

**TOURISM AND THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL
PRESERVATION:
A CASE STUDY OF BHUTAN**

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Tourism generates tremendous revenue for developing countries, but also serves as an instrument for the spread of Western cultural homogeneity. This article evaluates Bhutan's tourism policy based upon three criteria: opportunity for foreign exchange, space for cultural evolution, and prevention of cultural pollution. While Bhutan has experienced some success in its synthesis of tradition and modernity, it is likely to face significant challenges in the future. Ultimately, six recommendations are provided to strengthen Bhutan's tourism policy in light of its attempts to preserve its unique culture.

INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL EVOLUTION

The Need for Cultural Diversity

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that culture is “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes . . . modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (2002). Culture evolves with a people as a guidebook for living well with each other. Like biological species, the environment in which it is housed and the resources available to it guide a culture’s evolution. Cultures are living systems; they continually evolve as conditions, such as mounting population pressures and resource availability, change.

The evolution of a culture also is influenced by its contact with other disparate cultures. When cultures interact, there is an inevitable exchange of ideas, values, rituals, and commodities. Ideally, the exchange is of the most effective and equitable elements of each society—those elements that lend themselves to the attainment of a socially and environmentally sustainable society. Cultural diversity represents the expanded opportunity for learning through intercultural dialogue. Because each culture has evolved in a unique environment with a unique set of physical and human resources, each has a distinct set of guidelines for living to add to the cultural pool.

In theory, the opportunity for cultural learning in the 21st century is greater than ever. Globalization, in the form of world markets, free trade, and mass tourism, provides endless opportunities for the cultural interaction that opens the door for cultural dialogue.

The current push for globalization, however, is overwhelmingly characterized by

the assumption that Western culture is the most suitable model for progress. The language of globalization, for example “developed” versus “developing” in regard to Western and non-Western countries, reflects the idea that the Western construction of civilization is inherently better (i.e., more developed). Despite the rampant poverty, crime, and environmental degradation associated with Western culture, its reach grows ever more extensive through its promise of material goods. Therefore, cultural interaction in the current global framework inhibits the opportunity for cultural exchange and instead gives rise to cultural domination.

Cultural dialogue is effective only when each participant views the other as equal. Until genuine respect and legitimacy is given to non-Western cultures, the juxtaposition of cultures represents more of a threat to non-Western cultures’ existence than a benefit to the global cultural pool.

Tourism as an Agent of Cultural Contact

Because of Western culture’s global reach, there is a multitude of contact points between Western and non-Western cultures. Tourism is an especially powerful vehicle for cultural exchange. Through tourist-host interactions, the West meets the rest of the world through the common people—the agents of cultural evolution. Ironically, tourism is often driven by a search for variation in an increasingly homogenized world; yet tourism itself is an instrument for the expansion of homogeneity.

Helena Norberg-Hodge, a resident and researcher in Ladakh, India, sketches a portrait of Ladakhi lifestyle before and after the region was opened to Western tourists:

During my first years in Ladakh, young children I had never seen before used to run up to me and press apricots into my hands. Now little figures, looking shabbily Dickensian in threadbare Western clothing, greet foreigners with an empty outstretched hand. They demand ‘one pen, one pen,’ a phrase that has become the new mantra of Ladakhi children

(1991, 95).

Norberg-Hodge describes the psychological pressures Ladakhis encountered when confronted with modernization through the arrival of Western tourists. Exposed to only the superficial successes of Western culture, the people of Ladakh never came face to face with “the stress, the loneliness, the fear of growing old . . . [the] environmental decay, inflation, or unemployment” that is prevalent in the West. This limited contact with Western lifestyles caused some Ladakhis to view their culture as inferior, and to ultimately reject age-old traditions in favor of empty symbols of modernity (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 97-8). Inskeep describes this phenomenon as the “submergence of the local society by the outside cultural patterns of seemingly more affluent and successful tourists” (1991, 373). Cultural pollution is characterized by the abandonment of local traditions and values, and the wholesale adoption of foreign conventions.

