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Bhutan joins Ramsar spreading  
its wings of conservation





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Bumdeling

Having joined the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands on September 7<sup>th</sup> as the 161<sup>st</sup> contracting party, Bhutan is now set to further spread its conservation wings to four new Ramsar sites.

Initially, Bumdeling in Trashiyangtse Dzongkhag in North-Eastern Bhutan and Khotokha in Wangdue Dzongkhag in Western Bhutan were selected as two wetlands of international importance.

Both sites are important wintering grounds for the endangered Black Necked Cranes (*Grus nigricollis*) and have significant hydrological value.

However, considering the mounting threats of rapid economic and infrastructural development, coupled with global warming, the Watershed Management Division,

Department of Forests and Park Services and WWF Bhutan program have proposed to study additional Ramsar sites.

During a stakeholder consultation on wetland conservation in Bhutan held in July 2010, Phobjikha in Wangdue, Noop Tshonapata in the Toorsa Strict Nature Reserve, Tshokar Tshona in Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary and Peling Tsho and Nganglam in Pemagatshel were proposed for the study.

All of these sites are high altitude glacial lakes and low land lakes. The sites were selected based biodiversity values.

The proposal seeks to study the biodiversity, socio-economic and cultural values and the hydrological and freshwater features of the sites.

The proposal underlines that unless more Ramsar sites are studied and designated, it will be difficult to keep Bhutanese wetlands intact.

“There is a need to intervene at each level of threat so that fragile ecosystems remain protected in an era of international tourism, climate change and megaprojects in the region,” says the proposal.

Wetlands play a number of roles in the environment such as water storage and purification, flood control and shoreline stability.

Wetlands are also considered the most biologically diverse of all ecosystems, serving as homes to a wide range of plant and animal life. Phurba Lhendup, the WWF-Bhutan program officer for Freshwater says, “It is good that we are making an international commitment to save wetlands so that such biodiversity hotspots don’t disappear into the haze of development and climate



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change.”

According to Phurba Lhendup, the work to begin studying the new sites is underway. There are plans to propose and designate the sites as Wetlands of International Importance on the World Wetland Day in February, 2013.

With Bhutan joining Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, there are now 163 contracting parties in the Ramsar Convention with a total of 2053 wetlands the world over.



Khotokha

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# TRAMCA

## Securing Bhutan's southern ecosystem

This year, WWF-Bhutan has embarked on an ambitious goal to secure the Trans-boundary Manas Conservation Area (TRAMCA) by 2015.

Project 'TRAMCA' aims at securing Phibsoo and Khaling Wildlife Sanctuaries and the Royal Manas National Park as these protected areas harbour rich biodiversity along Bhutan's southern ecosystems.

TRAMCA is a conservation landscape that extends along South-Eastern Bhutan and North-Eastern India. It includes several protected areas and reserved forests connected



via habitat corridors along the international boundary between Bhutan and India.

The landscape has an important role in meeting global tiger conservation goals. It has the potential to double its current tiger population. Protected areas under the project are also important for conservation of Rhinoceros, Elephants and some endangered, Eastern Himalayan endemic species such as the Pygmy Hog and the Hispid Hare. There are also several important bird species in this landscape such as Hornbills, and the Bengal Florican.

While these protected areas are homes to large, wide-ranging species, habitat connectivity is essential to conserve ecological, demographic, and genetic viability. A recent survey of the biological corridors connecting these protected areas showed that new development activities and human rehabilitation programs in the area could hamper wildlife movement. More



Picture: Spotted deer at Phibsoo

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so, the southern protected areas are vulnerable to poaching. The landscape is also home to some of the poorest communities in Bhutan. The communities are directly or indirectly affected by the park owing to increasing human wildlife conflict such as crop destruction and domestic animal depredation.

Hence, there are plans to prioritize livelihood interventions like community tourism, livestock and crop insurance, alternative technology to reduce demand on natural resources and other income generation programs.

Such interventions are not only expected to reduce demand on natural resources but also to enhance community tolerance towards wildlife to garner their support for conservation.

The three protected areas have been largely unstaffed and un-managed for over a decade, primarily because of lack of funds.



# Homestays and Eco-tourism help reduce dependence on forest resources



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Picture: Aum Ugyen prepares dinner for the guests at her homestay

Pema Lhazom, 30, a high school graduate, now prefers to spend more time at home than wandering in the high mountains spending days in harsh weather to collect *cordyceps*. Pema now has a new found glory in her Alpine Organic homestay.

