Community Based Natural Resources Management Programs in Protected Areas of Bhutan

A Case Study on Park Festivals

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Department of Forests and Park Services
Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
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1.0 Executive Summary

Bhutan has a successful story of being able to integrate conservation with development and this may be attributed to the unique conservation philosophy of giving equal importance to wildlife conservation and community livelihoods. In order to promote community conservation programs, the Department of Forests and Park Services (DoFPS) initiated Integrated Conservation Development Program (ICDP). DoFPS initiated various ICDPs and one of these is institution of the park festivals. Park festival is an annual event organized by some national parks in the country to promote community participation in conservation and to improve rural livelihood through promoting ecotourism and marketing of community products.

This far, six different festivals were being organized by various DoFPS offices in the country: mushroom festival; Bhutan bird festival; Jomolhari mountain festival; nomads festival; Takin festival and rhododendron festival. Mushroom festival was first of its kind, which began in the year 2008 and organization of Takin festival was discontinued from 2014.

Though there are no exhaustive records on the benefit of festivals to communities; we found that the tangible returns from such festivals are minimal or negligible from whatever data we obtained. The only economic benefits may be accrued from the sale of local products and catering services. The records from the Bhutan bird festival shows return of only about 19% of the total festival expenditure to the communities. Wangchuck Centennial National Park attempted to collect fees and donations once with the objective to help sustain nomads festival, however this initiative generated only about 2% of the total budget spent on conducting the festival.

There may not be any notable benefits in terms of marketing local products through ecotourism as; only 170 tourists most likely visited either of the festivals in 2015 of the total 155,121 tourist visits. The Bhutan Bird festival which targeted to bring in bird lovers from across the globe could just get 4 tourists.

Since communities are reluctant to participate in such festivals without any financial incentives, they are paid daily wages to contribute labour and services while organizing the festival. The need of providing daily wages for every community participants and the fact that the daily wages are now revised will have even greater implication on cost efficiency and sustainability. To add to these costs, we also found that even the participation from government agencies for the festivals are mostly incentivized to encourage participation. Owing to these reasons, the sustainability of the festival remains questionable, and the fact that it’s organization is hugely dependent on the availability of grants from donor agencies does not help either. The average costs incurred to organize festival calculates to about Nu. 1.5 million.

Considering the difficulty in instituting self-sustaining process to organize festivals, we believe that park festivals needs to be planned and organized strategically. We suggest that the park festival be organized in different locations within the parks but not annually and to have dedicated festival dates so that it reaches wider audience through the Tourism Council of Bhutan. We also suggest on not conceptualizing any new festivals until existing festivals become self-sustainable.
2.0 Introduction

The annual park festivals centered on conservation and community participation in national parks across the country started in 2008 with the organization of mushroom festival by Phrumsegla National Park. Various festivals with different themes followed the mushroom festival thereafter. The festivals were being organized by DoFPS to promote Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM).

National park offices within the DoFPS coordinate the overall organization of the festival including the sourcing of funds. However, festival planning and coordination are done in close collaboration with local government and community institutions, as the community participation is one of the highlights of the festival.

Regardless of these festivals contributing to conservation efforts or to the livelihood of those adjoining communities, today, as many as five different festivals are organized across the country annually. They are mushroom festival (from 2008) in Phrumsegla National Park; nomads festival (from 2009) in Wangchuck Centennial National Park; Jomolhari mountain festival (from 2013) in Jigme Dorji National Park; and rhododendron festival (from 2013) in Lamperi Botanical Park. The first Bhutan bird festival was organized by the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research in 2015; Jigme Dorji National Park also organized Takin festival from 2011 until 2014, however it was discontinued due to financial constraints.

In this report, we try to understand the contribution of organizing festivals to the local economy through reviewing annual reports and through information obtained from festival focal persons. This report also includes a general comparative study on mushroom festival, Jomolhari mountain festival, nomads festival and Bhutan bird festival. Since there are no proper documentations on the benefits incurred to the communities by festivals, the report does not necessarily provide clear information on the benefits to the communities and national parks.

