Assessing Sustainability of Ecotourism Ventures in Bhutan

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Abstract

Mearns' (2011) methodology for determining the sustainability of ecotourism ventures is applied to Bhutan by adopting a case study methodology. Three cases were assessed, namely Haa Valley Homestay, Phobjikha Homestay Network, and the Phajoding Monastery Eco-Camp. The analysis found, in all three cases, that conservation goals were being achieved, which serves as a main characteristic that differentiates ecotourism from other forms of tourism. However, these conservation benefits were not causally linked to the ventures themselves and may be the result of a combination of other factors such as existing policies and pre-existent community values/practice. Additionally, there were a number of positive economic impacts, though these were often isolated to managers of each of the ventures and their families. In terms of weaknesses, problems with waste management, cultural impacts, and proper capacity building continue to limit development opportunities. A management-regime comparison was also conducted in which the NGO facilitated venture (Phobjikha) proved most 'sustainable' compared to the private (Haa) and government (Phajoding) facilitated ventures. This research provides critical insights and recommendations that will help improve the sustainability of ecotourism in Bhutan.

Introduction

Bhutan possesses a unique physical and socio-cultural environment, which has motivated its people towards a strong protectionist attitude in their use of natural resources and the preservation of cultural values. With the reality of globalization and a rapidly growing population, Bhutan has developed strategies for meeting the needs of its people, who long predominately engaged in agrarian practices. However, with the rise of a middle-class population and increased opportunities for higher education, more families are abandoning traditional agriculture in the pursuit of other livelihood alternatives. Tourism currently is the second major economic source of the country, behind the export of hydro-energy to India, and has great potential for alleviating poverty in rural areas. However, cultural erosion and environmental degradation are serious threats. With the demand for cultural and eco-style tours on the rise, the government also faces the challenge of ensuring proper distribution of benefits from the tourism industry. While the Bhutan Government has recognized the potential of ecotourism to

meet development goals (RGoB, 1999), rural communities remain concerned that tourism policies are too restrictive to support the industry in remote areas. Gyamtsho (1996) recognized that highland communities experienced few economic benefits from tourism, a mere 4% of their total income. He further postulated that in order to achieve conservation goals, development activities must account for the economic concerns of such rural areas, something tourism has not been able to do. With the looming threat of mass tourism and its impacts on Bhutan's ecological and cultural integrity, the Royal Government has actively explored options to mitigate these impacts. One option has been to diversify tourism products, creating tourism opportunities outside traditional peak seasons, and by diverting industry benefits to rural populations. Ecotourism has been promoted as a key opportunity to meet these goals.

Tourism in Bhutan hinges on a sustainable development model (MAF & TCB, 2012). The government recognizes the integrated nature of people and the environment and has shied away from the 'Yellowstone' protectionist model in terms of conservation (MAF & TCB, 2012). Instead, a zoning strategy has been set up within protected areas in which three zones exist. Core areas are for strict conservation in which activities related to tourism are extremely limited. Adjacent to these core areas are multiple-use zones, which work to account for traditional indigenous practices such as firewood collection, cultivation, fishing, among others. Finally, there are buffer zones, which also limit various activities, but are not as restrictive compared to the multiple-use areas and allow tourism operations. It is within this integrated understanding that Bhutan has strived for a robust ecotourism policy that meets objectives for development in rural communities.

Many developing countries have turned to ecotourism as an opportunity to increase foreign exchange, as opposed to other resource extractive activities (Honey, 2008), and Bhutan is a prime example. Initially the tourism industry was government-run through the Bhutan Tourism Corporation with restrictions placed on the number of arriving 'international' (as opposed to regional) tourists each year, but was then privatized in 1991. Regardless of the 1991 privatization, the Royal Government of Bhutan maintained its influence in heavily regulating the policy of the tourism industry (Honey, 2008). While this constrained the amount of economic leakages due to outside capital investments in the tourism sector, it also limited the distribution to a few tour operators, which subsequently thrived (Nepal and Karst, 2017).