Alpine Organic Homestay is a Co-operative with 20 farm house operators in Chhokhortoe geog under Bumthang district in North-Eastern Bhutan.

The Co-operative works towards equitable distribution of dividends from eco-tourism initiatives and improving community livelihood. It is also aimed at reducing dependence on natural resources and alleviating human-wildlife conflict.

Home stay programs in Chhoeckhortoe, Bumthang have helped reduce pressure on *cordyceps* harvesting in Wangchuck Centennial Park (WCP). Around 70 percent of *Cordyceps* in Bumthang is extracted from within the park.

“Usually I would spend an entire month harvesting *cordyceps* but last year I spent only 10 days as I had to attend to guests at my homestay,” she said.

Last year, in 10 days Pema collected some 300 pieces of *cordyceps* for which she earned Nu 51,000.

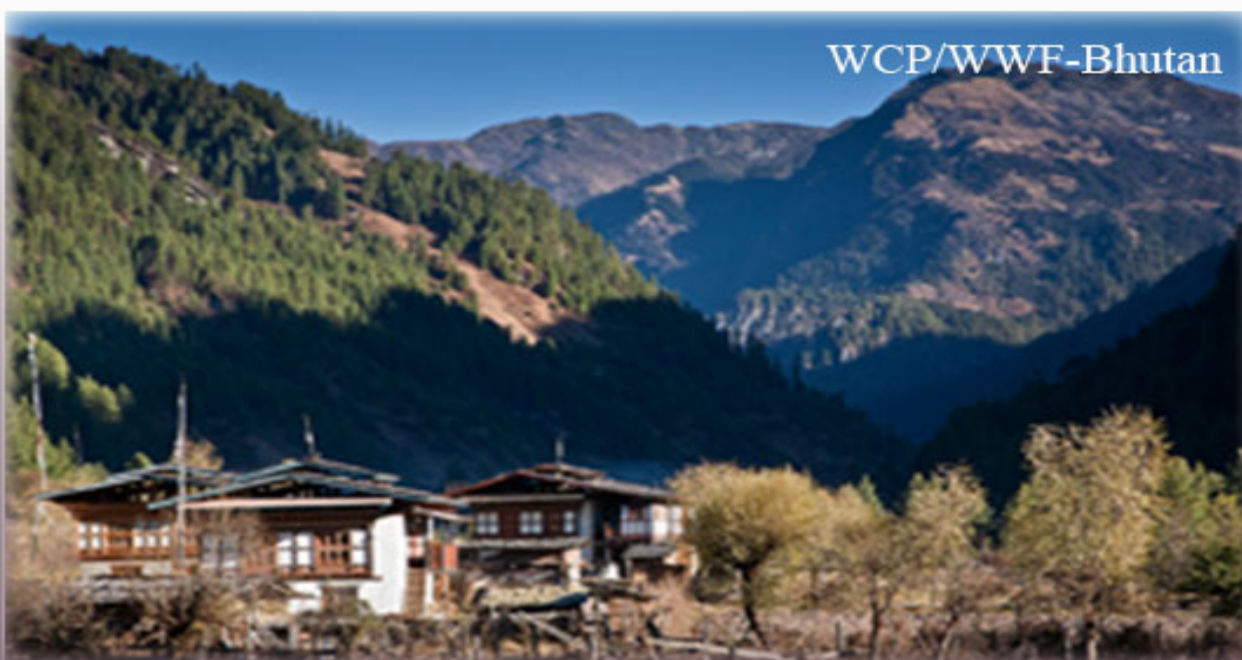
On the other hand, she earned Nu 110,000 in 20 days from her home stay. She says that

although income from *cordyceps* is good, home stays are a better option as it does not involve hard labour.

“Harvesting *cordyceps* and walking all the way up and staying there for a month is not easy,” she says. *Cordyceps* harvesters have to prepare a month ahead for the harvest and while they are there for the harvest, the weather is harsh and there are risks of wildlife attacking humans.

Homestays have changed the lives of





Picture: Chhoekhortoe Alpine Organic farm house co-operative, Bumthang

the people in Chhoekhortoe so much so that Sonam Tshomo, 24, who is also the secretary of Alpine Organic Homestays does not even remember how many of her 60 yaks were attacked by wildlife in the past few years. It is as though livestock rearing has become secondary after home stays started generating income for the people in Chhoekhortoe.

