

# Community tourism along the Nabji Trail in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park: An example of sustainable rural tourism development in Bhutan<sup>1</sup>



Photo<sup>2</sup>: Nabji's rice fields

## Tourism development in Bhutan

Rich in cultural heritage and ecological resources, the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan attracts tourists from all over the world. As the last Mahayana Buddhist Kingdom, Bhutan celebrates religious festivals throughout the year, and traditional customs are still very much alive. Nature enthusiasts visit the country to see its ecosystems that are home to a variety of species that have almost become extinct in other parts of the Himalaya. Both the cultural and ecological resources are prized by Bhutan's government, which helps protect them through a cautious approach towards tourism that favours low volume

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<sup>1</sup> John Hummel, with support of Nanda Ritsma. SNV has been providing advisory services in pro-poor sustainable tourism in Nepal and Bhutan, and is expanding to more countries in the Himalaya. The authors want to thank their client organisations in Bhutan, DoT, ABTO, and JSWNP, NCD, for their successful contribution to the first community tourism project in Bhutan and UNDP/GEF for funding this project.

<sup>2</sup> Photos by Nanda Ritsma.

with high yields. Even with just over 9,000 international tourist visits in 2004, Bhutan has become a model for sustainable tourism development.

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) privatised tourism in 1991 and has continued to promote it as a priority sector for socio-economic development. The country's Ninth Five-Year Plan for development and poverty reduction has targeted a steady increase in tourism, with goals of 15,000 tourist visits in 2007, increasing to 20,000 in 2012.

The average income per person per day in Bhutan is Ngultrum (Nu) 40, which is less than a dollar a day, and the average income in rural areas is even lower at Nu 33 per day (77 cents). The poverty line is about Nu 748.10 per person per month, which translates to \$17.40 USD per month and \$208.75 USD per year<sup>3</sup>. More than one third of the population lives below this poverty line<sup>4</sup>.



Photo: Elderly couple in Nimshong

Tourism has significant potential to fight poverty in Bhutan by generating employment and income for the rural poor. According to law, all tourists must book their travel with a tour operator registered with the government of Bhutan. The Department of Tourism has set minimum tariffs for tourists of \$200 USD per night during the high season. All expenses, like accommodation, transport, guide services, entrance fees, etc. are included in this amount. Tourists only pay extra for their drinks and souvenirs. Out of the \$200 USD, about \$70 USD are royalties and taxes (among others, the Royal Government of Bhutan is using these revenues to provide free health care and education, also benefiting poor); the rest remains with the tour operator to develop the daily package. The poor, rural areas must develop viable tourist products to attract tour operators and earn profits.

#### The need for assistance

In the Ninth Five Year Plan (FYP), the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) identified the tourism sector a priority economic sector for 2002-2007 and identified the following areas to be addressed:

- Lack of community participation
- Uneven distribution of profits
- Need for new products, such as trekking routes
- Extreme seasonality
- Lack of private sector investment

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<sup>3</sup> Source:

[http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/monitoring\\_poverty%20in%20bhutan,%20discussion%20paper.pdf](http://www.undp.org.bt/poverty/monitoring_poverty%20in%20bhutan,%20discussion%20paper.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the results of Bhutan's census 2005 are not yet confirmed, as such these figures are only indicative.

- Low and uneven standard of tourist accommodation
- Lack of clear policy guidelines and other related legislation

The government set goals to address these issues and aimed to develop sustainable community tourism that has socio-economic benefits for a wider group of people, especially those in rural areas. Based on these goals and the national tourism strategy, the Department of Tourism (DOT), the Nature Conservation Division (NCD) and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO) decided to explore possibilities for community tourism in Bhutan and initiate a pilot project.



Photo: Monpa porters

Community tourism is new in Bhutan, and experience with the implementation of community tourism development in the country is limited. Because of SNV's expertise in sustainable and community tourism development in the Himalaya and its long involvement in integrated development programmes in Bhutan, the Department of Tourism in 2002 requested SNV's assistance in product development, organisational and institutional strengthening, data management and support to the private sector, in particular the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO).

#### Community tourism in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park

A team of DOT, NCD, ABTO and SNV staff decided to explore the possibility of community-operated trekking trails that would provide additional income for local communities residing in the Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (JSWPN), which is located in one of the poorest districts in Bhutan. More than 90 per cent of the inhabitants of some villages inside the park lack self-sufficiency in cereals, and their location inside a national park limits their opportunities for earning cash income.

Unlike other countries with wide expanses of pure wilderness, national parks in Bhutan include areas with human settlement. Because the people traditionally depend on the forests as a source of sustenance and income, the declaration of these areas as national parks creates tensions between conservation and forest utilization.

Increasingly, state interventions are being implemented in the JSWNP and other areas to limit access to forest resources because growing population pressures and commercialization could lead to over-exploitation. For the vast majority of forest-dependent people, biodiversity conservation is often a secondary concern to making a living. Thus, the team decided to implement community-operated trekking trails to provide alternative sources of income

for practices that deplete forest resources and give forest-dependent people incentives for protecting and maintaining the environment.

### The Nabji Trail

With the specialist and process guidance support of SNV, feasibility studies on the trekking trails were conducted in March 2003. Based on the positive results of the study, the project team began developing plans for a pilot trail within the JSWNP, the Nabji Trail, in a way that would contribute not only to poverty reduction for the villages along the trail but also to cultural and ecological conservation.

In 2004, the project team drafted a proposal for the Nabji Trail. SNV provided specialist advice in drafting the proposal, supported the formulation process and facilitated cooperation among the various stakeholders involved. The team submitted the proposal to the UNDP Small Grant Fund of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), which approved the proposal in December 2004, and agreed to fund \$50,000 USD of the total \$115,000 USD project budget. Additional funds came in cash and kind from the various project stakeholders, which allowed implementation of the project to begin in early 2005.