Ecotourism has specifically been highlighted as an opportunity for Bhutan, offering the potential to diversify tourism 'products' rather than expanding the already saturated market (Reinfeld, 2003; RGOB, 1999). Such a strategy would call for strategic/selective marketing and elements of activity control (limited number of individuals for certain activities). While ecotourism is already present in a number of regions in Bhutan, the potential to expand is great. Gurung and Seeland (2008) found that young travellers between the ages of 31-40 were more interested in nature/ecotourism styles of travel, and showed a tendency to stay beyond 14 days

of travel, which was in contrast to older travellers, who focussed more on cultural tourism and rarely stayed beyond two weeks. Park staffs in Bhutan's Protected Areas network also recognized that dealing with livelihood concerns is necessary in order to achieve desired conservation goals (Wang et al, 2006), and ecotourism has been promoted as a key policy initiative to see this happen.

Additionally, with the concern of rapid rural-to-urban migration, ecotourism is recognized as an industry that can motivate individuals to remain in rural areas (Rinzin et al. 2007). In 2002, the government developed a National Ecotourism Strategy that laid the groundwork for how eco-tourism should be promoted in the country. This was followed up in 2012 with a guideline for the planning and management of ecotourism, which specifically focused on the Protected Areas Network of Bhutan (MAF & TCB, 2012). A number of ecotourism ventures in Bhutan have already begun to make a name for themselves as sustainable forms of tourism that meet the goals of both livelihood needs and conservation. Such cases include the Nabji Korphu Trail, Wangchuk Centennial National Park Homestay Program, and the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary.

To maintain their goal of 'high value & low impact', the government of Bhutan will need to pay much consideration to the unintended consequences of an increased volume of tourism, not only for traditional tourism products, but especially as they seek to promote ecotourism in rural areas. Monteverde in Costa Rica, for example, was heavily invested in the protection of Golden Toad habitat. However, as ecotourism came to dominate the landscape and outcompete traditional livelihoods, this transition coincided with the disappearance of the Golden Toad (Honey, 2008). Numbers of tourists have also overwhelmed national parks in the United States such as the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. When parks are overcrowded and no longer offer the 'nature' experience, people look to other locations. With such unique species such as the Black-Necked Crane, Snow leopard and the Red Panda, Bhutan has much potential in becoming a world-renowned ecotourism destination. However, it also has a lot to lose if ecotourism is not planned for appropriately and managed in a sustainable manner.

Environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity are not the only threats posed by the ecotourism industry. Loss of culture and threats to local ethno-ecologies are also serious consequences, and are of particular importance to a government mindful of cultural preservation. Hutchins (2007, p. 76) writes:

> the actual practice of ecotourism continuously pries open new space into which physical bodies and cultural meanings flow. The result is mutability rather than sustainability, where local nature is reordered as global commodity, and local meanings are reinterpreted to better align with consumer's desires.

While Bhutan has been unable to shield its citizens from pop-culture, which has 'leaked in' through television and Internet media, policies are in place to maintain various codes for architecture, traditional dress, among others. Yet, the effects of globalization on Bhutanese society, and especially Bhutanese youth, are clearly discernible as social identities are negotiated. This negotiation is hidden in the interaction with global market forces that interact through ecotourism as tourists' expectations shape the way local populations behave and present themselves (Hutchins, 2007).

Bhutan's ecotourism industry has been promoted as a panacea, an answer to the problems of traditional tourism, and a way to uphold principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH). Yet ecotourism has the ability to modify culture in significant ways (Hutchins, 2007). While culture is never static and is not to be 'preserved in some idealized form' (Hutchins, 2007, p. 85), Bhutan needs to be cognisant of what cultural changes are acceptable, and differentiate these from harmful influences that may present themselves as a corollary of ecotourism.

Methodology

Ecotourism Sustainability Indicators developed by Mearns (2011) have been adapted for the local Bhutanese context by adding site-specific indicators. This Indicator framework was used to assess three ecotourism ventures to answer the following questions:

1. Are the select ecotourism ventures operating in a sustainable way?
2. How do specific management regimes impact success and sustainability?
3. What policy shifts have occurred, and which are still needed, to help meet the ideal of ecotourism?

The research is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. An adaptation of Mearns' questionnaires and survey material was used to collect information from ecotourism operators, community members, and tourists. The research adopted a wide-ranging scope of tools such as direct observations, field notes, focus groups, questionnaires and data collected by GPS units. The data gathered from numerous field visits conducted during 2016-2017 was organized and analysed through the aid of both NVivo and SPSS software. An evaluation framework was adopted which included a total of 24 indicators and 48 sub-indicators.