Conflict also arises in the commoditization of culture. Traditional arts and festivals are often commercialized to generate revenue. As a result, the authenticity of these crafts and customs are lost in the race for economic prosperity that both modernization and Western tourists promote. Often a shell of the culture is preserved in the form of a festival or hand-woven rug, but the intangible heritage that gives such artifacts meaning is lost, replaced with the global consumerist culture.

Despite the potential negative consequences of mass tourism, its substantial economic benefits ensure that it will remain on global and state agendas. The tourism sector is emerging as the world’s largest growth industry, source of employment, and revenue generator. In 1999, 11.7 percent of the world gross domestic product was attributed to tourism, in addition to 12 percent of global employment, and 8 percent of

worldwide exports (Brunet 2001, 245). The World Tourism Organization predicts that by the year 2020, tourism will be the world's primary industry, generating over \$2 trillion in global revenues. The East Asia/Pacific region is forecasted to emerge as the second most popular tourist destination, enjoying 27 percent of the market share (Shackley 1999b, 27). Moreover, mass tourism is one of the few industries in which developing countries, by appealing to the Western search for cultural variety, have a competitive advantage. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, tourism "is the only major sector in international trade in services in which developing countries have consistently had surpluses" (1998).

Given the potential benefits and costs of tourism, governments and international agencies are increasingly recognizing the need for tourism policies that allow countries to take advantage of foreign exchange earnings while sustaining their cultural identity. The International Scientific Committee on Cultural Tourism (ISCCT), an affiliate of UNESCO, fashioned a charter on international cultural tourism. One of its many objectives is to "encourage those formulating plans and policies to develop detailed, measurable goals and strategies relating to the presentation and interpretation of heritage places and cultural activities, in the context of their preservation and conservation" (ISCCT 1999). Despite the charter's vague language, it demonstrates an increasing understanding of the need for cultural preservation policies in general and specifically in relation to tourism.

A demand for cultural preservation policies is not a call for cultural "freezing." Culture, as mentioned earlier, is a living system and will continue to evolve regardless of government efforts to standardize it. Moreover, no single culture is worthy of being

preserved in its entirety. Rather, the wisdom that is unique to a given culture, the knowledge that has accumulated over generations, and the values that have contributed equitably and effectively to humans living together must be protected. An effective cultural preservation policy safeguards these elements of heritage while creating a space for cultural evolution to continue.

Therefore, a culturally sustainable tourism policy must be evaluated based upon three criteria: its success in preventing cultural pollution, the opportunity it allows for foreign exchange, and the space it provides for cultural evolution. The ultimate objective for governments is to ensure a deliberate, cautious synthesis of tradition and modernity.

Bhutan is an ideal case for analysis because it is known for its attempts to preserve cultural heritage and because it claims to have an effective, well-designed tourism policy. Bhutan markets itself to the international community as unique, priding itself on its slow emergence into the modern world and its perpetuation of values that are distinct from Western norms.

THE CASE OF BHUTAN

Political History

Medieval Bhutan was marked by religious and territorial strife. Mountainous terrain and a multitude of Buddhist sects yielded a state with no nation and centuries of struggle. Bhutan was unified under the *Drukpa Kagyu* culture, a variation of Tibetan Buddhism, in the 17th century. The system of governance that emerged from the new, unified Bhutan was based out of religious political centers (Rahul 1997). Buddhist doctrines thus laid the foundation for much of Bhutan's future policy developments, including its current framework.

In 1907, Bhutan's political and religious leadership merged under the Wangchuk dynasty, the family of monarchs that remains in power today. The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGB) adopted a policy of isolationism that remained in place for nearly six decades. Bhutan emerged from isolation in 1961 largely to avoid a threat to its political sovereignty from China. Before being faced with Chinese aggression, the Bhutanese monarchy had intended on a slow, independent process of modernization. With its security at stake, however, the RGB needed immediate assistance and it was forced to turn to India for development aid (Priesner 1999). Bhutan remained reluctantly but steadfastly dependent on India throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.

Bhutan's catalyst to wean itself off of Indian assistance was the absorption of Sikkim into India in 1973. Bhutan sensed that its autonomy was threatened by not only China in the north, but also by India in the south. Consequently, Bhutan's highest priority for the past several decades has been the protection of its political sovereignty. "The main challenge facing the nation as a whole," states the Bhutanese Planning Commission, "is the maintenance of our identity, sovereignty and security as a nation-state" (1999, 26).