The project objectives are:

- To develop the Nabji Trail for trekking and community tourism, planned and managed by the communities along the trail;
- To provide awareness on natural resource management, energy, garbage management, and cultural consciousness to local communities, tourists, and tour operators; and
- To support improved tourism market chains, including tourism products and services, and a strengthening of micro and small enterprise development.

Implementation of the project is primarily the responsibility of the JSWNP staff, with support from DoT and ABTO. An SNV tourism product and marketing adviser is supporting the park staff and stakeholders with the implementation and marketing of the project, giving advice on sustainable tourism development and establishing support networks by linking the project with the private sector in Bhutan and international organisations. The project adviser is also building the capacity of the staff through training and coaching, so they will be able to carry out the work independently and share their knowledge with the local village communities.



Photo: Korphu village



The highlights of the Nabji trekking trail include visits to small Bhutanese mountain villages and the Monpa ethnic group, diverse forests of the park, and possible sightings of endangered and vulnerable species such as the golden langur and rufous-necked hornbill. The village communities along the trekking trail, namely the villages of Nimshong, Nabji, Korphu, Kupdra/Phrumzor and Jangbi, have expressed enthusiasm for the project and agreed to establish tourism management committees to plan and manage sustainable tourism development. The committees are supported by the JSWNP staff, with the training, coaching and technical advice of the SNV adviser, DoT and ABTO.

The project contributes to biodiversity conservation through a tourism and conservation awareness programme, as well as the promotion of socio-economic tourism benefits among the village communities. It is a capacity strengthening project based on applied research, policy analysis, participatory planning and management, and has a strong market orientation.



Photo: Golden Langur

#### Revenue distribution systems

In each village, specific activities are being developed to generate community revenues through community camping sites, cultural programmes, and meal service. On rotating basis, individuals from different villages can generate income through portering baggage from village to village, or assisting as cook, kitchen staff or village guide. Other activities that generate income are construction and maintenance work in the JSWNP for campsites, viewpoints and trails, along with sales of firewood, crafts, vegetables and other agricultural products. A percentage of the revenues is planned to be collected in a "Village Tourism Fund" aimed at generating benefits for those not directly involved in tourism activities, such as children and elderly. Distribution of this fund will be decided upon by the villagers in each village.

Fieldtrips and the first pilot tours, two ecotourist groups from the United States, indicate that considerable economic revenues can be generated in the villages. Based on the first visits, calculations have been made on the revenues per village and the total in the area per year, for 100, 300, and 600 visiting tourists. Even with as few as 100 tourists a year, an additional income of nearly \$1,400 USD per year per village can be generated (see Table 1.). It means an average increase of about \$40 USD per year per household, for an area with hardly any cash income a significant increase. With 300 tourist visits, that amount could be raised to more than \$4,000 USD. Considering that most villagers live on less than a dollar a day, this amount is considerable.

Table 1. Expected income per village in US dollars by 100, 300, 600 tourists.

Activity	Price in US dollars per tourist	Dollars per 100 tourists	Dollars per 300 tourists	Dollars per 600 tourists
Camping	\$2.33	\$233.00	\$699.00	\$1,398.00
Village guide	\$0.23	\$23.30	\$69.90	\$139.80
Cultural performance	\$1.16	\$116.00	\$348.00	\$696.00
Meal service	\$2.33	\$233.00	\$699.00	\$1,398.00
Porter	\$4.66	\$466.00	\$1,398.00	\$2,796.00
Kitchen garden	\$1.16	\$116.00	\$348.00	\$696.00
Firewood	\$1.86	\$186.00	\$558.00	\$1,116.00
	Total per village	\$1,373.30	\$4,119.90	\$8,239.80

Many tourists are interested in new products like the Nabji trekking trail, as well as for the services provided by the local communities. Several United States-based tour operators have already shown interest in including the trek in their brochures for the coming year, making it the goal of attracting at least 300 tourist visits to the trail a feasible one.

#### Project impact and effects

The Nabji Trail benefits local communities by promoting greater awareness, appreciation, and protection of natural and cultural resources among both villagers and visitors that will allow the tourism growth to be sustainable. Though it is in its initial phase, the project has already begun to provide tangible rural community assistance through training, education, improved infrastructure and facilities, and cash revenue. It aims to serve as a model for learning how to successfully apply the community tourism approach to Bhutan's unique landscape and culture.

The Tshokpa of Jangbi, Mr. Nakari mentions: 'For ages our people have been using the forest as their store room, but with the establishment of the park and the implementation of different conservation regulations, our people have difficulties to maintain their livelihoods. I hope that tourism will give the people the so much needed additional income to support their daily life.'

The project and its preparation have given stakeholders experience in inter-level cooperation for sustainable tourism development. Both the local- (tourism management committees, JSWNP, local communities) and national- (DOT, NCD, ABTO, SNV) level organisations have learned how to work together to design, plan and implement the project and understand the value of such cooperation.

Since the trail is part of a pilot project, leaders are cautious of raising the expectations of local communities when it comes to the economic benefits. Project leaders are instead working to build community support by

highlighting the improved infrastructure and environmental awareness benefits.

The first indications of field visits and pilot tours do show, however, that the socio-economic benefits are potentially substantial. In an area where the possibilities for socio-economic development are limited and most of the population lives on less than a dollar a day, additional revenues of even \$1,400 USD are significant.

The Nabji Trail project is the first of its kind in Bhutan, and considered a pilot project. Once the project has shown that it will generate socio-economic benefits for the communities along the trail, the project will be replicated in other parts of Bhutan.