Three cases were selected based on their alignment with the definition of 'ecotourism' provided by Honey (2008) that outlines criteria such as environmental conservation, improving local livelihoods, and education. Additionally, sites were selected based on management variability to assess the impacts of NGO, private, and government facilitated regimes. To meet these criteria the researchers consulted with the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), private entrepreneurs, and the Nature Recreation & Ecotourism Division of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests. Through consultation the

research team established the following three case studies: 1) Haa Valley Homestay in Haa, serving as a private entrepreneurship management regime, 2) the Phobjikha Homestay Network and Black Neck Crane Conservation area serving as an NGO facilitated management regime, and 3) the Phajoding Eco-Camp serving as a government funded and facilitated project in partnership with the Phajoding monastery.

Haa Valley Homestay

Operating since 2012, Haa Valley homestay is approximately 2-3 kilometers from Haa town, and within 5 minutes walking distance to *Lhakhang Karpo* (White Temple). It is a family run venture started by a husband and wife, in collaboration with other family members. While the husband and wife operate the homestay, another family member actively markets the homestay and runs a small tourism business. They also have a nephew who actively serves as a guide to guests at the homestay. A son and daughter also live at the homestay and often use their English language skills to help communicate between the husband & wife team and the guests. Activities provided include archery, hot stone bath, farm activities, and various trekking opportunities. Nearby lies the trailhead for the Nup Tsho Na Pata Trek (4-7 day trek), a recently constructed mountain bike trail, and numerous temple-viewing opportunities.

Phobjikha Homestay Network

Phobjikha Valley is part of Wangduephodrang District, located approximately 4-5 hours drive from Thimphu. The valley is a Conservation Area established by the Royal Government in 2003 due to the region's use as winter habitat for the Black-Necked Crane. This has resulted in immense interest from tourists to visit this unique destination. Due to this, a local NGO, Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), has partnered with local communities to establish policies for Community Based Sustainable Tourism, their branded form of ecotourism. Following this, RSPN and local community members established a local network of homestays (approximately 15), which is accompanied by training opportunities, start-up funding, pricing guide, and a community fund which is built-up through a 10% conservation fee applied to all tourist transactions. As part of this research, four of the homestays were adopted as cases to represent the larger Homestay Network.

Phajoding Eco-Camp

Phajoding Monastery is located approximately 3-4 hours hike from Thimphu and serves as the terminal point for the Druk Path Trek, which runs between the Paro and Thimphu valleys (4-6 day trek). As a cultural and monastic hub, it also serves as a base camp for exploring alpine valleys and lakes that has attracted both foreign and domestic visitors. As part of a larger

national strategy to establish and improve ecotourism facilities, the national government, through the appointed Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division (NRED) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, took on the task of constructing an Eco-Camp near the monastery grounds. While NRED served as a lead in the development, it was a collaborative effort with the Phajoding Monastery and the Tourism Council of Bhutan. Once construction was completed, management of the Eco-Camp was assumed by the monk body of Phajoding, with the intent that the proceeds from the venture would be used to help with eco-camp operation, monastery needs, and conservation efforts.

Evaluation Framework

It was determined that measuring traditional indicators of tourism, such as arrival numbers and tourist expenditures would not serve the purpose of measuring sustainability (Mearns, 2011; Roberts & Tribe, 2008). Therefore, it was deemed necessary to adopt indicators that measure performance from the viewpoint of a triple bottom line; economics, socio-cultural and environmental. Such an indicator system would allow the monitoring of a venture's performance in meeting sustainable development goals (UNCSD, 2001).

Mearns (2011; 2012) adopted 12 baseline indicators developed by the World Tourism Organization (2004) for determining sustainability within tourism ventures. In addition, Mearns developed six specific indicators unique to community based ecotourism initiatives. These 18 indicators are highlighted in Table 1, and were further divided into 34 sub-indicators as highlighted in Table 2.

