

# Ecotourism and Social Cohesion: Contrasting Phobjikha and Laya Experiences

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**ABSTRACT.** Phobjikha and Laya stand as popular tourist destinations in Bhutan, with much potential for future Sustainable Development initiatives that seek to dovetail conservation and livelihood concerns. While ecotourism has been employed in each location, they have done so through different strategies, resulting in differing social outcomes. Through the lens of Neoliberal Conservation, social cohesion, a key GNH indicator, was assessed in each location to understand the broader impact of ecotourism on local communities. Results show communities of Phobjikha experiencing a loss of community cohesion due to increased competition and privatization introduced by the ecotourism sector. As such, ecotourism in this context serves as a quintessential neoliberal project. In contrast, Laya residents express increased social cohesion and lack resentment towards neighbors who serve as competitors for limited tourist earnings. These differences are attributed to existing economic stability, threshold capacities for tourist numbers, and the influence of external actors. As such, these conditions serve as a cautionary note to policy makers, and both communities, as they look to expand ecotourism opportunities in their respective regions.

## Introduction

Ecotourism has become synonymous with development in many countries seeking to combat poverty and encourage conservation agendas. ‘Win-win’ scenarios, meeting socio-economic and conservation goals, motivate the adoption of ecotourism as a

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strategy, which has been affirmed by local, national, and international entities. The sector is understood as being more ‘sustainable’ than its older sibling ‘tourism’, and has been promoted by states, international organizations and development consultants. However, a number of negative impacts from the sector have received attention calling for a critical analysis of planning and operation going forward. This research adopts a case study approach to compare the sector’s impact on two rural communities in Bhutan. The study shows that each community’s experience differs, which is attributed to underlying economic circumstances, despite each location’s investment and efforts related to the sector’s development. We focus specifically on the impacts on social cohesion, which is a critical indicator of the country’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) agenda, and therefore represents a key criterion for measuring the sector’s success. Through a political ecology perspective, we frame ecotourism as a quintessential form of neoliberal conservation. As such, we understand the logics of ecotourism to contest rooted values embedded in Bhutanese society and the country’s GNH agenda (Montes, 2019). Nevertheless, we work towards emancipatory goals in order to promote novel adaptations of ecotourism that resonate with the country’s vision for development.

Much of what guides ecotourism in Bhutan, and development more broadly, is Gross National Happiness policy. While originally conceptualized as a philosophy, it has experienced a number of renditions to include four pillars, later an expansion to nine domains, and is now accompanied by a series of tools/institutions including the policy screening tool, project screening tool, the GNH commission, GNH index, GNH committees, GNH check, and Five-Year Plans (Schroeder, 2014; 2018). The 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year plan explicitly works to frame GNH in terms of the nine domains, leaving behind the four pillar approach, in an effort “to bring about greater synergy and focus on the impact of development programmes across the Nine Domains which forms the primary basis of measuring our progress towards achieving Gross National Happiness” (RGoB, 2017, p.1). With numerous Five-Year plans (see RGoB, 2017, 2013a, 2013b, 2008, 2003) and other planning documents (see RGoB, 1999; TCB 2012; NBC, 2014) pointing to ecotourism as a key component to accomplishing GNH within the country, it is necessary to establish a tradition of scrutiny that continuously works to improve the long-term operations of the sector.

We show that ecotourism success is partially dependent on already existing capacities within communities, and not solely dependent on proper management and implementation. Our exploration is narrowed to the aspect of social cohesion, although we recognize that other criteria also play a role in planning decisions that either promote or discourage ecotourism operations. In the case of Laya, despite ecotourism being

implemented only very recently and having relatively low tourist volumes, homestay operators and other residents have positive reports regarding social interactions and a maintenance of communitarian ideals. In contrast, Phobjikha has been operating as an ecotourism destination for many years and has seen a comparatively large number of visitors, and yet social conflicts between competing homestays, minimized interactions with neighbors, and decreased interaction with elders has been reported. These differences are attributed to factors of economic stability, threshold capacities to host tourists, and the influence of external actors. Therefore, this work contributes to GNH studies by providing a comparative concentrated analysis of social cohesion (a component of the 'community vitality' domain) within the country's ecotourism sector.

In what follows, we provide a review of literature pertaining to neoliberal conservation, distinguishing ecotourism as a particular strategy within this movement. We then review ecotourism as a sector within Bhutan, provide a summary of critical perspectives, and present GNH as a transformative tool to be applied to the sector. Following this we introduce our case study of two selected sites, Phobjikha and Laya. Data will present contrasting experiences attributed to criterion independent of the way ecotourism has been established and practiced in each location. We then discuss the findings in relation to broader trends in the ecotourism sector and how they relate to Bhutan's achievement of GNH.

