

# Environmental Governance in Bhutan

Ecotourism, Environmentality and Cosmological Subjectivities



Jesse Montes



## Propositions

1. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness strategy represents a novel form of governance that both challenges and incorporates dominant global development strategies.  
(this thesis)
2. Ecotourism is a cultural process whose promotion causes conflicts with customary Bhutanese perspectives and practices.  
(this thesis)
3. The 'environment' is a particular cultural frame that may conflict with local people's understanding of their relationship with the nonhuman world.
4. Conventional strategies for conservation primarily appeal to economic rationality and thus may crowd out alternative motives.
5. Spiritual claims about the nature of humanity and the universe are instrumental to understanding conservation behavior and conceptions of personhood.
6. Stories people tell regarding their experience of the surrounding landscape reveal assumptions concerning appropriate human-nonhuman relations .

Propositions belonging to the thesis, entitled

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Ecotourism, Environmentality and Cosmological Subjectivities

**Jesse Montes**

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## Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BFL	Bhutan for Life
CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
CBS	Centre for Bhutan Studies
CBST	Community-Based Sustainable Tourism
DoF	Department of Forests
DoFPS	Department of Forest and Park Services
GNH	Gross National Happiness
GNHC	Gross National Happiness Commission
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
NEC	National Environment Commission
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NRED	Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division
PES	Payment for Ecosystem Services
PFP	Project Finance for Permanence
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
RGoB	Royal Government of Bhutan
RSPN	Royal Society for the Protection of Nature
SD	Sustainable Development
SNV	<i>Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers</i> (Netherlands Development Organisation)
TCB	Tourism Council of Bhutan
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WWF	World Wide Fund for Nature, World Wildlife Fund

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In memory of Laurel Montes





# 1 Introduction

Bhutan, a small kingdom dominated by Buddhist ideals in the south-eastern Himalayas, has drawn substantial popular attention due to its attractive cultural and natural heritage, resulting in mythologized portraits of ‘the Last Shangri-La’ (Schroeder, 2011). International attention increased recently due to a growing disillusionment with ideals of democracy and development within the context of a neoliberal capitalist economy, with Bhutan creating hopeful space for constructing an alternative known as Gross National Happiness (GNH). Interest in Bhutan spans numerous fields of research, but predominantly Buddhist and GNH studies. Much of the work consists of historical analyses to explore unique specificities held intact through a history of isolation spurred on by both geo-physical barriers, due to the Himalayan landscape, and purposeful policy implementation in order to preserve culture and retain autonomy. While many small nations/kingdoms in the Himalayan region dissolved due to various geo-political circumstances, Bhutan remains, making it an attractive country to study.

Bhutan has made efforts to distinguish itself from ‘western’ influences, working to establish its own conceptualization of ‘progress’ and strategies for development. GNH embodies much of this effort, signifying a grassroots effort to establish a philosophy of practice for development. However, the historical trajectory for development in the country has been complicated by pervasive global economic trends. This is most notable in Bhutan’s relation to India, a country that heavily funded infrastructure in Bhutan in the 1960s and continues to play a role in current hydropower investments. This has led to an intimate relation between the two economies in which fluctuations in the Indian economy necessarily have impacts in Bhutan. To combat this deterministic relation, Bhutan has made efforts to become more self-efficient and less reliant on Indian imports and exports. Part of this move has entailed the development of particular advantages that Bhutan perceives related to its natural resource endowment. While hydropower remains its primary economic export, tourism, and specifically ecotourism as a subset of this sector, has been promoted as a strategy to attract foreign investment. Therefore, while Bhutan seeks economic independence and the establishment of a novel development trajectory, it is nevertheless drawn into a process of neoliberalization in which it is reliant on commodifying the environment as a means to access global markets.

Conservation debates are numerous in Bhutan, with ecotourism emerging as a dominant strategy that is heavily promoted. GNH philosophy, a tourism tariff system, and the country’s ‘high value – low impact’ policy have all had an important role in the development of tourism generally, however new advances in tourism policy seek to frame all tourism as ‘eco’tourism, thus redefining the entire sector. With ecotourism serving as a quintessential mode of neoliberal conservation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015), this also establishes neoliberalism as a key area of inquiry in the country. While Bhutan and its associated GNH philosophy are often framed as a response to hegemonic neoliberalism, a cognitive dissonance may emerge on the part of the reader. Doesn’t GNH promote happiness instead of profit? As a Buddhist country, isn’t Bhutan opposed to western styles of governance and market capitalism? Many popular international appeals promote Bhutan as an ideal alternative to global neoliberal trends, and yet we find neoliberal-like tendencies taking root in this small Himalayan kingdom.

## 1.1 Research objectives & questions

The specific objectives of the research are:

1. To understand how Bhutan has negotiated neoliberalization and how associated policy initiatives and practices have developed in the process.
2. To explore power relations involved in ecotourism promotion in Bhutan.
3. To examine the effects that engagement with neoliberalism has on community/individual relations, perceptions of the environment and local ethno-ecologies in the context of ecotourism.
4. To recommend policy avenues promoting the broader GNH agenda in light of neoliberalization trends fostered by the ecotourism sector.

The research questions are:

1. How has neoliberalization influenced national-level ecotourism policy and promotion in Bhutan and how has its implementation subsequently influenced local social and cultural practices of those involved in the sector?
2. How are local ethno-ecological perceptions and relations changing through engagement with ecotourism and broader environmental discourses?

## 1.2 Theoretical Orientation

This dissertation adopts a theoretical framing which is covered in greater detail in Chapter 3, in order to conceptualize environmental governance in Bhutan. A neoliberal trajectory in Bhutan is identified and explored within the context of ecotourism through the use of governmentality/environmentality, neoliberal, *dwelling*, and landscape ethnoecology framings. Governmentality has been adopted as it incorporates discourse and power relations as critical areas of inquiry, but also operates as a theoretical tool to map multiple governance rationalities, such as Foucault's sovereign, disciplinary, truth, and neoliberal modalities. Agrawal's environmentality (2005a, 2005b) is also absorbed into this conversation as ecotourism represents a particular type of environmental governance that is neoliberal in nature. As such, I am able to engage neoliberal scholarship as well that explores variegated forms of neoliberalism, leading to an emphasis in this literature on the process of neoliberalization (Peck and Tickel, 2002, Peck et al., 2009, Springer, 2012, 2014). This variegated neoliberal perspective is extended by my application of governmentality by answering the question: what alternative rationalities contest and articulate with neoliberalism to create novel forms of the conduct of conduct? Governmentality provides the language to describe such variegations. These other rationalities at play are not merely superseded to produce a wholly neoliberal state, rather variegations are produced that manifest in novel governance constellations. Further building on literature around ecotourism, I frame the sector as a discursive process and explore socio-cultural impacts that emerge from the underlying neoliberal logic. Discourses that embody the promotion and practice of ecotourism will be shown to promote particular perceptions that align with neoliberal ideals (competition, privatization, efficiency) and contest traditional Bhutanese values. I also adopt *dwelling* and landscape ethnoecological approaches to explore how particular subjects perceive and interact with both the

nonhuman environment and strategies intended to conduct their conduct in relation to it and will draw upon the works of Ingold (2000, 2011) and Johnson (2010; Johnson and Hunn, 2010; Johnson and Davidson-Hunt, 2011). While *dwelling* will be used to understand how one perceives themselves in the environment, landscape ethnoecology provides the context of resource management for investigation.

As a result, governmentality/environmentality, neoliberalism, *dwelling*, and landscape ethnoecology are used in dialectic tension to explore the perceptions and subjectivities of Bhutanese as they interact and are impacted by the ecotourism sector in the country. Each theoretical framing proved critical in interpreting data that came from multiple scales (i.e. global, national, community), and which required a novel perspective in order to interpret current neoliberal trends in the country. What the Bhutan context will show is that environmental governance avoids strict characterization as either 'neoliberal' or 'not neoliberal'. Rather, a host of rationalities merge to form a variegated governance model that reflects various values and discourses, and is influenced by both internal and external actors. This will be shown in a multi-scalar fashion starting from understanding Bhutan's position in global discourses, to documenting national policy trends, to exploring multiple community interactions with ecotourism, and finally to the investigation of individual subjectivities. In this way, particular perceptions and subjectivities are formed that manifest in specific social and human-environment relations as well as behaviours.

### 1.3 Thesis Contribution

This thesis seeks to contribute to multiple bodies of literature. Governmentality and environmentality are specific areas of poststructuralist political ecology inquiry (Fletcher, 2010, 2017; Agrawal 2005a, 2005b; Youdelis, 2013) that this work reflects on. Chapters 5, 6, and 8 seek to engage with this material and provide nuanced analyses of governance structures, and environmental governance and subjectivities in particular. I will show that governmentality must be understood as a variegated phenomenon, and will then, through investigation of the Bhutanese context, conceptualize a specific form of biopower that I call "Buddhist" biopower. This form of power emerges from the governance constellation (i.e. reliance on multiple governmentality modalities) that characterizes Bhutan and is based on Buddhist spiritualities, thus providing an unusual non-western context and application of a governmentality/biopower theory that has dominantly been applied to western forms of governance thus far. This variegation is also specified to the level of environmental governance, through which I show, in Chapter 6, how local rationalities merge, transform, and reinterpret hegemonic neoliberal trends. Specific to environmentality, in Chapter 8 I offer a detailed analysis of a *truth* environmentality that is currently lacking in the literature. While various authors have made passing reference to such a modality (Fletcher, 2010; Youdelis, 2013), I offer a concentrated analysis with an ethnographic case study revealing subjectivities motivated by beliefs and perceptions of an animated landscape in which a host of deities demand allegiances and specific behaviors from human actors.