Table 1. Baseline and Ecotourism Indicators

WTO Baseline Indicators	Community Based Ecotourism Indicators
Local satisfaction with tourism [Social]	Education [Social]
Effects of tourism on communities [Social]	Community decision making [Social]
Sustaining tourist satisfaction [Economic]	Community benefits [Social]
Tourism seasonality [Economic]	Culture [Social]
Economic benefits of tourism [Economic]	Biodiversity and conservation [Environment]
Energy management [Environment]	Networking and collaboration [Cross-Cutting]
Water availability & conservation [Environment]	
Drinking water quality [Environment]	
Sewage treatment [Environment]	
Solid waste management [Environment]	
Development controls [Cross-Cutting]	
Controlling use intensity [Environment]	

Table 2. Indicators and Sub-Indicators adopted by current research

Baseline Indicator	Sub-Indicators
Social Issues	
1. Local Satisfaction with Tourism	1.1 Local satisfaction with tourism
	1.2 Local community complaints
2. Effects of tourism on communities	2.1 Percentage who believe that tourism has helped bring new services of infrastructure
	2.2 Other effects of tourism on the community
3. Education	3.1 Education of tourists
	3.2 Education of community
	3.3 Training and skills development of staff members
4. Community decision making	4.1 Community decision-making structures
5. Community benefits	5.1 Community benefits from tourism
6. Culture	6.1 Cultural appreciation and conservation
Economic Issues	
7. Sustaining tourist satisfaction	7.1 Level of tourist satisfaction
	7.2 Perception of value for money
	7.3 Percentage of return visitors
	7.4 Perception of sustainability
	7.5 Tourist complaints
8. Tourism seasonality	8.1 Tourist arrivals by month
	8.2 Occupancy rates for accommodation by month
	8.3 Percentage of tourist industry jobs which are permanent or full time (compared to temporary/seasonal jobs)
9. Economic benefits of tourism	9.1 Number of local people employed in tourism (and ratio of men to women)
	9.2 Revenue generated
	9.3 Revenue spent in area
Environmental Issues	
10. Energy Management	10.1 Per Capita consumption of energy
	10.2 Energy-saving measures

	10.3 Percentage of energy consumption from renewable resources
11. Water availability and conservation	11.1 Water use (total water volume consumed and liters per tourist per day)
	11.2 Water conservation measures
12. Drinking water quality	12.1 Water supply method
	12.2 Water Bottle disposal method
13. Sewage treatment	13.1 Sewage treatment systems
14. Solid waste management	14.1 Waste volume produced
	14.2 Waste disposal (landfill, recycling, etc.)
15. Controlling use intensity	15.1 Number of tourists per square meter of the site (GPS info required)
16. Biodiversity and conservation	16.1 Local community involvement in conservation projects in area
Crosscutting issues	
17. Development controls	17.1 Existence of a development planning process including tourism
18. Networking and collaboration	18.1 Partnerships and collaborations

Furthermore, these indicators were supplemented by indicators that serve as an adaptation from six impact factors of the Bhutanese ecotourism context identified by Gurung and Scholz (2008). Table 3 below highlights the operationalization of the six impact factors.

Table 3. Bhutan Ecotourism Impact Factors and Indicators

Impact Factor	Indicator
Accessibility [Economic]	19.1 Travel time to destination
	19.2 Mode of travel
	19.3 Assessment of road/trail condition
Pricing Policy [Economic]	20.1 Impacts of current policy
	20.2 Suggestions for adaptation
Tourism Products [Economic]	21.1 Nature vs Cultural Based Products
Community Empowerment [Economic and Social]	22.1 Financial Assistance
	22.2 Independent Decision Making
Tourism Facilities [Economic]	23.1 Ownership
Marketing Tourism Products [Economic]	24.1 External vs Self Marketing

These 6 impact factors were modified to provide site-specific indicators (6 indicators and 10 sub-indicators) for ecotourism in Bhutan and were combined with the 18 indicators (35 sub-indicators) provided by Mearns. Furthermore, during the research three emerging indicators were developed, following a grounded approach to data analysis. These emerging indicators are highlighted in Table 4. This resulted in an evaluative framework that included 24 main indicators and 48 sub-indicators.

Table 4. Emerging Indicators

25.1	Indirect Impacts (schooling, power outages, migration)
26.1	Stakeholder Concerns (10% fee, food rates, controversies)
27.1	Socio-Cultural Changes (authenticity)

Sustainability Assessments

In this section, a summary of the research findings will be provided along with suggestions for short and long term actions required to increase sustainability. While the research team analyzed each of the established indicators, what follows is a focused analysis that highlights indicators deemed to have substantial impact on the sustainability of each case.

