farming, let alone our youths returning to the village to pursue farming.

Sangay Wangchuk is a former researcher for the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment Research in Bhutan. At present, he is studying at Charles Sturt University, Australia. He is also a freelance researcher and tweets at @SangayWk.



dholes is probably the classic case of disrupting ecological balance without an adequate 'scientific' understanding.

Here, I write about the voices of our farmers. I studied Gungtong and its links to HWC in Bhutan as part of my research. I interviewed 510 households, including 79 households identified as Gungtong by Gewogs. I write 'identified as Gungtong' as the definition of Gungtong is not comparable across Gewogs, which is another topic for discussion for some other time.

A significant proportion of households observed to have experienced increasing HWC events in the last decade. Household participants attributed several reasons for the increase but the most frequently mentioned were:

1. Increase in forest cover with the ban on shifting cultivation and several tree plantations campaigns;
2. Strict forest policies, prohibiting hunting animals;

“...the Government care more about wild animals than us...” if you ever spend some quality time trying to understand the feelings of some of our farmers, it is certain that you will hear similar sentiments. Imagine, a cow or farming as a sole household income source. For such a household, losing a cow or crops to wild animals will devastate the family financially and emotionally.

The human-wildlife conflict (HWC) literature agrees that such negative attitudes of our farmers toward conservation are due to the loss of resource use rights. Further, existing literature recognises that wild animals threaten farmers' daily sustenance in and adjacent to Protected Areas (PA) through livestock depre-

dition, crop damage, and their lives. The HWC is also affecting the government's objective of achieving national food self-sufficiency and jeopardising the future of Bhutan's conservation programs.

Contrary to what our farmers think, the relevant government agencies have been pursuing various programs and campaigns to reduce livestock depredation and crop damage by wild animals. One of the earliest recollected campaigns was the mass poisoning of dholes resulting from persistent livestock depredation in the 1980s. Although the mass poisoning may have reduced livestock kill, it is perceived to have contributed to the increase in the wild pig population, which became a new problem for our farmers. Poisoning

3. Religious sentiments

These perceptions were consistent with the WWF's HWC SAFE strategy published in 2016. Bhutan National Human-wildlife Conflict Management Strategy (HWC strategy), published in 2008 by the Department of Forests, has an entire chapter devoted to human-wild pig conflict management and states that "in Bhutan, the wild pig is often described as farmer's enemy number one." In addition, according to the data maintained by the Department of Agriculture, 75% of the crop loss [420 metric tons] from 2011-2015 in nine districts was attributed to wild pigs. This is significant and calls for a radical intervention based on a sound scientific study to minimise crop damage by wild pigs. The household representatives believe that the wild pig population had increased so much that there should be some policies allowing hunting them.

An increase in the incidences of HWC events has far-reaching implications for the country, let alone our farmers, even our government is aware of that. Therefore, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests has been providing several resources to our farmers, such as supplying improved livestock breed, cash compensation for animals killed by tigers, crop insurances, encouraging stall feeding of livestock, subsidised fertilisers and seeds, etc. The government also initiated electric fencing as a new 'solution' to reduce HWC.

However, many of the afore-mentioned government interventions are short-term solutions and not sustainable. For example, the perceived benefit of electric fencing is mixed. Some households claimed that they were able to get a good night's sleep, and the harvest increased after the electric fencing. However, electric fencing is perceived to push wild animals to fields of those households without the same. In addition, it is not feasible to fence all farmlands. Moreover, the electric fences require inten-

sive after-care to ensure its benefits for a longer duration.

Reverting to hunting wild pigs, the HWC strategy identified allowing interested people to hunt wild pigs under licenses and permission. However, it is not certain if this strategy was ever conveyed to our farmers. Instead, when the previous government [2013 – 2018] encouraged farmers to kill wild pigs, conservationists expressed their concerns, possibly indicating that conservationists themselves were not clear about the strategy.

In both scenarios: conservationists identifying controlled wild pig hunting and expressing concerns when the government encouraged farmers to hunt were based on assumptions. Assumptions do not help, and it is about time for Bhutan to invest in understanding the population of wild pigs and its predators. If we do not invest in measures to help our farmers grow our food in peace, we cannot expect to achieve food self-sufficiency.

Though there is evidence of controlled hunting of wild pigs reducing conflict in other countries, Bhutan may not afford to follow the same approach. Instead, we should invest in understanding the socio-ecological dynamics of wild pigs and other lesser-known species. We have justified the need to understand charismatic species and invested much of our resources. There is no disagreement that understanding the ecology and population of an apex predator is important, and I believe we should continue. Still, we cannot afford to neglect other species, which are detrimental to the nation's food self-sufficiency.

Taken together, it is evident that many factors should be considered to minimise human-wild pig conflict. It has been 14 years since the HWC strategy document was published, and the wild pig problem appears to be increasing. Our conservationists appear to be taking a cautious

approach to the wild pig problem. But the economic loss brought about by crop loss undoubtedly discourages our farmers from continuing farming, let alone our youths returning to the village to pursue farming. I found that about 10% of the 387 households lost 3 – 6 months' worth of food stock to wild animals annually from 2017 – 2019. Again, wild pig was reported to be the most destructive to croplands, followed by the monkey, barking deer and porcupine.

I've always wondered where we have collectively failed our farmers. In a desperate attempt to protect their crops from wild animals, some resort to illegally connecting live electric currents to fencing wires. Such a desperate measure has also resulted in few human lives lost, which is surprisingly not documented. Further, some set traps and use poisoned arrows indiscriminately, endangering human lives as well.

If we do not invest in studying wild pigs and intervene now, it is only a matter of time before our rural areas will be deserted. Our food self-sufficiency goal will remain a distant dream, and our conservation achievements will be at the expense of our farmers' livelihood. Though HWC strategy recognises that rural livelihoods and conservation are inseparably linked and states, "If conservation efforts are to succeed, then HWC must be reduced," it appears to have remained an ideology. Our conservationists must take a giant leap to contribute to our national food self-sufficiency. Now is the time we remind ourselves that the priority for our farmers is to have food on their plates, which we, as conservationists, academics or government officials, are perhaps failing to understand.





Ecotourism potentials in Zhemgang

“The district has 33 species of mammals, 234 species of birds, 41 species of herpetofauna, 207 species of butterflies, 60 species of moths, 93 species of orchids, and 349 species of wild flowers recorded till date by the Zhemgang Forest Division-- while many are still unrecorded.”

Jigme Dorji is a former forester and has done research on community-based tourism in Zhemgang for his master's degree. He is passionate about rural livelihoods and human-wildlife conflict management. Currently, he works for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project as the Project Technical Specialist.



2015. The second largest population of White-bellied Heron occurs in Mangdechhu and Drangmechhu Basins and their tributaries draining through the Dzongkhag. The Golden Langur that is endemic to Bhutan and Assam State of India is largely found in the entire Dzongkhag. There are 33 species of mammals, 234 species of birds, 41 species of herpetofauna, 207 species of butterflies, 60 species of moths, 93 species of orchids, and 349 species of wild flowers recorded till date by the Zhemgang Forest Division while many are unrecorded.

Zhemgang has about 3,800 households with over 17,700 resi-

Zhemgang Dzongkhag's boundary intersects with that of the Royal Manas National Park in the south, Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park in the West and Phrumsengla National Park in the North. About 90% area of the biological corridor (BC 4) connecting these three parks fall inside the Dzongkhag forming

52.45% of the total area under the protected area. Dominated with broadleaf forests, Zhemgang Dzongkhag has 94.17% forest cover, one of the highest in the country.

In terms of biodiversity richness, the Dzongkhag has recorded the highest number of tigers outside the protected areas with a density of 3 tigers per 100 km² during the nationwide survey in



Buli village in Zhemgang

dents. The Dzongkhag is traditionally divided into three regions: Upper Kheng covering Shingkhari and Bardo Gewogs; middle Kheng covering Nangkor and Trong Gewogs; and Lower Kheng covering Phangkhar, Goshing, Nangla and Bjoka Gewogs. The people of Kheng are mostly subsistence farmers with major income coming from agriculture farming. The Kamzhing (dryland) and Chhuzhing (paddy field) are dominant land use supported by cash crops such as orange, cardamom and potatoes. The lower regions of the Kheng are popular for bamboo crafting and generate substantial income from the sale of bamboo products.

The lower region of Zhemgang bordering Assam State of India falls within the administrative jurisdiction of the Royal Manas National Park, Bhutan's oldest protected area established in early 1960s.

This park shares boundary with the Manas National Park, India which is a World Heritage Site and Tiger Reserve. Because of this significance, Zhemgang was a hotspot for tourists in the 1980s where Bhutan Tourism Corporation promoted high-end visitors. The tourism in Manas was lifted during the 1990s due to insurgency problems along the transboundary until 2010. For two decades, the access to tourists was restricted and only important official visits of dignitaries and donors were permitted.

Zhemgang is also historically known for early use of the river as means for transportation since the early 1960s. The manual wooden boats were used to cross Manas River from Mathanguri to Manas camp where today Manas Range office is located. Later in the 1970s, a Japanese agriculturist, popularly known as Dasho Nishoka used mechanized

boats to transport machineries from India to Bhutan. In 2012, the River Guides of Panbang was formed by local youths to revitalize the legacy of river journey in the Dzongkhag. Both historically and geographically, Zhemgang has potential to develop as one of the top tourist destinations in the country.

The concept of ecotourism started in Zhemgang in 2009 after the first democratic government was elected. The basic idea was to increase local income and reduce rural poverty, generate employment for youth and reduce rural-urban migration. Since the conceptualization, the initiatives at the micro-level have started with support from different government agencies and conservation donors. The ecolodges at Gomphu, Pantang, and Panbang developed by Royal Manas National Park and handover to respective local communities for management. Bermoo Botanical Garden was established in 2015 to provide recreational sites to both the local and international visitors.

Buli Tsho (Lake) and Duen-mang Tshachu (hot spring) are two popular destinations in Zhemgang for domestic tourism. Duen-mang Tshachu is used a healing place for mostly sick and aged population from across the country. Mostly, people come in large group and stay there for one week to four weeks. The accommodation at the tshachu is managed by the Zhemgang Dzongkhag and has a capacity of roughly 100 bed nights. The visitors to Buli Tsho are mostly day visitors. For those who wish to stay back in Buli, there are homestays certified by the Tourism Council of Bhutan.

The annual report of the Tourism Council of Bhutan shows that Zhemgang received 346 visitors and spent 915 bed nights in 2019. Considering the ideal season to visit Zhemgang in dry months (October



River Guides of Panbang

to March), the accommodation available ranges from 15,660 bed night (single occupancy) to 29,160 bed night (double occupancy). This shows that only 5.7% of the facilities were currently being availed by the visitors. The potentiality of ecotourism in Zhemgang can easily be supported with existing facilities and services with some modest support from the government to improve it.

Studies also suggest that reorientation of local control over ecotourism business can encourage local people's participation in making community-based tourism as a rural development mecha-

nism. The disparity due to location, skills and capital investment result in inequitable sharing of benefits with the local community resulting in leakage of local economy. The use of local goods and services, employment of local residents is highly recommended for retaining local economy and avoid leakages from the Dzongkhag. The Tourism Council of Bhutan and the Association of Bhutan Tour Operators should encourage tour operators to use local facilities and services, discouraging them from even importing food items from outside the Dzongkhag.

With only 0.1% of the total

arrivals in the country visiting Zhemgang annually, the regional spread of tourists in remote locations of the country is seen as an inevitable challenge. The major factors affecting reach of tourists in remote Dzongkhags including Zhemgang are lack of credible infrastructure, long distance, and poor road conditions. Addressing these challenges could be a prerequisite to promote ecotourism or community-based tourism in the country in the long-run.



Mapping More-than-human Worlds of Conservation and Protection in Bhutan

Protected areas and sites of conservation in the Eastern Himalayas and Bhutan are deeply interwoven with contextually complex religious and spiritual histories, manifest in particular by a world of protective local deities and more-than-human spirits that are known to occupy territory in forests, lakes, trees, rocks, rivers, and mountains, and have bearing on relationships between communities and their environments.

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prohibitions that restrict entry and frequently limit extraction and development activities. In partnership with the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), our research explores how these worlds inevitably intersect with community-based conservation practices and ideologies of environmental protection, particularly in the geographic and biocultural context of two focal wildlife species, the revered Black-necked Cranes and the critically-endangered White-bellied Heron.

Around the world, spiritual and religious practices and worldviews can influence how environmental conservation is designed, implemented, and governed, as much as international foreign aid, domestic politics & policies, and global endangered species agendas. Lived religious beliefs are cognitive and experiential, but can also be spatial, relational, and geographical, and have profound implications for the ways in which conservation is conceptualized and practiced. Protected areas and sites of conservation in the Eastern Himalayas and Bhutan are deeply interwoven with contextually complex religious and spiritual histories, manifest in particular by a world of protective local deities and more-than-human spirits that are known to occupy territory in forests, lakes, trees, rocks, rivers, and mountains, and have bearing on relationships between communities and their environments. These places within the landscape- relational extensions of a broadly defined community

of humans, non-humans, and more-than-human beings- are referred to as “the deity’s palace” or “citadel of the deity” (*pho brang*). As has been articulated by prominent Bhutanese scholars, deity citadels are often afforded a certain degree of environmental protection, governed by social and communal rules and

Research Approach

The goal of our research has been to bring local and traditional knowledge directly into conversation with long-term environmental conservation endeavors, in recognition that local perspectives and perceptions have as much influence on the legacy and impact of conservation as does atten-



Black Necked Cranes



Gyempo in Studio

tion to development policies and species-focused biodiversity concerns. While drawing attention to lived religion and the complexities of both sacred and cultural landscapes in Bhutan, we employ an integrative approach to scholarship by drawing on research methodologies and philosophies of science from multiple disciplines, including anthropology, geography, ecology, and forestry & natural resources. This approach facilitates knowledge integration from local partners in ways that are at once scientifically rigorous, culturally salient, and programmatically valuable to conservation institutions and NGOs. Because our work focuses on how lived religion is spatially and relationally negotiated in these areas, we use community ethnography, participatory mapping, and sketch

mapping to better understand these complex cultural geographies of environmental protection. While this methodological approach is multi-dimensional, there are three significant dimensions worth highlighting:

- **Institutional & Community Collaboration:** This research is facilitated by Bhutan's oldest NGO, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), and is thus rooted in community-based approaches to conservation, directly partnering with local people in support of their voices and choices.

- **Broader Impacts & Significance:** This research endeavors to integrate multiple knowledges, not just in theory but in practice. While there are calls for bolder integration of

traditional and indigenous knowledge into conservation practices around the globe, decisions are still frequently made independent of the ways of knowing of indigenous people and local communities. This research foregrounds under-represented and de-centered local knowledge in applied community-based conservation projects.

- **Strategic & Creative Communication:** Through a dedicated collaboration with traditional-contemporary artist, Mr. Gyempo Wangchuk, we are documenting and painting the relational worlds of local deities and their territories in sites of conservation significance, alongside important aspects of lived religious practice and intangible cultural heritage through the creative visual arts and traditions observed in *druk*

gilhazo, alongside an integrative and collaborative approach to mapping otherwise.

Preliminary Findings

It is hard to travel through any area in Bhutan without encountering stories and local experiences connecting powerful local deities with histories of biocultural change, the emerging politics of development & modernization, environmental governance, and natural resource management efforts. Despite extraordinary and on-going governmental and non-governmental efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, oral histories, and local ecological knowledge related to deity citadels, our research suggests intergenerational knowledge transmission of local deities may be diminishing due to myriad social, cultural, and economic forces; there is the real likelihood that some environmental knowledge and socio-linguistic diversity in this regard may be lost if not interwoven into mindful conservation and development priorities.

One manifest challenge in conservation initiatives for cranes and herons, is that their habitat ranges and territories occupy different geographical areas in Bhutan that are marked by distinct social, cultural, and religious histories. This translates into different values, beliefs, and conceptualizations of what “conservation” means, and how spiritual landscapes should or could be protected into the future. Our research demonstrates that understanding and mapping local perceptions is key to pursuing protected area management in Bhutan, for visible or invisible, tangible or intangible beings, and can help guide community-based conservation and development agendas in ways that are both more inclusive and holistically effective.

Through our community ethno-



Community Mapping Baytsamang

graphic work, participatory mapping, and focus group interview series, we have found that some recorded experiences are not easily “mappable”, that is, they aren’t easily visualized with introduced cartographic rules and assumptions or mapping technologies like Geographic Information Systems (GIS). For instance, while deity citadels are understood to have certain boundaries or thresholds of power or influence, their territories are inherently relational, and can be fluid as well as indeterminate discrete, and do not neatly fit into western understandings of space and landscape classification categories.

Our research partners are actively engaging in alternative techniques for visualizing these complex more-than-human worlds, both documenting and protecting certain living aspects of tangible and intangible heritage deeply enmeshed within conservation protected areas and beyond in the Kingdom. Our collaborative efforts draw insights from Himalayan visionary worlds, Vajrayana Buddhist cosmologies, and traditional Bhutanese artistic expression, such as *thang kha* and *ldeb bris*.

Conclusion

Given the importance and centrality of deity citadels to lived experience in Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas, and their incontrovertible influence in cultural landscape formation, mindful development paradigms, and environmental conservation, the results of this research could help future scientists and conservation organizations think differently about how to be more inclusive of community knowledge and knowledge holders in decision-making processes. Broadly, our research aims to increase awareness of the richness of place-based religious experience in this context. If successful, geographically documenting protective deities alongside protected species in culturally salient ways, without attempting to assimilate the intricacies of the more-than-human worlds into limiting digital technologies of visualization (i.e. GIS), will influence the perceptive capacity of the scientific community, and conservation and development practitioners, who are working to protect and preserve both cultural and biological complexity and diversity.





Rufous-necked hornbill

Mesmerizing Mongar: The seven valleys of temples built by sky-dancers, healing pools and of a world heritage dance of drums from Bhutan

Entering Mongar district is a door to a multi-dimensional destination brimming with historical landmarks, cultural pursuits, natural wonders, and societal intricacies, offering an incredible and fascinating window into a diverse way of life and beliefs in the Zhonggar Tshodhuen (Seven Valleys).