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the current monarch, articulated the RGB's political strategy in the early 1990s:

The only factor we can fall back on, the only factor which can strengthen Bhutan's sovereignty and our different identity is the *unique culture* we have. I have always stressed the great importance of developing our tradition because it has everything to do with strengthening our security and sovereignty and determining the future survival of the Bhutanese people . . . (Brunet 2001, 244).

In order to ensure its political autonomy, the RGB adopted several policies aimed to preserve its "unique culture." The purpose of Bhutan's goal of cultural preservation is twofold. Firstly, by promoting a unified national identity, the government aims to foster a sense of nationalism among its people. "A nation can survive and prosper only if its

people are loyal to it, and are ever ready to defend it in whatever form is necessary,” states the Bhutanese Planning Commission (1999, 8). Secondly, culture is a tool with which Bhutan can market itself to the rest of the world as distinct from its neighbors. In doing so, the country’s political legitimacy is strengthened. Through the preservation and promotion of Bhutan’s culture, the RGB hopes to ensure the commitment of its people, as well as the international community, to the survival of the kingdom.

Bhutanese Culture

The shape of Bhutanese culture took form under heavy Buddhist influence. Bhutan’s success in evading colonization ensured that many of its Buddhist and traditional features endured. A comprehensive portrayal of Bhutanese culture is beyond the scope of this article; rather, three of its particularly unique features will be explored in brief: happiness, gender equity, and environmental conservation.

Happiness

Buddhist philosophy defines happiness as the welfare that springs from the union of the physical and the spiritual. This understanding of welfare is borne out in the Buddhist doctrine of “contentment” or “sufficiency,” wherein one’s quest for material goods is suppressed by a higher ideal (Aris 1994). The primary objective of economic activity in Bhutan is the enhancement of human wellbeing, not merely the acquisition of material goods. The pursuit of both material and non-material wealth is woven into the RGB’s development plan under the label “Gross National Happiness” (GNH).¹ Despite the meager per capita income of Bhutan (recorded at \$594 in 1997), there is little deprivation

or starvation in comparison to countries with similar wealth indicators. Most families have access to land for farming and shelter, and people are adequately clothed and fed (Planning Commission 2000).

Happiness, in the context of Bhutanese culture, also may be described as the elimination of human suffering (Aris 1994). In order to diminish suffering, Buddhism encourages kindness and compassion, frowning upon needless acts of cruelty as simple as plucking a blade of grass (Lhundup 2002). These features of welfare—compassion and contentment—are apparent in the community interdependence that is common in Bhutan and many subsistence economies. Peter Menzel, creator of *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, observed this fusion during his visit to Bhutan in 1993. “. . . The village seems to work as a place to live,” he comments. “Namgay, with his club foot, his hunchbacked son, Kinley, his dwarf-like daughter Bangum, would be lost or socially savaged in most Western societies, but these sweet people belong in these mountains with their all-encompassing Buddhist beliefs” (1994, 78).

Bhutan is not, however, the romanticized Shangri-La often portrayed by popular media.² The people of Bhutan suffer the hardships characteristic of a subsistence economy: contaminated water, low life expectancy, and infant mortality, among others (Brunet 2001). The challenge to the RGB is to uphold the doctrine of GNH while it pursues a greater quality of life for its people.

Gender Equity

Numerous government and United Nations reports illustrate the equitable nature of gender relations in traditional and legal Bhutanese doctrines. Inheritance norms vary

among regions and families; some claim that property is to be split equally among children, while others insist that the greatest portion be given to the eldest daughter. Consequently, the gender ratio of property ownership in rural Bhutan is approximated at 60 to 40, female to male (Planning Commission and UN 2001). In addition, according to Bhutanese law, either party can initiate divorce. Gender roles in general are more fluid in Bhutan than in many regions of the world; the head of the household is defined not by gender, but by who is most capable (Planning Commission 2000). Menzel tells of Kinley Dorji, a 61-year-old man, who chose not to marry in order to help his sister with childcare (1994).

