

Natural Landscape Conservation and/or/versus Tourism in Bhutan

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Abstract: Natural landscape conservation in this paper concerns the issues of safeguarding the landscape in the nature. Mostly it is called environmental conservation which is seemingly a disputing matter for tourism. The concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism have been expected to be solutions for the argument. This paper examines environmental conservation and tourism in Bhutan, where natural heritages are successfully preserved and tourism is very distinguished. There are minimal impacts on the environment due to policies, strategies, laws and legislations, plans and practices, of environmental conservation and tourism, which are thus reviewed in this study. An archival research and a site-survey technique are employed to obtain data required. The association, the alternation and the contradictory pertaining to the issues of environmental conservation and tourism are explored. It is suggested that appropriate landscape design and planning is the key to lessen effects on the environment.

Keywords: natural landscape, environmental conservation, tourism, Bhutan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Landscape has been described by the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA) as “the environment we experience ... the interaction of natural resources and the people’s needs”. It is generally understood that landscape can be the geological structure of the land, soils, animals and vegetation, as well as the pattern of human activity in the past and present [1]. Therefore, landscape is an interface between nature and culture, and people may have interacted and influenced on landscape in several ways. In the context of this study, it is believed that there is an interaction between nature and culture in natural landscapes. Therefore, natural landscapes would include natural areas with human influence on them. Some certain degrees of influence people have made on landscapes may be dangers to nature; hence, it is a need for people’s responsibility to ensure the survival of natural system. That is environmental conservation. It is “the activity to prevent deterioration” [2] and “the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspiration of future generations” [1]. Therefore, environmental conservation is interrelated to sustainable development, in the way that they are actions to prohibit activities innately un-suited on landscape and to manage land for the avoidance and mitigation of impacts [3].

It is noted that tourism is a kind of human activity that interacts on natural landscape and somehow put impacts on the environment. The subjects of environmental conservation and tourism have long been on disputes; however, the concept of sustainable tourism has been expected to be a solution for the argument as it intends to minimize the impacts on the natural and cultural environments while maximizing economic benefits. By sustainable tourism, environmental conservation would be achieved. It is the fact that tourism is vital for several countries since it provides the large incomes and the opportunity for employment in the service industries [4]. Implementing sustainable tourism will be apt to economic development and environmental safeguarding.

Bhutan, the small country in the eastern Himalayan region, has great reputation in safeguarding the nature. More than sixty percent of the country areas are preserved as forest reserves. This is due to the Gross National Happiness (GNH)

concept, initiated by the Fourth King, King Jigme Singye Wangchuk, which directs the national development to be along with natural conservation and thus brings sustainability to the nation. Thereby, Sustainable Tourism Policy has been adopted in Bhutan. It is expected that with the cautious tourism policy the country will gain economic development along with environmental conservation. Apart from tourism, natural safeguarding can also bring economic benefits to the country. This paper hence explores the approaches and practices pertaining to environmental conservation and tourism in Bhutan, which conclusively enhance the national economic development.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study examines how Bhutan has conserved the natural environment and explores Sustainable Tourism Policy while the nature has been safeguarded. The procedures are as follows.

2.1 The archival research on policies, laws and legislation, plans, programs and practices related to natural conservation and tourism in Bhutan was conducted.

2.2 The site surveys were carried out. Six villages in the nature conserved areas and four towns nearby were the selected sites to examine the activities of natural conservation and tourism. A small sample size of respondents was chosen as only to illustrate views and impression the respondent group having on natural conservation and tourism. It is noted that the information gained was not intended to generalize the total public opinions and evaluation.

2.3 Data obtained from these primary and secondary sources were investigated. Significant issues specifically economic development gained from natural conservation and tourism were then obtained.

2.4 The results of the study were concluded and the general implications were proposed.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The outcomes of the study include the information obtained from the archival research and the survey conducted in the selected sites.

3.1 *Environmental Conservation and Economic Development*

3.1.1 The Research of Policy, Legislation and Practices

Bhutan has strong policy on conservation of her nature as it shows that more than sixty percent of the country's land is preserved for pristine landscape. This is due to the fact that the national policy, GNH, is based on the goals of equitable economic development, environmental conservation, cultural promotion and good governance [5]. The conservation policy has brought about several legislations taking care of the natural resources. Though, Bhutan has just issued the first comprehensive codifies law, Supreme Law/Mother Law, in 1959. Before that, there was no written legislation and the use of natural resources was well administered by the community for ensuring resource sustainability that yields natural conservation. Later on, many effective measures are set forth and imposed for protection of nature. Examples are Forest Act of 1969, Forest and Nature Conservation Act (1995), Social Forestry Rules in 1990 and 1993, Environmental Assessment Act (2000), and Biodiversity Act (2003). These legislations aimed to protect the country's natural resources which are a grand asset for economic development.