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the 100 imprints of the sacred syllable “Aa” on the rock-cave left by Guru Rinpoche besides numerous other sacred sites. The Nye also has a medicinal spring which the locals believe can cure 18 diseases besides a nearby pool called Awa Chhu (now known as Uma Chuu). It is said to remove defilements in a person. It takes a minimum of three days to complete a pilgrimage to all the sacred sites.

There is a belief that Omba Ney of Trashy Yangtse, Aja Ney of Mongar and Hungrel Dzong of Paro are three equally important religious sites in Bhutan because their names start with the letters Om, Ah and Hung to complete the Buddhist Mantra of Om Ah Hung. The trail connecting Aja Ney and Ugyen Draphu in Mongar, and Sheri Dzong in Mongar-Trashi Yangtse border has made pilgrimage more convenient. The pilgrims can further trek to either Trashy Yangtse or Phuningla in Lhuentse via a trail connecting three districts.

Drametse Thekchog Namdrol Ugyen Choeling Monastery

Drametse Lhakhang was built in 1511 by Ani Choeten Zangmo, a descendant of Terton Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). The blessings of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal were multiplied by three succeeding incarnations, Zhabdrung Jigme Drakpa (1791-1830), Zhabdrung

The dzongkhag covers an area of 1,954 sq. km with elevations ranging from 400m to 4000m asl. Historically, Mongar was known as the “bastion of the Zhongarps” as some of the finest administrators in the country were born here. The district is strategically located and is often considered as the capital of eastern Bhutan. The region is one of the largest dzongkhags and is enclaved by Trashigang, Lhuentse, Pemagatshel, Samdrup Jongkhar and Zhemgang districts. This has led to the proliferation of a unique multi-dimensional cultural identity of the dzongkhag.

Hike to the mystical Larjab Drakar Choeling

Surrounded by alpine forests and mountains, Larjab Drakar Choeling Lhakhang in Yakpogang, Mongar gewog, was built sometime between 1701 and 1707 by Druythob Kuenzang Chophel, a disciple of the 9th abbot of Bhutan, Je Khenpo Shakya Rinchen.

Larjab literally means “behind the mountain”. It is said that at the spot where the temple was built, Druythob Kuenzang Chophel subdued an evil spirit which had assumed a human form. It is said the temple was miraculously built by sky dancers (dakini), empowered by Druythob’s wisdom. Resembling a Rhino’s Horn, the temple is said to have been built with small pebbles at the bottom (foundation), with bigger boulders used as the construction grew in height. Over the years, given its sanctity, the temple attained a special status as the “Taktshang of the east”. Today, the monastery has a Drubdey (a retreat for meditation) for lay monks established by Gyeltshen Truelku. The Larjab Drakar Choeling is reachable by a day-long hike.

Sacred Aja Ney and Aja-Ugyen Draphu-Sheridzong Trail

The renowned Aja Ney is located at an altitude of more than 3,500 meters under Sherimuhung Gewog. The most sacred are



Jigme Norbu (1831-1861), and Zhabdrung Jigme Chogyal (1862-1904). Both the Kudung (the bodily remains of Ani Choeten Zangmo) and the Kapala of Dakini, which bears the self-arisen words OM AH HUNG, are kept at the monastery. The Kapala was once again found by Terton Pema Lingpa and preserved in Tamzhing Lhuendrup Choeling's Taen Gam (treasure box) until Ani Choeten Zangmo was given it as a part of inheritance.

After finishing the construc-

tion of Samye Monastery in 769 AD, Guru Rinpoche and Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal are believed to have hidden it. The monastery not only has unique collection of significant manuscripts, murals, and religious sculptures, but it is also the home of the Dance of the Drums of Drametse.

Drametse Nga-chham

The Mask Dance of the Drums of Drametse was choreographed there in the 16th century after the

monastery's founder, Kunga Gyeltshen, the great grandson of Terton Pema Lingpa, had a vision of Guru Rinpoche's Zangtopelri (Copper-Colored Mountain Paradise). A total of 16 male dancers wearing masks and 10 musicians perform the dance. They first perform a prayer dance in the main shrine, and then, one by one, they enter the monastery's courtyard. The dance is divided into two sections: a quiet, meditative portion that symbolizes the tranquil deities, and a swift,



athletic portion that symbolizes the wrathful ones. The quintessence of Bhutanese identity, this dance has been performed for nearly five centuries all over the country. Now, it has become a crucial component of Tshechu in Bhutan. Dramétsé Nga-chham was designated as a “Masterpiece of the Intangible Heritage” at the Third Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in Paris in November 2005 because of its worldly, spiritual, and



Aja Ney

artistic values.

Wengkhar Nagtshang

Wengkhar Nagtshang is renowned and venerated for being the birthplace of Zhabdrung Jigme Drakpa (1725–1761), the third reincarnation of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. Its artifacts include gold-written religious texts, sculptures, and holy items belonging to Zhabdrung as well as his personal rosary, headpiece, and monk’s garb and the carpet on which he worshiped. The numerous relics are displayed to the public during a religious ritual that takes place on the tenth day of the third month of the Bhutanese calendar.

Yakgang Sang-ngag Choeling Lhakhang

The Yakganag Lhakhang was built by Sangdag, the youngest son of Terton Pema Lingpa sometime in the 16th century. The temple is renowned for its special and unique treasures, including a statue of the Buddha that Terton Pema Lingpa found in Mebartsho, a three-sided

Phurpa (sacred dagger) that Pema Lingpa found in Ugordra in Tibet, a dakini’s skull from Samye Chimphu Nadrak, and a Naga king’s skull. The temple also exhibits xylograph blocks, musical instruments, weaponry, and armor and masks from ancient times. The Buddhas (past, present, and future) as well as statues of Guru Rinpoche, Chenrizig, Terton Pema Lingpa, and Gyapo Lhashang can be found on the ground floor. When Choekhor Deb, a local king, attempted to open the treasure chest disclosed by Pema Lingpa, three statues were said to have escaped flying to Jakar Dzong, the Dongkala monastery, and to Yakgang Lhakhang.

Mongar is one of the fastest developing districts in the East. It is a home of diversity that offers a variety of exciting experiences, many of which will be covered in the coming weeks.





Art work by Asha Karma Wangdi,
VAST Bhutan

Buddhist **Wisdom** on Conservation with Lopen Karma Phuntsho

“All sentient beings including animals and human beings must coexist. Thus, any policy that favors one or the other will have consequences. It is important to formulate policies and adopt practices which maintain the ecological balance. Given the interconnectedness of life, practices which benefit the sustainability of both animals and human wellbeing will be the best option.”



Lopen Karma Phuntsho is spiritual thought leader, a Buddhist teacher and writer

An interview by Sonam Dema, Advocacy and Behavior Change Officer from GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan”.

Buddhists believe in various realms of gods, human, animals and spirits. Does being born as an animal (for example: tiger, golden langur, dog or a fish) means it is their past karma?

Buddhists believe in a wide range of living beings including visible ones such as humans, animals, fishes, insects, birds and also many invisible ones such as gods, demons and spirits. In a common Buddhist classification, there are six realms of beings with many sub-categories within each realm. These beings are considered to be all results of their own karma. Thus, an animal is born as an animal due to its actions in the

previous lifetimes.

As human beings, are we superior to animals? Does this also give us (human beings) the right to mistreat animals (domestic or wild)?

There is no concept of superiority unlike attitude promoted by the anthropocentric worldview but some beings are more fortunate and happier than others. Human birth is considered precious and special because it allows for the pursuit of higher purpose and meaning. All beings have their own strengths and weaknesses but no beings have the right to mistreat others. Mistreatment is bad karma and must be eschewed.



How does Buddhism view biodiversity (water, plants, insects and animals) in general?

Biodiversity is a result of the complexity of life and karmic causes. From the Buddhist point of view, biodiversity is an expression of the inconceivable nature of life and karmic causes, which only an enlightened being can fully understand.

Bhutan has over 72% of forest coverage, and prioritizes biodiversity conservation. Is biodiversity important for the world, according to Buddhism?

Yes, it is important for the world as life is interdependent and different life forms contribute in different ways to sustain the earth. From a Buddhist meditative point of view, biodiversity is the rich and astoundingly diverse expression of the one nature that we are all made of.

The diverse world helps appreciate the openness and potency of our fundamental nature from which such diversity emerges. A peacock's feather is often used in Vajrayana rituals to demonstrate such existential diversity and beauty.

Human-wildlife conflict is a growing concern in Bhutan. Farmers blame conservation policies and wild animals (like tigers, wild boars, monkeys, birds) when they lose their crops or livestock to wild animals. What does Buddhism say about Human-Wildlife Coexistence?

All sentient beings including animals and human beings must coexist. Thus, any policy that favors one or the other will have consequences. It is important to formulate policies and adopt practices which maintain the ecological balance. Given the interconnectedness of life, practices which benefit the sustainability of both animals and human wellbeing will be the best option.

To conserve the golden mahseers in our rivers and to enhance livelihood opportunities for the locals, Bhutan is promoting recreational high-end fly-fishing (catch and release). Your comments.

Fishing for food or fun is absolutely unacceptable in Buddhism. There is no justification for taking the life of another being, except in rare cases of self-defense or survival. Even fly-fishing is totally wrong. People who think fly-fishing is right must try piercing their lips and being dragged. It is totally contradictory to the culture of compassion, empathy and respect for life. It is inhuman and from the Buddhist point of view, such people will go through a similar pain manifold in future lifetimes.

Is the Golden Mahseer revered and considered as one of the Eight Auspicious Signs (Tashi Tagye) in Buddhism?

Whether we identify the pair of golden fish with Golden Mahseer or not, the Auspicious Golden Fish (བཏཱ་ཤིས་མེར་ཉི་ལྔ་ལྔ་) is one of the eight auspicious signs and they

represent the Buddha's compassionate and clairvoyant eyes, and the agility and swiftness of the Buddha's enlightened spirit. The two fishes symbolize the two types of penetrating and transcendental wisdom of the Buddha. They are also said to symbolize the two great rivers Ganga and Yamuna, solar and lunar powers, fertility and abundance, wisdom and compassion.

If we dedicate our actions, thoughts and words towards conserving biodiversity, do we gain some good merit in this life?

Dedication and prayers do bring some merit but it is not enough. For substantive merit, real action is required for real result. Thus, compassion must be expressed through the action of respecting life, saving biodiversity and protecting our environment.

As a Buddhist scholar, what is your advice for our readers and our youths on biodiversity conservation for Bhutan and for the world?

Our planet is our only home. It is fragile as is beautiful, and its survival depends on the state of the environment and life forms which constitute it. An imbalance in our ecology and life forms can destabilize this delicate planet we call home and bring an end to life and civilization as we know it. Neither economy, nor culture, religion or politics can help us exist, let alone make us prosperous or happy, if we fail to save the mother-earth.





Kantali Hut

The **unseen** adventures in Samdrupjongkhar

A gateway to eastern Bhutan by road with a whole new travel experience of birdwatching, indigenous seed banks, salt-trek route, and many more.

Most people who grew up in the eastern part of the country have memories of traveling to one of the oldest towns in the east, Samdrupjongkhar. The town was popularly known for having one of the first cinema halls, the oldest commercial hub of the east and also a gateway to the bustling Indian city of Guwahati. The district as an ideal travel destination has been underrated so far. The dzongkhag has much to offer. Here are some of the notable attractions for travelers.

Narphu - Samdrupjongkhar birding route

Bhutan is known to be home to over 7 percent of the world's bird species in various districts including Samdrupjongkhar owing to its rich forest coverage. About sixty kilo-

meters away from the main town, from the base of the famous mirror cliff (melong brak) is the sub-tropical and warm-broadleaf forest, the ideal birdwatching route. It is home to about 360 different species of birds found in Bhutan. Beautiful Nuthatch, Crimson Sunbird, Asian Emerald Cuckoo, Greater Goldenback, Ruby-cheeked Sunbird, and White-browed Scimitar Babbler are some of the prominent bird species that fly around within this vegetation. The birding activities can be done in spring, fall, and winter.

Kaloyen Tsho Hike

Located above Dewathang, Kaloyen Tsho is a 2-hour hike from the main road of Lamtsarong. Locals believe the lake belongs to the guardian deity of Dewathang, Kaloyen Yongba, and is therefore named



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as Kaloyen Tsho. Hikers can enjoy the breathtaking view of Yongla Goenpa, Dewathang, Samdrup-jongkhar town and views of Assam plains in the soft golden dusk. The hikers can also visit sacred sites along the route, and the rich vegetation.

Chokyi Gyatso Institute

Popularly known as Dzongsar Shedra, the minimal but magnificent Chokyi Gyatso Institute overlooking Dewathang valley is one of the attractions for local travelers. The monastery is unique in many ways. It has palatial architecture, a serene environment, and most importantly, it upholds traditional wisdom with modern innovative programs like Lhomen Education. So, it is an inimitable tourist destination for a traveler who is looking for valuable experiences. The Shedra welcomes all visitors with no limitations like dress code or religion -- he/she can visit each shrines, mediate at their own will for hours and exit the monastery whenever they want.

Bhairab Kunda Shiva Mandir

The Shiva Mandir at Jomotsangkha is popular among the local visitors and also regional tourists from across the border. It has rich religious stories and is also a popular place for picknickers. There is a self-arisen lake with linga beside the cave.

Salt-trek route

Like James Beard's weighty question, "Where would we be without salt?", a long time ago, people of Pema Gatshel and Trashigang traveled through the broad-leaved pine forests route carrying oranges for trading with salt and silk from Gudama-the border town of Samdrup-jongkhar. This was during the period when the national highway between Samdrupjongkhar and Trashigang was not constructed. It was an



Cereals and vegetable seeds



Chokyi Gyatso Institute



Dungsam Seeds Bank

eight-day voyage through beautiful villages and mountain ridges. Today, it is one of the potential nature-based treks in the Dzongkhag to retrace and revisit the ancient salt-trek route.

The palatable Orongpa Solo (Chili)

For food lovers, Samdrupjongkhar is also known for the famous local chili called Orongpa Solo which is best for preparing the national dish Ema Dasti, like Urka of Trashi Yangtse. The story has it that many moons ago, the people of Dueri noticed the millet husk drifting from the upper hill. They sensed the presence of fertile land above and so, they discovered Orong. The gift of this discovery was this special palatable Orongpa chili.

Dungsam Seeds Bank

With initiative from the local community, around sixty-seven varieties of indigenous cereals and vegetable seeds' genetic diversity is preserved and distributed at the Dungsam Seeds Bank in Samdrup-jongkhar. For instance, the cereal 'Yang-go' which was declining in the Geowgs was revived. The traditional seeds bank serves as the seed library with information on Dru-na-gu (the nine essential cereals of spiritual value) available in the Dzongkhag.

Kantali Hut

Kantali Hut in Dewathang is a must-visit for all visitors. Kantali is a Sanskrit word meaning replica. In line with its name, the hut exhibits the artisanship of the people in the Dzongkhag. The arts and crafts in the shop comprise products from mud, bamboo, wood to upcycled contemporary bags, bamboo mugs, plastic baskets, earthen pots, and natural dyed Bhutanese attires.

Access to the nearest ecotourism destination in Assam

Samdrupjongkhar dzongkhag is in proximity to the commercial hub and the international airport of Guwahati, Assam. It takes about 3-hour drive from the main town of Samdrupjongkhar to reach Guwahati. Assam is globally known for ecotourism. Hence, the Dzongkhag serves as the entry and exit gateway for all tourists to the rich tourism hotspot of Northeast India.

In a nutshell, the far-flung district of Samdrupjongkhar has a lot to offer to travelers who are seeking unique experiences, warmer weather and soft golden hours in the southeastern plains of Bhutan.





Sustainable **Tourism** in Bhutan – Balancing Conservation and Development

Tourism is not a single sector responsibility – as it used to be perceived – but a multi-dimensional concept which requires constant communications, collaboration, and partnerships. (Extracts of an interview with Dr Karma Tshering from Research Panel Sustainability Leaders Project: sustainability-leaders.com)

Dr Karma Tshering (PhD) is the Managing Director of BTFEC (Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation). He has PhD in Conservation and Development from University of Sydney, Australia. A passionate conservationist, Dr Karma has served for over 27 years in various agencies in the field of environmental conservation and ecotourism. He has been actively involved in the promotion of incentive-based conservation through transformation of conventional system of forest and park management by establishing and institutionalizing nature recreation and ecotourism in the country. He continues to dedicate his time and services for environmental conservation.



my attention was drawn to tourism.

Through my research I was able to demonstrate that sustainable tourism development is a viable option to stimulate the support of the public for biodiversity conservation and cultural preservation, and that such development is necessary for the sustainability of the Protected Areas in Bhutan.

It was evident that if planned and implemented in consultation with the local people and other relevant partners, tourism has the potential to offer a symbiotic relationship in promoting socio-economic development, cultural preservation and biodiversity conservation. Tourism is not a single sector responsibility – as it used to be perceived – but a multi-dimensional concept which requires constant communications, collaboration, and partnerships.

Tourism as a positive force for conservation and happiness

The four pillars to the vision of happiness, in addition to the conservation

Bhutan declared an extensive network of Protected Areas, covering almost half the size of the nation's land, one of the highest proportions in any country worldwide. The responsibility for its management within the government was entrusted to the Nature Conservation Division, the office I worked for during the start of my career. At the time, Protected Area (PA) management was relatively new in Bhutan. I consider myself lucky to have been given the opportunity to become, almost from its inception, a member of a group of Protected

Area professionals who grew with that vision.

Unlike many other countries, Bhutan's conservation policy allows people to reside within the PA. This circumstance demanded an integrated approach to conservation and development. Since most of the conservation programs were donor-funded, they lacked sustainability. The people's interest in conservation activities were short-term. Therefore, identifying projects that ensured long-term commitment and benefits to both people and conservation was essential. That's when

of the natural environment, are the preservation of the cultural heritage, equitable socio-economic development, and good governance. While the country seeks to focus development based on each of the happiness pillars, in my view we cannot focus on each pillar in isolation but will need an integrated approach that combines all four pillars.

It is important to identify programs that can successfully combine all the pillars, resulting in an overall positive impact. Tourism has the prospect to provide this critical link.