Haa Valley Homestay – Private Entrepreneurship Regime

Haa Valley Homestay has performed well in its years of operation in terms of economic performance and will likely continue to do so in the future. This can be attributed to indicators in which tourist satisfaction is high and the venture is conveniently located within a 3-6 hour drive from other popular destinations. Additionally, there is a high level of independent decision making by the homestay owners, preventing economic leakage. In Haa's case, being a private entrepreneurship, the venture was started by a single family and was not reliant on outside sources of funding. However, it was noted that the RSPN has been active in the Haa area, looking to reproduce the success of the Phobjikha Homestay Network they helped establish. As such, the Haa Valley Homestay has been approached by RSPN to be part of a coordinated regional effort to improve homestay-style attractions and increase tourist numbers. At the time of this research, the owners of the Homestay had not determined their involvement in these efforts.

Other positive impacts included improved hygiene, sanitation, and diet. However, the venture owners mostly experienced these benefits. Comments from the homestay family included:

> People used to live very dirty, but now after tourism started, people have started to keep their surroundings clean, learned to stay clean, wear clean clothes and also have improved table manners (male staff).
>
> Before, we wouldn't be eating varieties of food. Normally it would only just be one dish. When the guests are present we cook four different varieties of food (female staff).

The venture is particularly vulnerable with regards to community benefits, both social and economic. Local employment and profits earned are not extended to the broader community, leading to tensions. While family members expressed that the venture created new employment opportunities in the area, community members were less optimistic. Community members also reported that the nephew of the homestay owner was active in promoting their venture, which diverted customers from other homestays in the area. As such, there seemed to be underlying community dissatisfaction with regards to how the homestay was operating. This was emphasized by the anonymous destruction of signage advertising the venture.

Also, from an environmental perspective, the venture has struggled to find ways to deal with waste. Concurring to indicator 14.2, the manager was asked questions such as: 'where is solid waste disposed?' 'Is waste recycled (e.g. composted)?' The manger responded:

> The organic waste is given to cattle. We dump other inorganic wastes in the pit dug on our field. The government had told us to sack the waste and keep it for the garbage truck to come pick it up, but it never came and even if the garbage truck came, it leaves the garbage around. So non-organic garbage is burned as well.

Therefore, the Haa venture does not have an official plan for dealing with the solid waste generated. While organics are easily managed through the feeding of livestock, inorganic waste is merely collected to a central location without further management.

Additionally, while local residents report being active in environmental campaigns (i.e. waste cleanup, tree planting), these activities are not directly prompted by the venture. The indicator system determined that conservation activities are indeed taking place, but were incentivized through other government programs, community efforts, or personal values.

With these issues in mind, the following are short and long-term recommendations to consider in order to improve sustainability. In the short-term, the venture needs to expand its conservation focus by integrating specific actions or programs into routine operations. This may be done by engaging in specific conservation efforts that are conducted by the owners that show a commitment to the local environment (i.e. purchase and planting of saplings), or could be achieved through the incorporation of more ecological related activities for guests. In terms of waste management, a plan should be developed for how to responsibly deal with inorganic

wastes. This may require partnering with local government representatives to prompt a broader discussion on waste management for the region.

In the long-term, the venture owners need to develop more collaboration with community members. This may involve setting up more opportunities for part-time employment. For example, while children of the owners experience conflict with studies while entertaining tourists, there may be certain seasons where it is beneficial to hire help from outside the family to avoid the negative impacts. Additionally, the owner could engage local committees seeking opportunities for the Homestay to be active in collaborative community efforts. This would ease the local tensions with the community while also creating a positive influential presence that could be used to coordinate conservation efforts.

Phobjikha Homestay Network – NGO Facilitated Regime

The collaboration between RSPN and the Phobjikha Valley community is very positive and has resulted in a successful venture that will likely progress in the future. This relationship is characterized by positive economic impacts to the region through increased employment and income, for which RSPN serves as a strong source of advocacy and capacity building for the community. The multiple homestays that are a part of the established network have the advantage of drawing from the institutional capacity of the RSPN. RSPN has a large presence in the country, is centrally located in the capital of Thimphu, and has the capacity to properly market the venture. A manager interviewee reports, 'in terms of advertisement and marketing, RSPN does all the work'. Therefore, while individual homestay operators lack such capacity, the current collaborative relationship with the NGO is necessary, serving a positive role.