## **Neoliberal Conservation**

Neoliberal Conservation can be understood as a particular phase of capitalism, and characterizes the current international discourse and practice around conservation initiatives. By 'phase', we refer to the distinction that Büscher and Fletcher (2015) make between various modes of operation and accumulation that capitalism adopts throughout time in order to deal with barriers to accumulation. What brings us to our current phase is the realization that resources are finite, and therefore require, as some posit, encapsulation by the economy. Thus, the barrier to accumulation is a limitation of resources, and thus must be addressed by ascribing value to in-situ conservation that may maintain profit potential. Whereas previous strategies for conservation may have provided a protectionist model in appealing to societal values or ethics, capitalism provides the underlying motivation for conservation by attributing economic value to resources. This commodification of the environment serves multiple goals including the avoidance of environmental externalities (Meadows et al. 2005), efficient allocation of resources (Elgar, 2007) and continued economic growth.

Strategies for neoliberal conservation seek to harness markets as mechanisms for conservation, and shy away from state control, which is seen as a hindrance to efficiency (Barnett, 2010; West and Carrier, 2004). This paradigm is accompanied by numerous strategies such as Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), tax structures, and ecotourism, manifested through the likes of community-based ventures prescribing increased ownership, control and decision-making ability to local residents. While such projects are often framed as positive opportunities for development which increase local decision making and equity, they also support a neoliberal rationale characterized by privatization, competition and efficiency driven profit maximization (Montes & Kafley, 2019). Neoliberal conservation strategies work to harness the power of markets in order to protect nature, but also to ensure that economic growth goes on unfettered.

Critiques of neoliberal conservation are numerous. Honey (2008), Fletcher (2009), and Montes (2019) show how ecotourism's neoliberal logic promotes economics as the primary motivator for conservation with profit "at the forefront of operations" (Duffy, 2002, p.155). Fletcher and Breitling (2012) provide a nuanced analysis of PES strategies showing how, while intended to rely on market interactions for which 'buyers' and 'sellers' develop, these strategies, in practice, result in reliance on government subsidies. As such, while many countries look towards PES mechanisms, such as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD+), as a strategy for obtaining conservation funding, in the end it is local governments that sustain such programs. What this body of literature shows is that the profit motivated logics promote adverse impacts and the reliance on market tools have proved unsuccessful.

Additionally, the literature is abundant with examples of negative social consequences that result from neoliberal conservation strategies. Fletcher (2009, 2010, 2014), West and Carrier (2004), and Hutchins (2007) all show how ecotourism is used "as a means for inculcating norms and values associated with a neoliberal logic" (Montes and Kafley, 2019). With new values, then, comes the danger of undermining existing ethical, moral, and spiritual motivators for conservation (Singh, 2015). Holmes and Cavanaugh (2016) emphasize that these are not just isolated cases and that "within neoliberal conservation, processes of neoliberalisation nevertheless tend to produce certain recurring trends in their social impacts" (p.199). They then emphasize a reshaping of local values and subjectivities that also reify existing inequalities. By subjectivities they mean that novel forms of power are adopted in which conservation regulations are no longer imposed through sovereign governance models (i.e. fortress conservation or fines approaches) and rather work to change behaviors "by appealing to economic rationales and altering values and ideologies" (p.206). They then conclude

that trends of social impacts include: increasing resource availability for elite capture, rewarding actors that are already comparatively economically better-off, distinctions made between social groups and decisions about who can and can't access resources. However, they also recognize the potential for empowerment and alleviation of such inequalities and call for “novel analyses and interrogations of the changing forms of conservation governance, as well as explanations of its diverse social and economic outcomes” (p.207). It is to this call that we hope to attend and provide nuanced analyses that may reveal avenues for improving conservation, and specifically ecotourism practice, within the GNH agenda.

## **Ecotourism in Bhutan**

Ecotourism options in Bhutan have multiplied as the country comes to terms with a bulging tourism sector by seeking new products and opportunities for visitors. Ecotourism in the country, as per the NRED et al. (2012) Guidelines for Ecotourism, is defined by “high value low impact travel that supports the protection of cultural and natural heritage; provides positive and enriching experiences for visitors and hosts; assures tangible benefits to local people; and contributes to the pillars of Gross National Happiness” (p.15). However, it is also equated with the term ‘Sustainable Tourism’, which is characterized by “(i) environmentally friendly operations, (ii) support for the protection of cultural and natural heritage; and (iii) direct contribution to the social and economic well-being of local people and indigenous communities” (NRED et al., 2012, p.13). Gurung and Seeland (2008) take this even further to say that “all tourism in Bhutan can be said to be a type of ecotourism” (p.492), as does Rinzin et al. (2007) who claim that ecotourism characterizes the larger national tourism strategy.