Perhaps most importantly, female infanticide and dowries—common practices in many South Asian countries—are nonexistent in Bhutan, indicative of the enduring value of women in Bhutanese society (Kuensel Online 2002). Female participation in community-level decision-making in Bhutan is estimated at close to 70 percent, but “participation decreases as the level of governance rises” (Planning Commission and UN 2001, 5). Declining rates of participation are illustrative of Bhutan’s struggle to balance tradition and modernity. As people grow more involved in government processes, as the population continues to expand, and as urban migration becomes a popular trend, women’s roles will have to adjust accordingly. Bhutan’s well-established traditions of gender equality, however, will serve as a sturdy foundation for future change.

Environmental Conservation

Bhutan boasts a 72.5 percent forest cover, 5,500 plant species, and 165 recorded animal species. To maintain its forests and biodiversity, Bhutan has designated over 25 percent

of its landmass as protected areas (RSPN 2001). The strong conservation ethic in Bhutan is largely shaped by the Buddhist teachings mentioned previously: compassion and contentment. Buddhism “emphasizes the importance of coexisting with nature, rather than conquering it. Devout Buddhists admire a conserving lifestyle, rather than one which is profligate” (Lhundup 2002, 707). These traditional values are apparent in the multitude of Bhutanese environmental regulations that protect its natural resources. Legislation is heavily supplemented by “local traditions of resource consumption patterns and community participation in the ownership of natural resources” (713). Because a majority of the population depends on subsistence farming, maintaining the integrity of the land and its resources is a priority for both government and the people. As with gender relations, however, the face of conservation in Bhutan is changing with increasing modernization. Intensifying commercialism is weakening the centuries-old connection between humans and nature, demonstrated by the growing tendency to reference land in terms of its market value or agricultural productivity (Lhundup 2002).

Cultural Threats

Over the past several decades, Bhutan has faced both external and internal threats to its culture. Internally, the government is confronted with a substantial population of Nepalese immigrants in southern Bhutan. Their distinct language, religion, and general social mores are a constant reminder that Bhutan is culturally diverse and, perhaps, far from its goal of a unified national identity. In addition, Bhutan also has had to combat the various threats that modernization poses to its medieval culture. Both government sources and social scientists have noted the impacts of modernization, especially on Bhutanese

youth. Drug use and crime are on the rise, familial cohesion is declining, and the pursuit of material prosperity is increasing (Mathou 1999; Planning Commission 2001).

In response to these threats, the RGB has designed and implemented several policies that aim to *standardize* and *preserve* its unique culture. While the focus of this article is on the *preservation* of culture through Bhutan's tourism policy, its cultural *standardization* policy is a potent example of the dangers of regulating culture and therefore deserves brief mention.

Standardizing Culture: *Driglam Namzha*

Bhutan's assertion of a unique culture assumes the existence of a single, unified Bhutanese heritage. This assumption has been challenged over the past two decades by the Nepalese immigrant population in southern Bhutan. The immigration of Nepalese into Bhutan for the last half-century has resulted in a culturally disparate southern region.³ The Nepalese have, for the most part, clung to the traditional dress, religion (Hinduism), and festivals of their country of origin. Nepalese immigrants, therefore, represent a threat to the king's demand for a unified Bhutan (Rahul 1997).

The Nepalese also are perceived as a direct political menace: the collapse of Sikkim into India, the exact fate that Bhutan desperately is attempting to obviate, was due in large part to the marginalization of the once-dominant Sikkim nationals by the Nepalese immigrant population (Rahul 1997).

The RGB's response to the perceived Nepalese threat was the implementation of *Driglam Namzha*, a code of etiquette that regulated the language, dress, and general conduct of all inhabitants of Bhutan. Eventually, the government went so far as to ban the

teaching of the Nepalese language in schools in the southern region. This push for cultural homogenization ultimately sparked waves of rioting and Nepalese flight (Upreti 1996). According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, there are currently over 110,000 Bhutanese refugees of Nepalese origin living in camps in India and Nepal.