In terms of environmental impact, conservation of Black-necked Cranes has been a priority supported by the homestay network. With the Black-necked Cranes serving as the flagship species, a number of efforts have been made by the community to protect the crane habitat but they have also engaged in reforestation and waste clean-up campaigns. 88% of community members reported their involvement in such conservation projects. An interviewee comments:

> The community maintains the community forest…and awareness is created with the community about forest fires. We also plant trees in those areas where there is barren land.

In relation to the creation of social benefits; a number of locals have been trained and are employed as guides. While tourists often come to the valley with their own tour guides, local guides are seen as a unique opportunity to gain specific knowledge of the local customs and ecology. 58% of the community and staff respondents reported that more jobs for local youth have been created due to the homestay network. One interviewee commented thus:

> Youths can guide guests, which helps them to gain confidence. And the youth are also given opportunity for cultural exchange programs such as dancing and singing.

In terms of economic benefits, all managers reported revenues that helped supplement their primary incomes. While the number of tourists has been low, resulting in the homestays unable to sustain a full-time income, this is nevertheless in-line with the RSPN objective of creating supplementary income, instead of disrupting traditional livelihood activities.

For future improvements to promote sustainability, the Phobjikha Homestay network needs to specifically address issues of inequality, waste management, and misconceptions related to the 10% fee charged to guests that is retained for community projects.

Community members brought to light the issue of an increasing rich-poor divide. This was specifically related to how operators for the RSPN homestay network were chosen. At its inception, RSPN looked for volunteers from the community to open up their homes as official homestays. Because RSPN had limited start-up funds to disperse, it became apparent that only certain homes that had an already existing standard of construction could volunteer. As such, it enabled already economically well-off families to become integrated into the network leading to a further increase in their income. Therefore, while the ideal of ecotourism looks to improve livelihood conditions and combat poverty, in this case the more impoverished households were at a disadvantage from the beginning. The poor-rich gap that is present will continue to widen and may lead to disruptions in social cohesion, unless poverty issues can be addressed.

Waste management was also a problem in Phobjikha. With more tourists entering the valley, there has been an expected increase in waste generation. While the RSPN had initially helped coordinate efforts for garbage collection through the employment of a tractor, this activity has ceased. One interviewee notes:

> RSPN used to send a tractor to collect our waste and they would take it to a dumpsite. But now the amount of waste has increased due to tourism, and the tractor isn't working anymore.

Also related, the number of plastic water bottles provided to guests has been an issue:

> I have observed water bottles and other waste being left behind. Not a very long time ago, many tourists….filled the area with waste.

Additionally, one interview reported that waste might be collected in one area, only to be dumped in another part of the valley. As such, waste management will continue to intensify as more tourists are drawn to the area, leading to a larger amount of waste that can no longer be addressed by rural residents alone.

A critical issue that was revealed through interviews was a misconception related to how a 10% fee associated with all tourist purchases within the homestay network was applied and

used. The intent was that 10% of the fees on food and accommodation would be set aside for community projects such as activities related to crane conservation, school upgrades, and road maintenance. These funds would be directed to a Homestay Committee, which would manage the funds accordingly. However, many were not aware of how these funds were being used. There seemed to be a significant amount of distrust between various community members, including allegations of fraudulent behavior. Additionally, homestay owners criticized the 10% fee as a source of economic loss. Managers reported that the fee made their services look more expensive and created a deterrent for travel companies. One manger commented, 'If they really wanted to benefit us they wouldn't be charging us from what we earn.'

To deal with these issues, short and long-term recommendations for this venture are as follows. In the short-term, the RSPN should instigate renewed communication with the Homestay Committee, Homestay Operators and interested community members more broadly. The role of the 10% fee in terms of collection and usage should be clarified. While much of this work may have already been done in the past, reviving this conversation will work to dispel current misunderstandings. In the long-term, RSPN and the Homestay Committee need to determine a workable enduring waste management option. A vision for managing the issue will be in the best interest of the Phobjikha Valley, for both its human and wildlife populations. This could be done through incentivizing waste management at the individual homestay scale or by contacting the local Dzongkhag administration to discuss regional solutions.