While the 2012 guideline (NRED et al.) lays out a framework for planning and management of ecotourism within the protected areas network of the country, this has not constrained operations from being initiated elsewhere. Therefore, while many locations within parks such as Mt. Jomolhari, Laya, and Merak/Sakteng have been heralded as ecotourism destinations, Phobjikha, Haa, and others outside the protected areas network have also seen successful start-ups. Activities under this ecotourism banner include bird watching, fishing, rafting, trekking, hot springs, and cultural tours (DoT, 2001). Part of Bhutan's allure to ecotourist is also grounded in the presence of unique flora and fauna including the Red Panda, Black necked Crane, Takin, numerous species of Rhododendrons and Himalayan Poppies, and more.

Pivotal works that address ecotourism in Bhutan include Rinzin et al. (2007) and Gurung and Seeland (2011) who attribute ecotourism as a way to promote sustainable development, Gurung and Seeland (2008) who make an appeal to extend tourism benefits to rural areas, and Gurung and Scholz (2008) with their multi-stakeholder assessment pointing towards benefits of community-based operations. Pertaining to social impacts, the work of Rinzin et al. (2007) claims that “the impact on culture and the environment is currently low. However, expected growth may, if it is not managed properly, erode the unique nature of tourism in Bhutan” (p.109). They attribute this low impact to the state’s ‘controlled liberalization’ approach which permits freedom within the private sector in relation to ecotourism expansion yet preventive measures are put in place to protect culture. Interestingly enough, soon after this publication, Gurung and Scholz (2008) and Gurung and Seeland (2011) both point towards potential inequalities emerging in rural areas due to increased incomes in rural areas.

More recently, the work of Karst (2016, 2017; Karst and Gyeltshen, 2016) on ecotourism in Bhutan has provided additional analyses that point towards entrenched social conflicts. She notes that “ecotourism is often introduced, supported, or dominated by external actors or agencies” (Karst, 2016, p.1), supporting sentiments of Bixler et al. (2015) that “find political mistrust by local people of state authorities and conservation programs” (p.175). External actors, defined by Karst, included those from outside the highland communities she conducted research in, including government officials and park rangers that promoted ecotourism throughout the Merak/Sakteng region. Distrust and angst with such individuals was attributed to unrealized economic benefits. Karst (2016) concludes that “ecotourism fostered discord in human relations while nature was seen as a commodity through which tourism could be used to harness its economic value” (p.8). Therefore, while social relations experienced strain, this also impacted broader human-environment relations as a result of commodification processes. In addition to external actors, community members themselves experienced negative interactions with each other. Shopkeepers, livestock owners, pony porters and homestay owners were seen to have specific advantages that allowed them to access tourism dollars more readily, creating inequities that were, ideally, meant to be squashed. As such, reframing of the landscape as a source of economics and restructuring livelihood opportunities in terms of competitive advantages within ecotourism has emphasized competitive social relations. While competition may have been present previously, ecotourism has introduced a novel dynamic that has instigated a social reconfiguration.

## Incorporating GNH

As mentioned in the country's ecotourism definition, GNH is a critical element to planning and implementation of the sector. Montes and Bhattarai (2018) and Montes (2019) make direct linkages between GNH and ecotourism pointing out that GNH represents a hopeful imaginary for what the sector could be. While a neoliberal rationale (competition, commodification, market reliance) underscores ecotourism, GNH provides contesting discourses that provide a potential for transforming the sector. Montes (2019) frames GNH as a formal institution that, despite neoliberal conservation's priorities of accumulation, "instils a more holistic ethic in policy making" and "plays a critical role in directing neoliberal trends" (p.13).

GNH works to promulgate nine domains: psychological wellbeing, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, and ecological diversity and resilience. These domains are then separated into various indicators, for the purpose of measurement within the GNH index. For our purposes in this research, we are interested in investigating ecotourism's impact on community vitality, which is expanded to the following indicators "1) social support which depicts the civic contributions made 2) community relationship, which refers to social bonding and a sense of community 3) family relationships, and 4) perceived safety." (Ura et al., 2012, 161). It is to this domain that the Provisional Findings of the 2015 GNH Survey (Ura et al., 2015) asks "Are our communities more cohesive?" To which the report responds:

There were statistically significant decreases in sufficiency in all four of its component indicators, and an overall decrease in the contribution of communities to overall wellbeing. The donations of time and money fell by 3%, but the largest change by far was in community relationships. The percentage of people having sufficient trust in their neighbours and sense of 'belonging' to their communities plummeted by 11%, making a noticeable reduction in the contribution of community vitality to GNH (p.70).