The RGB claims that GNH is the essence of Bhutanese culture and the guiding force of national integration (Planning Commission 2000). Its discrimination against the Nepalese population in the name of cultural homogeneity, however, begs the question: with whose happiness is the government concerned?⁴

Despite the tragic consequences of Bhutan's national integration policy, the government's desire to protect its culture is not inherently malevolent or destructive. Regardless of the RGB's political motivations, the external benefits of its efforts—national pride and global cultural diversity—may be worthwhile if a more sustainable policy than Driglam Namzha is identified. In its attempt to standardize culture, the government effectively marginalized a large segment of its population and lost an opportunity for cultural learning. Again, cultural dialogue is possible only when each culture in the pool is viewed as legitimate and valuable. Clearly, the RGB did not give credence to the Nepalese culture. Hence, while the policy safeguarded aspects of Bhutanese culture, it impeded cultural evolution.

Cultural Preservation: Tourism Policy

While efforts by the Bhutanese government to standardize culture have yielded disastrous results, policies aimed at preserving culture have proven more successful. The failure of

Bhutan's cultural standardization policies lie in the government's assumption that it is the most fitting judge of which aspects of Bhutanese culture are worth protecting. By contrast, the RGB's cultural preservation policies prevent the wholesale abandonment of local traditions, but allow culture to remain a living system, with its flow directed by the people. Cultural preservation policies may not be an effective tool to manage what the government perceives as the "Nepali problem," but they have greater potential to prevent the corrosion of heritage caused by mass tourism.

When Bhutan opened its doors to foreign commercial interests and visitors in 1974, 13 years after abandoning its policy of isolationism, its intention was to market itself to the international community and thus gain legitimacy as an independent entity (Rahul 1997). Additionally, inviting foreign exchange would diversify Bhutan's financial resources, thereby further distancing it from its dependence on India. Ironically, this attempt to separate itself from India and assert its political and economic autonomy ultimately jeopardized Bhutan's independence of culture, manifested in the cultural exchange that began between foreign visitors (or tourists) and Bhutanese nationals.

Because Bhutan was a latecomer to the world of tourism, it was able to learn from the mistakes of its neighboring countries, including the case of Ladakh mentioned previously. The RGB consequently took a cautious approach towards tourism, designing a policy of "high-yield, low-impact" tourism, aimed at providing high quality service to wealthy tourists who are interested in and sensitive to Bhutan's culture and traditions (Brunet 2001). The objective of the policy is to generate revenue and achieve economic self-sufficiency, but prevent cultural pollution. The successes and challenges of Bhutan's tourism policy will be evaluated based on its achievement of these goals, as well as the

opportunity it provides for cultural evolution.

After 1974, when Bhutan admitted 287 tourists to witness the coronation of the king, a strict quota of 200 (non-Indian) visitors per year was imposed. In addition to the quota, a daily tariff of \$130 was placed on tourists. Travel to Bhutan in the early days of tourism was exceedingly difficult—all tourists crossed through one of two Indian border towns (Brunet 2001). Because of the high price and inconvenience of traveling to Bhutan, as well as the global community's unfamiliarity with the tiny nation-state, the tourist quota was not difficult to enforce (Shackley 1999b).

The opening of Paro airport and the national airline in 1983 made travel to Bhutan significantly easier, surpassed only by the extension of the runway and the introduction of direct international flights in 1990. All travel remained strictly operated and monitored by the government agency, Bhutan Tourism Corporation (Brunet 2001). In 1991, however, the industry was partially privatized, and individual firms arose to run the tourism sector. The industry continues to run under private operation today, with tour operators accountable to the Department of Tourism (DOT), which is under the administrative authority of the Ministry of Trade and Industry (DOT 2002). DOT remains responsible for designing tourism policy goals and for monitoring private operator compliance.

In 1991, DOT raised the individual daily tariff to \$200 (peak season rate), allocating over 30 percent of the tariff to consolidated government revenue. The department understood, however, that if the RGB hoped to attract “high quality” tourists willing to pay the astronomical daily tariff, it must offer “high quality” services. Thus, the government approves all hotels and accommodations to ensure certain standards of hospitality, and English-speaking guides are examined and licensed by DOT. In addition,

the tourism policy stipulates that guides must meet tour groups upon arrival at Paro airport and accompany them until their departure (Brunet 2001).

According to DOT, the tourism policy in Bhutan is intended to increase “private sector contribution to maximize the returns from tourism, in a sustainable manner,” and “to be a positive force for the cause for conservation of the environment and promotion of our culture, tradition and sovereign status” (DOT 2002). Bhutan has been fairly successful in maximizing profits while avoiding cultural pollution, as is seen below, but future expansion of tourism may bring challenges in synthesizing these goals.