Especially for Bhutan, with limited potential for industrialization, but with a unique culture and an intact natural environment, the capacity of tourism as a major force for its development is apparent. There are several examples around the world where tourism is becoming the driving force for conservation. Likewise, here in Bhutan, tourism has made a substantial contribution to conservation and happiness.

The stringent conservation policies weigh heavily on the local people living in and around the forests and parks with increased wildlife predation impacting their subsistence livelihood. This problem has been alleviated through seed funding established for livestock compensation established through tourism, other interventions and promoting of community-based tourism to provide supplementary income.

Sustainable tourism development is able to generate positive benefits for conservation of the cultural and natural heritage while offering socio-economic benefits to the local people. This symbiosis contributes to happiness.

'Incentive-based Conservation' as a practical approach to safeguarding nature

I am sure many of us would agree that human motivation to a large

extent is incentive-driven. Incentives can come in different forms either direct or indirect. Likewise, an incentive-based approach to conservation to me is the most logical and practical to fulfilling conservation needs.

It is only natural that people become more encouraged to participate in conservation if they see some benefits for themselves. Economic benefits are no doubt attractive, but there are also far-reaching benefits for people's appreciation towards conservation through nature recreational activities.

I had the opportunity to demonstrate this in Bhutan by starting nature recreational programs. I realized that although we had an extensive network of parks and Protected Areas in Bhutan, it lacked public interest in its appreciation and consequently its support.

Incentivizing through responsible enjoyment to me is a sustainable approach. I played a key role in advocating the establishment of a Division within the Department of Forests and Parks that was specifically mandated to promote nature recreation and ecotourism programs within the forests and parks of Bhutan.

The Division, since its establishment in 2011, has created several nature recreational areas and programs for the public. This has led to an increased understanding and appreciation of natural areas, resulting in increased public support for conservation.

People are a vital link to nature conservation and strengthening this link is fundamental to achieving the conservation objectives. A conservation policy that engages people's participation through an incentive approach has the prospects of delivering positive benefits for people and nature.

Lessons from Bhutan as a sustainable tourism destination

The state of the natural environment is one of the most important attributes for developing sustainable tourism. Bhutan is fortunate that the stringent conservation policies within a large subsistence farming community have led to an intact natural environment consisting of over 72% of the country under forest cover.

While quick monetary benefits from forests have lured many countries to indiscriminately log large areas, Bhutan on the contrary, under the visionary leadership of The Fourth Druk Gyalpo was not tempted towards these short-term gains. Instead, the forests were conserved and nurtured like the goose that lays the golden eggs for the future economy of Bhutan. The Bhutanese people now enjoy that future. The pristine state of the natural environment has generated substantial revenue from clean energy production through hydropower and also enhanced opportunities for tourism.

Bhutan has demonstrated to the outside world that supporting conservation is not only about fulfilling the ecological need, but an economic investment endowed with long-term benefits. Hopefully, many countries are encouraged and will learn from Bhutan and pledge their commitment to follow this path.

Travellers are increasingly seeking destinations that are more natural. The authentic cultural and natural landscape of Bhutan has branded Bhutan as one of the top tourist destinations and Bhutan will continue to be sought for its natural exclusivity by our visitors.





Omba Ney in
Trashi Yangtshi

Discover Trashi Yangtse

The land of heavenly birds, roaming lakes and hidden paradise

Sonam Dema is currently working as the communications (advocacy and behavior change) officer for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project. Sonam is a former television anchor/producer for Bhutan Broadcasting Service and has a master's degree in Diplomacy and International Studies. Sonam is also a freelance travel writer, passionate about writing, story-telling and photography.



winter visiting birds including ibis-bills, bar-headed geese and ducks.

Boomdeling Ramsar site

In 2012, the Boomdeling floodplain area was declared a Ramsar site, a wetland of international importance, one of the first two in Bhutan. It includes the winter roosting area of Black-necked Cranes and hosts many other birds. Since 1994, large areas of paddy fields in the area have been washed away or were covered under thick layers of sand by flash floods of the Kholong Chu or debris flows of the Nakpola Chu. The floodplain was created due to a huge debris flow that formed the Dungzam constriction. According to the local legend linked to the event, a local deity created a huge landslide as revenge for the villagers killing its son and daughter who had transformed themselves into snakes to attend a local celebration.

Trashi Yangtse has flourishing ecosystem, picturesque villages and a vibrant rural community, rich in such folklores of giants, roaming lakes and the most popular legend of a dakini girl from Tawang.

Chorten Kora Stupa

The revered stupa of Chorten Kora was built in 1740, over a period of 12 years, by Lama Ngawang Loday. It is said, the chorten was modelled after Boudhanath stupa in Nepal, which the lama carved out of a radish. Differences between the Chorten Kora and Boudhanath stupas were due to the distortion of the model as it shrunk on the return journey of the lama to Bhutan. Locals believe that a Dakini girl was sealed alive of her own free will in the chorten as an offering from the Dakpa people

Have you heard stories of heavenly birds, wandering lakes and hidden paradise? Trashi Yangtse valley is thriving in such stories, spiritual allures and a flourishing wildlife. Already popular among the domestic tourists for spiritual pilgrimage, Trashi Yangtse also has a huge potential for ecotourism with its vibrant community and rich biodiversity. The district is a winter-home to the endangered Black-necked Cranes and also, known for Bhutan's national butterfly among the lepidopterists.



Ludlow's Bhutan Glory

Bhutan's national butterfly, Ludlow's Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis ludlowi*), is found in certain places in Trashi Yangtse. It flies mainly in the month of August. Ludlow's Bhutan Glory was rediscovered in 2009, 75 years after the only two known specimens were collected in the same area.

Boomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS)

Apart from hosting the black-necked crane in winter BWS is also home to Ludlow's Bhutan Glory. The park has rich biodiversity, including snow leopards in the north and probably still visiting tigers in the south and red pandas at several places. Other wildlife, such as barking deer, sambar, capped langurs and Assamese macaques are much more common. The surrounding area is also said to be a good place for

Black-necked Cranes and Ludlow's Bhutan Glory

Hundreds of Black-necked Cranes come to Bhutan in winter months due to availability of wetlands that serve as their habitat in a few other districts including Trashi Yangtse.

In Trashi Yangtse, the Boomdeling Ramsar site serves as the winter roosting ground for the Black-necked Cranes that forage in the paddy fields between Zhapang to the north and Chorten Kora to the south. Black-necked Cranes are revered in Bhutan as "Heavenly Bird". To locals, their arrival signifies good luck and good harvest. Scientifically, the presence of Black-necked Cranes indicates healthy agricultural land and its surrounding ecosystems including wetlands, ponds and water bodies.

of Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, India. Before the pandemic, the Dakpas would come for circum-ambulation on the 15th day of the 1st month every year to pay their homage and offer prayers. Bhutanese celebrate their Kora on the 30th of the 1st Bhutanese month.

Beyul or the hidden Paradise

Over 10 kilometers' drive away, north of Yangtse town and about 30 minutes hike from Womanang Village, you will find a hidden lhakhang "Dechen Phodrang" deep down in the gorge between the rivers. Locals believe it is a Beyul (Tibetan/Dzongkha: རྗེ་མཚོ་ལྗོངས་ལྗོངས་) meaning 'hidden valleys' which was blessed by Guru Padmasambhava in the 8th century and worship such spiritual sites as a paradise. Dechen Phodrang is a popular destination among the locals and domestic tourists from other districts of Bhutan.

Taktshang of the east

Popularly known as the taktshang of the east, Omba Lhakhang is also built on a cliff and is located within the holy pilgrim site of Omba Ney, where the letter OM can be seen on the rock face. It is one of three unique holy places linked to Guru Rimpoche, the others being Aja and Hungrel where the letters AH and HUM can be seen.

Trashi Yangtse is also popular for a special local chilli Urka Bangla and also for exclusive local cuisine from Ramjar gewog. The far-flung district has a lot to offer to a spirited traveler, nature lover and spiritual seeker— therefore, a one-page story doesn't justify the beauty and mysteries surrounding the beautiful valleys of Trashi Yangtse.





Special local cuisine from Ramjar Gewog in Trashi Yangtshi (Photo: Trashi Yangtshi Dzongkhag)



Singye Dzong (Photo: Tenzin Gyelwang)

Lhuentse: An abode of **divine** experiences

If you believe traveling sets your mind free and brings a celestial joy, Lhuentse awaits you!

Tshewang Zangmo is working as Asst. Economic Development Officer under Lhuentse Dzongkhag Administration. She graduated from Sherubtse College studying B.A. Dzongkhag and English. She loves travelling, photography, reading, writing free verse and painting. She believes mindfulness at workplace is key to success.



Lhuentse lies in the north-eastern corner of Bhutan and is the ancestral home of our monarchs. Lhuentse is also popular among the domestic tourists for the authentic spiritual and cultural experiences it offers to the visitors.

Lhuentse Dzong and Lekpagang gi Tshenden

Lhuentse Dzong, popularly known as Lhuendruptse gi Dzongchen or Lhuendrup Rinchentse is a well-known historic site. It was initially

built on the site where Yongzin Ngagi Wangchuk was in 1552 as a Dzongchung-small dzong. Later on, Trongsa Penlop Minjur Tempa built the current Dzong. It has many sacred relics including the Tshepamay statue that was once kept in Kidlung Lhakhag. Annually the Dzongkhag Administration and Dratshang organize Tshempay Tshechu, where people get the blessing of longevity from the statue. Today it serves as the office for the district administrative and religious body, housing

many sacred relics installed by Desi Tenzin Rabgay. The fortress sits atop a hill overlooking the majestic Kurichhu river and is the venue for the Lhuentse festival. The Dzong's most sacred artifact is the bronze statue of Tshepamey, which was found in the fishing net of a local fisherman.

Another notable attraction is Lekpagang gi Tshenden (cypress trees of Lekpagang) opposite to Lhuentse Dzong, which is believed to release smoke once every year before we celebrate Thrué Bab (Blessed Rainy Day). It is said to be the oldest of all the cypress trees in Bhutan as its story can be traced back to the 8th century when Khikha Rathoed was exiled from Khenpajong to Bumthang.

Singye Dzong

Singye Dzong is one of the famous sacred places related to Guru Rinpoche in the history of Bhutan. Every year hundreds and thousands of domestic tourists visit Singye Dzong. It is located three days' walk away from Khoma Gewog. It falls under Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary sharing border with China. The closest



meadows, icy crystal clear streams, flowers, birds, and medical herbs. It is a breathtaking moment for anyone who makes it there.

Singye Dzong has eight sacred rocky hill Dzongs and many imprints of Guru Rinpoche's and Dakini Yeshey Tshogyel's bodies and hidden termas are still visible to visitors. There are four major lakes known as Yumtharma, Tshona, Tshokhar, and Terdha Latsho. Bhutanese devotees across the country dream of visiting the Singye Dzong at least once in their life for this divine experience and belief of cleansing their sins and to make their afterlife journey peaceful. The daggers discovered by Guru Rinpoche are still viewed as the main relics of Singye Dzong.

Rinchen Bumpa and Kuenzangling Lhakhang

Rinchen Bumpa (vase of the jewels) is also a prominent domestic tourist attraction in Lhuentse and is located in Kurtoed Gewog. It takes six hours uphill walk from Kuenzangling Lhakhang. The sacred site manuscript mentions that it was prophesied by Ratna Lingpa and later blessed by Longchenpa. Locals believe it is a place where the beings with karmic connection had attained accomplishment, a place where devotees make offerings. Among many sacred relics, the most fascinating is a large rock slab on which visitors can eyewitness holy letters when the first of the sun falls on the rock. It remains for an hour and fades away gradually. Devotees stay overnight to witness the sacred holy letters. Other significant places related to Guru Rinpoche, Khandro Yeshey Tshogyal and Khandro Tashi Kedron can also be seen.

Kunezangling Lhakhang is located on the base of Rinchen Bumpa, which is blessed by Kuenkhan Longchen Rabjam. The main sacred objects include a

statue of Buddha, Guru Rinpoche, and Zambala. Inside the temple, one can see the footprints of Kuenkhan Longchen Rabjam on the rock where he meditated.

Dungkar Naktshang and Jigme Namgyal Naktshang

Dungkar Naktshang, the ancient home of the Dungkar Chojie and the ancestral home of the Wangchuck Dynasty, is located near Jigme Namgyal Naktshang on the Dungkar shape land. Pila Goenpo Wangyel married Sonam Pelzom of Jangsa and gave birth to Jigme Namgyal, the father of the first King of Bhutan. The 16th century magnificent Naktshang, where Jigme Namgyal was born still stands tall today and it is located 40 KM drive away from Lhuentse Dzong. In 1825, a boy called Jigme Namgyal was born in Dungkar, Kurtoed Gewog, and started the Wangchuck Dynasty. He traveled toward Trongsa in search of his destiny to become Trongsa Penlop. Later, his son Druk Gyalpo Ugyen Wangchuck became the first King of Bhutan. These two ancestral home of the monarchs are the historical and architectural feast for all visitors.

Lhuentse Dzongkhag witnesses increasing number of visitors all season every year. Most visit the district for spiritual pilgrimage, while some for nature, culture and exotic textile. Lhuentse dzongkhag is a perfect model of ecotourism destination in Bhutan with rich biodiversity, living culture and vibrant community. Lhuentse has a huge potential for high value tourism experiences for all.



Dungkar Naktshang

communities to Singye Dzong are Khomagang and Denchung villages. Currently, the area has a mediation center that accommodates 12 monks in a three-year retreat, and two main monasteries are Gawa Dzong and Singye Dzong.

The entire journey has wooden bridges, a wide footpath, signage, and resting places. One is accompanied throughout the journey by the swift-flowing river that starts from one of the Singye Dzong lakes. When we are about to reach the destination, the vegetation changes with view of tall rocky mountains, small shrubs, yak grazing in the

Trashigang – The Far East

Trashigang is all about legendary history, thriving nomadic culture and unique social practices. A destination brimming with extraordinary experiences for adventurous traveler.



Article contributed by **Jigme Dorji**. He is the Project Technical Special for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project.

Trashigang has been the political stronghold of Eastern Bhutan for over 300 years. Even today, it is one of the largest Dzongkhags in the country and has an area of over 2204 square kilometers. Characterized by high forest cover, endemic flora and fauna, flourishing agriculture, rich weaving culture and semi-nomadic community, the district has diverse and authentic Bhutanese experiences to offer for travelers who haven't experienced the eastern pockets of Bhutan yet.

Trashigang Dzong

Known as 'The Fortress of the auspicious hill', Trashigang Dzong was built in 1659 to defend against Tibetan invasions. The historic significance of this dzong is its strategic position on the spur overlooking Drangmachhu River that has visually suppressed invading



Yonphula Domestic Airport

Tibetan armies. It is believed that the view of the dzong forced them to retreat, as the soldiers said, "the fortress is not on the ground, but looks like it is a sky fortress". As highlighted in this oral history, the dzong does look high above in the sky when viewed from the chazam (the iron bridge) below.

Yonphula Domestic Airport

The military airfield of 1960s was developed into a domestic airport in 2012. Standing at 9000 feet above sea level, this airport connects people of six districts of eastern Bhutan to west, central and



Highlanders



Rangjung Woesel Choeling Monastery, Trashigang

south-central regions. DrukAir, the Royal Bhutan Airlines operates its flight service from Paro International airport, Bumthang and Gelephu domestic airport to Yonphula on regular basis.

Sherubtse college

Bhutan's premier institute, Sherubtse College was founded as a public school in 1968 and became a junior college in 1976. It became the oldest and largest constituent college of the Royal University of Bhutan in 2003. Spreading over a sprawling lush green campus with an authentic rural ambiance, Sherubtse College is only about 10 minutes' drive away from the Yonphula airport on the way to Trashigang Dzong. Kanglung is a small town with few shops, Zangthopelri and beautiful college campus that makes travelers worth stopping by for a few hours.

Rangjung Woesel Choeling Monastery

The elders in the locality vividly remember that the present Trashicho Dzong was proposed to be constructed on the hillock where present day Rangjung Woesel Choeling Monastery is located. They believe that the local spirit at that time obstructed construction of the Dzong and finally diverted to Thimphu

dzongkhag. The monastery was founded by His Eminence Dzungse Garab Dorje Rinpoche in the year 1989 and became an iconic place for worshiper of Dudjom New Treasure Lineage. The daily prayers of monks and nuns along with melodious sound of religious instruments keeps small satellite town of Jangjung lively and free of misfortunes. Driving from Trashigang to SWS headquarters in Phongmay, one will be tempted to visit the monastery and meet with the monks and nuns.

Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary

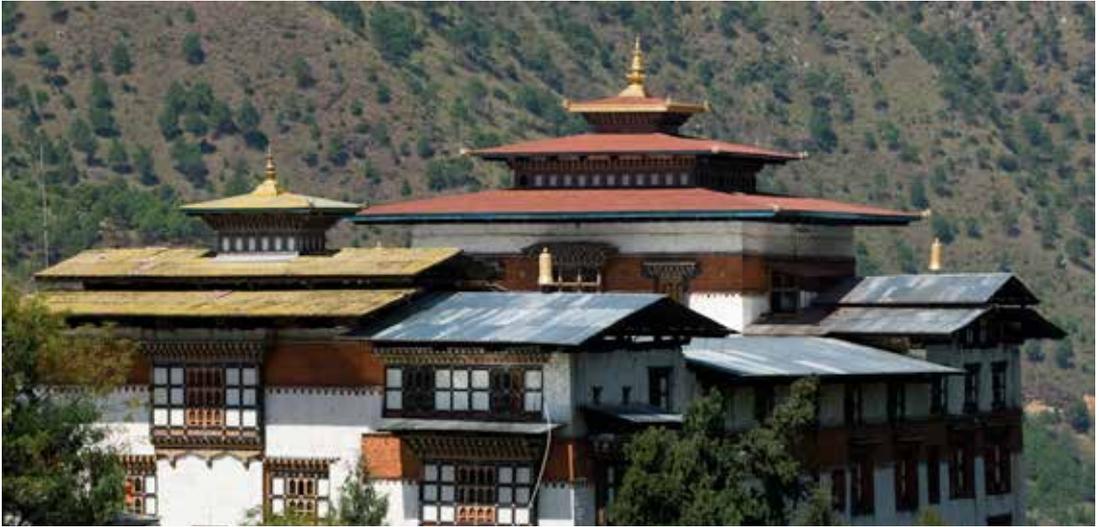
Expanded within the altitude range of 1700-4100 meters above sea level, Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) represents the diversity of Eastern Himalayan terrestrial ecosystem – alpine meadows, temperate and ward broadleaf forests. Adorned with extraordinary beauty of 35 species of rhododendrons, the sanctuary is popularly known as 'paradise of rhododendrons' in Trashigang. The presence of globally threatened and endangered species such

as Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens*), Himalaya Serow (*Capricornis sumatraensis thar*), Wild Dog (*Cuon alpinus*), Himalayan Black Bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) and Musk Deer (*Moschus moschiferus*) add glory to richness of the sanctuary. The mutual thriving of semi-nomadic pastoralist locally known as 'Brokpa' confirms unique feature of the sanctuary where human and wildlife can live together. Merak and Sakteng forms core custodians of the wildlife sanctuary with their aged old traditions of yak herding in the sacred mountains of Nakchungla. This mountain between Merak and Sakteng villages is historically known for causing altitudinal sickness to both horse and human. It is a moderately tough walk and experience the beauty of alpine meadows.