Narrowing this analysis even more, we look to the second indicator, that of community relationship. Here we find the core of what we refer to as social cohesion. We accept the findings of Ura et al. (2012) that "identify the community to be one of the significant determinants of wellbeing for individuals, as well as families and

communities” (p.160). Social bonding and a sense of community are thus understood as critical elements. It is this criterion for GNH that we apply a critical comparative assessment of two ecotourism operations in the country.

## **Methodology**

This analysis emerged from a broad ecotourism study that sought to explore sustainability of the sector. After visiting numerous ecotourism destinations, including the Druk Path, Phajoding Eco-Camp, Haa Valley, and others, team members noticed a particular contrast between data gathered at both Phobjikha and Laya communities. Social cohesion became a dominant theme in interviews, calling for an intensified investigation. In contrast to the GNH index approach to measure community relationship, which is more quantitative for purposes of creating index values, we adopt qualitative methodology. Field visits were conducted from 2015-2018 in the communities of Phobjikha and Laya, with research team members being present both during and outside key festival dates (Phobjikha Black-Necked Crane Festival, 2015, 2016, 2017; Laya Royal Highlander Festival, 2017, 2018). This engagement allowed researchers to ascertain fresh recall of individual experiences related to ecotourism sector involvement. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation we engaged a total of 110 individuals to gain an understanding of how ecotourism impacts social cohesion. Interviewees comprised 51 females and 59 males who ranged from ages 15-72 and included community members, homestay owners, shopkeepers, festival attendees and members of the monk body. Interviews were conducted primarily in Dzongkha, unless otherwise requested by the interviewees, and recorded for data retention purposes. Interview recordings were later transcribed into English and analysed through NVivo 11 data analysis software.

We recognize that issues of social cohesion may not be causally linked to ecotourism engagement. There are numerous variables that likely impact social cohesion and should be explored further. The purpose here is to highlight individual experiences as they engage in ecotourism and look towards possible remedies for improving GNH outcomes.

## **Ecotourism Engagement and Social Cohesion**

### **Phobjikha**



Phobjikha, used here in reference to the larger Phobjikha Valley that includes villages such as Phobji, Gangtey, Moel, Tangchey, Daphu, and others, is located in Wangduephodrang Dzongkhag and has largely become a popular tourism destination due to the presence of Black necked cranes. The cranes use the valley as winter habitat, arriving in early November and then return to summer habitat in Tibet in March. While Phobjikha does not lie within the boundaries of the country's national parks system, the wetland ecosystem was officially designated as a Ramsar site in June 2016 (Phuntsho, 2016a). The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) has adopted a large role in the protection of both the wetlands and the Black necked cranes and has made efforts to incorporate local involvement in conservation through their Community-Based Sustainable Tourism program. Through this program, ecotourism is employed as a means to educate both locals and visitors, provide conservation funding, and create economic opportunities for locals (RSPN, n.d.). Part of this effort has involved the creation of a homestay network in which operators commit a percentage of earnings to conservation and community efforts. A 2017 news article claims that since the inception of homestays in 2012 there were 21 operators that participated in the RSPN program (Gyelmo, 2017).

With RSPN conservation efforts starting in 1986 (Phuntsho and Tshering, 2015; Pradhan et al., 2014), it was in 1998 that the first Black Necked Crane Festival was held (Phuntsho, 2016b). This festival has brought significant attention to the valley, with visitor trends increasing each year. As such, RSPN's vision for the valley as an ecotourism destination has been challenged by an influx of other tourism actors looking to investment in the lucrative location, with a number of large resorts opening. While the resorts operate on the larger national policy of "high value - low impact" by entertaining demand for high-end tourist products, the nature of benefits to the local population is muddled thus contesting the broader goals of ecotourism. While these tourism actors are largely external, coming from locations such as Thimphu, Paro and even abroad, internal actors are also looking to capitalize on tourism profits. A number of local private homestays have emerged, not connected to the RSPN network, and therefore are not required to commit a percentage of profits to conservation efforts. Additionally, some homestays are owned by people originating from outside the valley and hire locals to run operations, with the majority of profits leaving the valley. These actors, both external and internal, create a competitive atmosphere in the valley that makes it difficult for the RSPN homestay network to maintain operations.