Economic Impacts

From a meager 287 tourists in 1974, the number of visitors to Bhutan has increased steadily for the past two and a half decades. DOT removed the fixed quota in the late 1970s, choosing to rely on the high tariffs and lack of tourism infrastructure to keep the number of tourists at a sustainable level. Since then, the number of tourists jumped to nearly 3,000 in 1992 and surpassed 6,000 in 1998 (Dorji 2001). Accordingly, Bhutan generates a steady source of revenue from its tourism industry.

Because the daily tariff hike in 1991 coincided with the privatization of the Bhutan Tourism Corporation and the reopening of several religious sites to tourists, tourism demand continued to climb (Dorji 2001). The tourism industry ultimately emerged as a reliable source of revenue for the government, and it is Bhutan’s third highest generator of foreign exchange (Planning Commission 1999).

In addition to fostering foreign exchange, the tourism industry has boosted the private sector and local economies as well. The privatization of tourism in 1991 was a

boon to the private sector. As the potential earnings in the tourism sector became apparent, more private entrepreneurs began to invest and earn profits. Because foreign exchange in Bhutan is minimal, profits are reinvested in the Bhutanese economy.

Moreover, the tourism industry offers many employment opportunities for cooks, guides, hotel staff, and transport operators. According to the Ninth Five-Year Plan (Planning Commission 2001), the hotel industry employs 1,000 staff workers, and the government has approved over 300 trekking and cultural guides. Unfortunately, many of these jobs are not full-time positions because of the extreme seasonality of the industry. The most recent estimates of gross revenue from the tourism industry fell between \$10.5 and \$14 million, 15 to 20 percent of the total value of exports (Planning Commission 2001).

The informal sector also has benefited financially from the tourism industry. Several micro-enterprises, such as handicraft shops, have been established in the capital city of Thimpu (Dorji 2001). Regional non-governmental organizations have helped women create small enterprises at local festivals to sell weavings and other goods to tourists. In addition, rural economies reap the benefits of the tourism sector by setting up local transportation and portage ventures (Brunet 2001).

While tourism has brought some economic benefits to local economies, local impact is one area of the Bhutanese tourism policy in which there is room for improvement. Without expansion of the informal sector in rural Bhutan, the increasingly educated youth are expected to migrate en masse to the ill-prepared urban centers (Planning Commission 1999). If DOT extends tourism deeper into Bhutanese villages, however, it runs the risk of endangering the culture it has labored to protect.

Cultural Impacts

“High-value, low-impact” tourism has generated substantial economic benefits for Bhutan. In keeping with its commitment to cultural preservation, however, the RGB has sought to minimize the exposure of Bhutanese to Western tourists.

Given the economic burden of traveling to Bhutan, the average tourist’s length of stay is only 7.4 to 8.3 days (Planning Commission 2001). Harsh terrain and minimal transportation infrastructure limit travel into Bhutan’s countryside in this short amount of time, thereby minimizing the exposure of rural Bhutanese to Western tourists.

Strict government control of the tourism industry also has kept interaction between tourists and rural Bhutanese to a minimum. As explained previously, all tourism amenities, including lodging, must be approved by DOT to ensure quality service. To date, only 57 tourist accommodations have been approved in 11 population centers (Planning Commission 2001). The lack of tourism infrastructure thus concentrates tourism along established routes primarily in the western region (Inskeep 1991).

Despite DOT’s successes in insulating rural communities from excessive exposure to Western tourists, there is necessarily interaction between host and guest in the larger population centers. There is an absence of hard data, however, regarding the impacts of tourism in urban centers, due partially to the minimal research conducted and partially to the lack of quantifiable, relevant indicators (Brunet 2001).

The RGB describes the declining conditions in urban centers in the Ninth Five Year Plan, asserting that “exposure [to Western culture] . . . has its negative consequences, especially among the youth. Abuse of drugs, loss of respect for honest

labour, [and loss of] respect for other community and social values are all becoming more pronounced” (Planning Commission 2001, 28). To establish a direct causal relationship between urban decline and tourism, however, is a gross oversimplification that discounts the many other factors that Bhutan struggles with in attempting to synthesize tradition and modernity.