Other than the environmental legislations, there is a landscape conservation plan called Bhutan Biological Conservation Complex (B2C2), the establishment of a system of parks and reserves connected by biological corridors. It focuses on biodiversity conservation in protected areas, biological corridors and conservation areas, positive human-nature interactions, public environmental education, partnership in conservation programs, and the use of limited resources [6]. The Plan has provided economic benefits to communities in the area.

Within B2C2 landscape, there are several programs supported by World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF), including Forest and Freshwater Program and Sustainable Livelihood [7]. The Forest and Freshwater Program is designed to protect, restore and promote the forest conservation program through policy advocacy and partnership with the Government implementing conservation actions at the local levels. The Sustainable Livelihood deals with people living in areas of high biodiversity value but poor and inferior in power, and their livelihoods are negatively impacted with the newly introduced protected areas. The Government realizing this fact, therefore, puts forward the development alternative, environmentally sustainable rural livelihoods, to complement traditional ones that tend to rely on natural resources. It is the Integrated Conservation Development Program (ICDP), the project that links biodiversity conservation in protected

areas with local socioeconomic development. With this approach the people living in and around the protected areas have food, money, good health, educated children and protected forest around them. The areas of intervention are holistic with the improvements of education, agriculture, livestock, communication, health, road accessibility, forestry and income generation. These interventions are expected to improve livelihoods of the local communities and reduce pressure on natural resources.

At the national park level, Management Plans are developed for directing conservation programs and activities in the conserved areas. Different protected areas have different issues to deal with; therefore, details of each Management Plan can be differed. Many Plans consist of management objectives and conservation policies for different sectors of the Park [7, 8]. For an example, a visitor zone in the Park is less restricted in terms of conservation. Necessitated amenities and development may be located in this zone and thus bring about local economic improvement.

Outside the conserved areas, there is Community Forest Program employed in suitable areas. The Program's objectives are to transfer primary responsibility for management (protection, development, utilization) of forests adjacent to communities to local management groups; to strengthen institutional and technical capacity of Forest Management Groups (FMG) to manage in a sustainable way and equity share benefits from forests handed over them; and to assist FMG in development of appropriate forest-based home and cottage industries and provide marketing assistance [9]. This Program can promote production sectors in remote villages.

Community-Based Natural Resource Management Approach (CBNRM) is another interesting practice for environmental conservation. CBNRM can be defined as a communal process of managing natural resources that aims to secure and improve rural livelihoods; where people are provided the opportunity and responsibility to managing their own resource; which functions in an enabling legal and policy environment; and which leads to a sustainable and harmonious resource use. It aims to improve development opportunities and livelihood security for resource users, with priority to local users; sustain productivity and conservation of natural resources; and strengthen local institutions and empower local decision-making regarding natural resource management [10]. The wise use of local resources can improve quality of life and socioeconomic conditions to communities.

3.1.2 The Site Survey

At the villages in the nature reserves there are several ICDPs, the integrated conservation and development programs which build environmentally sustainable rural livelihoods to complement traditional ones that tend to rely on natural resources. Examples are pasture improvement; irrigation development; providing of CGI roofing, health facility, school, and electricity; and development of a community-based ecotourism. The programs meet the objectives which include those to maximize production output from marginal land, to create reliable employment opportunity, to enhance living standard, and to gain self sufficiency and GNH. The local people like the programs and the development the Government provided. Some villagers have opinions that there should be more awareness on natural conservation. They however need more fencing materials and fuel wood supply. Few villagers have conflicts with the officials on grazing land in winters since the Government does not allow farmers to migrate cattle to lower altitude areas where forest regenerates. The official has opinion that there should be an adjustment of pest animal protected areas near farmlands to help farmers able to protect their crop yields. Some officials have comments that the fines imposing on the poor villagers who cut down trees in the forest should be reduced and the implementation of the forest regulations should be flexible. The activities of environmental conservation are extensive in the survey sites. Several programs have significantly improved local socioeconomic conditions.

In addition to the responses from the villagers and the officials residing in the conserved areas, there are responses obtained from the villagers and tourists in the towns nearby. The residences' responses can be summarized that they like natural landscapes; they agree with natural conservation approaches; they know about laws and programs of natural conservation; they participate in and like conservation programs; they need more plantation programs; they need more environmental awareness; and they need more infrastructure development. Few respondents feel indifferent towards the conservation issues whereas tourists show good attitudes towards landscape, nature, mountain, people, and architecture. They further suggest that there should be an improvement of urban environment, regarding cleanliness and building crowd. In a summary, it is revealed that there is a positive sign for conservation.