Radhi village – the rice bowl of Trashigang

Known as the 'Rice Bowl of the East' Radhi village is characterized by vast expanse of paddy fields. Radhi is biggest producer of local rice in Trashigang. The other attractions of this village comprising of 200 households is





Trashigang Dzong

textile production using raw silk locally known as Bura textiles. All textiles produced in Radhi are made using the traditional back-strap loom and traditional dyes. As a result, Radhi village produces some of the most authentic high-quality raw silk textiles to be found anywhere in Bhutan. For the travelers wishing to halt a night and enjoy the agriculture or textile tour

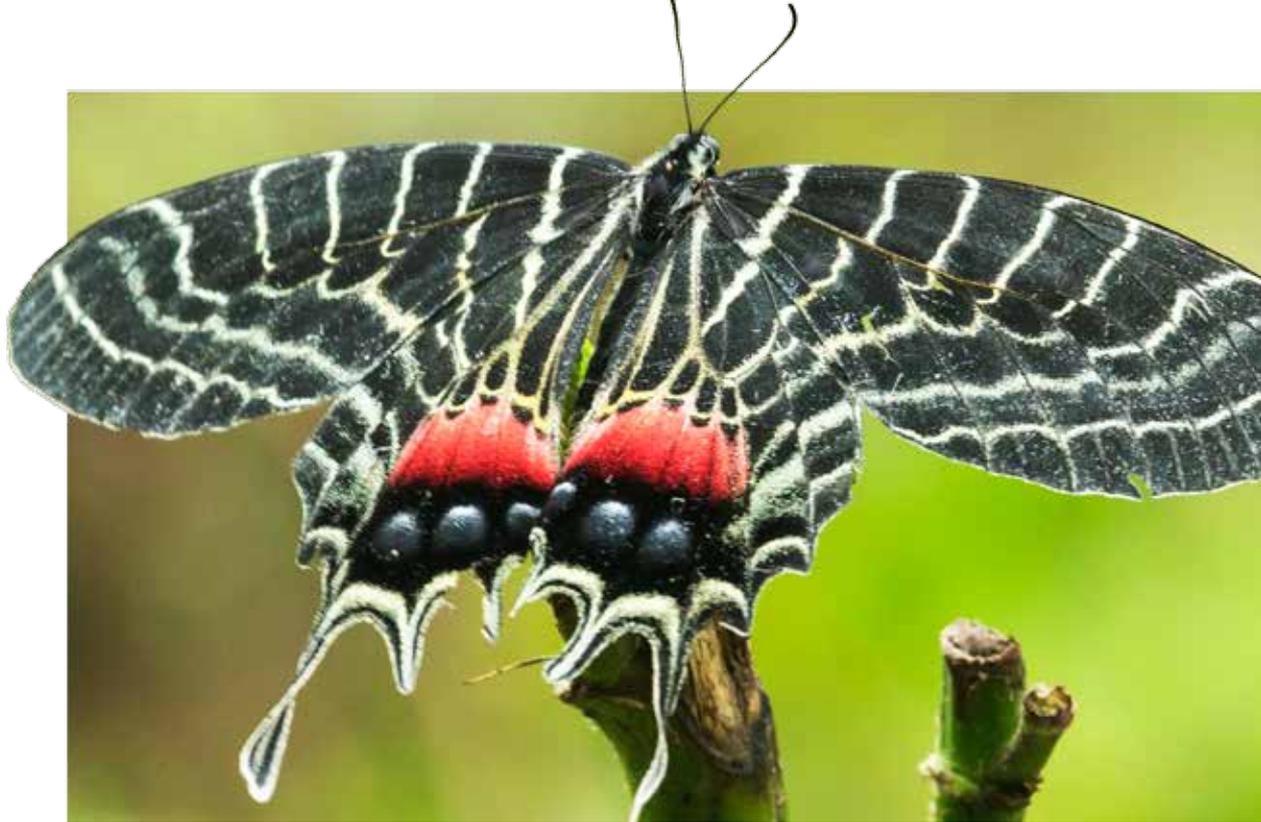
around the villages, there is village homestay with a very reasonable price and friendly host at Radhi Panthang.

Nomadic culture

Merak and Sakteng villages are home to the semi nomadic indigenous people known as the Brokpas (highlanders). Merak means land created from slash and burn and Sakteng literally means bamboo field. Men wear a thick red wool coat and women wear a red and

white striped dress. The name of Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary is derived from the Sakteng Village since this two villages form the cultural and social heritage of the sanctuary. Livestock rearing and seasonal movements of the household from mountains to lowland is peculiar lifestyle of the highlanders. Both the villages are connected by motorable road and it takes half day to drive from Trashigang.





Bhutan's national butterfly is Ludlow's Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis ludlowi*)

Butterflies of Bhutan

Butterfly tourism in Bhutan would really help diversify tourism products and opportunities for the local communities and for our guests because the butterfly species found in Bhutan are diverse, exotic and priceless.



Photographs and article contributed by **Tshultrim**. He is a birder and butterfly-watching tour guide with almost a decade's experience. Tshultrim has also co-authored a pictorial field guide book, "Birds and Butterflies of Bhutan". You can contact him at wildwingadventure@gmail.com

Swallowtail butterflies are large, colorful and fork-tailed butterflies that compose the family Papilionidae. They are named after the bird the swallow in the naming of the type species *Papilio machaon* (Common Yellow Swallowtail). Globally, there are over 550 species, and in Bhutan 42 swallowtail butterflies are recorded. Our national butterfly is Ludlow's Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis ludlowi*) which is identified as endangered species. *Bhutanitis ludlowi* is commonly known as Ludlow's Bhutan Glory. It was officially declared as Bhutan's national butterfly in 2012. It is found at an altitude of 2000 to 2500 meters asl. It is spotted commonly in Trashi Yangtse

Valley during Autumn season. Ludlow's Bhutan Glory (*Bhutanitis ludlowi*) is listed as endangered under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), not much was known about the butterfly species until recently. The butterfly was first discovered by plant hunters, Frank Ludlow and George Sheriff at Tobrang, upper parts of Trashi Yangtse valley in 1933-34. Commonly seen in Bumdeling valley in Bhutan, Ludlow's Bhutan Glory was rediscovered after 75 years in 2009 by a Bhutanese forester, Karma Wangdi. Travelers can visit Trashi Yangtse to see these beautiful species.

Forester Karma Wangdi, who rediscovered Bhutan's national butterfly and also received the pres-



tigious Jigme Singye Wangchuck Outstanding Environmental Stewardship Award, has been an inspiration for many butterfly enthusiasts like me. His pure passion and dedication motivated me to continue studying and observing diverse butterflies in Bhutan. However, there is a need for some kind of institutional support for the general butterfly-lovers who are genuinely interested in learning and documenting information on butterflies in Bhutan.

With far-sighted environment conservation vision of our monarchs, Bhutan is blessed with pristine forests and rich biodiversity. What is remarkable is that Bhutan keeps discovering new species to science almost every year, and there are undoubtedly many undiscovered species to be discovered before they are extinct, including exotic butterflies and moths which are essential for our eco system.

In my exertion to learn more about butterflies, I have individually observed 650 butterflies so far and some of them are new species



Common Blue Apollo (*Parnassius hardwickii*)



Gem Silverspot (*Issoria gemmata*)



Narrow-banded Satyr (*Aulocera brahminus*)

found in Bhutan or India. In the past few years, I have studied life cycles of 10 butterflies. One of which was recently listed as new to Indian Subcontinent. What is exciting about butterfly-watching is that it is not only beautiful mysterious creatures but it teaches you a lot of patience, it is like a meditation. One of the toughest butterfly families to observe are Hesperinae (Skippers) and Lycaenidae (Blues).

As a Bhutanese butterfly enthusiast and butterfly-watching tour guide, I am personally very grateful to Bhutan Ecological Society for supporting to publish a field guide book with aims to create awareness



Japanese Awlking (*Chaospes benjaminii japonica*)



Purple and Gold Flitter (*Zographetus satwa*)

on birds and butterflies of Bhutan among our citizens, students and tour guides.

I was recently invited to Assam, India, for their 7th Northeast Butterfly Festival to represent Bhutan. It was organized by Butterflies of Northeast India Group in collaboration with the Government of Bodoland Territorial Council and NGOs like ATREE, WWF India, WTI, Aranyak, SEED, Flutters.org, Ngunu Ziro, BECT, BAMOS and Wiki Love Butterflies. The aim was to create awareness about biodiversity conservation and to boost tourism potential in the region. Attending the meet, I realized there is a need for such events in Bhutan and also a transboundary Indo-Bhutan butterfly survey would actually benefit the countries in butterfly discovery and conservation.

I feel butterfly tourism in Bhutan would really help diversify tourism products, services and opportunities for the local communities and for our guests because the butterfly species found in Bhutan are diverse, exotic and priceless.





Pemagatshel: The blissful land of lotus in the far east of Bhutan

The district has rich spiritual memories, abundant local festivals, folklores, artisans and a historical story of resisting British troops during the Duar Wars. Pemagatshel is the lotus garden of happiness, almost forgotten by travellers but still celebrated in history books.

Nima Zangmo is currently working as Asst. Economic Development Officer at Pemagatshel Dzongkhag Administration. She has graduated from ICFAI University, Sikkim, India and majored in BBA. She enjoys reading, poetry, cooking, hiking and traveling. She believes that “We tend to progress when we are out of our comfort zone so never hesitate to step out for your self-growth”.



Jigme Kuendal was sent by Jigme Lingpa (treasure revealer) to find a place that resembled Tsari in Tibet and shaped like a ritual dagger. He was also asked to spread his teachings through the land. When Jigme Kuendal reached the site, he asked Khandro if it was the same place prophesied by Jigme Lingpa, Khandro replied, “yong yong” meaning “yes yes”, hence the place came to be known as Yongla. Having confirmed that he was in the right place, Jigme Kuendal meditated immediately. As time passed, people from the nearby villages approached him for blessings and teachings. Jigme Kuendrol graciously gave them blessings and teachings, and over time built a meditation center. He soon attracted many disciples and the center flourished around

Pemagatshel literally means the “Blissful Land of Lotus”. It is situated at the South- Eastern part of Bhutan, covering an area of about 1,023 square km with the population of 23,800 and 4,448 household according to the recent survey. This is the only eastern Dzongkhag where no other dialects are spoken except Tshangla. The district has its own special tourist attractions. Situated upon a dagger-shaped mountain, Yongla Goenpa is one of the oldest

and holiest shrines in Eastern Bhutan.

Yongla Goenpa

Also known as the Yongla Riwa Pelbar Dargay Choeling Gonpa or the Pelri Gonpa is a 18th century buddhist monastery. The Goenpa was constructed on the orders of the second Yongla Lam Dorji Jamtsho in 1736 to commemorate Khendrup Jigme Kuendal who identified, mediated and blessed this place. According to legend,

Yongla. A nunnery was also established close by, and was looked after by Kudung, a disciplinarian.

One of the more interesting historical facts about the temple is that during the Duar War the Trongsa Poenlop (Feudal Lord) Jigme Namgyel, father of the First King Ugyen Wangchuck, used it as a base of operations in order to launch raids upon the British troops.

Yongla Phurpai Drubchen

The famous Yongla Phurpai Drubchen is said to have begun right from the time of Jigme Kuen-drol. It however, lost some of its significance during the successive Lams. It was restored back to the past glory by Lam Sonam Zangpo, the great Yogi Master in the 1960s. Its significance peaked once again in 1970 following the visit of His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche during which time His Holiness gave the present name, Pemagatshel, meaning "the Blissful land of the Lotus".

According to elderly people of the Dzongkhag, the Lhakhang was built in the late 1980s. A total of 16 successive lams have served as the abbot of Yongla Goenpa. Besides, several Buddhist masters and luminaries have also blessed this sacred place in the past. Unfortunately, the Lhakhang was severely damaged by the 6.1 magnitude earthquake that struck the entire country on 21st September 2009. Visiting the Goenpa in 2009, His Majesty commanded the reconstruction of the Goenpa, with immediate effect, to its present glory.

Jashar Anim Goenpa

There were many instances of the reincarnations of Drubchen Saraha being reborn in Tibet and out of the many reincarnations; one of them was Togden Shakya Shri. He had many disciples and out of them, nine were considered very learned.

Among these nine learned disciples, Anim Woesel Choden turned out to be the most learned of them. She had dedicated her life to life-long meditation. In 1958, she built the Ja Shar Woong Drubdey. She had about 15 to 25 disciples.

She was born in 1921 and lived until 1982. After her death, the house that Anim Woesel Choden and her disciples lived was not maintained and it had dilapidated. After a request from the local community, H.E. Gyeltshen Trulku took over the management and started building a monastery, which comprised a common place for meditation, a guest house and other facilities. Since then, there has been over 50 people studying and living there all the time. However, the construction is not complete yet and funds are still required to paint frescoes on the walls of the temple, and commission the making of life-size statues of Buddha Amitabha, Avaloketishvara and Guru Dewa.

Kheri Goenpa

The 15th century Goenpa was established by Kuenga Wangpo, son of the great treasure revealer, Pema Lingpa. The structure is said to be built over a lake at which he meditated for several days. The temple's main relics are some sacred statues of the Buddha, Guru rinpoche, Chenrizig and Chuchizhey. The Tsechu is performed on the 10th day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar.

Ngangshing Goenpa

The Lhakhang was constructed over 400 years back by Drubthob Kuenzang Lhuendup. The Lhakhang was constructed mainly to have their village and people blessed and also for the well-being of all the sentient beings. Due to some urgent maintenance, the Lhakhang has undergone a renovation in the year 2013 through labour contribution by the public. It is currently owned by the

community.

Dungkhar Lhakhang

Dungkhar Lhakhang, located to the south of the Dzongkhag, is believed to have been constructed by Yab Mipham Tenpey Nyima (1567-1619), father of Zhadrung Ngawang Namgyel, in the 16th century when he visited Bhutan. Yab Tenpey Nyima was said to have fathered a son from a woman who later played an important role under Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel.

The Lhakhang is said to have been constructed on a ridge that resembles a conch. Hence it got the name Dungkhar. It is currently owned by the community. They perform the religious ritual, Annual Tshechu where people from the neighboring villages gather at the Goenpa in pitch tents for many days. Considered very sacred, people seek spiritual blessings from this Lhakhang and it's believed to be unfailing in its blessing and protection.

Thonphu Goenpa

Thonphu Zangdopelri Goenpa, like all the Goenpas, was built to benefit sentient beings, particularly to the people in the locality. There was no Lhakhang or a religious institution before the construction of the Lhakhang to receive blessings of Buddha dharma in the locality. The Lhakhang was constructed with the pure labour contribution by the public under the spiritual guidance and direction of late Lam Sangay Dorji. The Goenpa, with more than 50 monks, perform religious ritual known as Annual Drupchen.

Pemagatshel is also famous for its artisans and weavers, and for numerous local festivals and folk songs. We will bring you more stories from Pemagatshel in the following weeks.



Trongsa at the Centre

Stories of indigenous community still upholding the ancient emphasis on protecting the environment, natural and sacred places by worshipping the mighty Black Mountains in Trongsa.

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which are linked to the rich history of the people who once lived there.

This mountain is one of the unclimbed mountains in Bhutan. No men have stepped on it except the foresters reaching the base or the mid-way for the patrolling purpose. With the Black Mountain Festival recently conducted, the dzongkhag is now looking forward to exploring the most comfortable trail to black mountain peak. It has potential of becoming the most adventurous trail in the country.

Monpas: the indigenous people of the Black Mountain

The Monpas are considered to be the first inhabitants of Bhutan. They are often mistaken for the “Doyaps”, the native people from Dorokha. They are indigenous people living in the buffer zone of the Black Mountain National Park. They speak a very different dialect known as Monkha, a distinct dialect of Tibeto-Burman origin. The Bon value system, which the Monpas still uphold, places a strong emphasis on protecting the environment and culturally significant natural and sacred locations.

The Monpas had lived in the hinterland of the isolated Black Mountain forests and they were here before the founders of modern Bhutan built dzongs in the country. The Monpa kept themselves uninfluenced by the 2000 years old the mainstream culture of Bhutan. Today, the Monpas occupy

Located at the heart of the country, Trongsa dzongkhag is construed as a transitory path to another dzongkhags. Travelers rarely take interest in knowing what lies beyond the majestic Trongsa Dzong and Ta-dzong Museum. Trongsa is a socio-culturally diverse district where socio-cultural lifestyles are fundamentally shaped by the geographical landscape, separated by the rugged mountains and the Mangdechhu river. Each community has its own beliefs, customs, and dialects. More so, here is why one should come and explore Trongsa.