Cultural Evolution: The Black-Necked Crane Festival

While Bhutan has taken reasonable steps to protect its culture, it cannot ultimately stop modernization. In order to develop economically while avoiding cultural pollution, Bhutan has experimented with tourism as a vehicle to stimulate cultural evolution.

In the mid-1990s, a significant decline in the number of black-necked cranes was noted in the Tongsa region of Bhutan. The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), a national Bhutanese non-governmental organization, discovered that local farmers were killing the cranes. Although subsistence farming has existed in the region for centuries, farmers, exposed to capitalist markets and foreign exchange, felt the need to increase productivity. While the cranes did not interfere with farming at the subsistence level, they posed a threat to the production of cash crops. Faced with the pressures of modernization, the Buddhist attributes of simplicity and humanity were buried and forgotten by the Bhutanese farmers (Brunet 2001).

In response, RSPN initiated the Black-Necked Crane Festival. Festivals in the Himalayan region are century-old forms of religious ritual and community unification. They are also a central tourist attraction (Shackley 1999b). Given the ancient traditions that underlie many Himalayan festivals, the creation of a new festival in the 20th century

seems unusual and perhaps even inappropriate. The ultimate goal of RSPN, however, was not to modify culture in Tongsa, but rather to unearth the latent traditional values of Tongsa farmers and ascribe new rituals to them.

In addition to promoting Bhutanese culture, the festival was designed to boost the local economy. RSPN created a partnership in this effort with the International Crane Foundation. The foundation, based out of the United States, organizes trips to Tongsa every winter and donates \$100 per visitor to RSPN, which shares the proceeds with a local development organization (Dorji 2001). The festival is also a source of local employment and micro-industry. Local job opportunities deter youth from migrating to ill-prepared urban centers in search of employment (Brunet 2001).

The festival was designed to promote local participation. The involvement of the community development organization provides local people with a sense of ownership and ensures that their needs are met. The festival is designed to be both a source of revenue and employment and a breeding ground for cultural development through enhanced community interaction.

The Black-Necked Crane Festival has been an outstanding success. Because of the revenue generated from increased tourism, the farmers no longer feel pressured to increase agricultural productivity and have controlled the killing of cranes (Brunet 2001). The festival has not reversed the economic pursuits that modernization spurred, nor was this its purpose; rather, RSPN utilized tourism to integrate tradition and modernity.

Festivals that provide opportunities for cultural expression, without dictating that expression, are appropriate vehicles for cultural growth. Ideally, such festivals would be closed to tourists, in order to remain faithful to the RGB's goal of minimal Western

presence in Bhutan, but access may be granted if the local participants are secure in their central role. This approach towards cultural promotion can be generalized, especially in the Himalayan region where festivals are a cultural norm, but the model can be modified to be appropriate for other parts of the world.

Cultural Degradation: When Profit Wins

Despite the RGB's constant rhetoric regarding cultural preservation in Bhutan, the fragility of the balance between revenue and culture was revealed in the early 1990s. The fortress-monasteries that litter the Bhutanese Himalayan mountainsides are the feature attraction on every tourist's itinerary. The annual festivals are the one time a year that tourists may enter the monasteries. With the rise of cultural tourism, attendance at these religious festivals increases each year. Local participants often complain of being crowded out by tourists. While monks sometimes welcome the increased revenue, the cultural and religious integrity of the festivals is undermined, especially when rituals are changed to satisfy tourists (Shackley 1999b).

In 1987, monastic authorities in Bhutan voiced complaints about disrespectful photography (Shackley 1999b). A commission on tourism was formulated to investigate the complaints. The commission confirmed the inappropriate behavior of tourists and noted "growing materialism" among monastic authorities who were accepting gifts from tourists (Mowforth and Munt 1998, 153). Additionally, the commission reported "tourism may have an adverse moral impact on young people if they observe tourists' behavior that might be interpreted as belittling the mystical power of the country's religion" (Inskeep 1991, 261). In response, and in accordance with the ideal of GNH that underlies

Bhutan's tourism policy, the monasteries were closed to tourists.