Phajoding Eco-Camp – Government Facilitated Regime

While tourists and domestic visitors were already common to the Druk Path trek, the Eco-Camp established at the Phajoding monastery has served as an additional point of attraction. The collaboration between the NRED, TCB and the Phajoding monastery was conceived with a positive development agenda in which government agencies would initiate and fund the project with the long-term goal of handing over operations to the monk body. The monk body was actively involved in the initial planning stages, which reveals a strong community based agenda, which is critical for successful ecotourism ventures. However, the research team deduced that capacity building was not sufficient at the time of handing over the project, which resulted in a number of negative outcomes related to long-term management. Community members seemed to have received very little in terms of skills, such as nature and culture training. Interviewee responses revealed that only 16.6% felt they had received such training. Weakness in waste management, increased visitor volumes, profit generation and acculturation were all viewed as critical areas to be addressed.

Waste management was also a difficulty for the venture. Researchers observed waste problems at the Eco-Camp, but also in the adjoining monastery and throughout the Druk Path Trek. The presence of visitors, both tourists and domestic visitors, to the region has generated

a large waste management problem for the monastery. There is no proper waste disposal site, and while the Thimphu municipality used to collect it in the past this practice has ceased. Interviewees reported that it is not primarily the overseas tourists that are the culprit; rather it is both the Bhutanese guides/trekking staff as well as regional visitors (i.e. India, Bangladesh, etc.). Interviewees commented:

> The tourists take good care of their waste but children and domestic visitors are the ones who are careless.
>
> The tourist litter the surroundings as well as the route they take for trekking [Druk Path].

The monk body reported a number of issues such as increased volumes of visitors, conflicts with trekking staff, and a disruption of religious practices. Therefore, local monks were deprived of an enabling spiritual environment and felt compelled to entertain visitors. Two interviewees commented respectively:

> Monks cannot talk back and fight with the staff and the horsemen because they are doing religious and spiritual practices.
>
> People who visit Phajoding usually do not have proper beds and camps. The monastery gives them shelter, food and a bed.

With an increased numbers of tourists and horse caravans, there was a reported shortage of firewood and grazing areas. This was not only an issue for the local monk community, but also community members in the area along the Druk Path trekking route, which included a number of yak herding families.

The generation of revenue is a key indicator that determines the venture's ability to retain profits. In the case of the Eco-Camp, the venture is reported to be running at a loss. There has been very little revenue generated, and anything that is generated is used for buying items to maintain operations, such as soap, toilet paper, and disinfectants. It should also be noted that at the time of field research, the Eco-Camp was not in operation for tourists and was serving as accommodation for construction workers labouring on monastery improvements and new constructions.

Socio-cultural change was an emerging impact noticed, both while in the field and during the analysis of our data. Researchers recognized a repeated theme of 'authenticity' in the responses of interviewees. Authenticity is a controversial issue in the social sciences, related to how cultures evolve and change due to outside impacts. In the case of tourism, and by extension ecotourism, authenticity is framed as a particular perception that tourists have of a local culture/people. Ecotourists have a strong desire to visit places and cultures that are deemed

'authentic', which then imposes an expectation upon local peoples to produce this experiential product of 'authenticity'. However, a conundrum exists because it is impossible to determine what 'authentic' is in any given context. Cultures change constantly and are never a static social construct, therefore 'authenticity', in the realm of tourism, has become 'whatever the tourist expects to see'. These expectations, therefore, determine what is 'authentic', and local people work to fulfill these expectations in order to continue benefiting from tourism revenues (see Maccannell, 1973; Urry, 2001).

This scenario has resulted in a process of acculturation in which the local monk culture has changed to meet the needs of tourists. Community interviews revealed that monks were motivated to act in particular ways to ensure that visitors would continue to come to the area. Therefore, tourists' presence, rather than intrinsic cultural motivators, were motivating behavioural changes. Community members commented:

> We have to be a good example to all the people and guests, so there have been improvements in living standards, we eat with plates and mugs.
>
> We think it is better to plant more trees and flowers to beautify our surroundings to attract more tourists.
>
> Our monks have been exposed to western clothes and have started to have fancy and fashionable jackets and started to have them on top of the monk robes.
>
> Looking at the tourists, we get inspired to change our mindset (thoughts) and think holistically about the life and situations. They are a good example to see how clean and neat they stay unlike us the monks so we are encouraged to maintain hygiene.