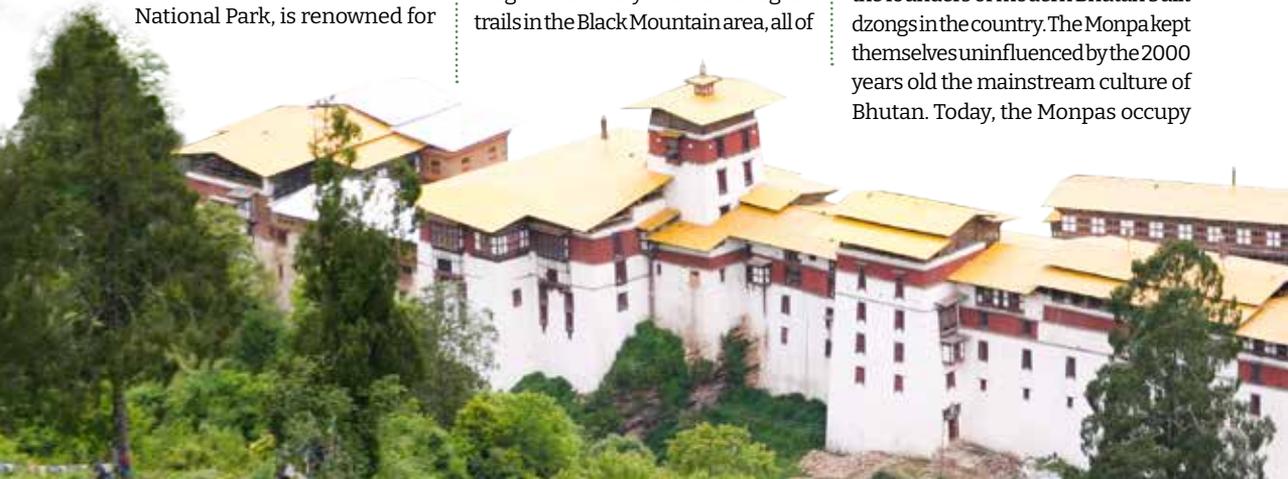
The mighty Black Mountain (Jowo Durshing)

The Black Mountain ranges are a sub-range of the Himalayan range in central Bhutan. Locals call the Black Mountain Range as Dungshing Gang, which means “fir peaks”. Durshingla peak, at 15,145 feet (4,616 meters) is the range’s highest point and falls geographically in the Trongsa district. The Black Mountain area, located in the heart of Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park, is renowned for

its breathtaking alpine scenery and fascinating ancient history.

The black mountain range is home to some of the beautiful alpine lakes which are the source of some rivers. The lakes are (Gesa Tsho, Sertsho, Yumtsho, Tsho Lumoed, and Tsho zhaw) which adds more glamor and beauty to the landscape. The majestic Dungshinggho (perforated mountain) is a distinctive topography related to the histories of war between the Trongsa and Jowo durshingang Deities. Aside from its scenic and panoramic beauty, the Black Mountain region is home to a diverse range of flora and fauna, including charismatic keystone species such as the Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Himalayan Musk deer (*Moschus leucogaster*), Himalayan Black Bear (*Ursus Thibeticanus*), and Himalayan Monal (*Ursus monal*) (*Lophophorus impejanus*).

Apart from animals, it is home to a diverse range of floral species and medicinal herbs, including the rare orchid *Primula Chasmophilia*, which can only be found in this region. Many religious sites may be found along the trails in the Black Mountain area, all of



Wangling, Jangbi, and Phumzur villages under Langthil Gewog in Trongsa Dzongkhag. Monpas have a single place of worship, Jho-du-shingphu, the Black Mountain, they consider it to be the center of the earth and the source of all their material needs and everything they want in their lives.

Pagay the Monpa Dress

The traditional dress of the Monpa is called Pagay. It is woven with fibers from the gigantic nettle plant locally known as kulima. It is a white color wrap-around dress that is tied in the neck with a knot and at the waist with a belt forming a large pouch above the waist. Phagay is worn like Kira without tego by women, keeping the arms naked. Pagay when worn, stretches down to the knees for men and up to the toes for women. The dress is known for rough texture but once it's worn, it becomes comfortable and last for several years. The traditional dress usually accompanied a bamboo woven hat called the Chok Turkhumung. The culture of wearing Pagay is now on the verge of disappearing owing to the easier, more convenient garments from the nearby market. Nevertheless, the dialect they speak still remains the main mode of communication within the community.

Arts and Crafts

Trongsa, which is centrally placed, has a wealth of traditional arts and crafts dating back to the early and medieval periods. Without mentioning the district's historical significance,

each village has its own unique arts of various crafts practices that have served as the communities' identity and, on other occasions, have been exchanged and practiced as a source of household income.

Tsharzow (cane/bamboo products) and pottery from Langthel Gewog

People of this gewog, especially the native black mountain people are skilled at weaving basket out of cane and bamboo and making earthen pots. It is their main household item. The items are used for their daily household activities. Several bamboo products include cane basket, cane carpet, winnow, hats, and container amongst many. Bamboo products are usually known for its multipurpose usage, appeal, and durability.

Likewise, making an earthen pot in the village has been an age-old practice. The support from the Tarayana foundation has helped them reskill and upscale their production at the commercial level. Today it is one of the most successful businesses in the locality. The product is recognized for its quality and design. Many travelers and visitors take these products for themselves and as a souvenir.

Textile from the nettle plant

The fact that cloth fiber is extracted from plants, nettle is one plant species that were used by our ancestors to extract fibres for making cloths. The textile from the nettle plant is durable, heavy, and warm. Women's group in langthel gewog is still running this textile cottage industry through support from Tarayana Foundation. Different cloth piece like scarf, pagay, pouch and bags etc., are produced from the plant's fiber. The place offers

myriad of experiences starting from collecting nettle plants, grading, dying, weaving, and stitching in their own natural ways.

Shagzow the Art of Wood turning (Drakteng gewog)

It is one of the vibrant crafts among wood-work practiced by the people of eastern Bhutan. Woodturning produces wood utensils used by our ancestors. Shagzow has been one of the prevalent practices in the gewog but it dwindled with time. With the fund support from the Agency for the promotion of Indigenous Craft, a group of interested participants from the gewog has now ventured into the wood-turning work. They now produce different wood products with modern shapes and designs.

Samcholing Green tea, a gift

Trongsa specializes in making some of the finest organic green tea. Samcholing Green tea is a well-known brand and a highly sought-after good. The history of green tea, which is made from *Camellia sinensis*, an evergreen shrub native to Trongsa, dates back to the 1920s to 1950s, during the reign of Bhutan's second king. These plants were planted in and around Samcholing and Kuengarabten palace, from which it is thought to have come from Kalimpong. The Second King gave the community his finest gift with it. Since then, the locals of Samcholing have begun to grow tea from the original plant and have created saplings. Samcholing green tea is known for its taste and the natural process involved in its production. Currently, 34 women are part of this production, and are working on the tea plantation which is spread out across about 47 acres among the communities. This product is gaining popularity among health enthusiasts and organic tea lovers.

We will bring you more exclusive stories from Trongsa dzongkhag in the following weeks.



Other unknown attractions of Wangdue

Most travelers have only explored Gangtey and Phobjikha valleys in Wangdue-- the district, indeed, has a several other unexplored attractions waiting to be discovered.



Dechen Wangmo is Asst. Economic Development Officer at Wangdue Phodrang Dzongkhag. She completed B.Sc life science from Sherubtse College. She loves reading, hiking, blogging, and socializing.

Samtengang Lake

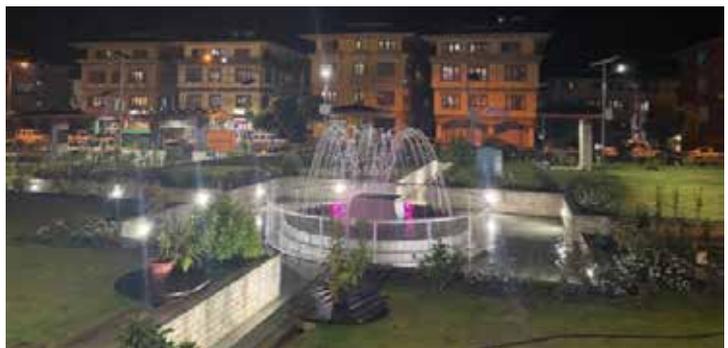
It takes over two hours' drive to reach Wangdue from the capital city of Thimphu. If you are fond of serene lakes, Luetshokha lake, commonly known as Samtengang lake, is waiting to be discovered. It is located about 10 kms from the main highway (Chuzomsa). The size of the lake is around 2 kms in circumference and has a concrete footpath around the lake for people to walk around. There is a beautiful oral story behind how the lake was formed. The locals still make offerings to the lake every year to remember the story, and to pray for wealth and prosperity of the community.

Morakhar Lhaxhang

Locals believe that Guru Rinpoche along with Khandrom Mendarawa



Phobjikha valley



Bajo town



were on their way to Bumthang. To avoid the cold weather of Bumthang, the Khandrom stayed back at this place today known as Morakhar Lhakhang. Morakhar literally means 'Mo' refers to her or khandrom Mendarawa and 'Khar' means the place. The main relic of the lhakhang is Chador statue which was one of the treasures discovered by Tertön Pema Lingpa. It is believed there are only three of such statues, of which two are at Wangdue Dzongkhag, one at this lhakhang and one at Wangdue Dzong. There are even stories that during Khandrom's stay at the place she planted betel leaves, and weaved to save her boredom. The loom can still be seen at the lhakhang.

Phobjikha valley

Phobjikha valley is a wide glacial valley, vast, green and beautiful. The valley is popular among the tourists and domestic travelers. The area is one of the sites protected for being the winter habitat for the Black-necked cranes. While in the village, one can opt to stay in the village homestays to learn about the authentic Bhutanese culture, cuisines and rural way of life.

Gangtey nature trail

While in the valley the best way to connect with nature is by taking a short hike around. Gangtey nature trail starts from the center of the valley 'Khewang' and ends at the way to Gangtey Goemba. Although it is a simple 2 hours' hike, it offers a memorable nature experience to the hikers. The whole valley can be seen from the popular photo spot (white chorten at the start of the hike).

Rinchengang village

Rinchengang is derived from the term 'Drinchengang' which means grateful village. It is



Dolung Goemba



Samtengang Lake

known as grateful village as the masonry experts came to build the majestic Wangdue Phodrang Dzong during the time of Zhabdrung. After completion of the construction, they settled at Rinchengang. The interesting facts about the village are that it is

one of the oldest cluster villages in Bhutan. Multiple families stay in one house, they have common land holding and practise double cropping. Skills of the masonry can be seen in the houses at the village. For the visitors, the view of Wangdue Phodrang Dzong can be

seen undisturbed from Rinchengang village.

Chu bo to re sa

Although not year round the waterfall at Gasetshogom has gained the attention of the passers-by. It is located right above the Basochu



Phobjikha valley

Zam and is formed when the excess water of Basochu hydropower is released. It can be seen only during peak summer and one must visit if one is visiting the place during that time of the year.

Bajo town

The Bajo town is a pleasant and clean town with decent recreational facilities. With a beautiful park in the center of the town, it provides visitors a pleasant experience to stroll around casually both during the day or evening.

Dangchu Wangchu Hot Stone Bath

Dangchu Wangchu is believed to have been revealed by the 2nd Je Khenpo Sonam Oezer in the 17th Century. It is widely believed that Dangchu Wangchu spring water has medicinal properties curing several diseases. Under the initiative of the Dzongkhag Administration, Dangchu Menchu currently has seven bathrooms, seven guest rooms, a common kitchen and three public toilets. After the onset of Dangchu Wangchu hot stone bath service, it has recorded approximately 200 visitors weekly. It is located approximately 2 hours

drive from Nobding.

Windmill

The district is also popularly known for its wind turbines at Rubesa. It is the first one of its kind in Bhutan, and each of the turbines generate 300kw of electricity. This turbine has always been of great interest to the visitors. It is celebrated for generating renewable energy.

Athang to Phobjikha trail

This two-days walking trail from Athang to Phobjikha was used as a walking route during the ancient times for the people of Athang to shift to their summer residence at Phobjikha. A variety of flora and fauna can be explored while walking in this beautiful trail.

Lopkha lake

Lokpokha lake or Athang Tsho is located under Athang gewog. It is around 5 minutes walk from the road point. It is a popular site for visitors as there are stories associated to a mermaid. Locals believe the lake was relocated to the current location by a mermaid for peace and tranquility. One can visit the lake, and enjoy its serene

beauty. The best part, you may spot the endangered species, White Bellied Heron near the lake.

Dolung Goemba

The monastery is located on the top of Sha Khotokha valley which is the summer home of the people of Bjena and Rubi Gewog, and the winter habitat of the beautiful Black-necked Cranes. The name of the monastery literally means, "Handle Stone". 'Do' means Stone and 'Lung' means handle. The stone with handle was discovered by the 2nd Je Khenpo, Khuenkhen Sonam Yoedser in the 17th century during the foundation laying ceremony for the construction of the monastery. Thereafter, the monastery was named Dolung Goemba. It is a must-visit place if one is on a spiritual journey.





Birdwatching group of
Trashiyangtse LSS at
Bumdeling Ramsar Site



Sundays with the Nature- Birdwatchers' Club of Trashiyangtse LSS

A story of one binoculars, 60 young budding bird-watchers and over 315 species of birds in the wilderness of Trashiyangtse

Tandin Wangdi is a teacher at Trashiyangtse LSS. Besides his teaching job, he loves to promote nature, conservation and protection through working with students and the community. He also blogs at connectingyouthwithnature.blogspot.com which he started after being motivated by reading his students' blogs. To know more about the club, you can write to him at nidnat.619@gmail.com



According to social psychology when people experience a memorable natural encounter as a child, that experience can reawaken in the adult. It is also scientifically proven that people who got outdoors and enjoyed nature as a child tend to be more environmentally responsible.

As an educator, a nature-lover and an aspiring bird-watcher, I believe birdwatching has the potential to influence how children think, understand and act toward their immediate living environment. It can be a doorway to let the children develop the right attitudes, mindfulness and practices towards the natural world at an early age. I also strongly believe that a small initiative like birdwatching club in the schools can provide an engaging theme for a whole host of cross-curricular activities including language, science, mathematics, and technology. Of

all, it can teach children a life-long lessons on the values of the interdependence or coexistence of all life forms: human or wildlife.

Further, this adheres to the principle of environmental conservation chartered in the developmental framework, GNH. Bhutanese children are growing up to learn that our nation is indebted to our environmental policies envisioned by the succession of visionary kings to ensure our environment remain pristine for all generations. We embrace the value and conviction of a healthy planet for all sentient beings. As the leader of a global conservation initiative and the first carbon-negative nation in the world, we are required to take this action. The enormous international responsibility of maintaining this stellar reputation and acting compassionately and sincerely for the sake of safeguarding our shared planet is what Bhutan's future upholds.



Birdwatching group of Trashiyangtse LSS

The Nature-Birdwatchers' Club of Trashiyangtse LSS

As we have learned that bird-watching can be a progressive activity to let children appreciate nature for personal and social well-being towards nature, we started a Nature-Birdwatchers' Club in our school. This humble club in Trashiyangtse Lower Secondary School has 60 members from classes 4 to 8, comprising 25 girls and 35 boys which we consider as the largest club in our school.

Till 2020, the club functioned as School Nature Club with help from Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) in providing guidebooks, newsletters, card

games, DVDs of documentaries of Black-necked Cranes, and other significant RSPN publications. In the beginning of 2022, our well-wishers Tshultrim and Thinley Wangchuk donated a few copies of their book titled "A Pictorial Field Guide to Birds and Butterflies of Bhutan". However, our club has only one pair of binoculars for field use purchased by the club coordinator.

Despite the lack of professional birding gears, the members of the birdwatching club have never been discouraged but have shown a fervent interest in exploring and learning about birds and the natural world around us here in Trashiyangtse valley. What

keeps motivating the birding club members is that we may have only one binocular but we have over 315 species of birds to discover in Trashiyangtse. We also have globally endangered species like the Black-necked Cranes and also the national butterfly found here. Our club members love and are fascinated by wild ducks, kingfisher and Black-necked Cranes. They like eagles too.

Our main objectives for forming the club are to create environmentally conscious students and to encourage bird-watching among students at a very young age. We also try to help students learn about bird species, distribution, and their

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... If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the environmental problems of the world.

habitats. We hope our students acquire skills needed to identify, investigate, and contribute to the resolution of nature conservation in future.

Some scientific research has shown that birdwatching can also help children with their mental health issues and foster a life-long connection to nature. This beneficial bond with nature often deepens as individuals mature. Additionally, birding helps children strengthen their powers of observation and attention to detail. Children fundamentally learn to look from an aesthetic standpoint.

There are a thousand benefits of birding in general.

I would like to end my article with these emphatic words of Thomas Lovejoy, a biologist also known as the Godfather of Biodiversity, “If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the environmental problems of the world.”



Tandin Wangdi with two students of Bumdeling LSS



A wholesome travel experience in Lhuentse

Lhuentse is blessed not only with spiritual attractions like healing hot springs but also with arts and crafts



Article contributed by
Tshewang Zangmo, Asst.
EDO, Lhuentse Dzongkhag.

Waga Pangtsho Lake

In Jarey gewog, a lake called Waga Pangtsho is situated atop a mountain. The lake has no visible sources or outlets, but the amount of water is constant all year long. Walking uphill takes about five hours from Ladrong village. The local legend has it the lake moved to its current location after being chased away by the residents of Tokari village in Tsamang, Mongar. The lake was polluted with human waste and animal carcasses because it drew too many affluent individuals, making it difficult for the locals to do their tasks. When the lake's goddess (mermaid) arrived at the location, she asked a neighboring farmer for permission to spend the night in his home. Instead, the farmer offered his barren paddy

field. The deity had left the farmer a milk churner the following morning as a sign of appreciation for his hospitality.

Other hot stone bathing sites

Hot stone bath is deemed as a perfect way to relax and wind down after a long day of exploration, and is also believed to have numerous health benefits. The hot stone bathing sites in Lhuentse has rest sheds, footpaths, and stone bathing tubs (naturally formed tubs at Kurichhu river bank).