3.2 *Tourism and Economic Development*

3.2.1 The Research of Policy, Legislation and Practices

Bhutan's tourism industry just began in 1974. It was intended to generate national revenue and contribute to socioeconomic development. The Royal Government of Bhutan has been aware of tourism's negative impacts on the natural and cultural environment. Therefore, the Government adopted a policy of "high value-low volume" tourism, controlling the type and quantity of tourism, for which the Department of Tourism is responsible [11].

Since the country's policy and people's way of life strongly regard the protection of nature and culture, Bhutan has employed Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy (2005). It is a master plan developed to achieve an ecotourism destination and to avoid potential negative impacts on culture and natural resources [12]. It contributes to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage and improves the well-being of people within the concept of GNH which emphasizes the harmony between tradition and modernity, between man and nature and the importance of preserving unique way of life in this era of globalization. The number of tourists admitted to Bhutan has been well within the capacity of socio-cultural and natural environment to absorb visitors without negative impacts. The number of international arrivals is not as important as the contribution which tourism makes to economic development through livelihoods and to the provision of developing welfare system.

The tourism industry has made significant contribution to the country's economic development. Substantial profits have gone to several businesses and individuals, such as tour operators, guides, cooks, drivers, hotels, restaurants, handicraft shops, and local communities. Rural people can also earn incomes from tourist transport and portage, selling of food and souvenirs, and a business of cottage industry. Moreover, tourism has put forward the development of service sectors, such as hotels, restaurants, transportation and communication [11].

There are interesting rules and regulations issued by the Government that strongly concern the natural environment. For instances, the use of firewood on treks are banned so as to preserve the forest. Tour operators are to provide liquid petroleum gas or kerosene for all trekkers. Any operators who violate the rule will be fined in substantial amount of money and if they continued to disobey they will be taken away their trekking permits. There are also Environmental Clearance Guidelines for Tourism and Environmental Code of Practice for Tourism Activities [11, 13, 14].

3.2.2 The Site Survey

In the survey, two nature conserved areas were founded relevant to environmental tourism. They are Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park and Bumdelling Wildlife Sanctuary. In Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park, there are Phobjikha Valley and Nabji-Korphu Trail at Village of Tongtongphey. These trekking routes are accounted for a community-based ecotourism. The tourism business belongs to the community while there are technical supports from the Government and private/non-government sectors.

In Phobjikha Valley the Royal Society for the Protection of nature (RSPN), a Bhutanese NGO, helps the community to develop its Ecotourism Management Plan, the first such program in the country that promotes partnership between an international organization, a local tour operator, an NGO and the local community. The Ecotourism Management Plan provides a promotion of local economic development as well as foreign exchange and national benefits. In Nabji-Korphu Trail at Village of Tongtongphey, Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park, the trekking business belongs to the local community. The Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators and Ministry of Agriculture, by the Department of Forestry, supervise the ecotourism business which boosts the local economy [11]. In Bumdelling Wildlife Sanctuary, the Government provides the villagers the development of ecotourism; however, this nature conserved area is rather remote so the tourism development was not well known.

IV. CONCLUSION

There has been a strong relationship between Bhutanese people and nature. Natural landscape features were believed to be inhibited by spirits that can protect people from natural calamities. Therefore, the landscape is respected and not to be disturbed but well protected until present days. This belief and conduct still strongly attaches to Bhutanese society and culture, and aids today's natural conservation. The people-nature relationship has reflected on the national development policy, legislations, several plans and programs ensuring preservation of the nature. The environmental conservation has thus been successful in Bhutan and brought about richness in natural resources which has been sustainable used and

provided sensible economic development. The preserved landscape in turns gives very special places for tourists to visit as it shows that Bhutan is one of the most exclusive travel destinations in the world. In order to prevent the negative impacts from tourism, Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy has been adopted in Bhutan. Ecotourism is employed to improve environment and socioeconomic development. Good practice of tourism can lessen harm on the natural and cultural environment. Moreover, if the development on the environment to facilitate tourism activities is unavoidable, appropriate landscape design and planning is required. Importantly, it is suggested that there be a partnership of the Government, public and private sectors, importantly along with local communities to achieve positive environmental, economic, social and cultural development. That refers to sustainable tourism, an approach for safeguarding environment along with social and economic improvement.

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