Critical analysis of neoliberalism is also a body of literature addressed by this thesis. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 address the promotion of neoliberal discourses and the underlying rationality relied upon to influence conservation behaviours. I reinforce current trends in neoliberal literature by conceptualizing neoliberalization as a process, and to

understand neoliberalism as a variegated phenomenon. However, I further the literature by exploring what also exists in articulation with neoliberal processes and institutions. I challenge this body of literature to think beyond variegated neoliberalisms and to expand the purview to variegated governmentalities, and variegated environmentalities, in order to explore non-neoliberal rationalities that intersect with neoliberal influences.

Chapter 7 avoids traditional framings of ecotourism as a wholly material practice and instead frames it as a discursive process as well (Fletcher, 2009). In this chapter I adopt a *dwelling* lens for analysis, with particular attention to Ingold's (2000) concept of 'temporality of the landscape' in which he claims, "the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves" (p. 189). This perspective sets the analysis apart from previous work that has used *dwelling* as a frame for examining both tourism (Prince, 2017; Palmer, 2018) and ecotourism sectors (Jamal and Stronza, 2009; Koot, 2013, 2017). Further, this investigation reveals how the discursive processes of ecotourism promote new forms of social and human-environment engagement.

Finally, I advance the literature on Bhutan and GNH studies. While Simeon Teoh's (2015a, 2015b) work is the first and only to bring together GNH and governmentality, I critique his conceptualization of GNH as a particular governmentality by promoting a variegated perspective, and further the understanding of this relationship by conceptualizing a specific "Buddhist" biopower. Additionally, I work towards a constructive critique of GNH that is often missed within the literature. While GNH is often held on a pedestal in the international academic community, particularly amongst scholars with anti-western or anti-capitalist sentiments, there is a general lack of constructive critical attention to the concept (see Brooks 2013, Yangka et al., 2018). I promote such constructive dialogue by providing a nuanced analysis of GNH as a philosophy and set of policy tools in order to examine how it has evolved and incorporated discourses around governance, conservation, and subjectivity. I do so in the hope that GNH can be refined, better understood, and applied in ways that help Bhutan meet policy and societal goals.

In summary, the thesis contributes to the academic literature in the following:

1. Illustrates the variegated nature of a novel governance framework in Bhutan and how this manifests in a situated form of biopower embodying non-western (Buddhist) spiritualities.
2. Underscores local specificities that account for discrepancies in the vision and execution of neoliberal conservation but goes beyond this to express what also exists within a variegated environmentality framework. I show that indigenous efforts prove critical when re-interpreting conservation strategies and warding off external dynamics that promote possibly dangerous hegemonic trends.
3. Addresses the discursive nature of the ecotourism sector through a rarely employed *dwelling* lens to explore changes in understandings of human-environment relations that result from introducing a neoliberal logic,

highlighting divergences in local perceptions and values signifying new forms of social and human-environment engagement.

4. Contributes to GNH studies by juxtaposing the ideal of GNH with the neoliberal conservation paradigm, revealing opportunities for adapting the country's ecotourism strategy.
5. Provides a concentrated analysis of *truth* environmentalities based on subjectivities that emerge from the perception and belief in cosmological actors within the landscape.

## 1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis comprises this introductory chapter (1), a historical overview (Chapter 2), theoretical framework (Chapter 3), methods (Chapter 4), four articles (Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8), a general discussion (Chapter 9) and conclusions (Chapter 10). The purpose of Chapter 1 is to outline the objectives of this research and provide a brief introduction to the context and theoretical orientation of the thesis. Additionally, I provide details of the thesis' contributions and overall structure. Chapter 2 works to familiarize the reader with historical background on ecotourism development generally, and then introduce the specific context of Bhutan. Chapter 3 then outlines the theoretical framework adopted, followed by an overview of methods in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5, entitled "Buddhist biopower? – Variegated governmentality in Bhutan's Gross National Happiness agenda", is the first of the four core articles presented and provides a broad examination of Bhutan governance generally, situating the country's recent development trajectory within global discourses around governance and neoliberal capitalism. Through a funnel-like approach, the following chapters then progressively narrow in scope providing perspectives at multiple scales. Chapter 6, "Neoliberal environmentality in the land of Gross National Happiness", explores environmental governance through an analysis of the "Bhutan for Life" program and growing ecotourism sector. Chapter 7, "Ecotourism discourse in Bhutan: contested perceptions and values", then adopts a community-level perspective by investigating processes of ecotourism development within three rural communities, emphasizing how social and human-environment relations change within these processes. The last of the articles, Chapter 8 entitled "Cosmological subjectivities: exploring 'truth' environmentalities in Haa Highlands" explores how environmental subjectivities are constructed through an ethnoecological approach. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 have been published in peer-reviewed journals and Chapter 8 has been submitted and is under review (see Table 1 for a summary of publication status). While I have conducted the majority of writing and conceptualization for each chapter, I made repeated efforts to acknowledge my role as a foreigner, and to recognize my own limited understanding of place and culture within Bhutan. This necessarily meant collaborating with local co-authors in order to 'decolonize methodologies' (Smith, 1999), adopting a research approach that recognizes "the significance of indigenous perspectives" (p.3). Therefore, while I am the sole author of Chapter 6, chapters 5, 7, and 8 were co-authored with Bhutanese colleagues who laboured with me in data retrieval, language interpretation, and/or manuscript revisions.

Table 1: Publication status of thesis articles

Article	1 (Ch.5)	2 (Ch.6)	3 (Ch.7)	4 (Ch.8)
Authorship	First Author	Sole Author	First Author	First Author
Status	published	published	accepted	under review
Journal	<i>Geoforum</i>	<i>Nature and Space</i>	<i>Tourism Geographies</i>	<i>Conservation &amp; Society</i>

Chapter 9 provides a general discussion of the overall findings and their potential implications for policy and practice in the country, as well as future lines of inquiry in the relevant theoretical fields. Finally, the Conclusion in Chapter 10 offers a summary of findings and concluding remarks.



## 2 Historical Background

Sandwiched between economic giants China and India, Bhutan has long resisted external forces of colonialism and encapsulation both through purposeful policy and geo-physical isolation. What has evolved, then, is a uniquely situated society, based on a Buddhist theocratic governance model initiated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, strengthened through monarchical rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic transition with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary system. Through this evolution, Buddhist philosophy has thrived beyond the realm of religion and serves as a basis for cultural practice, governance, and state legitimacy more generally.

Bhutan has become internationally renowned for its promotion of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which serves as a development model that incorporates environmental conservation and cultural preservation into mainstream policymaking. This has resulted in a unique trajectory that is seen to contrast conventional economic development models and is attributed to a home-grown set of values and beliefs. As such, Bhutan has also developed as an idealized representation in the western imaginary as other states also seek alternatives to the hegemonic form of global capitalism and ideas surrounding ‘progress’ (see Helliwell et al., 2012; UN, 2013; OECD, 2011). Part of this development model involves the promotion of ecological values that drive conservation policy and practice in the country.

In terms of conservation governance, a historical progression reveals movement from sovereign to more community-integrated approaches, and then to more market-based strategies. After the country’s initial Five-Year Plan of 1961 Bhutan enacted its first modern piece of legislation, the 1969 Forest Act. The Forest Act brought all forest resources under state control with the purpose of deterring exploitative practices (NCD, 2004). This was followed by the nationalization of logging operations in the country in 1979 as well as the creation of a number of protected areas. With the first protected area established in 1966, six were added in 1974, and five more in 1983 (Penjore, 2008), with a current protected areas system that includes five National Parks, four Wildlife Sanctuaries, one Strict Nature Reserve, and multiple biological corridors making up 51.44% of the country’s land base (NEC, 2016). Over this progression, however, state control transitioned to account for more inclusive consultation with local residents and resource users. In 1995 the Forest Act was repealed and replaced with the Forest and Nature Conservation Act (FNCA), which provided opportunity for such engagement (NCD, 2004) signaling a more integrated model of conservation. The National Environment Commission stressed “specifically the integration of development, environmental protection, and community participation” (NEC, 1994, p.14). While this trend towards engagement continues, recent strategies for conservation strongly resemble a neoliberal approach. The 2010 Economic Development Plan (RGoB, 2010), the 2013-2018 Eleventh Five Year Plan (RGoB, 2013a; 2013b), and the 2014 National Biodiversity Strategy (MoAF, 2014) all strongly promote tax incentives, payment for ecosystem services (PES) and ecotourism as key strategies for furthering the conservation agenda.

This chapter provides historical background to the context of development and environmental governance, focused particularly on the promotion of ecotourism, within Bhutan. To start, I offer a historical overview of the broader global tourism sector that

paves the way for sub-sectors such as ecotourism. While ecotourism is seen as a response to many of the problems ascribed to conventional mass tourism, it maintains a neoliberal rationality that continues to produce systematic contradictions. As a result, the activity perpetuates many of the same negative impacts it claims to avoid. I then transition to Bhutan, highlighting how the country has sought to transition from tourism to ecotourism, following the trajectories of global discourse and practice. The purpose of this information is to construct a foundation for the thesis' theoretical foundations and arguments that follow. I argue that understanding ecotourism development in Bhutan demands a poststructuralist political ecology approach in order to understand its nuanced discourses and promotion of particular forms of subjectivity. While governmentality provides the initial framework for this (i.e. mapping out various governance rationalities at play), the dwelling perspective addresses local perspectives that contest neoliberal subjectivities that seek to produce dualist human-environment relations. Landscape ethnoecology then situates these novel perceptions and cultural interactions within the context of environmental management and provides methodological tools for the exploration of these novel subjectivities related to human-environment interactions.