Khenpajong, Yonten Kuenjung, Pasalum Tshachu

Historical roots, spiritual significance and various health benefits of Baeyul Khenpajong holy water blessed by Guru Rinpoche are located at a one-day walk either from Ney village under Gangzur Gewog or Jasebi village under Kurtoed Gewog. One of the Buddhist documents points out that the revealer of Baeyul Khenpajong Neys, its hidden treas-

ures and tshachu was prophesized by Khandro Yeshe Tshogyal to Terton Pema Lingpa. Later it was revealed by Terton Pema Lingpa and it has three pools namely: Guru tshachu, Tshepamay tshachu and Khadro tshachu. Knowing the health benefits of the tsachu, people across the country visit the sites every year.

Yonten Kuenjung tshachu is located 5 hours walk from Khenpajong tshachu. Therapeutic values Yonten Kuenjung means 'source of all wisdom'. The name originated from the achievement of Guru Rinpoche while he was dripping in the tshachu. There are two pools. The local people believed that Guru Rinpoche gained the knowledge and techniques to conquer the resident demon Khykha Rathoe. Khykha Rotoe arrived there while exiled by his father, Thrising Duetsen to Khenpajong/Khambalung. The waterfall on the other side of the river is believed to be the saliva of Guru while playing a flute. When the demon and his people were lost in the melody of the flute, Guru brought them under control.

Pasalum tshachu is located 2 days walk from Yonten Kenjong tshachu. The tshachu is also believed to be blessed by Guru Rinpoche. It is said anyone visiting there will be blessed with longevity. Some also



believed that one reaching there will be not reborn in the three realms: hell, hungry ghosts, and animals.

Rodungla trekking route

The Rodungla trekking route is one of the ancient highways that connects Bumthang in central Bhutan to Lhuentse in Eastern. The route was an important trade road in the past. With the introduction of a modern road in the country and climate change, it has been neglected for centuries. We can still witness the age-old walls and steps, which alternatively make us feel blessed to walk through the ancient highway, where many spiritual lamas once walked through. It gives us an awe of its original unbridled form of flora and fauna with not much human interference. It's not just for international tourists, who love birdwatching and trekking but it is also very exciting and rejuvenating for domestic tourists, who loves nature hike. Another trail that Dzongkhag can explore is Dongla, which connects Lhuentse with Trashiyangtse.

Textiles and handicrafts Khoma and Kishuthara

Most women in Lhuentse are experts at weaving kishuthara textile. Kishuthara is one of the most expensive and attractive handicraft products in the country. It is beautifully hand-woven with a mixture of sweat, patience, and skills of women.

While taking the tour in the

textile village, one can experience weaving with comfortable Village Homestay (VHS). Khoma has 11 Village Homestays. The best way of exploring and getting an authentic cultural understanding of Lhuentse is by opting to stay in one of the farm-houses. They offer fresh local dishes including arra (spirit distilled from grains). Khoma also has a weaving center with women working back-strap looms. Moreover, spending a night or two at a farmhouse offers an authentic experience of the traditional Bhutanese way of life.

One can hike to Sangwa Dhadrug, where Guru Rinpoche and his consort meditated for six months secretly. It is a one-hour uphill hike from Khoma village. Sangay Lodruk temple has many sacred relics related to Guru Rinpoche, where devotees' wishes and prayers can be fulfilled. Another hiking site is about a one-hour climb from Sangay Lodru, it is known as Zepadur. One can witness an outcrop of rocks on which paddy grows every year. It is called Matapai Lotho-meaning crops that grow without sowing. Other places, one can visit while staying at Khoma are Goenpa Karp, Kharphu temple, Ngelamdung, Timula, and many more sacred temples.

Gangzur Pottery

Another craft that has stood the test of time and is still in use today is pottery. Some potters live in Gangzur village, which is about two kilometers

from Lhuentse town. A small number of people are still attempting to maintain the profession even though there are fewer people practicing the craft now. With cooperation from government agencies, women in Gangzur create earthen pots.

Nettle-Fiber Weaving

The stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), which is widely distributed throughout Bhutan, is a plant whose fiber is utilized to make lovely homemade textiles. The custom is widespread in Ney Village, Gangzur Gewog, and Lhuentse, where the traditional craft continues to be practiced now. Cutting the nettle plant, which grows readily in cool and temperate climates, releases fiber from its bark. The fibers are then dried before it is turned into yarn. In the past, nettle fiber was spun into yarn and used to construct ropes, mats, bags, and blankets. Traditional bowstrings were also made using it. With support from the government and civil society organizations, nettle weavers today produce beautifully handmade table mats, kiras, and other common household textiles that are much sought after in the local market and among tourists.

All these attractions comprise to make Lhuentse a district of a unique and wholesome experience for all travelers.





Guru Nangsey Zilneon Statue

Spiritual attractions in Lhuentse Dzongkhag

Most places in Lhuentse are associated with the revered spiritual pioneers of Buddhism like Guru Rinpoche and Terton Pema Lingpa

Article contributed by
Tshewang Zangmo, Asst. EDO, Lhuentse Dzongkhag.



Guru Nangsey Zilneon Statue

The magnificent Guru Rinpoche (Guru Nangsey Zilneon) Statue in Lhuentse is said to be one of the world's tallest statues. Located at Takila, the statue is about 157 feet tall and perches atop a 38-foot lotus. To see the statue, one has to travel over 13 kilometers away from Tangmachu Village. The statue is revered as the fulfillment of a prophecy made by treasure hunter Lerab Lingpa (1856–1926) and well-known yogi Sonam Zangpo that Bhutan will require the physical structure of Guru Padmasambhava to preserve peace and prosperity. To fulfill the prophecy, the Druk Odiyana Foundation led by Khenpo Karpo built the world's largest Guru statue in Takila. Other spiritual sites near Takila are Karney Goenpa, Barkha Lhakhang, and Rawabi Lhakhang.

Khawchung and Kidlung

On the way to Kurtoed Gewog, there is a well-known Khawchung Lhakhang, located above Zhamling village. It is believed Terton Pema Lingpa prophesied and instructed his son Khedrup Kinga Wangpo to establish his seat in the hamlet, which is located opposite of Khenpajong where a ridge resembling the trunk of an elephant is being hung. As instructed by his father, Kinga Wangpo traveled from Bumthang to Zhamling and constructed a temple in the 14th century, from where the Khawchung Chhoje lineage emerged. The stone bathtub and footprint of a horse can still be seen there. The main relic present in the temple is the Guru Rinpoche statue discovered by Terton Pema Lingpa and later gifted to his son.

While one travels to Kurtoed Dungkar, you spectate another sacred site at hilltop Kidlung, overlooking the Khurichu river. The local people here believed that Kidlung Lhakhang once hold a Tshepamey statue (longevity) discovered by a fisherman. The caretaker narrates that despite the statue having been put in the iron chain mall, it flew three times from there. The three holes on the iron chain mall are still visible to the visitors. Today, the escaped statue is housed in Lhuentse Dzong and it is the main relic.

Kamphu Ney and Nyag Lhakhang

As one travels from Dungkar to Jasabi village, there is cave Lhakhang near the river known as Khamphu Ney. It is one of five Phu (meditation caves) associated with the visit of Guru Rinpoche. Local people believed that Guru Rinpoche blessed the site and hidden many sacred relics underneath the rock. Among many sacred spots and objects, the stupa blessed by Terton Pema Lingpa is one prominent.

Nyag Lhakhang is another place blessed by Terton Pema Lingpa along with Khamphu. It is located 5 hour's walk from Jasabi village. The main relics of the Lhakhang are the Buddha statue and stupa built by Terton Pema Lingpa.

Yamalung Lhakhang

It is located far from the settlement on the top of a ridge overlooking the valley of Ungar village, Maedtsho Gewog. It is believed of having a similar amount of blessing to visiting the Yamalung monastery in Tibet where Guru Rinpoche meditated and achieved immortality. The Lhakhang houses a statue of Guru Rinpoche as the main relic and it is surrounded by significant spots.

Ruins of Bangtsho Gyalpoi Phodrang

According to oral history, during the 8th century, there came a king from Tibet who was neither human nor animal so-called Khikha Rathoe, later he was known as Bangtsho Gyalpo after he settled in Bangtsho village. He was here because he was exiled from his own country by the Tibetan king. During that moment he brought all his belongings and properties along with him. When he reach Bangtsho, he built his palace under the ground to protect it from Tibetan attack and settled there.

According to the local people, there are nine stories underneath the ground, on contrary, some say there are nine compartments. Today we see seven doors from the top. While constructing the palace, it is said that the king brought stones from the place called Dongchen under Tshochen village with the help of a mule and horses. Today we see the leftover stones at the quarry site. After the completion of the palace, he constructed the tunnel till Khepachu which is underneath the ground for drinking water. The water was also transported with the help of mules and horses. Today, Khepachu lies between Wambur and Umling village. One can still see the sacred words 'Om Ma Ni Pad Med Hum' written on a slate that hid the exit doorway of the king's palace.

Stone Mortars

Stone mortars that appear to have been carved hundreds of years ago



Kamphu Ney

are all over a location in Minje village. According to the locals, the number is approximately 108, which is a lucky number in Buddhism. The inhabitants have no idea who carved them or why. Though some say that the stone mortars date back to the ninth century when Khandro Yeshey Tshogyal used them to prepare Tshog (ceremonial meal) offerings for Guru Padmasambhava or it may perhaps be older.

Phuningla- Aja trails

Phuningla is located on the mountaintop southeast of Lhuentse Dzong under Tsaenkhargewog. It is also a sacred place blessed by Guru Rinpoche. From Phuningla it takes one day to reach Aja Nye one of the sacred places also blessed by Guru Rinpoche. It is considered as one which is exactly located in the center of other mountains; thus, the mountain is known to be Phuningla- the center of the mountains.

Ruins of Khenpajong housew

Baeyul Khenpa Jong also referred to as the "Hidden Paradise" of Khenpa Jong, is located in northern Lhuentse. Legends has it that King Trisong Detsen's demonic son Khikha Rathoe was exiled from Tibet in the seventh century. He made a pledge to destroy Buddhism, and Khenpa Jong came to be the ruler of his awful realm. Guru Padmasambhava chased him covertly to Khenpa Jong, where he addressed the king while

pretending to be one Haranagpo. The King agreed to Haranagpo's plan to jointly overturn Tibet's governing elite after being astounded by his magical abilities. The Guru flew the king from Khenpa Jong into an unknown region in a flying wooden object using cunning and divine talents. He kept Khenpa Jong hidden so that the king would never discover it again. After being rediscovered by Terton Pema Lingpa in the fifteenth century, Khenpa Jong rose to prominence as a sacred location in the Himalayan Buddhist tradition. From 1939 through 1961, Lama Sonam Zangpo resided at Khenpa Jong. It was a neighborhood of roughly 62 homes, all of which were devoted to religion. However, due to the tensions brought up by the Sino-Indian war of 1962, the settlement was completely abandoned.

Namdroling Goenzin Dratshang

Nam-droling Goenzin Dratshang is built at the sacred location of Guru Drakmar and is situated in Autsho, Tsaenkhargewog, which is regarded as the entrance to Lhuentse Dzong-khag. The Dratshang's construction started in 2002 and took almost two decades to finish. His Holiness Trulku Jigme Choeda, the 70th Je Khenpo, blessed it. The monastery is the home to a Chenrezig Ri-Nga Thongdrel, among many other holy artifacts. The 35-foot tall appliqué is the nation's first of its sort. Each year in January, a week-long Guru Drakmar Drupchen is celebrated. There are numerous monks and instructors at the Dratshang. As one goes few kilometers up from Namdroling Goenzin Dratshang, there stand a magnificent Dragmar Lhakhang attached to the hill.

Lhuentse is one of the most visited districts in the country by domestic tourists because of the district's rich spiritual significance.





Photo: Bhutan age, Yannick Jooris, 2019

More about Zhonggar *Tsho-dhuen* (the Seven Valleys)

Mongar is not only known for being one of the birding hotspots in the country, the district also has a diverse cultural local festival...

Article contributed by **Karma Dema**, Asst. Economic Development Officer under Mongar Dzongkhag Administration.



A Birding Paradise

Mongar's pristine subtropical and temperate forests are home to some rarest species, making it a prime birding destination in the world. The dzongkhag's diverse mountain valleys, which range in elevation from 400 meters in the southern tropical foothills to 4000 meters in the sub-alpine north, are home to about 572 bird species, including the rare and endangered Rufous-necked Hornbill and Blood Pheasants, the majestic Steppe Eagle, and Ward's Trogon. Due to climate and nature protection, these magnificent birds are

thriving in their native habitat.

Numerous other rare and vulnerable birds, including the extremely endangered White-bellied Heron, Bearded Vultures, Himalayan Griffons, Yellow-rumped Honeyguide, and uncommon Oriental Bay-Owl, are also conserved in the district. The roughly 26 kilometers (km) between Sengor and Yonkola are home to some of Asia's top birding spots. From the gorgeous Satyr Tragopan to the unmatched Ward's Trogon and the Great Slaty Woodpecker, this region is home to a wide variety of Laughing Thrushes,

Parrotbills, and other special bird species.

The western and northeastern parts of Mongar are part of the Phrumsengla National Park and the Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary, respectively, yet most of the bird trails and habitats are easily accessible by road or old trekking routes/mule tracks, making the district a paradise for bird lovers and ornithologists.

Mongar and Drametse Tshechu

Some of the most significant cultural events hosted by the dzongkhag are the yearly Mongar Tshechu, which takes place somewhere between the end of November and the beginning of December. Drametse Tshechu is



Photo: Barun Gurung FB

deemed distinct from any other festivals in Bhutan. Drametse Tshechhu is celebrated for three days three times a year: on the tenth day of the fifth month of the Bhutanese calendar (Telda Tshechu), on the tenth day of the sixth month (Tordho Tshechu), and on the thirteenth day of the tenth month (Kangsol Chenmo).

Kharpbu Bon Festival

Eastern Bhutan's most celebrated Kharpbu bon festival originates from Tsamang. The rural community organizes this tradition that predates Buddhism in Bhutan. The seven-day event begins on the 7th day of the 4th month of Bhutanese calendar. It draws the community's attention to assure community wealth, excellent crop, timely rainfall, good health, and promoting couples conceiving, chasing evils, receiving blessings, and preserving an ancient tradition.



Kharam Festival

Kharam literally means curse and the festival centered upon the Kharamshing, a phallus carved out of wood is observed in the villages of Tsamang, Chali, Thridangbi, and a few other places on the 29th day of the 9th month of

the Bhutanese calendar. Three types of kharam exist: those that concern one's land (zhing gi kharam), one's health (miyi kharam), and those that concern one's property or livestock (nor gi kharam). It is observed over a three-day period.

Khandro Kongshag Festival

This festival is performed once every three years in Tsakaling village between the 25th and 30th day of the 11th month of the Bhutanese calendar. It is a confession prayer to cleanse defilements, ward off obstacles and misfortunes, and bring prosperity and wellbeing to the communities. The festival attracts many devotees and spectators. Besides mask dances, there is a tradition of villagers going around every household in the locality as far as Takhambi, a seven hour walk from Tsakaling Lhakhang. It is said that the youth in particular spend the entire duration of the festival circumambulating the temple and engaging in courtship.

Lha (HA) Festival

Every year, in the sixth month of the Bhutanese calendar, the Ganglakong Kilikhar community celebrates the Lha (Ha) festival to ensure soil fertility, timely rainfall, healthy cattle, and bumper harvests. Two households - Thogpa and Wogpa - host the festival while the others contribute materials and participate. The main feature of the festival is the singing of a verse called "Wayo". "Wayo Bo" means "Summon Wayo" while "Wayo Wayo Bjing" is a refrain after each Wayo couplet. Recited without a clear sequence, most couplets contain lewd and ribald phrases, expressions that echo the spirit of the celebration or the shedding of inhibitions in sexual behavior.

Dueza Bon Festival

Remote communities in Keng-khar gewog celebrate Dueza, a bon ritual that takes place once a year. On the 15th day of the ninth lunar month, which occurs in October, locals from far-flung settlements travel to Duezama for a ritual feast

with walnuts, steamed tapioca, and alcoholic beverages. The rites are typically performed by the keeper of Dungkar Lhakhang, who wears a crown of marigolds. In ancient times, a live cow was sacrificed as part of the rites, but now a dough effigy shaped like a cow's head is used instead. The locals will wrap fresh fish in banana leaves and set them on the altar in front of the cattle-head deity as an offering. At the end of the day-long ceremony, the people of the village carry the cattle-head effigy to the Dungkar Lhakhang, where it is burned in a bonfire.

Exquisite Arts and Craft

Jandom (Wooden wine casks): The natives of Kengkhar are known to be adept in the 13 traditional arts and crafts with wood carving – chiefly Jandhom making - taking center-stage of their economic livelihood today. The wooden wine casks are made from the sturdy trunks of a tree locally known as Gongtsinang Shing. Interestingly, despite widespread popularity of the product, the art of Jandhom-making remains known to only the local people of Kengkhar. This valley is also known for its finest furniture production.

Wooden mask making (Babzoo): Mask making skills are drawn extensively from traditional Buddhist blueprints and represent different mythological characters. The masks are used during the performance of ritual dances, mostly during Tshechus or Buddhist festivals. The communities of Kengkhar, Jurmey and Drametse are known for their elaborate mask-carving skills and their products are traded throughout the country and abroad. Their masks are also kept as souvenirs in temples, monasteries and individual home altars.

Cane and Bamboo craft

Tsharzo is the art of weaving cane and bamboo to produce household items like containers and serving plates (bangchung), tshogthrun (vessels for serving food), baekhu (container for wool and threads), and patshadromchung (container for jewelry). The sub-tropical forests of lower Mongar, especially Saling and Gongdue gewogs, have abundant bamboo and cane forest which have led to a thriving local economy dependent on these forest products. The locals here produce an array of colorful bamboo products including baskets, winnowers, mats, hats, quivers, wine containers known as palangs, and bangchungs (food containers).

Nettle-fiber Weaving

A very common plant that grows in Bhutan's countryside is the stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) whose bark fiber is used to weave exquisite traditional textiles in Bhutan. The tradition is common in the eastern districts of Lhuentse, Pemagatshel, Trashigang and Zhemgang where the age-old craft thrives to this day. Ropes were once made from nettle yarn, which was also used to construct mats, bags, blankets and also traditional bowstring. In today's market, nettle weavers are in high demand by both locals and visitors for their complex hand-woven jackets, table mats, kiras, and other ordinary household textiles with support from the government and civil society organizations. The region is also known for its skilled weavers, and intricate textile designs and fabrics produced here are considered some of the finest.