2.1 Fund

Since the national park festival neither has guaranteed donors nor the festival trust fund, every year, it becomes the duty of the concerned organizing national park to source funds. Thus, availability of funds becomes the deciding factor on the organization of the festival. The festivals are mostly supported by WWF-Bhutan, Tourism Council of Bhutan and Bhutan Foundation (Table 1). The first Bhutan Bird festival was organized through the financial support of Royal Government of Bhutan to celebrate the 60th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Great Fourth.
Table 1. Annual expenditure for each festival with funding institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parks/ Organizers</th>
<th>Festivals/ Year</th>
<th>Budget (M)</th>
<th>Funding Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jhomolhari Mountain festival</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jigme Dorji National Park</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Bhutan Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>Bhutan Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>0.505</td>
<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mushroom festival</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Phrumsengla National Park</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td>2009</td>
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<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>4.554¹</td>
<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td><strong>Nomads festival</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wangchuck Centennial National Park</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>WWF Bhutan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>WWF Bhutan &amp; Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>WWF Bhutan &amp; Tourism Council of Bhutan</td>
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<td><strong>Bhutan Bird festival</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation &amp; Environmental Research</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>Royal Government of Bhutan</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nu. 24.4</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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¹Total budget for 6 annual events of Mushroom festival
The startup cost for all festivals were much higher with an average of about Nu. 3 million and the recurring annual average cost is half the initial cost. The Jomolhari mountain festival and mushroom festival functions at lower costs of about Nu. 0.82 million and 0.72 million respectively. The higher cost of about Nu.3.7 million for first Bhutan bird festival could be largely attributed to the fact that the festival was organized at the dzongkhag level for all the communities (8 Geogs) of Zhemgang dzongkhag (Figure 1).

2.2 Participation

Though the Park festivals are aimed for maximum participation of communities, we classified the participants into three categories: community; government officials; and tourists.

Community: Community participants usually take part in selling local products and food; performing cultural exhibitions like traditional dances and mask dances; and traditional games. Local people also participate as spectators and to avail services from participating government agencies (health and renewable natural resources sectors) and local government offices.

Government Officials: Government officials participate as guest, as well as to organize various awareness booths. Participation from the government institutions are mostly from sectors under Ministry of Agriculture and Forests. The participation is mostly frequented by Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division, regional and dzongkhag Renewable Natural Resources sectors, National Mushroom Center, local schools, health sectors, and funding institutions.

Tourist: Most festivals failed to bring in enough tourists except for Jomolhari mountain festival. This festival records comparatively good number of tourists, which could be attributed to better recreational activities like mountain hiking and sightseeing, pre-planned festival schedules and broader and better mode of advertisements.

Figure 1. Average and cumulative cost of festivals
Figure 2. Average annual festival participants

Guests and student participants at the Bhutan Bird Festival 2015, Tingtibi, Zhemgang
3.0 Bhutan Bird Festival 2015 - Understanding Cost and Benefit

3.1 Background
The Bhutan bird festival was organized in Tingtibi, Zhemgang by the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research for the first time from 8th-10th October 2015. It was organized to celebrate the incredible diversity of birdlife in Bhutan and in dedication to honor the 60th birth anniversary of His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo. The festival also targeted community participation and bringing regional and international tourists to mark the ‘Visit Bhutan Year-2015’.

3.2 Expenditure and Participation
The festival was funded by Royal Government of Bhutan with grant of Nu. 3.7 million. The Bhutan bird festival, unlike other festivals was organized for the entire community of Zhemgang dzongkhag comprising of 8 geogs.

3.3 Benefits
Direct benefits to the community were through the sale of local products, catering food and logistical services. People from Tingtibi, who set up food stalls (n=11) made around Nu. 359,900.00 in three days festival period. All 8 geogs of Zhemgang sold locally made bamboo and wooden products which were displayed in traditionally built bamboo huts in the festival venue and sold handicraft products worth Nu. 150,000.00. A Khengrig Namsum Cooperatives formed by group of locals from Zhemgang sold their products worth of Nu.15,000.00. The most sought after products during 3 days festival period was locally brewed wine, which was served in a bamboo made container, famously known as Tongba. Tongba was sold by Goshing geog which made highest income of Nu.175,000.00. The overall income from sell of food and products during the three days festival period was Nu.711,900.00. This makes up to only about 19% of the total festival budget. But most of these stalls were managed by local vendors, thereby questioning the objective of improving livelihood of local communities.

However it benefited community through labour and service charges. As per the record, about Nu. 600,000.00 was paid as wages to local participants, community leaders and as charges for participants performing cultural programs. Income generated by local hotels and restaurants could not be accounted.