Asked if there have been any instances where her yaks were attacked or killed by wildlife she smiles gently and says, “I don’t remember and I haven’t even inquired.” Since her homestay started operating in 2010, she has earned around Nu 200,000 to 300,000 and she hasn’t looked back ever since.

To further improve the homestay services, WWF and WCP have now started organic farming for vegetables. WWF provides better seeds and green house equipments. This will add value to the services provided by the home stays. According to Netra Binod Sharma, WWF Co-Manager for WCP, the primary idea behind starting the homestays was to reduce high dependence

of the park residents on the natural resources, avoid human-wildlife conflict and provide employment opportunities to the school leavers in the villages.

Similarly, it also supplements the Government’s policy of reducing rural poverty to 15% by the end of the tenth five year plan.

Meanwhile, in Upper Choeckhor, the Park management has engaged around 20 households in developing farm houses and supported them in improving facilities as well as trained school leavers. They are now running the farm houses.

Damber Singh Rai, the Chief Forestry Officer of Wangchuck Centennial Park said, “Through this scheme, we are not only helping the local community but also building a good relationship with the community which will benefit conservation objectives.”

He added that as long as the community bonds well with the Park management, it will be easier to convince them help conserve the environment.





# Matsutake festival

Observed first in 2009, the Matsutake Festival in Ura, Bumthang has developed an identity of its own and has woven itself into the local culture. The annual festival has not only helped the community generate income but also a sense of ownership and thereby the need to sustain it for times to come.

Matsutake (*Tricholoma matsutake*), popularly known in Bhutan as *Sangay Shamu* is found in the last remaining pristine temperate habitats, spruce and pine forests in Ura valley at more than 3000 m. Matsutake are hard to find, though simple to harvest, and, therefore, priced highly.

The Matsutake festival was initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forest together with WWF to generate enthusiasm and involve the community in conserving the Thrumshingla National Park area and highlight sustainable

harvest of Matsutake mushrooms.

This year, the festival was held from 24th to 26th August. Inaugurating the event, Agriculture Minister Pema Gyamtsho said, “Be it environment or wildlife protection, it is most important that the people living in the protected areas acknowledge the efforts on conservation as the government alone cannot do it.”

Lyonpo said that this way, people take ownership of the natural resources as it also benefits the larger community.

Recognizing the festival as an important annual event for the community, Ura gup Dorji Wangchuk said, “We will organize and celebrate the festival annually for generations to come as we know that such an event, in the long run, will help our community climb up the ladder of development and well being.”

Matsutake is not just a major source of



income for Bumthang farmers but also a major foreign currency generator to the government revenue. It is exported to Japan, Thailand, India, Singapore and Hongkong.

Last year alone, a total of 1316.3 kgs of Matsutake mushrooms were exported

Harvesting matsutake mushrooms has helped people in Ura gewog manage their lives better since 2005 when they started a committee for sustainable harvest of the mushrooms.

According to Tenzin, 48, the chairperson of *Somthang Shamu tshogpa* (committee), each of the 12 members of the *tsogpa* earns a minimum of Nu 17,000 annually.

The income not only benefits members individually, but also serves the community in meeting education expenses for their children and managing household activities better.

The *tshogpa* keeps a certain percentage from the annual income separately which is used to provide agricultural and educational loans to the community.

With the community reaping such benefits from Matsutake harvest, the committee is

mindful of harvesting it sustainably.

“With the help of the government and the park management, we have been receiving trainings on sustainable harvesting and that has really helped us keep our income steady,” said Tenzin.

Dawa Penjor, a senior official of the National Mushroom Centre in Thimphu said that the government is now working on a mushroom management plan however adding that it ultimately depends on the community as to how they manage.

He said, “We try and convince people that whatever is there in the forest is theirs and if they harvest it sensibly, they can reap its benefits for generations.”

While the government, together with the community, is working towards better managing this important natural resource, the future looks promising with new enthusiasts visiting the festival every year.

Yumiko Yanai, a Japanese employee at Uma Resort, Paro was one such enthusiast. Yumiko has been researching on how Uma Resort in Paro could best promote the Matsutake festival among Japanese tourists.