## **2.1 Tourism**

### **2.1.1 The Expansion of Tourism**

Finding opportunities for leisure has been a common quest of human societies across time and spatial scales. Ancient Egyptian and Greek societies have been shown, through archaeological evidence, that wealthy class individuals embarked on excursions for the purpose of recreation (Honey, 2008; Gyr, 2010). While such excursions were regional, the idea of leisure permeated society and was promoted as a way to escape, or balance, the confines of a monotonous work schedule. Leisure was not the only motivator for such activities; education and exploration also drew a number of participants to travel outside their home environments. Another historical precursor to conventional tourism can be found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when ruling class individuals or nobleman travelled to broaden their perspective and education (Gyr, 2010). A key characteristic of such travel however was disposable income. To travel outside one's territory was a leisure that not all could afford, was likely seen as an unnecessary expense, and thus limited the number of participants to few individuals.

The age of industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century marked a new age for tourism as it began to lay the infrastructure necessary for the tourism industry to develop and expand. Routes initially laid for trade and markets in the form of roads and railways were later adapted for multiple purposes including tourism. This transportation revolution along with massive industrialization and urbanization that led to increased incomes laid a foundation for modern tourism (Gyr, 2010). When World War II came to a close the global environment for tourism was ripe, as economic growth in the West was massive along with rapid technological progress. Gyr (2010) comments:

*The increase in recreational mobility among broad strata of society should be seen against this background. Various factors brought about this boom, including rising affluence, urbanization, the unprecedented construction of transportation and communication networks and the increase in leisure time as a result of shortening working hours, all of which shaped socialisation (p.8).*

A major tool in aiding the expansion of the tourism industry was air travel, which drastically minimized the spatial scale of destinations. In 1957, flights between America and Europe facilitated a mass increase in global tourism numbers, which further expanded to developing world destinations in 1970 (Honey, 2008). The affordability of air travel, along with a relaxation of work hour policies, emphasis on leisure time and a large working class, created a breeding ground for the mass tourism industry that we see today.

Tour operators partnered with airlines to offer chartered flights to bring large numbers of tourists to destinations (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012), which further spurred a capitalist frenzy of hotels, activities and other service-oriented operations. This new age of tourism found advantage in economies of scale in which price levels were dropped due to an increasing market demand. Cheap all-inclusive packages brought an influx of visitors to destinations that had previously been 'untouched'. While tourist providers initially drove this expansion (Sezgin and Yolal, 2012), the development of tourism products began to diversify after consumers began to fine-tune their leisure preferences. Therefore, while mass tourism to exotic developing world destinations may have become the norm, a number of alternatives have developed such as cultural, adventure, and historical tourism.

### **2.1.2 Negative Impact of Tourism**

The Manila Declaration on World Tourism of 1980 concluded that "tourism does more harm than good to people and to societies in the Third World". This was in reaction to a global tourism industry that developed a reputation of importing foreigners to experience leisure activities in developing countries and leaving a wake of negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts (Mowforth and Munt, 2008).

Low paying employment was often the only benefit to local communities, which came at a cost of environmental pollution, uneven development, and culturally insensitive foreigners (Honey, 2008; Mowforth and Munt, 2008). Environmental issues include water use, waste disposal, water quality standards, wastewater disposal, transportation, biodiversity protection, waste recycling, and conservation projects. Socio-cultural issues associated with tourism include unequal distribution of income causing strife, decision-making processes that are not transparent, increased crime, a widening of understanding between generations, lack of communication, and loss of traditional practices. The creation of National Parks in the United States promoted a 'preservationist' view around the globe in which local people were at times forcibly removed from traditional lands (Honey, 2008; MAF and TCB, 2012). The relationship between parks and people were at odds.

Chatkaewnapanon (2011) comments that the "tourism development processes influence the social structure and the historical sequences of development in a destination. Particularly, tourism can create changes in values and system, traditional lifestyles, individual behaviour and community structure" (p.9). This highlights the power of the tourism industry in producing societal change. The ability of the tourism market to produce such change is seen both in its development stage (incorporating local cultures

into preparing a destination for market) and post-implementation (effects of visitors and globalization).

Negative economic impacts are also numerous as a result of tourism operations. Such impacts may include unrealized livelihood benefits, unequal income distribution, and interdependence between the community and the venture. Foreign, or even regional, investments meant to stimulate an economy often lead to economic leakages and do not maintain a presence in local communities (Honey, 2008). Rinzin et al. (2007) found that a major expense for Bhutanese tour operators was food items. 90% of these food items for treks were canned or packaged products, which were imported from India. As a result, very little reliance is placed on local communities for food provision to tour groups. Similar results are also found throughout the Himalayan region such as in Nepal and Sikkim. In the Mustang region of Nepal tourism policies have tried to combat this trend by relying more heavily on local resources such as porters, food options, etc. And in southern Nepal, near Chitwan National Park, a few private tourism ventures have provided peripheral communities with healthcare facilities and schools. While there is a growing concern to improve tourism's track record, tourism industry dollars are still not reaching rural populations (Rinzin et al 2007; Reinfeld, 2003).

## 2.2 Ecotourism

A number of agencies including the World Bank, USAID, Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Wide Fund for Nature have promoted ecotourism as a key development strategy in the developing world (Honey, 2008). The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) initially defined ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES, 1990). This definition was later expanded to include features of "interpretation and education" (TIES, 2015). This element of education has also been incorporated into a number of definitions developed by ecotourism professionals (Honey, 2008; Gaymans, 1996). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) defines ecotourism as:

*environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local population* (Ceballos-Lascurian 1996).

Honey (2008) provides a comprehensive definition of Ecotourism as:

*travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It helps educate the traveller, provides funds for conservation, directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights* (p.33).

Ecotourism in this definition is based on seven characteristics including: travel to natural destinations, minimizes impacts, builds environmental awareness, provides direct financial benefits for conservation, provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people, respects local culture, and supports human rights & democratic movements. As a result, ecotourism can manifest itself in a number of ways and is not limited to a few specific activities. Rather, ecotourism is a set of principles rather than

a focus on a type of activity or experience (Honey, 2008). Based on such principles, ecotourism has served as a development tool to help meet livelihood and conservation goals (Fennel, 1999; Weaver 2001; Garrod, 2003; Honey, 2008). This has often resulted in circumstances “where the needs of the tourist, the community and the conservation of the environment are mutually interdependent” (Mearns, 2011, p.135).

In order to meet the goals of improved livelihoods and environmental conservation, ecotourism requires high levels of participation by communities, ranging from communities being the primary decision makers to cases where there are high levels of collaboration regardless of which stakeholder has decision-making power. Contrary to many perspectives arguing for pure grass-roots operations, communities may likely need outside support to develop a capacity to run tourism activities, market their products, and to host tourists through appropriate food and accommodation. Fletcher (2014) refers to this as the “paradox of local empowerment”. Such needed skills have often necessitated a collaborative approach. In community-based forms of ecotourism the community is in a prioritized position to make key management decisions and will also be the primary benefactor (Mearns, 2011). Benefits to the community are not limited to mere cash flow from tourists but may also be the ability to benefit from the use of natural resources that they are active in conserving.

Ideally, community-based ecotourism ventures will be set up in such a way that there is an equitable distribution of income among contributing members of the community (Mearns, 2011). However, ‘community’ can be misleading as if referring to a group of individuals all sharing similar positions while ignoring internal hierarchical relationships that may promote the marginalization of select ‘community’ members (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; also see Rigg, 1994). Development practitioners can develop tunnel vision in terms of which a particular community is viewed as marginalized or lacking in resources without recognizing the communities internal dynamics that exist. Such a narrow scope of vision has led to issues in which only key well-off community members experience the benefits of development projects. This circumstance is reflected on more in Chapter 7 with one of the communities explored in this research. In addition, the term ‘community’ can be misleading as if referring to the fact that only the community is involved, when in fact the situation is often much more complex and involves a collaborative effort encompassing numerous parties including government and private sector entities (Berkes, 2004).

Ecotourism benefits experienced by communities have not all been beneficial. In some cases, where there has been a decline in resource harvesting and even a number of conservation activities, the economic increases due to ecotourism have facilitated greater consumption of market products and increased expansion of production. Stronza (2007) found that while economic benefits are certainly an outcome, new values and social relations develop as a result as well. Studies have shown that changes in indigenous culture and society are the result of the introduction of market-based systems (Escobar, 1991; Stronza, 2007). Some communities have actually used increased income to be more efficient in harvesting resources, such as buying tools that make harvesting easier (i.e. chainsaws, guns, etc.) (Stronza, 2007). Ecotourism increases economic opportunities, but unless strictly linked to conservation and with proper enforcement, it could simply lead to more rapid resource extraction (Barret et al., 2000).

Some ecotourism ventures are nothing more than nature-based tourism operations, lacking meaningful input from local peoples (Garrod, 2003). This façade of

participation merely serves as a “greenwashing” of the tourism product offered. In such cases ecotourism does not meet the core values entailed in proposed definitions, and therefore fails to deliver its promise of sustainability. In many cases, as Honey (2008) confesses, “genuine ecotourism is hard to find” (p.6).