3.4 Economic Feasibility
The contribution from ecotourism was almost nil with just 4 tourists visit. The cost of festival was exacerbated by the fact that nearly 400 participants including organizers, invited guests and individuals from participating agencies were provided free logistics for all three days. The overall costs would be even higher if expenses borne by the participating agencies were also accounted.

Though Bhutan bird festival contributed to community livelihood and in promoting conservation, especially birdlife, the cost of organizing the festival outweighs the benefit. With current trend, it may increasingly become difficult to source funds and to encourage people to participate, take responsibility and ownership of such festivals. Therefore, establishing Bhutan Bird festival as a community centered and self sustaining festival may be a great challenge.
4.0 Impacts of Festivals on Promoting Community Livelihood and Conservation

The Park festivals provide opportunities to the communities to showcase their lifestyle, culture and tradition. The communities also benefit from sale and promotion of their products, while some also take opportunity to provide catering services and others in providing home-stays. Festivals also serve as occasion to build relationship, socialize and coordination among villages. Farmers also see it as an opportunity to avail services like health checkups and farm services from Renewable Natural Resources offices. These festivals also serve as platform to showcase some state-of-the-art technologies, especially those, which are useful to farmers and for rural livelihood.

Officials from many government agencies participate in these festivals to disseminate awareness and educate on conservation. The knowledge sharing on importance of conservation and protection of endangered flora and fauna, sustainable harvest of natural resources and waste management practices are some of the most important information displayed during the course of the festivals. Such outreach initiatives, according to natural resources managers is helping to reduce wildlife trafficking and in bringing people at the centre of conservation programs.

5.0 Constraints of Conducting Park Festivals

5.1 Fund
The major concern is securing fund to conduct festivals annually let alone in the future. The festivals are being conducted annually until now with gracious support of some of the funding institutions in the country such as WWF-Bhutan, Tourism Council of Bhutan and Bhutan Foundation. However, Takin festival which was being conducted by Jigme Dorji National Park was discontinued from 2014 due to lack of fund. Likewise Phrumsengla National Park could not conduct its annual Mushroom festival in 2010 for the same reason. Even the recently introduced Bhutan bird festival which started in 2015 is unsure of its fate.

5.2 Coordination and Participation
The festivals demand proper coordination between the park management and local government offices. Leaders from various parties engage in several meetings to plan and prepare for the festival, however there are reports of disagreements among the parties. One of the main area of the disagreement is the community people not willing to contribute labour unless they are paid. Incidences of some representatives failing to participate in planning meetings, resulting in people’s failure to participate are also reported. Such failures on the part of the community representatives may be an indication of poorer interest in the festival. Moreover we found that those participating communities are required to be paid daily wages to encourage them to participate in festival. We report here that the trend of having to pay community people for their participation is further questioning the fate of these festivals especially when there are no dedicated funds to organize such festivals.

5.3 Ecotourism
Tourists arrivals in Bhutan has increased rapidly in recent years. Bhutan recorded total of 116,209 tourists in 2013, 133,480 in 2014 and 155,121 in 2015 (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2015). This figure represents roughly one tourist for every seven Bhutanese; one of the highest visitor to population ratio in the region. Majority of tourists visiting Bhutan are cultural tourists constituting about 86 %. Other visits are about 12 % for adventure, 0.2 % for spiritual wellness, 0.07 % for Nature, 0.5 % for festivals/tshechus and 0.04 % for trekking.

In 2015, of the 155,121 tourists, only 100 tourists visited the Jomolhari mountain festival, 23 nomads festival, 43 mushroom festival and 4 visited Bhutan bird festival. Over the last three years, only about 0.1 % of tourists visited the park festivals. The overall contribution to local economy from tourists is very minimal considering the number of tourists attending park festivals.
The reasons for less tourist turnout could be due to ineffective advertisement and information sharing. Most of the time such advertisements are done through media channels in the country and travel magazines of Bhutan airlines and Drukair. Advertising through monthly issues of Bhutan airlines and Drukair magazines may not be effective as the information is mostly limited to only those who boarded the flight and they would have already planned their travel schedules. One reason for failure could be also because there is no confirmed date for the festivals. Tourists spends on an average just 6.4 nights in the country (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2015) which may be the reason for less participation in far-flung park festivals. There are not much variety in programs and activities of park festivals than that of other cultural and religious festivals: common program in the festival includes cultural dances, local mask dances, traditional games and local food counters.

