

Sustainable Rural Tourism in Bhutan

Community Tourism in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park

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Bhutan is a Buddhist Kingdom rich in cultural and biodiversity resources. Religious festivals are celebrated throughout the year and traditional customs are still very much alive. The country's rich ecosystems are home to a variety of species, some of which cannot be found in other parts of the Himalayan region. Combined with a generally cautious approach towards tourism, Bhutan has become a model for sustainable tourism development in this part of the world.



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The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) has identified tourism as an important sector for the country's socioeconomic development. The 9th Five-Year Plan has set a target of 15,000 tourist arrivals in 2007, increasing to 20,000 arrivals in 2012. In 2003, the number of arrivals reached 6261; in 2004 arrivals soared to 9,249. Steady growth is expected for 2005. Accessibility, the tourist tariff system, and marketing determine the number of visitors. Tourists have to spend US\$200 a day in Bhutan. All expenses like accommodation, transport, guide services, entrance fees, and others are included in this amount. Tourists need only to pay for drinks and souvenirs. Of the total amount, around US\$70 are royalties and taxes, the remainder goes to the tour operator to develop the daily tour package.

Several strategies are proposed in the 9th Plan, especially related to seasonality, length of stay, new products, and new markets. Products will be developed in

the fields of rural or community tourism and eco-tourism, health, spa, and spiritual renewal, adventure, and domestic tourism.

How can sustainable rural tourism be developed in Bhutan, and how can local people benefit, especially considering the imposing US\$200 a day tariff system? To address these questions, this article focuses on a community tourism project in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (JSWNP). The project is situated in the park close to the road between Trongsa and Zhemgang and provides opportunity for easy trekking during the winter months. Highlights of the trek include visits to small Bhutanese mountain villages, Monpa ethnic group, the diverse forests of the park, and possible sightings of the golden langur and rufous-necked hornbill.

The trek in JSWNP fits well with the agreed strategies of the 9th Plan, as it is a new product for Bhutan, provides income generation possibilities in rural areas, and addresses seasonality (the trail can be used seven months a year). The project started only in 2005, but already, initial conclusions can be drawn.

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The people of the Korphu and Langthel 'geogs' (blocks) in the JSWNP are interested in participating in a community tourism project in the six main villages along the trekking trail. During the feasibility study, communities agreed to establish tourism management committees in the villages of Nimshong, Nabji, Korphu, Kupdra/Phrumzor, and Jangbi to plan and manage sustainable tourism. The committees are supported by the park staff of JSWNP, and by officials of the Nature Conservation Division (NCD), Department of Tourism (DOT), and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO).

The objectives of the project are:

- to develop the Nabji-Korphu Trail for trekking and community tourism, planned and managed by the communities along the trail;
- to provide awareness on natural resource management, energy, waste management, and cultural consciousness to local communities, tourists, and their staff, and introduce alternatives; and
- to support improved tourism market chains, including tourism products and services, and strengthen micro and small enterprise development.

The project contributes to biodiversity conservation through a tourism awareness programme, sustainable tourism and conservation activities, and promotion of alternative socioeconomic tourism benefits. It is a capacity strengthening project based on applied research, policy analysis, participatory planning and management, and market orientation. Overall, the trek offers major benefits to the communities and the country, including:

- greater awareness, appreciation for, and protection of natural and cultural resources, among both villagers and visitors;
- a test and model for learning how to successfully apply the community tourism approach to Bhutan's unique landscape and culture;
- provision of tangible rural community assistance through training, education, improved infrastructure and facilities, and modest cash revenue; and
- enhancement of Bhutan's reputation for high value, low impact tourism;

Revenue distribution systems

To support the livelihood of local communities in the area and to create more awareness on natural, environmental, and cultural issues, specific measures have to be in place to maximise positive socioeconomic benefits from tourism development and minimise negative impacts. In this article, the socioeconomic issues are highlighted.

In each village specific activities generate community revenues. Community camping sites (Nimshong, Nabji, Kupdra and Jangbi), cultural programmes (Nimshong, Nabji, Jangbi), and local lunches, tea breaks or dinners are being developed. On a rotation basis, individuals from different villages can generate income through pack animals or portering from village to village, and assisting as cook, kitchen staff or village guide. Other activities that generate income for individuals through developing tourism include construction and maintenance work (campsites, viewpoints and trails), and sales of crafts, vegetables (and other agricultural products), and firewood.

Camping site at Jangbi

On fieldtrips and the first pilot tours, two nature tourist groups from the USA indicated that considerable rev-

Table. Expected income per village in Nu (43 Nu = 1 US\$) from 100/300/600 tourists

Activity	Price in Nu	Total per 100 tourists	Total per 300 tourists	Total per 600 tourists
Camping	100 per person	10,000	30,000	60,000
Village guide	100 per group	1,000	3,000	6,000
Cultural performance	500 per group	5,000	15,000	30,000
Local lunch/dinner	100 per person	10,000	30,000	60,000
Porter	200 per person	20,000	60,000	120,000
Kitchen garden	50 per person	5,000	15,000	30,000
Firewood	80 per group	800	2,400	4,800
	Total per night	51,800	155,400	310,800
	Total in area	259,000	777,000	1,554,000

enues can be generated in the villages. Based on the first visits, calculations have been made on the revenue per village and in total in the area per year, for 100, 300, or 600 visiting tourists (10, 30 and 60 groups, respectively). Even with 100 tourists a year, an additional income of over US\$ 1,200 per village per year can be generated (see table).

Even considering the 200 US\$ a day tariff system in Bhutan, tourists are interested in new tourism products like the trekking trail in the JSWNP. Some USA-based tour operators have shown an interest in including the trek in their brochure for the coming year. A figure of 300 tourists seems certainly feasible.

Conclusions

Although the project started officially only in 2005, several steps were initiated starting in 2002. In the national strategy and the 9th plan, it was agreed that Bhutan will develop sustainable community tourism that is beneficial socioeconomically for a wider group of people, especially people in remoter rural areas. In 2003, DOT and NCD, with the support of SNV, conducted two feasibility studies in the JSWNP. The two easy trails studied were both feasible, and it was agreed that plans would be developed for these trekking trails. In 2004, a project proposal was written for the present trek and submitted to the Small Grants Fund of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF). The project was approved in December 2004. Stakeholders at local (tourism management committees, JSWNP) and national (DOT, NCD, ABTO, SNV) level implement the project together.

Although the project is very conscious of not raising local expectations, highlighting the basic infrastructure and environmental awareness, rather than the socioeconomic benefits, based on the first indications of field-visits and pilot tours it can be concluded that the socio economic benefits can be substantial. In an area where the possibilities for socioeconomic development are limited, additional revenues of even US\$ 1,200 are significant. Of course, it is much too early to indicate the success of the project, although the initial infrastructure, environmental, and socioeconomic benefits in the villages are promising.