### 2.3 Tourism in Bhutan

In 1974 Bhutan opened its doors to tourists for the first time and allowed 287 individuals to enter the ‘Land of the Thunder Dragon’ (Dorji, 2001). This monumental occasion signified a drastic change in foreign policy, which was previously dominated by an isolationist approach. Economic opportunities for tourism were vast and the Royal Government of Bhutan recognized the high value it possessed in terms of a pristine environment and a unique cultural heritage (RGoB, 1999; MAF and TCB, 2012). Bhutan, along with many other developing countries, promoted tourism as a key development strategy for redistributing wealth from developed/rich nations and a tool for economic diversification (Honey, 2008). The construction of the Paro airport in 1983 improved the accessibility of the country and increased tourism opportunities. While the doors were open, extreme caution and a protectionist attitude characterized Bhutanese tourism policy, guarding closely principles of cultural and environmental preservation. However, the tourism market has steadily increased over the years and has been partly driven by the Government’s foreign exchange interests (Gurung and Seeland, 2008). In 2009, 23,480 international tourists came to Bhutan, which rose to 40,873 in 2010, 116,000 in 2013, and 130,000 in 2014 (Zangmo, 2015; TCB, 2011; MAF and TCB, 2012; TCB, 2014). While these numbers represent international visitors, they do not account for regional visitors from India, which is the largest source market for tourism in Bhutan (TCB, 2014). By 2017 tourist arrivals, including both international and regional guests, peaked at 254,574 (TCB, 2018).

Bhutan has developed a unique reputation in the realm of tourism as it has developed an aura of exclusivity and otherworldliness through the application of various strategies and policies. The guiding principle behind much of the development in the country, inclusive of the tourism industry, has been the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which will be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6. According to Braun (2009), GNH was introduced in 1972 by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the 4<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan. However, there is a body of scholarship that criticizes this early origin, arguing that it has a much later development, with first documentation in 1980 and commitment to the concept as an overarching policy guide only in 1996 (Munroe, 2016). The GNH philosophy includes 4 pillars with 9 domains, which are used as a framework for making development decisions (see Table 2).

Table 2: Four Pillars and Nine Domains of GNH

Pillars	Domains
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good Governance</li> <li>• Sustainable Socio-Economic Development</li> <li>• Preservation and Promotion of Culture</li> <li>• Environmental Conservation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Living Standards</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Environment</li> <li>• Community Vitality</li> <li>• Time-use</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological well-being</li> <li>• Good Governance</li> <li>• Cultural Resilience and Promotion</li> </ul>
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The GNH philosophy was in large part a reaction to traditional methods of measuring prosperity within a country (i.e. GDP), which were seen as inappropriate measures (Braun, 2009). Thus, the GNH philosophy stood as a defining act of independence from the global community in which Bhutan explored for itself what societal progress should look like. GNH has received global attention, and criticism, especially in relation to a quote, supposedly made by the 4<sup>th</sup> King, in which he directly contrasts GNH with GNP by saying “Gross National Happiness is more important than Gross National Product” (Braun, 2009). GNH has received much criticism not only from outside, but also from national Bhutanese who have been disillusioned by the ‘GNH experiment’. In response the GNH Commission of Bhutan has been explicit about its use as an index creating indicators and guides for its application (Centre for Bhutan Studies, n.d.). Its success as an implemented index can be debated, however as a philosophy it continues to be promoted and impacts policy decisions within the country (see Chapter 6).

Through the lens of GNH, tourism policy decisions are made to ensure that the 4 pillars and 9 domains are upheld. Tourism is seen as an “inter-connection between GNH and business because of the interactive and service-based nature of work” (RGoB, 2012 p.16). GNH, then, serves as a rationale for promoting such an industry because tourism is seen to operationalize many of the GNH objectives such as improving living standards and cultural promotion (see Chapters 6 and 7).

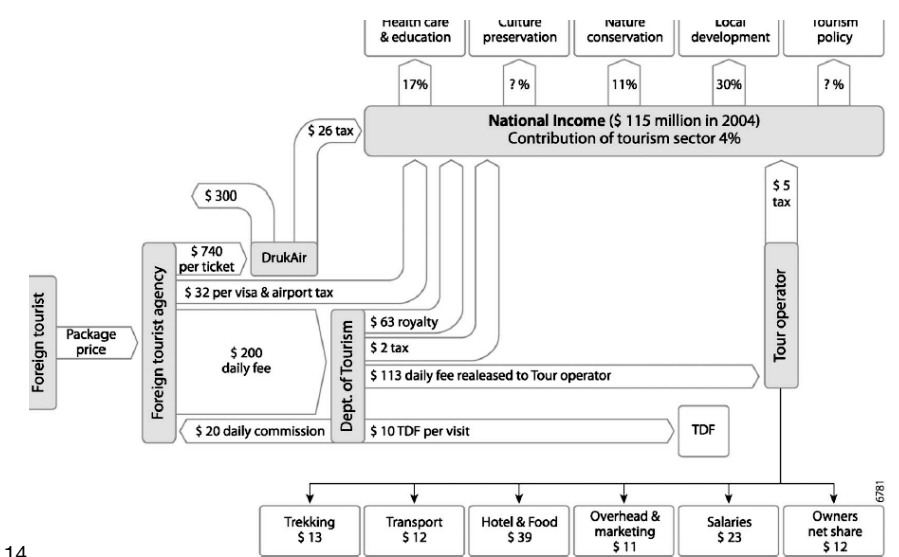
Initially, a policy of ‘high value – low volume’ was introduced due to fears of negative impacts from unrestricted tourism (Dorji, 2001). This ‘controlled tourism’ model was adopted after witnessing how tourism could cause harm to the cultures of neighbouring countries (Rinzin et al, 2007). It was this controlled model, limiting the number of tourists per year, which aided in creating an exclusive tourism product that further enhanced the attraction to this isolated kingdom. Numerous travel magazines continue to highlight Bhutan as an exclusive destination that must be seen in one’s lifetime. With high tariffs and the ‘high value – low volume’ policies in place, Bhutan recognized that it had created a niche for itself within the tourism market. However, as more citizens desired to take part in the industry the government conceded a limited amount of control in 1991 and allowed the industry to become privatised (Dorji, 2001). This new system was said to be ‘partially’ privatized, as tour operators remained under the supervision of the Department of Tourism, under the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Reinfeld, 2003). Tourism numbers, no longer restricted to a government quota system, again saw a rise regardless of the tariffs still in place. With the government’s release on the ‘low volume’ aspect, the tourism strategy changed to what became known as “high value, low impact” in 2011 (MAF and TCB, 2012). The commitment to this strategy focused on attracting wealthy customers as opposed to the strategies of neighbours such as Nepal which catered to backpackers (Gurung and Seeland, 2008; Brown et al., 2007; Rinzin et al., 2007), and yet was no longer imposed by a determined number of visitors per year. The strategy rather focused on allowing the market price itself to restrict those who chose to visit Bhutan. This strategy also aimed at minimizing the cultural impact on local peoples (RGoB, 1999; Rinzin et al., 2007; Dorji, 2001). Rinzin et al. (2007) refer to Bhutan’s tourism policy as a ‘controlled liberalization’ for the purpose of allowing economic progress while also protecting national values including cultural and

environmental preservation, which serve as critical GNH objectives. However, as I will show in Chapter 5, the philosophy of GNH is not clearly defined leading to multiple understandings regarding how objectives are established.

Bhutan has capitalized on cultural tourism. This is not unique to Bhutan; other countries have seen the value that culture adds to create an attraction that draws tourists (Hakim, 2008; Luchman et al., 2009). While numerous other activities are offered creating niche markets such as bird watching, botanical sites, river trips and trekking (Gurung and Seeland, 2008), the cultural “products” dominate the market. As such, cultural festival dates are a primary determinant for travel dates, along with climactic conditions (Rinzin et al., 2007). This makes March-May and Sept-November the high-seasons for tourism due to the lack of monsoon rains and a higher concentration of festivals. In addition to temporal restrictions, tourism activities are also restricted in scale to a relatively small portion of the country. Tourism nights spent in Bhutan are dominant in Thimphu and Paro, followed by a small portion in Punakha, Wangdue, Bumthang and Trongsa (Rinzin et al., 2007). This is not due to government policy or market manipulation, rather tourism activities have dominated in areas of accessibility. Infrastructure developments, such as roads and tourist facilities, that can accommodate tourist travel, are limited to a few sites. Eastern Bhutan, as a result, is relatively unintegrated.

While distribution of tourism benefits to rural areas is fairly limited, the specific issue of tourism dollar distribution has been a point of concern for many stakeholders in the country including tourism providers, government, and rural communities (Chapter 7 also reflects on this issue). From stakeholders there are a number of criticisms ranging from; government percentages being too high, daily fee requirements are too restrictive to tourism businesses, tour operators unfairly competing through ‘shady’ cost-cutting measures, etc. It should also be noted that there is a high level of uncertainty amongst the common public about the actual distribution of tourism dollars. Figure 1 (from Rinzin et al., 2007) is a flow chart that highlights distribution starting from the foreign tourist through to ground level service providers:

Figure 1: Distribution of Tourism Dollars (Rinzin et al., 2007)



Tourism in Bhutan has been faced with many difficulties such as monsoons that create sharp peak seasons for visitation, few repeat visitors, regional imbalances and relatively few sites with attractions for visitors (Wangmo, 2008; Namgyel et al, 2014; Dorji, 2001). As a result, the government has tried to promote tourism in a few different ways; for example, recasting Bhutan's image as providing tourism opportunities outside peak seasons. This is not an easy problem to remedy as tourists are drawn to destinations with amicable weather, yet dealing with this negative seasonal stereotype is necessary to deal with in order to create a more consistent and reliable income from the tourist market. However, in a survey conducted by the Department of Tourism in 2004, they found that most tourists based their visitation period on recommendations from their tour agents (Rinzin et al, 2007). This finding suggests that tourist decisions are less likely dependent on knowledge of monsoon seasons, and require more informed agents who can perhaps provide attractive tourism options outside traditional periods of visitation.