Training Workshop on Ecotourism Product Development

30 participants comprising the dzongkhag economic development officers (EDO), planning officers, environment officers, gewog administrative officers and forestry officers from around the country attended a training workshop on Ecotourism Product Development organized by the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project under the Department of Tourism in July, 2022.

The objective of the workshop was to enhance capacity of the stakeholders within and outside the project landscape, and to provide platform for knowledge and experience sharing for the project coordinators in the landscape districts and beyond. The workshop also prioritized creating awareness and help develop a common understanding of the mandatory project requirements during the implementation phase.

During the workshop, the participants were updated on the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism sector in Bhutan”. The participants were made to differentiate between ecotourism, nature tourism and wildlife tourism. They were also sensitized on environmental and social safeguards, screening process and management plan and relevant topics in line with ecotourism entrepreneurship and product

development.

The participants from different dzongkhags presented their business and products ideas and shared their perspectives on ecotourism potential in their respective districts.

“I consider this Ecotourism Project as a very potential endeavor for the enhancement of tourism in Lhuentse as our dzongkhag prioritizes both domestic and international tourists. So, even during the Pandemic, our dzongkhag



was not affected badly as we constantly received domestic tourists which help sustain our community's livelihood," said the EDO from Lhuentse, Tshewang Zangmo.

She added, as Singye Dzong eco-trail and Ludlow-butterfly trail are well-known to the people, the ecotourism project intervention at these sites would further boost the livelihood of the local people residing nearby these sites. Lhuentse has many potential tourist attractions like Takila Guru Statue, Khoma Kishuthara, Gangzur Earthen Pottery, Singye Dzong trek, Rinchen Bumpa, Jigme Namgyal Muesum and Dungkar Naktshang, Phuningla to Aja trail, Rodungla trek. Singye Dzong trek and Phuningla to Aja trails are some of the significance ecotourism products of the Project.

The EDO from Samdrup Jong-



khari, Sonam Wangchuk, said although the district is not under project landscape and tourism policy is limited only to the municipality, the project will definitely benefit the dzongkhag in the long-run. The project provides funds and supports the feasibility

studies of potential tourism products from the district. He highlighted that Samdrup Jongkhar has valuable tourist attractions like Narphung-Samdrup Jongkhar bird-watching, Kalingtsho hiking, Chokyi Gyatsho Institute (Dzongsar Shedra), Shiv-

Mandir at Jomotsangkha, and an exclusive salt-trek route from Samdrup Jongkhar to Trashigang.

The Bumthang EDO, Pema Tshomo said she is now convinced about the essence of ecotourism after attending the workshop. She highlights, "Ecotourism can be an important driver to improving livelihoods and conserving the environment we live in. While protection of nature is at the core of ecotourism, it also provides visitors an avenue to immerse in the goodness of nature and create meaningful experiences."

She added that the most important thing she learn is that when communities are taken as an important stakeholder in ecotourism and engaged in the development process, the management and sustainability of such projects are ensured throughout.

"Under the tourism flagship support, Pema Gatshel district has revived the ancient trading route of east which is commonly known as the salt route. This trek product is called Lotus valley trekking and travel. This 3-day trek is developed around 11 kilometers' walk and rest travel by road, with chances of biodiversity exploration like birding, camping and visiting Ney (holy sites)," said the EDO from Pema Gatshel, Nima Zangmo. The district also has other attractions like local festivals, unique textile (Kamthagma traditional Cotton weaving), art and craft (Khar Dung Jaling), and religious sites of Yongla Goenpa, Dungkhar Goenpa, Thongphu Goenpa and more.

According to the Trashi Yangtse EDO, Chimi Yudon, Trashi Yangtse is already popular for domestic tourism with national landmark like Chortan Kora, and many revered holy sites like Omba Ney, Rigsum Gonpa,

Shero Dzong and Dechenphodrang. The district, she said, has a huge potential as an ecotourism destination with attractions like Black-necked Cranes, Ludlow's Bhutan Glory, Boomdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and Ramsar site.

During the workshop, a presentation was also made on birding in ecotourism by Dr. Sherub, an ornithologist from the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research (UWICER). He said with 761 bird species recorded in Bhutan till date, there is a huge potential for birding tourism in the country.

The most commonly accepted definition of ecotourism was established by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) in 1990 as: responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. However, ecotourism in Bhutan is defined as "High Value Low-Impact travel that supports the protection of cultural and natural heritage; provides positive and enriching experiences for visitors and hosts; assures tangible benefits to local people; and contributes to the pillars of Gross National happiness."

"Promoting High Value Low-Impact not only in terms of revenue generation alone but excellence in standards and services and providing unique and authentic experiences. Low Impact by minimizing negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts," said one of the resource persons, Tshering Pem from the Nature Conservation Division under the Department of Forests and Park Services.

According to the Project Technical Specialist of the Ecotourism Project, Jigme Dorji, Bhutan has remained unexplored in terms of offering ecological services to

the tourists.

"There is ample opportunities that mainstreaming biodiversity into the tourism sector will contribute towards diversification of high-end tourism products in the country. Ecotourism can be very effective tools to provoke regional distribution of tourists and enhance income opportunities for the local communities," he said.

The workshop trainers and resource persons were from the UNDP Bhutan, Nature Conservation Division, Ministry of Labour of Human Resources and the project management unit under the Department of Tourism.

The Department of Tourism launched the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project "Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan" in September, last year. The Project is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) through UNDP Bhutan office. The project is expected to bring about transformational changes in the rural development landscape. It is expected to diversify the agriculture dominant rural economy by promoting wildlife-based economy, boosting domestic tourism, creating employment opportunities and increasing community resilience and connection to nature.



Biodiversity, biopiracy and its relevance to tourism

Tour guides and frontline workers are being trained on biodiversity, biopiracy and its relevance to tourism by the National Biodiversity Centre, with support from the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector in Bhutan” under the Department of Tourism.

A total of 149 participants attended the training workshop last month which aims to create awareness on the importance of biodiversity conservation in Bhutan, biopiracy and its relevance to tourism among the tour guides and frontliners as they are the ambassadors of the country to visitors. The workshop's objective is also to garner support from the tourism sector in biodiversity conservation, and mitigation of biopiracy and misappropriation in the country.

A series of training workshops was conducted in districts of Samdrup Jongkhar, Gelephu, Phuentshogling and Paro International Airport for relevant stakeholders and frontliners. The training was organized by the National Biodiversity Centre (NBC) in collaboration with the Department of Tourism

with support from the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector in Bhutan”.

Awareness on national measures on conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity by regulating Bhutan's biodiversity, understanding misappropriation and biopiracy, instructions on how to make use online platforms like the Bhutan biodiversity portal and BioBlitz were some of the topics covered during the training workshop. BioBlitz is an intense period of biological surveying in an attempt to record all the living species within a designated area.

NBC Program Director, Dr Karma Dema Dorji, said “Globally, Bhutan is well known as a country with rich biodiversity and all Bhutanese traveling outside Bhutan also take a pride

in talking about our pristine biodiversity. So, our foreign guests would want to know more about Bhutan's biodiversity when they arrive in the country. Tour guides are, therefore, the most important ambassadors and focal persons.

“So, it is very important for the guides to know about biodiversity and also biopiracy. Their work requires them to deal with outsiders and there is always a certain degree of risk of losing species and especially, if the species is endemic to Bhutan and is of high value in which case Bhutan would lose out of the benefits. If the guides are aware of biopiracy, they can be mindful of their clients taking any species out of the country unknowingly or by accident,” she added.

According to Mani Prasad Nirola, the Deputy Chief Biodiversity Officer from the NBC, misappropriation and biopiracy is evident and happening



Tour guides taking pictures to upload images on Bhutan Biodiversity Portal



BioBlitz session to familiarize the participants with citizen science-based biodiversity online applications

globally, and Bhutan may not be spared. Therefore, tourguides and the frontline workers at the immigration points of the country can play a vital role in safeguarding our biodiversity through biopiracy and misappropriation-- as well as support in biodiversity conservation efforts of the country.

The participants were also trained on the identification of plants and animal species under the appendices of the CITES hands-on operation, and citizen-contribution on the Bhutan Biodiversity Portal. CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement between governments. The participants visited the Biodiversity Interpretation Centre, National Invertebrate Repository, Native Plant Conservation Facility, Genebanks, National Herbarium, Bioprospecting and Natural Product Development Lab and, National Plant Conservation facility located at National Biodiversity Centre in Serbithang.

A participant, Tshulthrim, said with such trainings tour guides will be able to identify flora and fauna in the country, and also be able to contribute pictures and information on online platforms like Bhutan biodiversity portal. He said, this will enable tour guides to also contribute to the country's data resource on

biodiversity which will be priceless for now and for generations to come.

Another participant, Tashi Lhamo said she didn't know about biopiracy and CITES listed species of wild fauna and flora before, but now she is well-informed about the rules and regulations. She said this information will be useful for her as a tour guide while traveling with her guests in and around the country.

According to Peday, a tour guide, such trainings should be made mandatory in tourism sector. "Globally Bhutan is known for its rich biodiversity but most of us working in the tourism industry are not aware of some of most important aspects of our biodiversity and also unfamiliar about biopiracy." She added, through this training she learned valuable lessons on Bhutan's endangered species, biodiversity and also which species are unique and precious to Bhutan and globally. This, she said, has renewed her pride in Bhutan's rich biodiversity, and most essentially, makes her a better tour guide.

Biodiversity status of Bhutan

According to National Biodiversity Centre Status Report 2022, Bhutan has 70.77% of the total area under forest cover and 51.44% secured as protected areas and biological corridors. Bhutan is home to 11,248

species of flora and fauna including 4978 species of vascular plants, 3511 insects, 129 mammals, 736 birds, 125 fishes and 158 amphibians and reptiles. To date, over 300 species of medicinal plants have been found at altitudes ranging from 200 to 7800 meters above sea level. In terms of domestic biodiversity, there are more than 55 species of agriculture crops and 6 species of livestock. Some of these have adapted to the country's rugged mountains and harsh climatic conditions and, therefore, bear distinctive features which need to be conserved, especially to build resilience in the face of climate change for food security and improved livelihoods.

Bhutan became party to and ratified the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 1995 by the 73rd National Assembly of Bhutan in recognition of the country's biodiversity conservation and sustainable utilization efforts, and subsequently, became party to the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing after ratification by the 9th session of the 1st Parliament of Bhutan in 2012.

Bhutan's GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project "mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector in Bhutan" was launched last year, with aims to establish Bhutan as a model ecotourism destination, to generate livelihood opportunities, sustainable financing for landscapes within and outside protected areas, facilitate human-wildlife coexistence, and mitigate the negative impacts of increasing tourism on Bhutan's socio-cultural heritage and globally significant biodiversity. The project's flagship species for ecotourism are Ludlow's Bhutan Glory butterflies, golden mahseers, red pandas, black-necked cranes, golden langurs, and the exotic birds of Bhutan.

You can access Bhutan Biodiversity Portal at www.biodiversity.bt





Ecotourism: Tapping the Future of Tourism

Contributed by **Kezang Deki**. She is the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project under the Department of Tourism. Kezang has a degree in B.Sc Life Science and a Post Graduate Diploma in Public Administration. She loves hiking and trekking, and enjoys stories, poems and memoirs.



Tourism in Bhutan began with a cautious approach in the 1970s with an overarching guiding principle of “High Value Low Volume” which resonated with every Bhutanese; being mindful of tourism’s contribution to socio-economic development as well as being careful of the negative impacts associated with it. Looking back, we have seen unprecedented growth in tourism with a tremendous contribution to the socio-economic growth of the country through revenue and foreign exchange earnings, employment opportunities, conservation of natural and cultural heritage, and ultimately

gearing towards the achievement of national development goals – Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

According to the Bhutan Tourism Monitor report, a total of 315,599 visitors arrived in the country in 2019 from a mere 287 in 1974. The arrivals in 2019 represented an increase of over 15% as compared to 2018. These arrivals generated a gross earning of USD 345.88 million with a direct revenue of USD 23.42 million as Sustainable Development Fee (SDF).

The Tourism Establishment Census of Bhutan 2021 estimated a

total of 52,174 individuals employed in the tourism sector. However, the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the country in March 2020 has left the sector crippled with an enormous drop of arrivals to about 90% from 2019, with a subsequent drop of 88% in the tourism earnings in addition to the displacement of those employed in tourism.

Undoubtedly, tourism has proven to be a strategic and valuable asset to the country.

After a complete halt of tourism activities since 2020, the country reopened to tourism with renewed vigor, vision and identity on 23rd September with the launch of a new tourism system where visitors have greater flexibility to choices. The launching of the new national brand “BHUTAN” with emphasis on believing in our future, values, nature, worth, and ourselves further cements and instills a powerful sense of expectation in our guests.

With the increased SDF as compared to pre-COVID times, this is all the more apt and crucial that calls for a greater sense of responsibility to live up to our national vision and identity. Tourism in



the country aspires to be “A green, sustainable, inclusive, and a high-value destination,” and the answer to offering what is natively and culturally ours is the experiences of visiting Bhutan as an Ecotourism Destination, when the country is already recognized as the only carbon negative country in the world.

Fortunately, we have been bestowed to be the custodian of the Global Environment Facility (GEF-7) and UNDP’s ecotourism project “Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan”. This is a 5-year project that started its implementation in August 2021. It aims to serve as a long-term strategy to mitigate threats to biodiversity while generating opportunities for livelihoods and promoting coexistence between human and wildlife. The project landscape area covers the two Protected Areas of Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary (BWS) and Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) in the eastern and central region of the country, including the districts of Trashi Yangtse, Trashigang, Mongar, Zhemgang, and Lhuentse. These project landscape areas



indisputably have huge potential to offer experiences that are locally unique and authentic.

The district of Trashi Yangtse will mesmerize you with the dances of the Black-necked Cranes while captivating you with the national butterfly Bhutanitis Ludlowi, popularly known as Ludlow’s Bhutan Glory. The Jomo Panda Trail in Trashigang will unveil the cute Red Panda while taking you to the journey of climate change through the Biodiversity Run Trail along the different climatic regions. The land of exotic species will definitely take your breath away, a rare opportunity in Mongar and Zhemgang to witness the wonders of the

nature- Ward’s Trogon, Babbler, Pheasants, Golden Langur, and Golden Masheer. A beautifully woven intricacies of our culture, the Kishuthara in Khoma Village in Lhuentse will transport you to the roots of our culture and to the majestic Singye Dzong, a hotspot for domestic tourism.

The guardian of the world’s most pristine, wild and sacred places, Bhutan welcomes our guests to be part of these places with great potentials where tourism and biodiversity conservation complements each other.





Students' visit to the Seed Bank

The Seed Keepers of Dewathang

This is a story of those unsung heroes from the remote villages of Samdrup Jongkhar who are helping conserve and improve biodiversity by reviving indigenous seeds. Today, they have revived over seventy local cereal crops that were at the verge of extinction from their villages. They are the seed keepers of Dewathang.

Sonam Dema is currently working as the communications (advocacy and behavior change) officer for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project. Sonam is a former television anchor/producer for Bhutan Broadcasting Service and has a master's degree in Diplomacy and International Studies. Sonam is also a freelance travel writer, passionate about writing, story-telling and photography.



and compost, making a decent income. He told me he had volunteered to serve as the manager after the establishment of the seed bank, thinking that is the only way he could give back to the community.

"I am also glad that my effort in farming is also contributing in a small way to the country's national vision of sustainable organic farming."

He narrated how a native cereal crop locally called "yangro" (which was used for religious purpose) had vanished from his village. With support from the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative team, they inquired about the cereal among the villagers far and near and found the seeds. After cultivating the cereal crop, they distributed the variety to the villagers. Today, the cereal has revived and flourished in the farms in Dewathang.

Similarly, a sweet local maize,

A Seed Keeper's Story

During my last trip to Samdrup Jongkhar a few years back, I visited the Dungsam Community Seed Bank, located within the campus of the Chokyi Gyatso Institute in Dewathang. I was introduced to farmer Tshering Gyelpo, who introduced himself as the manager of the Dungsam Community Seed Bank. He is fondly known as Ata Daza among the locals for being a short-built person. Although he had never been to a formal school, he seems to know a lot about organic farming, local cereals, seed growing and preservation.

Talking passionately about

farming, he said although he saw many youths leaving villages for better livelihood to urban towns, he never left his village. "It never occurred to me to leave my village as I always thought there was a plenty of opportunities in my village."

Today, Ata Daza has retired from the post of manager but he still remains an inspiration for many farmers and youth in his village, Bangtsho. He grows food crops for himself and his family. His family never had to rely on imported food items except for salt, sugar and oil. Ata Daza produces and even sells farm produces like milk, vegetables, cereals, seeds,

known as “zerpo-dazo” had also vanished from the villages. After traveling and inquiring around, they found a woman in a distant village still cultivating the maize. They collected a bagful of zerpo-dazo from her and cultivated in Bangtsho.

The Seed growers

During my visit, the Seed Bank had a basketful of zerpo-dazo grains, ready to be distributed to the villagers. A farmer from Rikhay, Ata Karma, had arrived at the bank to loan some seeds.

Farmer Karma is one of the farmers from the eight villages in SamdrupJongkhar, who volunteered as seed keepers and growers to help preserve indigenous cereal seeds and crops in their villages.

He borrowed a few bowls of native seeds like Yangro (fox tail millet) and zerpo-dazo (sweet native maize). After growing and preserving these seeds, he will have to repay the bank with one bowl each as tax for borrowing the seeds. He said he will be able to repay his seeds loans in a year or two.

After a few months, I received pictures of Ata Karma’s field in Rikhay village, lush and green with fox tail millet and azerpo-dazo, and other native cereal crops. The

Dungsam Seed Bank has inspired and changed the lives of many farmers in Samdrup Jongkhar.

39 farmers from the villages of SamdrupJongkhar help revive and grow over 70 varieties of seeds that were vanishing from their villages.