The powerful message that DOT's response sent—that cultural preservation was its first priority—did not last. In 1991, after two years of decreased numbers of visitors and diminishing revenues, the government reopened the religious sites to tourists. Indeed, tourism bounced back immediately, but at what cost? Is the marginalization of local residents worth the increased revenue? If the government does not have a unified people rallied behind it, of what benefit are greater profits?

The Bhutanese objective of preserving culture is continuously weighed against its economic objective of self-sufficiency and the opportunity for cultural growth. Thus far, Bhutan has maintained a relatively successful balance, but future development pressures are likely to make choices between preserving tradition and encouraging modernity increasingly difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The future of tourism in Bhutan is unlikely to remain stable as economic development pressures rise and the prospect for expansion of the tourism industry grows. The following are recommendations for DOT to aid it in maintaining the balance.

- 1) Carrying capacity criteria should be developed on a region-by-region basis derived from the amount of tourism that offers the greatest economic benefit without disturbing community activities or lifestyles (Inskeep 1991).
- 2) In order to implement relevant indicators, DOT should have a greater presence at tourist hot spots to monitor the interaction between host and visitor.
- 3) Bhutan's long-term tourism development plan was designed in 1986 (Inskeep 1991). It is recommended that DOT reevaluates and modifies the original plan based on current

conditions and forecasts.

- 4) Future tourism development plans likely will investigate opportunities for village tourism. While not ideal from a cultural preservation standpoint, expanding tourism into rural areas will boost local economies and curb rural-urban migration. To do this sustainably, DOT should regulate strictly the number of visitors and involve local residents in planning and management processes.
- 5) Bhutan should explore its options for diversifying the tourism sector rather than expanding it. Ecotourism and special interest tourism (e.g., ornithology, photography) are opportunities for tourism diversification (Dorji 2001).
- 6) The RGB should begin to engage in selective, rather than wholesale marketing. Considering the large wealthy class in the West, the high daily tariffs may not be enough to deter tourists who are insensitive to Bhutan's unique culture. Selective marketing and activity control (e.g., limiting the amount of trekking) should be used to encourage the type of tourists Bhutan desires (Inskeep 1991).

CONCLUSION

Efforts to market Bhutanese culture as unique are central to the RGB's political strategy. Its true uniqueness, however, lies in the basic recognition of the importance of culture. As more cultures are abandoned in favor of the Western model, the opportunity for cultural exchange is rapidly disappearing. Bhutan's "high-yield, low-impact" tourism policy is designed to prevent both the abandonment of its culture and the indiscriminate adoption of a model that may be only superficially appealing.

Through its tourism policy, Bhutan has reaped the economic benefits of tourism

while largely avoiding its cultural consequences. Modernization is in many ways necessary to improve the overall quality of life in Bhutan, but it need not vanquish the rich, centuries-old culture. Bhutan, by balancing the benefits and challenges of mass tourism, has emerged as a model for the synthesis of tradition and modernity.

The greatest task of the RGB is to remain faithful to the vision that underlies its tourism policy. Similarly, those countries that seek to emulate Bhutan's tourism initiatives must first define their priorities. If economic development is the solitary concern, then the lessons to be learned from Bhutan are minimal. If, however, the nation seeks to advance emotional and spiritual quality of life, to preserve culture, or to promote it, then Bhutan provides an exemplary framework.

NOTES

¹ In addition to a development strategy, GNH also serves as a government marketing tool. It is an effective device by which Bhutan can distinguish itself from its neighbors and assert its national sovereignty because (1) it is undeniably unique, and (2) it appeals to the growing Western desire for spirituality and meaning (Brunet 2001).

² See *The Living Edens: Bhutan, The Last Shangri-La* (Burbank, CA: PBS Home Video, c1997).

³ The movement of Nepalese immigrants into the central Himalayan region and northern Bhutan has been banned since the late 1950s, effectively isolating them physically and sociologically from the remainder of the Bhutanese population.

⁴ Bhutan's escalating refugee problem is unambiguous evidence that it is not the paradisiacal society that many maintain it to be. The aim of this article is not to present Bhutan as a universal development model; rather, it is to acknowledge the inherent challenges in developing sound cultural preservation policies.

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