When asked about their experience since ecotourism operations were initiated in the valley, a 60-year-old female homestay owner had the following to say:

They are a bit jealous with each other, homestay owners talking about others, there is this negative vibe developed through jealousy, jealousy is never a good thing

Further, a 25-year-old male Bhutanese, regarding homestay operations, commented:

There are issues among homestays when one homestay earns more than the other. It seems like some homestays compare the money among others and complain about it creating misunderstanding amongst themselves

Other reports include:

I think everyone is envious of each other because a person cannot have everything they need in one moment. People in my neighborhood envy me because I get income from the homestay...sometimes I feel insecure when I see new houses built because tourists will be attracted to that house and my business will lose customers (30-year old female homestay owner)

those of farmhouse holdings and hotel owners are the only ones to be benefitted. Otherwise, the community as a whole is not benefitted (50-year-old female community member)

From comments such as this, it seems homestay operations are creating a competitive atmosphere, thus changing previous social interactions. This new livelihood activity, working towards accumulating limited available tourist dollars, now favors those with particular competitive advantages. Exacerbating this scenario, an international NGO was reported to be working with individual RSPN homestay owners to provide online advertising for their operations. While the intent was to improve visitor numbers to these homestays, it worked against the RSPN initiated reservation system that aimed at distributing tourists in an equitable manner to each member. While the community vitality GNH domain is characterized by ‘social bonding’ and ‘a sense of community’, interviewees reported:

We all live in our own houses so we do not have much interaction or communication with our neighbors. People in our village are concerned with their own life (56-year-old female community member)

People used to sit together and eat, but nowadays they eat separate and eat with a spoon instead of hands, like people in towns. People have started to speak other languages...imitating the tourists and changing their way of dressing. (34-year-old female community member)

We all live in our own houses so we do not have much interaction or communication with our neighbors (56-year-old female community member)

Youth behavior is changing. They have started to dress up like westerners, wanting to buy expensive electronics, and vehicles (53-year-old female homestay owner)

Before we used to help with building houses...but nowadays we don't really need to help them because there are people who are made for this job and so we simply just watch and do nothing...now we don't have to depend on others because everyone has become independent and can now afford their own...necessities. So the relationships have changed as well. (31-year-old male community member)

While not all of these quotes point to ecotourism as the cause of such breakdown in social interaction, the general trend is concerning, thus begging the question, is ecotourism playing a role in the breakdown of community vitality? If not, why is ecotourism not promoting the opposite trend? Regardless of specific causal relationships, it is hoped that the implementation of ecotourism under GNH guidance should promote social cohesion rather than stand idly while other factors deteriorate this core value. More investigation is required in order to confirm such causal relations and what role the ecotourism sector has to play.

The Phobjikha case presents a scenario where ecotourism has been in operation for more than 20 years, has seen a large growing number of tourists, and has been facilitated by an NGO resulting in mixed success. Along with the data presented here, there were certainly other reports from interviewees to support successful economic and

conservation outcomes. However, these assessments were not uniform. Additionally, the RSPNs reservation system can be seen as a positive attempt to maintain communitarian ideals that work towards equitable distribution of ecotourism benefits. Regardless, social fissures have developed that have either been caused, or at least been ignored, by the ecotourism sector. These fissures may be due to other long-term modernization trends but may also be influenced by the neoliberal rationale underlying ecotourism, thus promoting new social interactions based on competition, decentralization, and market-based incentives.

## **Laya**

The village of Laya has become a popular destination in recent years, not having the same volume of visitors that Phobjikha has had, but nevertheless has seen a steady increase in tourist numbers. The village is located in the northwest region of Bhutan within Jigme Dorji National Park along the infamous Snowman Trek, which is a 26+ day trek stretching from the Paro to Bumthang valleys (TCB, 2019). The 2015 Bhutan Tourism Report (TCB, 2016) states that the smaller Gasa to Laya trek received 291 trekkers in 2015, which represented a 2.06% increase from 2014. The 2017 Bhutan Tourism Report (TCB, 2018) then claims an increase to 319 visitors. While these numbers are still relatively small, it is indicative of a remote location separated from road connectivity that requires significant effort to reach. However, with the 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan promoting highland development through “livestock related festivals” (RGoB, 2013b, p.30), The Royal Highlander Festival was initiated in 2016. The festival includes a number of spectacles including horse racing, strong-man competitions, yak showings, dancing, comedic presentations, and more. Highland communities from across Bhutan gather to present their culture and products, including representatives from Haa, Paro, Thimphu, Bumthang, Lhuntse, Trashiyangtse, and Trashigang Dzongkhags.