Dungsam Community Seed Bank

Farmers had generally lost many of their traditional seeds in less than a decade by increasingly becoming dependent on the external sources for seeds.

“The past practice of farmers saving their own seeds, however, is dwindling because of free seed supply. Therefore, in an effort towards sustaining and promoting local cereals and to help farmers get access to seeds on time, Dungsam Community Seed Bank is being constructed with 95% local materials,” says Cheku Dorji from the SJI.

As of now, the Seed Bank has collected 68 varieties of local or traditional seeds (cereals) apart from local vegetable seeds, and additional of 9 essential cereals of Bhutan (Dru-Na-Gu) which has spiritual symbolism and significance in Bhutanese households.

Traditional crops like Wheat, Barley, Buckwheat, Mastered, Millet and Amaranthus are at the verge of disappearing. However, the SJI team has been able to revive, preserve and promote

the native seeds with the help of the community seed bank, seed keepers and growers group.

To ensure food security and self-sufficiency, the SJI has plans to have at least one community seed bank in every gewog in Samdrup Jongkhar in future, and also promote household level seed savings, product development from traditional cereal crops, marketing and educating wider audiences on the importance of traditional seeds.

“Dungsam community seed bank has played a very important role in ensuring an easy access of traditional seeds to our farmers, enhanced crop diversity which is significantly nutritious and climate resilient, improved food-sufficiency and became less dependent to the government for free seed supply,” said Cheku Dorji.

Currently, there are 39 members in the seed keepers and growers’ group from 8 different villages of the district. The seed bank facilitates exchange and sell of seeds, and loaning of seeds to the farmers.

The seed bank was initiated by the Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative (SJI) Project initiated by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche under the patronage of the Lho Mon Society.

The Samdrup Jongkhar Initiative (SJI)

The SJI is an NGO, designed to foster GNH-based development in harmony with the goals of the Government of Bhutan.

It aims to raise living standards



in Samdrup Jongkhar region by establishing food security and self-sufficiency, while protecting and enhancing the natural environment, strengthening communities, promoting Bhutan's unique culture, stemming the rural-urban tide, and fostering a cooperative, productive, entrepreneurial, and self-reliant spirit.

“We are coming up with agricultural museum on the ground floor of our seed bank at Chokyi Gyatso Institute. Currently, we are focusing more on household-level seed savings and exchange through our members. Now the seed bank collects only those seeds that are on the verge of extinction and distributes them for revival and promotion among our members. Apart from revival, preservation and promotion, the seed bank also provides educational platforms for the general public,” said Cheku Dorji.

For a decade now, the SJI has been promoting best organic agriculture practices in selected gewogs through the concept of Lead Farmers, Farmer-to-Farmer Extension and development of Model Farms including revival, conservation and promotion of local agro-biodiversity for food security and a resilient future.

They have been supported by GEF Small Grant Programme, UNDP Bhutan, ARDC - Weng-khar, Bhutan Foundation and the Royal Government of Bhutan.







Red Panda in Bhutan

In Bhutan, red panda is believed to be the reincarnation of Buddhist monk, linking its red fur to the red robe of the monk and their sighting in the wild is believed to bring good luck to the travelers.

The primary diet of red panda are young leaves and shoots of the bamboo, and it also feeds on fruit, roots, succulent grasses, acorns, lichens and occasionally bird's eggs, insects and grubs. The red panda is endemic to the temperate forests

of the Himalayas, with the exception of a tropical forest population in Meghalaya, India. Occurrence of red panda in Bhutan has been confirmed in seventeen districts including seven of the ten protected areas and all eight biological corridors within the altitudinal range of 2000 to 4300 meters above sea level.

Red panda is globally threatened—listed as endangered on the IUCN red list. Global red panda population is estimated at less than

10,000 mature individuals over the entire range. The major threats to red panda are habitat loss and degradation, poaching and illegal trade, developmental activities, climate change and illegal herbal plant collection. Increasing developmental activities, livestock grazing and migration, subsistence agriculture and collection of non-wood forest produce are reported as major red panda conservation threats in Bhutan.

An anatomy of the brand

BHUTAN - Believe

“Those who seek us out are called here. Arriving as guests, you become our partners in this transformative moment and make a meaningful contribution towards preserving what is priceless.” This national brand is, a sort of, revolution — a dedication to what is priceless: our country, culture, nature and our future. Our youth.

Written by **Sonam Dema**. She is Project Communication Specialist (advocacy and behavior change officer) for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector in Bhutan” under Department of Tourism, RGoB.



On September 23, 2022, Bhutan reopened its borders, welcoming guests back to the kingdom after more than two years. At the same time, the country has revealed a new national identity that demonstrates an evolution and a spirit of optimism, destined to inspire pride and spark the imaginations of citizens and visitors alike.

To mark the reopening of the kingdom and to look to the future, Bhutan created a whole new identity for the country to inspire a new vision of the future to its citizens. The result reflects Bhutan's character and landscapes, history and ambitions: bold, vivid, richly storied and utterly distinctive – rebranding it for a new future, both for its people and its guests who are seeking a different travel experience.

Few foreigners have experienced Bhutan's extraordinary nature and culture for themselves. This small nation of only 800,000 people has long practised a policy of ‘high value, low volume’ tourism to protect and preserve its peace, its sacred places and its wildernesses. Like many coun-

tries, Bhutan closed its borders in March 2020 in response to Covid. During this extended period of closure, the nation reconsidered its relationship with tourism, and developed new policies and plans for the country's advancement – in particular, for how it can invest in creating sustainable opportunities for its young people. As it reopens to embrace visitors once more, one of the notable changes is the increase in the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF), a daily contribution made by visitors towards Bhutan's development. The funds raised by the SDF will play an invaluable role in supporting a range of social, environmental and cultural initiatives, as well as Bhutan's wider aspirations.

BHUTAN

Brand Bhutan aims to capture the optimism and renewed ambition of the kingdom as it opens its doors to guests once again, as well as communicating its promise and plans for its young citizens.

“This kingdom is steeped in history, but our gaze is fixed on the future. This is our moment of revolution.

Guardians of some of the

world's most pristine, wild and sacred places- and of a rich, deeply rooted culture- we are steadfast as the cypress in our commitment to conservation.

Our future requires us to protect our heritage and to forge fresh pathways for forthcoming generations.”

Bhutan is rightfully called the guardian of the world's most pristine, wild and sacred places with rich forest cover, sacred spiritual places, living cultures and a youthful and educated population. With about 70% of geographical area still under forest cover and over 50% of its total land declared as protected areas, Bhutan is also recognized worldwide for its abundant biodiversity. These are the priceless assets of the country.

Bhutan's new tagline: Believe

A sense of optimism surrounds this tagline. The nation believes in a better future, led by wisdom from its past and a belief that it is manifesting daily.

The brand manifesto sums up this optimism with the brand message:

“We see a bright future. And we believe in our ability and responsibility to realise it together, and shine as a beacon of possibility in the world.”

The hope is we become what we believe in. We are asked to believe in ourselves, in our worth, in Bhutan's future, with hope and conviction.

Youth at the heart of the brand Bhutan

The brand Bhutan is focused on youths and the campaign posters comprises cheerful mugshots of young Bhutanese students who represent Bhutan's future. The Prime Minister of Bhutan, during the launch said, "The brand will be a shared asset that will be taken care for generations. Youth is our focus—we believe in their future, dreams and aspirations." He also stated that the best conduit to realising Bhutan's vision are the youth and professionals in the tourism industry. "While those working in the tourism sector will represent the Bhutanese people at the forefront, the entire nation is the tourism industry and every Bhutanese is a host. The minimum fee the country is asking the visitors to pay is to be reinvested in the people, the place of the meeting, which will be the Bhutanese people's shared asset for generations."

Contemporary Constellations of Brand Bhutan

Brand Bhutan's 'Contemporary Constellations' comprises traditional Bhutanese patterns or hand-painted ornaments, auspicious symbols and mythical animals. If you travel in and around Bhutan, you will notice several hand-painted patterns or ornaments on houses and structures.

These 13 crafts or Zorig Chusum represent Bhutanese cultural identity. These traditional motifs have been reimaged with digital precision to create dynamic new icons for Brand Bhutan.

The eight auspicious symbols (Tashi Tagye) which is celebrated in Bhutanese culture, has also been ingrained in the brand constellations with a bold, graphic reworking in high-contrast hues, evoking Bhutan's dynamism and transformation, rooted in its vibrant heritage. This digital art,

in a way, is symbolic as they also represent revolution-- a change from what is traditional to something new and contemporary.

We also notice the four guardian animals from Buddhist mythology: tiger (tak), snow lion (Singye), garuda (Jachung) and dragon (druk). These symbolic paintings are seen in the temples and homes in Bhutan. The digital images of these four auspicious animals are seen scattered in the brand constellations to symbolize and invoke stories of Bhutan from past, present and future.

All these motifs, symbols and animals in intense colors are imagined as a mesmerizing constellation. Hidden at first, but upon a closer look, vivid like stars in the night sky. This is how Bhutan's brand narrative aspires to portray Bhutan to a conscious traveler.

Conscious travelers

As the brand's constellations symbolize the missing pieces only visible to conscious eyes, so will Bhutan be noticeable only to those who are willing to take an extra effort to seek Bhutan from the constellations of other global destinations. Only a dedicated closer look will ensure that the travelers find Bhutan and so, find a piece of themselves in Bhutan. Such travelers are Bhutan's guests who would be dedicated partners in Bhutan's transformation journey to make a meaningful contribution towards preserving Bhutan's priceless people, nature and culture.

Sustainable Development Fee

Bhutan gained global attention for recently announcing its raised Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) from USD 65 to USD 200 per person, per night. There were mixed reactions to this bold move. However, what remains essential is to under-

stand that the SDF will directly go towards projects that support Bhutan's economic, social, environmental and cultural development. The fees raised will fund national investment in programmes that will help preserve Bhutan's cultural traditions, sustainability projects, infrastructure upgrades and opportunities for youth, including free healthcare and education for all.

Happiness is still a place

Bhutanese still believe in happiness and for most outsiders, Bhutan would always be known as the country of happy people. Although the previous blue poppy logo with the tagline 'happiness is a place' is removed, Bhutan's philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) still remains intact with the new brand as it is the root of Bhutan's foundation-- a gift from the golden throne.

It's these plans and programmes that Bhutan's brand – and new campaign – is built upon. It offers a rallying cry to believe - in the nation's capabilities, its values, its global contribution, its responsibilities, and its future.

Bhutanese who understand the new brand concept, know that it is the time for us to move on from the good old familiarities, and metamorphose into progressive, reliable and innovative citizens. In simple words, the optimism is to work hard towards a common dream of a progressive Bhutan for our children, grandchildren and for the generations beyond.

Disclaimer: this article is writer's independent perspective on brand Bhutan – believe. This was first published in the Royal Bhutan Airlines magazine TashiDelek as the cover story.







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BHUTAN
Believe

bhutan.travel

From our reopening on September 23rd, visitors to Bhutan will make an active contribution to Bhutan's economic, social and cultural development. The Sustainable Development Fee enables investment in transformative programmes that preserve our traditions, protect our heritage and environment, upgrade infrastructure, create opportunities for our young people, and build resilience.

For more on the SDF, visiting Bhutan and our plans for the future, visit www.bhutan.travel

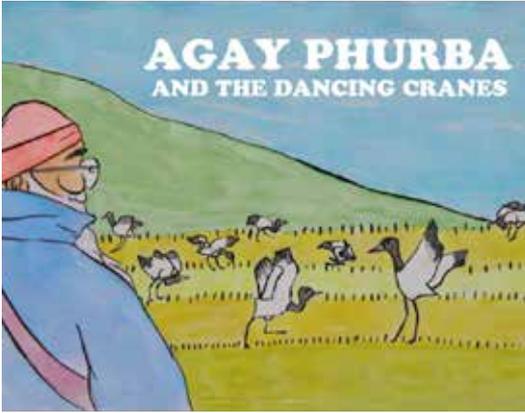
PROJECT NEWS 2021-2022



Project Inception Workshop for GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into the Tourism Sector” was held in Trashigang on World Tourism Day in 27th September, 2021. With the launch of the implementation of USD 4.854 million ecotourism project, Bhutan began the journey to mainstream biodiversity conservation into the tourism development and position itself as “a model ecotourism destination”. The project is timely and comes at a time when Bhutan rethinks tourism in the wake of COVID-19 and the tourism sector, hit hard by the pandemic, strives to make a comeback to rebuild lives and livelihoods through a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive tourism economy.



Storytelling Workshop for youth and students (aged between 12-15) was held in Trashi Yangtse, Bumdeling valley. This picturesque valley falls in the Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and is one of the most popular winter homes of the endangered, Black-necked Cranes. It was during this trip that the children got to meet Agay Phurba and learn about this magnificent crane species. Based on their conversation with Agay Phurba, the students came up with the book aptly entitled, “Agay Phurba and the Dancing Cranes”.



The children's book on conservation "Agay Phurba and the Dancing Cranes" by children was virtually launched on His Royal Highness The Gyalsey Jigme Namgyel Wangchuck's birth anniversary on 5th February, 2022, as a dedication to children all over.



KAP Survey on Biodiversity Conservation and Ecotourism Development started in May and completed in July 2022. The survey was carried out in the project landscape districts of Zhemgang, Lhuentse, Trashigang, Trashi Yangtse and Mongar.

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche on Biodiversity Conservation and illegal wildlife trade in Asia

The most greatest loss in all Buddhist teachings is that everything is considered just that there is nothing that is not a condition or conditioned. Among all the conditioning, the most important is the conditioning of mind. So, taking that right approach to have biodiversity, you pay for the survival of human beings but the of forests, a paramita.



And yet, I see hardly anyone fighting to protect our fragile ecology. With the possible exception of the Indians, how much angering have you seen regarding our ecology do we see in the mainstream media? What country is renowned because it is destroying its ecology? What country suffers from a trade embargo because it is using and its wildlife? How many monks in their own ecology and wildlife are regularly ordained by the political leaders of the world's most powerful nation?

Human-wildlife conflict: Did we forget livelihood for conservation?

Shantideva's thought: The entire nature of things exist to die. Living beings exist at a world heritage shrine of Dharma from their...

Sustainable Tourism in Bhutan – Balancing Conservation and Development

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Butterflies of Bhutan

Lhuentse: An abode of divine experiences

Shantideva's thought: The entire nature of things exist to die. Living beings exist at a world heritage shrine of Dharma from their...

A nationwide knowledge series (stories, perspectives, interviews and articles by experts, passionate individuals, and district economic development officers) on biodiversity conservation, human-wildlife conflicts, ecotourism and tourism perspective in other districts was launched on the national newspaper Kuensel from June and ended in December 2022.



Biodiversity, Biopiracy and its relevance to Tourism Training Workshop was organized by the National Biodiversity Centre in collaboration with the Department of Tourism with support from the GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project “mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector in Bhutan” in November, 2022. Over 200 tour guides and frontline workers were trained. The objective of the training was to create awareness on the importance of biodiversity conservation in Bhutan, biopiracy and its relevance to tourism among the tour guides as they are the ambassadors of the country to our visitors. The workshop also aims to garner support from the tourism sector in biodiversity conservation, and mitigation of biopiracy and misappropriation in the country.



The GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project started the promotion of the new national brand BHUTAN Believe and destination promotion of the project landscape districts in the newspaper and inflight magazines from August to December 2022.



Bus Stickers: Biodiversity Pride Campaign began in November 2022 in collaboration with VAST Bhutan volunteer artists, with support from RSTA and private transport company. The project's Biodiversity Pride Campaign is based on the concept that "Pride is a universal motivator" and aims to inspire people to take pride in the species and habitats that make their communities unique, while also introducing viable alternatives to environmentally destructive practices. Five different arts works by VAST Bhutan with relevant conservation messages are being placed on the public buses travelling to the project landscape districts, with aims to promote the destinations for domestic tourism.



Recreational High-end Flyfishing (Catch & Release) Guide Training was conducted in November, 2022 with 13 registered tour guides, 4 local guides from Panbang, Zhemgang and the officials from Department of Forests and Park Services, Department of Tourism, and the WWF Bhutan. The training was conducted by the Nature Conservation Division, under the Department of Forests and Park Services, in collaboration with the Department of Tourism, and was supported by GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project.



Blyth's tragopan (*Tragopan blythii*) male is brightly colored with its rusty red head, yellow face and spotted with white dots on its back. It has white band on the base of the tail and it has two pale blue horns that erects during matting. Female are dark brown with a mixture of black, buff and white molting.

The species is rare, falls under restricted range and globally threatened being listed as Vulnerable by Birdlife International as per IUCN. It has small fragmented population, which is rapidly deteriorating due to loss of forest habitat and hunting trends. It is sparsely distributed in the Arunachal Pradesh, south-east Tibet, north-east India and in eastern Myanmar and Bhutan.

It is mostly seen in spring season (April). The Tragopan mostly flocks to wooded areas as it inhabits dense undergrowth of evergreen oak and rhododendron forest and bamboo thickets moist broadleaf forest.

In Bhutan Blyth's Tragopan is confined to eastern valleys primarily consisted of Shingkhari Lauri, Yonphula and Trashigang district. The specimens were collected at altitudinal range of 2600m in those places in 1930s and 1960s/1970s. In recent years it has been observed again in Shingkhari Lauri, Samdrup Jongkhari district in dense bamboo. There is also possible record of elusive female Tragopan crossing the road between Wamrong and Deothang at 2250m but identification could not be ascertained.

In April, 2021 it was observed at Wamrong, Trashigang district. Moreover, enthusiast birders have photographed in daft bamboo and broadleaf forest. In the same year one of the forester took photo of male Tragopan in Jomotsangkha Wildlife Sanctuary (JWS). The potential importance of Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary and JWS requires field survey and must be assessed to obtain specific data on its altitudinal range and the extent of its distribution.

This picture was taken in April 2022 in Wamrong, Trashigang.



Article and photograph contributed by **Thinley Wangchuk**. He is a birder, birding tour guide and a photographer based in Thimphu, Bhutan. You can contact him at thinleyjr@gmail.com



A watercolor painting of Ludlow's Bhutan Glory by Sonam Dema, GEF-UNDP Ecotourism Project



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