Cultural preservation is also a key aspect of the Bhutan Tourism policy and there have been mixed reviews regarding tourism's impact in this regard as well. In a survey done by Rinzin et al. (2007) 79% of tour operators believe tourism has a negligible impact on local culture. Yet festival venues do seem to be crowded and lack the "traditional" feel that high paying tourists seek out of their experience. Paro residents were later surveyed by Jadhav et al. (2013) in regards to perceived impacts of tourism. While some aspects were positive in regards to the promotion of religious festivals, negative cultural impacts were mentioned such as a shift in social acceptance of western food, music, dress, and even names for children. Chapters 7 and 8 also present critical findings regarding changes in perceptions and cultural practice as a result of engagement in the tourism sector. These perceived threats stand as a critical issue in Bhutan as culture is a source of pride, and numerous policies aim to preserve local culture through dress codes, architectural codes, etc.

GNH philosophy, the tourism tariff system, and the 'high value – low impact' policy have all played an important role in the development of tourism in the country and have important implications for the future of the industry. While cultural products have dominated the market, and as criticisms have been encountered, the government has been investigating opportunities to diversify the industry.

## **2.4 Ecotourism in Bhutan**

With the looming threat of mass tourism and its impacts on Bhutan's ecological and cultural integrity, the Royal Government has actively explored options to mitigate these impacts. In addition, avenues for rural development have also been a growing concern. One option has been to diversify tourism products in the country and to find more avenues for visitors to not only find tourism opportunities outside traditional peak seasons, but to also divert industry benefits to rural populations. Ideas for expanding tourism into rural areas include (Rinzin et al., 2007):

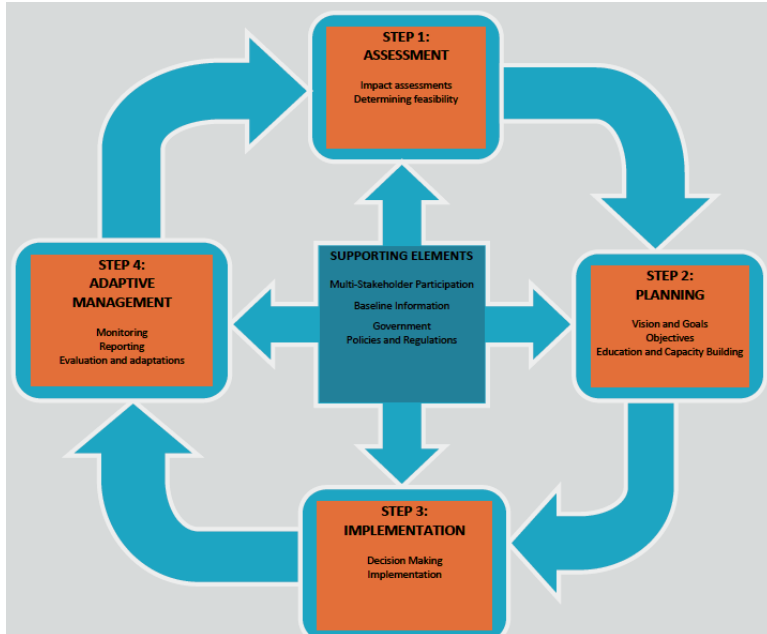
- Opening up eastern regions
- Reduce seasonality
- Develop new cultural events
- Special interest products
- Increasing the number of entry points, specifically in the east.

Ecotourism has been highlighted as an opportunity, offering such diversification rather than expanding the already bulging market (Reinfeld, 2003; RGoB, 1999). Chapter 6 highlights this sector as a means to meet the development challenges of the country. Such a strategy would call for strategic/selective marketing and elements of activity control (limited number of individuals for certain activities). While ecotourism is already present in a number of cases in Bhutan, the potential to expand is great. Gurung and Seeland (2008) found that younger travellers between ages of 31-40 were more interested in nature/ecotourism type of travel and showed more tendency to stay beyond 14 days of travel, which was in contrast to older travellers focussed more on cultural tourism who rarely stayed for this amount of time. Park staffs in Bhutan's Protected Areas network have also recognized that dealing with livelihood concerns is necessary in order to achieve desired conservation goals (Wang et al., 2006), and ecotourism has been promoted as a key policy initiative to see this happen. As well, with the concern of rapid rural-to-urban migration occurring, ecotourism is recognized as an industry that can motivate individuals to remain in rural areas (Rinzin et al., 2007).

While the Bhutan Government has recognized the potential of ecotourism to meet rural development goals (RGoB, 1999; Gurung and Seeland, 2008), rural communities remain concerned that tourism policies are too restrictive to support the industry in remote areas. Gyamtsho (1996) recognized that communities in highland areas of Bhutan experienced very little economic benefit from tourism, a mere 4% of their total income. He further postulated that in order to achieve conservation goals in such highland areas, development activities must account for the economic concerns of the rural population, something tourism has also not been able to do in remote areas. Hence, the success of ecotourism will largely be dependent on the Government's willingness to adopt liberalized policies towards new forms of tourism (Gurung and Seeland, 2008).

In 2002 the government developed a National Ecotourism Strategy that laid out groundwork for how such a product should be created and promoted in the country. This was followed up in 2012 with a guideline for planning and management of ecotourism, which specifically had a focus on the Protected Areas Network of Bhutan (MAF and TCB, 2012). Figure 2 (from MAF and TCB, 2012) symbolizes the framework for which ecotourism is to be further developed.

Figure 2: Framework for Ecotourism Development in the Protected Areas Network of Bhutan (MAF and TCB, 2012)

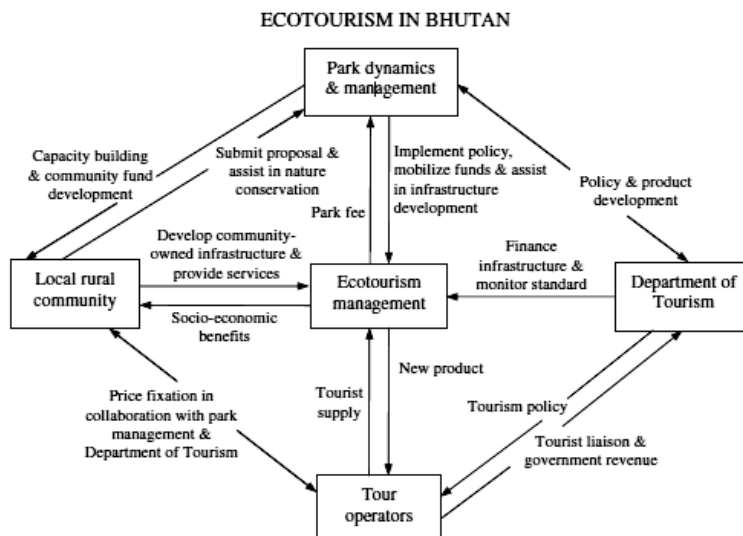


While shifts in policy and practice are seen, there are still a number of hurdles that must be dealt with to promote ecotourism as a unique tourism product that lives up to the principles it promotes. Current pricing mechanisms favour high-end tourists, and these tend to be older/retired individuals who are more interested in cultural tourism products. High tariffs are a “limiting factor” for tourists who want to enjoy trekking and other outdoor activities that require travel time to more remote areas (Gurung and Seeland, 2008). At one point, prior to 1997, Trekking and cultural tourism tariffs were different. This allowed more flexibility to travellers wanting to experience rural Bhutan through trekking as the tariffs for this activity were lower. However, in 1997 a uniform tariff was put in place (Rinzin et al., 2008). As a result, trekking and rural tourism saw a 73% decline from 1996 to 2004, 1851 trekkers down to 507 (Rinzin et al., 2007). Following this, little investment has been made to maintain trekking routes and a lack of tourism infrastructure in rural areas resulting in little value being added for those tourists that do decide to opt for such an option. Gurung and Seeland (2008) argue that, if the Royal Government of Bhutan desires to further expand ecotourism opportunities, they must consider diversifying products, encouraging community micro-enterprises, and adjusting the current pricing policy. A two-tiered system may need to be reintroduced to promote traffic into rural areas and motivate investment into rural infrastructure. They conclude, the success of ecotourism is dependent on a liberalized pricing policy, which allows time and flexibility to access remote areas.

Gurung and Seeland (2008) have promoted the idea of communities investing in micro-enterprises in which communities jointly invest in eco-lodge type ventures which meet the high-end quality expected from luxury travellers, yet the benefits are evenly

distributed among the community instead of local elites gaining the majority of benefits (Gurung and Seeland, 2008). Training and initial investment aid would be required from outside sources whether it is government or other aid organizations. The role of a payment for ecosystem services (PES) scheme in ecotourism has also been suggested and initiated in sites (i.e. Nabji-Korphu Trail) (Ritsma et al., 2010). PES is not uncommon in the Himalayas, as it has also been considered in areas of the Tibetan Plateau where yak herding communities willingly avoid use of pastureland in order to protect headwater zones to ensure water quality downstream (Foggin, 2014). Regardless of the specific mechanisms used to attract investment and economic incentives for ecotourism, partnerships between various stakeholders will be critical to providing a thriving successful ecotourism industry. Gurung and Seeland (2008) produced the following diagram to show the required collaboration for such efforts (specific to Protected Areas):

Figure 3: Organizational Roles of Major Stakeholders in Ecotourism Management (Gurung and Seeland, 2008)



A number of ecotourism ventures in Bhutan have already begun to make a name for themselves as sustainable forms of tourism that meet the goals of both livelihood needs and conservation:

- Nabji Trail (SNV, n.d.; Ritsma et al., 2010) in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park, started in 2006. By 2008 it was the 8<sup>th</sup> best-selling trek in Bhutan (Ritsma et al., 2010). The project was initiated by the private sector and then welcomed and managed by local communities who developed Tourism Management Committees (Ritsma et al., 2010). Capacity building was provided by SNV (SNV, n.d.).
- Wangchuck Centennial National Park Homestay Programme – Homestay programme initiated by WWF Bhutan (WWF, 2012). Started in 2008. This project was designed with the specific purpose to curb rural-urban migration and to distribute tourist related funds to the rural

population. 21 families have been trained in skills and services required for homestay operations, prioritizing women for such training.