During our field visits in 2016 and 2017 our research team attended the festivals and stayed in a number of homestays throughout the village. Discussions with villagers revealed that ecotourism was not a significant portion of their income as they were much more reliant on yak herding, but also the collection of various medicinal plant species. When asked about social interactions they commented:

Before, other income was made by selling incense, and people who are rich did not really look after the problems of the commoners, but now

with the Cordycep business, people are more well-to-do and also more willing to help others. (45-year-old female community member)

In the past we had lack of food and resources, so it was difficult to be cordial to each other but now with our generous government and the King trying their best to provide us with all our demands, life is much easier. Now we are more friendly and compassionate towards each other. Cordycep is another helping hand in making our life much easier. Cordycep is our main source of living so it has solved our problem of poverty. (32-year-old male community member)

I have a very good relationship with my neighbors. If anything happens to me or my family my neighbors are the first to know and help out. During our financial difficulties our neighbors are the ones to help us out, so it is very important to have a good neighbor and have an even better relationship with them. They are of most import when you are building your house. They are your main labor and without them one wouldn't even have a roof over their head. (37-year-old male community member)

Earlier we didn't have much dealing with our neighbors because the houses were built far apart due to a small population. But now thanks to our King, we have the permission to harvest Cordycep and also due to the increase in population here, our relationship with our neighbors has significantly improved. (48-year-old female community)

It seems that the *Cordycep* harvest has played a significant role in improving economic status throughout the community. As such, community relations have improved. With the introduction of new livelihood opportunities through tourism, we were interested in ascertaining local accounts of how the sector was being developed and managed, with a keen interest on impacts to social cohesion. Noticeably, the establishment of homestays, and the larger ecotourism sector, were not reported as points of contention. Rather, both homestay owners and community members reported the following:

My husband is a carpenter, so we earn our revenue through construction and my husband says we can help our neighbors by not having homestay in our house so that there will be less competition and our neighbors can earn form tourism. (36-year-old female community member)

People are actually happy for us and there are certain people who allocate these tourists in different houses so we don't really think much about it. And it also depends on how many our house can accommodate...people do not treat me any differently because I accommodate tourists. (Laya Homestay owner)

We do not steal each other's' guests, so there is no need for anyone to get angry or feel jealous. In fact, if we cannot host tourists at a difficult time, we ask other homestays to do it and they will help us...as we will when they cannot. (Laya Homestay owner)

Now there are tourists coming in our village to see the festival, so people in our village have started homestays. While establishing a homestay we need to have a contract with the Gup, and our neighbors help each other to get the proper contract which strengthens our relationship in the neighborhood. (37-year-old community member)

Right now we do not keep any tourists in our house because my house is far from the festival ground, so tourists do not prefer being away from the festival. From my family I am the only one who is directly involved in tourism. I have yaks and horses so I help tourists carry their luggage from Laya to Gasa and I help tourists find a homestay. When I help the tourists to find a house I also help my fellow friends to earn some money by letting the people stay in their house. (37-year-old male community member)

It does benefit me being a homestay owner. And there is no way there will ever be a conflict among the neighbors. If I have guests and I don't have good vegetables to feed my guests, my neighbors are the ones who would actually bring what he has and will let me borrow it. Even curry cookers and other appliances sometimes. I would do the same for them. In fact there is more interaction among the neighbors due to it. We are all religious people here. We would always be happy of others' success. (35-year-old male homestay owner)

Therefore, while ecotourism cannot be attributed to the expressed social cohesion, we do see positive trends that allow the sector to support and reify community vitality. Community member assessments are generally positive and welcome increased efforts of the Dzongkhag administration to promote ecotourism in the area. However, these positive ecotourism trends seem reliant on economic baseline indicators.

Research team observations also noticed that there is little to no impact from external actors. While a number of external actors were present during the festival dates, that seemed to be the extent of their influence. The local Dzongkhag administration was involved in all the planning, working in collaboration with the Laya community. Additionally, the lack of road connectivity has not fostered a booming real estate market, thus Layaps are the sole residents in the village.

## Discussion

### Contributing Factors

The two cases show profound differences regarding reports of social cohesion. While the research is not able to make a causal connection to ecotourism specifically, there are a number of possible contributing factors that need to be explored in further research, in order to generate better data for future policy decisions. Three factors that need to be considered include economic stability, threshold capacities, and the influence of external actors.