These changes to behaviour motivated by tourists can be understood as staged behaviours out of sync with ordinary customs. Therefore, what has evolved is not necessarily what could be considered 'authentic', but rather a spectacle that meets the economic requirements of the ecotourism sector. While some of the above observations can be considered positive, they seemingly conflict with Bhutan's commitment to cultural preservation that is embedded in GNH philosophy.

To deal with these aforesaid issues, short and long-term recommendations for this venture are as follows. In the short-term, capacity building exercises should be provided by the partnering agencies (NRED and TCB) to ensure management capabilities are instilled in the Phajoding management body. This could be achieved through a series of workshops that would concentrate on specific skill sets. Paired with this recommendation, there should be an institutional champion that is committed to following up with the management committee, ensuring an uptake in best practices including maintaining finance records and cleanliness. Such a champion need not be NRED or TCB, but a suitable partner should be established.

Tour operators and guides should also be committed to discussions with the Phajoding management team to find avenues that successfully meet the economic, social and environmental goals of the venture. A collaborative event could be organized in which tour operators/guides tour the Eco-Camp and converse with the management team, thus creating a relationship to foster future forums on Eco-Camp issues.

In the long-term, Druk Path policies should be developed to ensure use of proper campsites. The current scenario allows tour operators to set up camps randomly, and they often choose to avoid extra fees associated with the Eco-Camp, resulting in economic loss of the venture. Strict policies that ensure campsites are set up at established locations will minimize environmental disturbance while also ensuring revenues are generated for the venture. Additionally, while a monitoring plan has been developed, it has not been implemented. The plan should be revisited, amended as needed and adopted allowing the Phajoding management committee to undergo periodic assessments in order to improve operations.

Conclusion

Ecotourism in Bhutan is an evolving sector that contains much potential for meeting sustainability goals within the country. While the larger tourism sector is showing stress in terms of carrying capacity, ecotourism is an avenue resorted to not only diversify tourism products, but to also meet rural livelihood concerns. In this report, we have presented an analysis of three separate ecotourism ventures that are all characterized by core components of Honey's (2008) definition of ecotourism, but are also differentiated by separate management regimes (private entrepreneurship, NGO facilitation, and government facilitation). The selected management regimes are not exhaustive of all potential forms of collaboration but serve as a subset of existing arrangements.

The Haa Valley Homestay was characterized by a grass-roots implementation with a sole beneficiary, in the form of a single family, and was primarily driven by profits. As such, the venture runs like a business venture, dominated by independent decision-making allowing the owner to successfully supplement income-earning strategies. While it lacks an ideal community focus, the venture is successful from an economic point of view and will continue to prosper. This healthy economic base provides opportunity for improving other social and environmental indicators. Therefore, the private entrepreneurship model, in this case, is not without faults but is likely to continue operating with great potential for improving sustainability.

The Phobjikha Homestay Network was characterized by a strong NGO collaboration. RSPN initiated a robust program that sought economic, social, and environmental goals and has served as a key institutional support for the local community. Marketing, administrative capacities, and capacity building were key areas that RSPN offered to the project. The Homestay Committee

that was established promotes a decentralized form of decision making, thereby allowing the local community a say in how the venture will be developed in the future. Therefore, the NGO facilitated model runs as a 'Partnership' in which power and decision-making are shared and has resulted in a successful model for ecotourism. Despite these benefits, there are a number of issues that demand immediate attention to ensure long term sustainability.

The Phajoding Eco-Camp is characterized by government facilitation in which the key organization, NRED, in partnership with TCB, initiated the joint venture. The project looked to achieve broader national goals of rural development, and therefore received significant startup funding. While capacity building amongst local managers was minimal, this weakness was exacerbated through the handing over of the project without significant on-going support. Therefore, the current capacity for local management at the Phajoding Eco-Camp puts the sustainability of the venture at risk in the long term. While this prediction is not indicative of all government facilitated projects, it does serve as a word of caution for how future programs should be rolled-out.

The final question associated with this research looks to determine which policy shifts can ensure the manifestation of the ideal of ecotourism. Admittedly, this is an issue that has not been fully explored by the research team as it stands. While the data gathering methods of this research proved suitable to individual cases they did not demonstrate the same usefulness when addressing broader policy needs. Therefore, addressing of the third research question was not possible through the current research and will require an alternative framework for assessment. As such, determining the best way forward for ecotourism policy in Bhutan stands as a gap in current research, but which we seek to close in the near future

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