6.0 Conclusion

Though the Park festivals were initiated with the objectives of advocating conservation through community participation and uplifting community livelihood through ecotourism and marketing of local products, the festivals conducted thus far failed to achieve these objectives. The organization of festivals depend solely on external grants. The expenses for daily wages to community labours engaged for preparatory activities, participants of cultural programs, booth managers for the festivals, meals for community participants and invited guests are all met from festival funds. Communities are very reluctant to participate and take responsibility and ownership of festivals without certain financial incentives. The practice of requiring to pay communities to participate, coupled with not having secured funding sources would mean increased difficulty in sustaining these festivals.

Few tourists are recorded to have visited festivals except for Jomolhari mountain festival, which has attractive mountain hiking and sightseeing combined with activities of nomadic people. However, all other festivals do not have much of an exciting events other than ceremonial and cultural programs, local dances, local cuisines and local games which can also be witnessed during other community festivals. Owing to the lack of ensured funding to organize these festivals, schedule for such festivals could not be fixed well in advance. This may be the reason in determining the tourists turnout as tourists travel plans are scheduled well in advance.

With all these constraints there are also perceived benefits to communities and parks. Direct benefit to the communities can be through the sale of their products and providing logistical services to tourists and participants during the festival period. Farmers seem to make modest income from contributing labour
for the festival, which may not be the possibility, should incentive system be done away. Other forms of benefit includes being able to advocate sustainable use of natural resources and promote awareness on conservation by forestry officials. Such festivals may help community to preserve and promote their local identity and tradition.

Without concrete evidence and reliable data, pricing the overall benefits of the festival is very difficult. Therefore, the respective parks should keep records of yearly festival proceedings including information on costs, benefits and participants. The question of sustaining these festivals warrants thorough debate and discussion as the festivals are totally organized upon the generous support from the donor agencies.

7.0 Recommendations

The study suggests following recommendations;

1. DoFPS, in collaboration with TCB and ABTO should review each festivals to validate its existing status. Those festivals which are not able to fulfill its objectives may be conducted in alternate years.

2. To add identity and variety to each of the existing park festivals, the festival events should be reviewed as most of the current festivals has similar events like that of other cultural and religious festivals.

3. The festival dates and events should be planned and target maximum tourists through developing comprehensive tour package.

4. The festival ownership and responsibility should be given to the concerned communities through formation of community groups. However, relevant stakeholders should assist in providing technical support and securing establishment funds.

5. The venue of the festival should be taken to different communities within the national park to encourage more participation and for better outreach.

6. No new park festivals should be instituted until existing festivals become functioning and self sustainable.
8.0 Acknowledgement

A case study of Park festivals is compiled through review of annual festival reports and information requested from the focal persons of respective Parks. Hence, we would like to thank all the focal persons for sharing festival reports and information. Sincere thanks to Mr. Sangay Norbu, Jigme Dorji National Park for providing details on Jomolhari mountain festival; Mr. Tashi Dorji focal person for nomads festival in Wangchuck Centennial National Park and Mr. Kezang Wangchuk of Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research for the records of Bhutan bird festival. We would also like to thank Mr. Ugyen Namgay, Phrumsengla National Park for sharing report on mushroom festival and Mrs. Kezang Dema for sharing documents on various festivals maintained with Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division. Sincere thanks to all the Chief Forestry Officers of all concerned park offices.

9.0 References


The Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research is a Government based research and training institute. We strive to foster better stewardship of our natural heritage – land, water, air and species therein – through rigorous science based research and transmission of cutting-edge science results to field practitioners, environmental leaders and policy makers.

Our current focus areas are defined by needs and challenges within Bhutan and outside. We recognize interlinkages between the way forestry is practiced to the dynamics of species conservation and persistence. We understand the implications of landuse practices and global climate change on water resources and energy requirements. Above all, we appreciate and seek to understand human impacts and impacts on humans by studying social patterns and economic implications of management and policy interventions.

In addition to conducting research, we provide a one-year certificate course in environment, forestry and conservation. We also offer tailor made course within the field of conservation biology, sustainable forestry and water resources for professionals working in these fields. We also offer opportunities for undergraduate students to conduct research projects as part of their Honours program.

As part of our initiative to encourage discourses and dialogue within the environmental community, we regularly organize seminars and host conferences at both national and international level.