- Phobjikha Homestay and Black-necked Crane Conservation Area - The Royal Society of the Protection of Nature (RSPN) drafted an Ecotourism Management Plan for Phobjikha, which was declared a conservation area for Black-necked Crane habitat (Dorji, 2001). This site has shown a unique collaborative effort between communities, a local NGO, international NGO, and the Bhutan government. This case will be explored further in Chapter 7.
- Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary – a campsite has been established along with a number of capacity building training programs for nomadic indigenous groups whom are trained in guiding and cooking (MAF and TCB, 2012). This is a joint venture with government park management staff and local *Brokpa* communities.

To maintain their goal of ‘high value - low impact’, the government of Bhutan will need to pay much consideration to the unintended consequences of increased volumes, not only for traditional tourism products, but especially as they seek to promote ecotourism in rural areas. Monteverde in Costa Rica, for example, was heavily invested in the protection of Golden Toad habitat. However, as ecotourism came to dominate the landscape and outcompete traditional livelihoods, this transition coincided with the disappearance of the species (Honey, 2008). Numbers of tourists have overwhelmed parks such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and more. When such parks were overcrowded and no longer offered the ‘nature’ experience, people looked to other locations. With such unique species such as the Black-necked Crane, Snow Leopard and the Red Panda, Bhutan has much potential in creating a world-renowned ecotourism destination. However, it also has a lot to lose if ecotourism is not planned for appropriately and managed in a sustainable manner.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

The work of both Teoh (n.d., 2015a, 2015b) and Karst (2016; Nepal and Karst, 2017) have approached the context of tourism/ecotourism in Bhutan and have criticized aspects of the sector's formation and practice. Teoh analyzes the broader tourism sector and looks at dynamics related to GNH. He argues that trends in the global mass tourism phenomenon are disparate to the spirit of GNH, and that specific policy measures promoted by external actors, such as McKinsey & Company in 2009 (a case further analyzed in Chapter 6), represent dangerous contestations. Karst, diverting from an emphasis on GNH, highlights the policy and practice of ecotourism specifically. She shows how the sector creates confusion and conflict amongst rural communities as they struggle to meet established development objectives. These more recent critiques of ecotourism in Bhutan, however, fail to explore dynamics related to how ecotourism represents a rationality for governance, how GNH contests and merges with competing rationalities, and how particular 'environmental subjects' (Agrawal, 2005) transpire. In this chapter, I outline a theoretical framework for how I address this lacuna.

Political Ecology, rooted in the political economy of (post-) Marxian thinking and later expanded through poststructuralist perspectives, serves as the overarching conceptual framework for this research. Political Ecology has proven useful for multi-scalar analyses linking larger transnational and societal discourses (Forsyth, 2003; Paulson et al., 2003; Peet and Watts, 1996) to localized case studies (Khan, 2013; Zimmerer, 2006; Escobar, 1998). A poststructuralist analysis, and in particular an approach grounded in Foucauldian governmentality, will be used to understand ecotourism as a discourse and function of a particular neoliberal 'environmentality' (Fletcher, 2010, 2014) and to explore the power relations involved in ecotourism promotion in Bhutan. Both governmentality and environmentality have been used to map out various rationalities for governance, but also the forms of subjectivity these rationalities promote. How is the conduct of conduct systematically organized in the context of environmental governance and ecotourism in particular? How are specific behaviours either encouraged or manipulated? And in the context of ecotourism, how does the sector play a role in these subjectivities? Governmentality/environmentality provide the lens for this investigation. However, I argue that this theoretical framework only provides partial explanation for the data observed in Bhutan.

This research also integrates Ingold's *dwelling* approach (2000) to investigate local specificities in terms of human-environment interactions, an approach employed in previous research on ecotourism (Jamal and Stronza, 2009; Koot, 2013). This perspective emphasizes a novel ontology that challenges conventional managerial attitudes towards the environment in which humans are placed in a role of dominance. As many local informants expressed worldviews that contrasted this positionality, the data demanded a theoretical framework that was suited to investigate a more integrated human-environment relationship. *Dwelling* provides this framing by recognizing humans as actors who are actively engaged, effecting but also being affected by their surroundings, rather than as agents who merely act *upon* the environment.

The *dwelling* approach has also been embraced by landscape ethnoecology researchers, another field of inquiry that was adopted in this thesis. Landscape ethnoecology emphasizes the integration of perception, resource use and cultural practice. While *dwelling* allows me to shift the starting point, to acknowledge the influence of worldview



perspectives on subjectivities, landscape ethnoecology provides methodologies for this exploration. As the landscape shapes and is shaped by those who reside within it, specific cultural behaviors and beliefs follow. Stories and myths about the landscape emerge and have profound explanatory value about how particular subjectivities are entrenched. As such, the stories that this thesis shares are reflective of a particular human-environment relationship, and I employ landscape ethnoecology to make sense of this. Finally, this exploration of worldviews and perceptions makes a convenient integration with governmentality/environmentality as my findings reveal a particular *truth* environmentality from a 'storying' process.

In what follows, I explain my adoption of these theoretical traditions by summarizing each of them and showing how they, in unison, compliment the data set. I start by addressing governmentality as the broad base for inquiry that may be used to address multiple governance rationalities, but also show the relevance of environmentality as conceptualized by Agrawal (2005a, 2005b) and further reconceptualized by others. I then show how this intersects work on neoliberal conservation, and ecotourism as a manifestation of this trend. Ecotourism will be shown as, not only a material and economic practice, but also a discursive cultural process. I then move to *dwelling*, which provides a repositioning of the human-environment relationship that aligns with the Bhutanese context, contesting the nature-culture dichotomy that ecotourism promotes. And finally, I address landscape ethnoecology as a critical approach to interpreting the data through the process of storying, which reveals novel perceptions and subjectivities related to the landscape.

### **3.1 Governmentality, Environmentality, and Variegated Approaches**

Governmentality research has been taken up by a host of social scientists working to make sense of Foucault's perspective on history, governance, and power. Senellart (2007) claims that Foucault's thought evolved over time and has only been revealed to the Anglophone world in stages as translation work of his lectures progresses. As a result, theorists confront particular perspectives from the early Foucault, which are then challenged and contradicted by more recently published works. Nevertheless, the term 'governmentality' has come to mean "the way in which one conducts the conduct of men" (Foucault, 2008a, p.186). Inherent in this concept is the notion of power, or more correctly "relations of power", which is analysed in terms of how "the management of a whole social body" (p.186) is conducted. Foucault's approach to understanding power provides a unique framework for analysing how a particular form of government legitimizes itself and motivates compliance amongst its subject population.

Governmentality is closely related to another of Foucault's popular concepts: biopower. In reference to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which saw an evolution of power away from strict sovereign forms, Foucault comments "there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of population, making the beginning of an era of 'biopower'" (1990, p.140). Here we find that the population becomes a primary target of control. Rather than a sovereign merely protecting his/her claims through forcible power that threatens death, there is a shift in the foci of governance in which the societal body, and its ability to survive, becomes the objective. Biopower is described by Foucault as "techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions (the family and the army, schools and the police, individual medicine and the administration of collective

bodies).....guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony” (1990, p.141). Biopower, then, is seen in contrast to *sovereign* power in that this approach sees the health and vitality of the population as a whole as the key objective of governance. “It is the population itself on which government will act either directly, through large-scale campaign, or indirectly, through techniques that will make possible, without the full awareness of the people, the stimulation of birth rates, the directing of the flow of population into certain regions or activities, and so on” (Foucault, 1994, p.217).

While Foucault’s earlier work explores sovereign forms of power, he later confronts modern governmentalities that were birthed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault, 2008a). It was at this time, during great economic reforms, when ‘power over life’ became a much more profitable and efficient way to establish dominance, in contrast to historical sovereign powers that used the ‘fear of death’ as the tool for enforcing conformity. With the *sovereign* and *disciplinary* states serving as the main subjects of analysis, Foucault later explored new forms of liberalism, being careful to distinguish between German, French, and Western/United States expressions. It was the more western expression of neoliberalism upon which he comments, “it seems to me that we are seeing the birth, maybe for a short period or maybe for a longer period, of a new art of government” (2008a, p.176). This *neoliberal* governmentality is a unique form of governance that “seeks merely to create external incentive structures within which individuals, understood as self-interested rational actors, can be motivated to exhibit appropriate behaviours through manipulation of incentives” (Fletcher, 2010, p.173). By contrast, a *sovereign* governmentality forces subjects to conform to various expected standards of conduct; a *truth* governmentality works to impose specific truth/religious claims as moral imperatives; while a *disciplinary* governmentality works to inculcate social norms in subjects through fear or observation (Foucault, 2008a).