Phobjikha residents are primarily dependent on potato farming, with some reporting that they run at a loss over consecutive years. As such, the promise of ecotourism as a new livelihood opportunity is very appealing. However, RSPN's strategy is to ensure that ecotourism is seen as a supplemental source of income and does not replace agriculture livelihoods (RSPN, n.d.; Phuntsho, 2010). Regardless, villagers have either been given false impressions or have created their own expectations about how ecotourism will impact them financially. This has resulted in similar frustrations as those found by Karst (2016) in Merak/Sakteng. Contrasting this, Laya residents have benefited immensely from the legalization of *Cordyceps* harvest, which has become a primary source of income. Ecotourism is thus perceived by locals as supplemental income, and in return minimizes a sense of competition and conflict amongst community members. This points to the importance of existing economic stability that may allow the implementation of ecotourism to foster social cohesion.

Threshold capacities are also a critical factor, which emphasizes a location's ability to host a specific number of tourists. While tourism literature points to ecological thresholds (Shi et al., 2015; Singh and Mishra, 2004), in which local resources and ecosystems are determined to have a limit to the number of people they can support, we promote efforts to also emphasize social thresholds (see Salerno et al., 2013). Capacities of local communities to engage with outsiders in a way that maintains social values and practice is important to the GNH agenda. The village of Laya has supported very few tourists in comparison to the Phobjikha valley and has thus not experienced the same level of tourist interaction. Phobjikha reports allude to the fact that homestay owners have become more individualistic as they entertain tourists, gearing their homes around tourist interactions, that may deter other community members from visiting. The negative comments regarding social cohesion may indicate that the valley has reached a particular social threshold for engagement in the ecotourism sector. This is not to say that the RSPN homestays are attracting a plethora of tourists, in fact many have reported that they are unable to attract as many clients as they would like. However, the valley as a whole does receive a large number of visitors, with the majority staying at large hotels and resorts. Nevertheless, homestay owners have a particular expectation of economic benefit that is not being met, which is frustrating as they see many tourists present. Therefore, while thresholds related to economic capacities may reveal opportunities for increased revenues in rural Phobjikha households, social thresholds will likely show the opposite, that community relations are stressed and not fostered through ecotourism engagement.

External actors are also playing a role in the contrasting experiences of Phobjikha and Laya. While Phobjikha has seen a range of actors including international NGOs, national NGOs, and trans-local capitalist actors, Laya has essentially seen no such interaction. While the influence of external actors within traditional tourism debates is framed in terms of economic leakages, which is also occurring in Phobjikha, we stress the social fissures that have emerged. These external actors have promoted an atmosphere of competition that has unduly put pressure on a homestay network that was established through communitarian ideals. Therefore, the efforts of RSPN, while external in nature itself, have been thwarted through additional external actor interference. This competition is related to the underlying neoliberal logic of ecotourism. That being said, future research needs to explore how the discursive logics of the sector can be adapted as to provide the communitarian values promoted by RSPN and the broader GNH agenda.



## Reassessing Ecotourism in Bhutan

Earlier in this manuscript we acknowledged the work of Rinzin et al. (2007) who claimed that ecotourism's impact on culture was 'currently low'. With this assessment now being twelve years old, it is necessary to reassess the sector. With \$29.85 million (USD) earned in 2007 from international visitors (TCB, 2013), this has risen to \$79.8 million (USD) in 2017 (TCB, 2018), resulting in a more than doubling of the sector. While these numbers reflect the broader tourism sector, we reflect back to the definitions of ecotourism within the country which conflate tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism (see Gurung and Seeland (2008) and Rinzin et al., 2007). While such a conflation is problematic, we nevertheless want to comment on the current state of ecotourism in regard to the five conclusions found in Rinzin et al. (2007), which include:

1. "The tourism sector is a fast-growing service sector" and "has created a fair and healthy playing field for competition"
2. "Government exercises strong control over tourism" but "comprehensive integrated policy is still lacking and various stakeholders stress the need for a stronger and clearer government policy"
3. "Tourism provides additional income and generates self-employment. Hence, tourism has the potential to avert urban migration from rural areas and to keep alive the local culture, arts, and crafts"
4. "The 'high value, low impact' policy can be judged a success...local communities respond very positively to tourists visiting their communities and say that negative impacts on their culture are generally non-existent"
5. "continued growth, eventually up to double the volume of 2004, needs to be carefully managed in order to prevent adverse effects...concerted action...is needed to successfully adhere to the 'high value, low impact' principle" (pp.123-124)