While Foucault’s characterizations of specific governmentalities (i.e. sovereign, disciplinary, truth and neoliberal) have served as theoretical constructs, some practitioners have proven ridged in their application, overlaying such modalities onto reality rather than viewing them as a useful heuristic. This has led to “certain accusations that governmentality is guilty of homeostasis - that it provides rigid models of government” (Rose et al., 2006, p.98). This is certainly the case in the first and only work to relate governmentality to the GNH agenda. Teoh (2015a, 2015b) conceptualizes GNH as a particular modality of governmentality (see Chapter 6), setting it up as a counter to a neoliberal rationale, failing to understand governmentality as a variegated framework in which multiple modalities may overlap. Governing rationalities “are not fixed or universal, but heterogeneous and historically contingent” (McKee, 2009, p.470). A ‘realist’ approach (McKee, 2009), points towards new variegated forms of governmentality that challenge a silo approach to understanding Foucault’s work. It recognizes Foucault’s work as historically placed and appreciates “the rather limited and specific nature of his project” (Sawicki, 1996, p.176), while freeing contemporary researchers from theoretical shackles, thus enabling us to take “Foucault beyond Foucault” (Nealon, 2008) in developing creative applications of his concepts. As such, governmentality should not be seen as a restrictive set of governance modalities to be applied as frameworks for inquiry, but rather a field that provides techniques for exploring variegated governance rationalities. This approach has profound implications for the exploration of Bhutan’s governance model in which GNH resonates with sovereign, disciplinary, truth and neoliberal governmentalities.

Work related to governmentality has also evolved to offer more precise analyses of environmental governance in particular, an approach that has come to be known as the study of ‘environmentality’ (Luke, 1995; Agrawal, 2005a, 2005b; Fletcher, 2010). This has particular relevance to analyses of ecotourism, providing a more defined investigation of the conduct of conduct promoted within the sector as a tool for conservation. In this frame the “environment” becomes a contested realm of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. While Luke (1995) originally conceptualizes the term as a means to integrate Foucauldian thought with the ‘environment’ as a dominant node of discourse and expression of disciplinary forms of power, Agrawal (2005a, 2005b) subsequently extended this. Agrawal focuses on a mode of environmentality in which environmental subjects are formed through disciplinary means, and postulates that enrolment of subjects within state programs facilitates subjectification. Thus, it is through participation in conservation activities that subjects begin to internalize discourses and values, in pursuit of an idealized environmental subject that the state promulgates. Engaging with Agrawal, Fletcher (2010) then offers a critical expansion of environmentality literature by drawing on Foucault’s later work to conceptualize multiple modalities for environmentality beyond the disciplinary function that Luke and Agrawal emphasize. This move dramatically increases the framework’s scope for application and explanatory power. *Sovereign, Truth, and neoliberal* modalities then present themselves as additional categories to provide more nuanced investigations into conservation paradigms, which has specific application to my own analysis of ecotourism as a conservation strategy (see specifically Chapters 6, 7 and 8).

Of particular interest and relevance to this current research are trends in governmentality research that seek to forward new applications accounting for local specificities and expanding beyond an “overly abstract view of governing in which politics is reduced to rationality” (McKee, 2009, p.478). While the Bhutan/GNH case presents a novel application of governmentality, there are numerous sociocultural and historical characteristics that confound mentalities of rule, thus demanding a more ethnographic approach to exploring governance rationalities and actual practice. For example, although ecotourism presents a neoliberal rationale, how does a history of state paternalism (i.e. sovereign), a commitment to a Buddhist worldview (i.e. truth), and the establishment of GNH policy tools (i.e. disciplinary) contest this governmentality? (see Chapter 7 which addresses these contesting governmentalities). O’Malley et al. (1997) warn against:

*the reduction of politics to a ‘mentality of rule’. The lack of attention to social relations occurs by epistemological design, not by accident. It is a problem at the level of its theoretical object, ‘mentality of rule’, that has led governmentality studies to be insensitive to social variation and social heterogeneity (p.505).*

In response, McKee (2009) promotes the ‘realist’ approach that combines a discursive governmentality framework, common to current governmentality studies, with grounded empirical work that strives to mediate promoted mentalities of rule and governing practices. As such, the realist approach produces a multi-level framework that does justice to issues, such as resistance and subject reflexivity, by accounting for field based empirical insights (McKee, 2009). Gupta and Sharma (2006) also reflect on how policy agendas of the state are not well understood and may even be subverted at micropolitical levels. Schroeder (2014, 2018) found similar themes in the Bhutanese context in which an analysis of GNH policy intention and practice point to a failure of the Bhutanese state to facilitate compliance through targeted policies, yet societal

objectives were still achieved through shared cultural/value commitments that resembled the larger GNH philosophy. Therefore, while specific policies resembling a mentality of rule were promoted and unable to succeed, local commitments to the wider cultural ethos proved pivotal in achieving societal objectives.

This variegated approach to governmentality also allows me to explore processes of neoliberalization in a more nuanced manner. Trends in neoliberal literature no longer conceptualize neoliberalism as a unified entity or set of practices for governance, but rather understand it as a process of neoliberalization (Peck and Tickel, 2002; Peck et al., 2009; Springer, 2012, 2014). However, while this body of literature actively explores variegated forms of neoliberalism and how it adapts to specific contexts, it has not provided the language for the other rationalities that also exist. Therefore, by combining variegated neoliberalism literature with variegated governmentality, I'm able to map out and describe contesting rationalities. The context of GNH in Bhutan provides a novel opportunity to combine these theoretical framings in order to explore how global neoliberal trajectories contest and merge with Asian values, spiritualities, and governance producing a particular type of environmental subject.

### **3.2 Neoliberal and Discursive Dimensions of Ecotourism**

Researchers have elaborated on the connection between ecotourism and neoliberalism (Duffy, 2002, 2008; Fletcher, 2009, 2010, 2014; West and Carrier, 2004; Hutchins, 2007). Neoliberalism invites a decentralized system in which individual market entities exercise increased power and influence, further materialized through privatization schemes in which state owned good and services are partitioned off to private entities (Barnett, 2010; West and Carrier, 2004). Fletcher's (2014) ethnographic analysis of the origins of ecotourism traces key characteristics of the industry to neoliberalism ideals promoted by the stereotypical western white middle class male. Therefore, in order for community-based ventures to be successful they must market to a culture that is not their own, to meet the needs of the tourist 'gaze' (Urry, 2001) that contains various expectations of the purchased experiences. Such a critique not only highlights the neoliberal nature of ecotourism, but also calls for critical consideration concerning cultural influences entailed in its promotion. Therefore, while the sector has been heavily critiqued with a strong emphasis on economic, social and environmental impacts (see Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Honey, 2008; Fennell, 2014) for which these material impacts are highlighted as contradictions within the sector, the sector can also be analysed as a discursive process in which cultural values and perceptions are reshaped. Fletcher (2009) claims that the sector must also be framed as a "discursive process, embodying a culturally specific set of beliefs and values" (p.269). As such, ecotourism not only promotes material and economic practice aligned with neoliberal capitalism, but also a specific set of values that are promulgated. These values may therefore be alien to host cultures that adopt ecotourism as a strategy for conservation.

This novel framing of ecotourism shifts the focus from economic practice to discourses that drive the sector. Ecotourism inculcates norms and values associated with a neoliberal logic (see Fletcher, 2009, 2010, 2014; West and Carrier, 2004; Hutchins, 2007) with privatization, competitive advantages, and decentralization dominating the governance rational for both policy and practice. Holmes and Cavanagh (2016) support this notion of altering local values noting that "conservation regulations are moving from being an external force to working within the lives of rural people, changing their

behaviour not just by threatening them with the law and its agents, but also by appealing to economic rationales” (p.206).

One element of this discursive dimension is the promotion of a nature-culture dichotomy in which humans are seen as separate and against the environment (West and Carrier, 2004). From this perspective, humans seek interaction with a ‘wild’ environment to gain experiences as opposed to relying on it for sustenance, and nature becomes subservient and passive to the demands that humanity places upon it. Ecotourism promotion portrays nature as a commodity (Hutchins, 2007) that then reorients local perspectives about their surroundings, with nature becoming something that can be managed and manipulated for human well-being.

This instrumental worldview contrasts many rural perspectives that perceive humanity being at the mercy or being subjected to nature. Nunez et al. (2014) note “in societies that are subjected to nature, people completely accept their situation, and this is their preferred survival strategy” (p.46), which is a more common view from indigenous cultures in places where ecotourism often takes place. Koot (2013) notes that in South African Bushmen society there is a perspective in which nature and culture are not separate entities but rather interact “as undivided beings” (p.37). Influence on local sociocultural formations is seen as a major drawback of ecotourism. Hutchins (2007) in his research with Ecuadorians of the Upper Amazon comments:

*the selective representation of indigenous culture is accompanied by a process that also redefines the forest in which they live. The mere presence of tourists at sacred sites and during certain rituals has an effect on how these places and practices are interpreted by local residents (p. 92).*

As locals reinterpret their surroundings, this brings new meaning/significance to the landscape, resources, and everyday life. Hutchins (2007) goes further showing how identities are imposed on local communities, not by any single sovereign like actor/entity, but through a series of globalized market interactions such as tourism.

An additional criticism concerns how ecotourism conceptualizes and promotes human behaviour. The “stakeholders theory,” in which conservation efforts are linked to economic incentives, is a common theory of motivation for local involvement in ecotourism (Honey, 2008; Fletcher, 2009). From this perspective it is thought that in order for ecotourism to be properly promoted, one must argue that it makes economic sense. However, such rhetoric may be undermining – economists call this “crowding out” – alternative conservation frameworks already existing in indigenous communities, which are less economically motivated (see Singh, 2013, 2015).

Therefore, ecotourism discourse presents a neoliberal set of values that contest local worldviews. As such, this research required a theoretical framework to account for worldviews that lacked dichotomous framings, one that better represented rural Bhutanese perspectives. To address this issue I also incorporated the use of *dwelling* theory.