The first part of conclusion 1 is applicable to the present day in that it recognizes growth in the sector and that 'fair' competition has been facilitated. However, what is fair? This seems to imply an issue of equality. While we agree that various actors are able to access the ecotourism market and fairly compete with one another, this does not account for the disadvantages that rural populations have compared to other actors. There are issues of existing economic advantages and management capacities that necessarily favor tourism actors from urban locations such as Thimphu, Paro,

Phuentsholing and others. In this sense, we contest the fairness of such competitive relations, while also contradicting the ‘healthy playing field’ in light of the social conflicts that have resulted in the Phobjikha case. In terms of Laya, however, there does in fact seem to be more relevance for conclusion 1, although more thoughtful policy work is needed to advance the sector in this region. Conclusion 2 is still very relevant as the government continues to emphasize a “controlled liberalization” (Rinzin et al., 2007) governance model, which has the potential to reverse negative trends from ecotourism’s neoliberal rational. This potential could be enacted through collaborative policy making that accounts for impacts, such as those found in this study. Conclusion 3 also has relevance to today’s sector, providing income opportunities to rural areas. However, while our current study does not address this specifically, future work needs to explore the effectiveness of these income distribution policy efforts.

In conclusion 4 we see a major discrepancy between then and now. Our findings show that community members in Phobjikha are experiencing negative impacts on their culture, related to social cohesion (i.e. reduced reliance on communal labor, increased competition, lack of Traditional Knowledge transfer, disputes over hosting tourists), which contradicts this 2007 assessment. While Laya has not experienced negative impacts as such, this may be due to the fact that the sector is still in its infancy stage in this location. Regardless, the case of Phobjikha shows this conclusion to be inapplicable to today’s ecotourism sector in the country, which should serve as a warning post to decision makers going forward.

And finally, conclusion 5 looks to encourage the sector to expand ‘up to double the volume of 2004’. 2004 earnings were \$12.5 million (USD) with approximately 9,249 international visitors (TCB, 2011). These numbers pale in comparison to 2017 in which \$79.8 million (USD) came from 71,417 international tourists, which is only a portion of the larger 254,704 visitors when you combine both international and regional guests (TCB, 2018). While Rinzin et al. (2007) called for a doubling of 2004 volumes, what recommendation should we present in light of an almost eight-fold increase? Our purpose here is not to disseminate specific policy recommendations. However, we do want to emphasize that our data presents the need for a reassessment of the sector. Such a reassessment requires careful consideration of community vitality, and specifically social cohesion, which is a primary goal of GNH.

## Conclusion

Framing ecotourism as part of larger neoliberal trends is a contentious claim in light of global efforts to reinforce the strategy as a path to equitable sustainable development. Nevertheless, conservation literature is clear in this equivocation showing ecotourism as an embodiment of neoliberal logics and practice. As such, we have sought to explore practice of the sector in Bhutan, which has developed a reputation for GNH that represents an alternative development model. That being said, how can GNH, as an alternative to hegemonic trends that prioritize economic indicators and strategies, utilize ecotourism as a development tool despite its underlying neoliberal logic? The data presented in this research shows that this process has not been without struggle.

Social cohesion, something we affiliate with the Community Vitality domain of GNH, emerges as a critical indicator to the (un)successfulness of ecotourism. The cases of Phobjikha and Laya show two contrasting experiences. While Phobjikha has 20+ years of experience with the ecotourism sector and a comparatively larger portion of tourist visitations, social cohesion is reported to be in disarray. Laya, on the other hand, has less experience, less visitors, and yet social cohesion is thriving. Being clear that the data does not point towards a causal relationship between social cohesion and ecotourism, we further complicate the connection by positing other contributing factors that likely play a role: economic stability, social threshold capacities, and the influence of external actors. Regardless, we challenge the sector by asking, even if ecotourism is not causing a breakdown in social cohesion, why isn't it supporting it? And if it is not supportive, how should the GNH agenda move forward in discouraging/encouraging development of the sector? These cases offer warning posts to policy makers and should prompt investigation of factors that facilitate successful ecotourism implementation.

To conclude, we would like to make it clear that we are not promoting an abandonment of ecotourism as a development strategy. Rather, we promote critical investigation that looks to acknowledge underlying logics of the sector in order to repurpose them in-line with the societal values inherent in GNH. While we have highlighted a single element of the GNH bricolage, we encourage future research to explore additional domains. Through such intensified analyses ecotourism can become the hopeful development solution that Bhutan envisions it to be.

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