### **3.3 Dwelling and Landscape Ethnoecology**

While a variegated governmentality approach allows for novel framings of ecotourism as a discursive neoliberal process, governmentality more generally has a negative connotation in regards to subjectivities as it tends to focus on how a state subjugates the

populace, a process commonly understood to entail the minimization of individual agency (Cepek, 2011). This critique carries over to environmentality, specifically in relation to Agrawal's 'participation' thesis (2005a, 2005b), which posits that environmental subjects are formed through merely participating in conservation activities. In his work in Amazonia, Cepek (2011) shows that despite inducement to assume a particular approach to environmental governance via participation, locals maintain their own perspectives and values related to the nonhuman environment. Similar perspectives are advanced by Jepson et al. (2012), Faye (2016), and Cortes and Ruiz (2018), all of whom echo previous feminist critiques of Foucault's (1977) 'docile bodies' thesis (see Bordo, 1993 and Deveaux, 1994). Cortes and Ruiz (2018) note "the formation of environmental subjects is in many cases an incomplete project that is manipulated and made messier by the capacity of people to negotiate, adapt, and combine different forms of practice, incorporating their own interests, affects, and habits" (p.240). These scholars complicate environmentality by pointing out that subject formation is not a simplistic equation in which political actors merely produce 'docile bodies', a notion that Foucault himself later revised (Deveaux, 1994). Therefore, while governmentality offers some insight into the process of subjectivity, it only tells part of the story. What is required is an additional theoretical framing that more accurately accounts for agential determinism, as well as local perceptions and worldview perspectives that influence behavior.

*Dwelling* theory is of interest as it resituates the starting point for understanding how an individual perceives and behaves in an environment. Rather than assuming a western perspective that positions humans as managers of the environment, *dwelling* views humans as actors *within* the environment, part of a relationship in which they both impact and are impacted by their surroundings. The work of Ingold (2000, 2011), the primary promoter of the *dwelling* perspective, proposes, "to collapse the Cartesian dualities between mind and body, subject and object" in order to better account for "non-Western understandings – which are not generally concordant with such dualities" (2000, p.170). Therefore, *dwelling* pertains to how one perceives their surroundings and how it becomes 'home'. As Ingold (1991) states, "it is through dwelling in a landscape, through the incorporation of its features into a pattern of everyday activities, that it becomes home to hunters and gatherers" as well as other actors (p.61). This understanding of dwelling will affect how societies relate to the environment, how they value it, and in turn how they act within it. This has enormous application when we turn to environmental management activities. In turn we can postulate that communities with differing practices, whether they be agriculturalists, pastoralists, or foragers, will have different conceptions and understandings of the landscape. This knowledge is not well 'organized', recorded or cognitively mapped; rather it heavily depends on an experiential component in which the knowledge is useful and accessed as needed (Ingold, 2000; Johnson, 2010).

Ingold (2000), drawing on Heidegger, makes a distinction between a "building" and "dwelling" perspective in terms of how individuals perceive and act within their environment. The 'building perspective' entails that an individual chooses to dwell in their environment based on a preconceived mental construct regarding what can be accomplished in that environment, which Ingold calls 'acts of worldmaking'. In terms of actual homemaking, different types of societies create homes based on a growing understanding of their surroundings mixed with an element of cultural influence. While the agriculturalist will build a home with permanence, the nomad will build one with fluidity and adaptability. Both contain elements of a perceived 'building', yet one has

more permanence (Ingold, 2000). This 'building' perspective is described by Rapoport (1994) as the case where 'built environments are thought before they are built' (p.488).

By contrast, the 'dwelling' perspective posits that the building and the act of dwelling are related to one another, but not the same thing. Stated another way, the physical structure of a building does not necessarily mean that a satisfactory place of dwelling has been constructed, rather there is much more to a 'dwelling' that makes a building become 'home' (Pearson and Richards, 1994). We make buildings because we are dwellers and we have a need to dwell in something. This perspective accounts for an underlying human need to feel safe and secure, to feel at home. In the same way, a simple tree could be viewed similar to a constructed house (an element of architecture). While the tree and house are different in many ways, they share a common thread in that they both serve as dwellings for animals. This sense of dwelling is what drives us in how we interact and construct objects in our environment (Ingold, 2000).

Therefore, a *dwelling* perspective allows me to integrate cultural perceptions regarding the environment and further aids my emphasis on ecotourism as a discursive process. Ecotourism promotion, with its underlying neoliberal environmentality, commonly understands behaviour to be externally motivated by utilitarian cost-benefit calculations and the environment is framed as something to be managed or commodified for individual gain. Additionally, the framing of a nature-culture dichotomy inherent in ecotourism promotion is opposed by the *dwelling* approach. As well, this neoliberal framing is contested by local Bhutanese perspectives influenced by Buddhist spiritualities that resonate more with a *dwelling* perspective. Thus, I am able to reflect on competing claims of human positionality, those introduced by the neoliberal nature of ecotourism and of the rural Bhutanese agriculturalist/pastoralist. What will be shown is that rural residents, those who are drawn into relations of ecotourism, perceive an environment that dominates and threatens their survival. Instead of viewing a landscape in which they are able to manipulate elements, they are at the mercy of natural and spiritual forces. Human actors are not perceived as being in a position of dominance over nature but are rather subjected to natural forces and a host of deities that govern the natural world. Therefore, *dwelling* integrates with my use of governmentality in order to more thoroughly account for local subjectivities.

Landscape ethnecology is a specific field of study that has employed the *dwelling* approach (see esp. Toledo, 2002; Johnson, 2010; Johnson and Hunn, 2010; Johnson and Davidson-Hunt, 2011). It also provides a methodological tool box for exploring these perceptions by exploring language, affective relations, and 'storying' of the landscape. Ethnecology can be defined as "an interdisciplinary approach that explores how nature is viewed by human groups through a screen of beliefs and knowledge, and how humans use their images to acquire and manage natural resources" (Toledo, 2002, p.514). The landscape that a community perceives and lives in, then, is more than just the physical environment, but entails elements of culture that affect the perceived environment. There are cosmological and spiritual elements encompassed in this way of understanding one's surroundings and it affects their practices and actions (Johnson, 2010; Toledo, 2002).

Speaking to the field of ethnecology more broadly, Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) define it as the "interdisciplinary study of how nature is perceived by humans through a screen of beliefs and knowledge, and how humans, through their symbolic meanings and representations, use and/or manage landscapes and natural resources" (p.11).

Ruiz-Mallen et al. (2011) categorize the study of ethnoecology as the intersection of the following 4 categories:

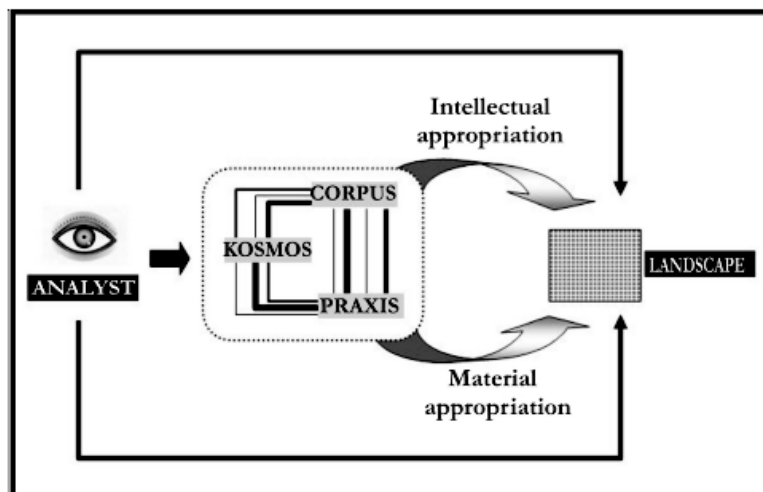
1. Belief systems and Worldviews
2. Set of TEK used to manage natural resources
3. Combination of productive practices to fulfil material and spiritual needs
4. Local institutions (formal and informal) involved in natural resource management

Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) also reflect on these links, specifically highlighting beliefs, knowledge, and natural resource management as key realms to explore and understand Yucatec Maya communities in Central America. Mayan multiple-use strategies for managing multiple landscapes for sustenance and market production has proven successful and sustainable (Barrera-Bassols, 2005; Toledo et al., 2003). Toledo (1992) states that the starting point for ethnoecological research should be:

*to explore the connections between corpus (the whole repertory of symbols, concepts and perceptions on nature) and praxis (the set of practical operations through which take place the material appropriation of nature) in the concrete process of production (p. 5).*

Ethnoecology, then, focuses on the elements of *corpus* (knowledge system) and *praxis* (practice) and how they relate to the *kosmos*, or the belief system of the culture being examined (see Figure 4 from Barrera-Bassols and Toledo, 2005). This k-c-p complex, or the belief-knowledge-practice complex, seeks to understand the process in which societies interact in and use the environment.

Figure 4: k-c-p complex (Barrera-Bassols and Toledo, 2005)



The interaction between these three spheres is dynamic and complex. Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) note that in researching the Yucatec Maya culture and practices, these three spheres operated like 'hinges' as the relationships were interdependent on one another. For example: symbolic colours that had religious meanings were often used in plant nomenclature and classification; the spirit world was often associated with environmental elements such as rain, wind, caves, springs; agrarian ceremonies



practiced throughout the year; sacred places on the landscape. All of these examples “illustrate reciprocal relations between the cosmological dimension, the cognitive body and the ensemble of practices” (Barrera-Bassols and Toledo, 2005, p.28). The beliefs, knowledge, and practices (k-c-p) of a culture are interrelated and have spatio-temporal expressions that can be explored through the lens of ethnoecology.

The perceptions of the world/environment that people have will shape how they act (Rappaport, 1979; Toledo, 1992). The k-c-p complex cannot necessarily be compared to knowledge in a western scientific way of thinking, but rather should be understood as wisdom, belief, and practice that helps one navigate the world. This perspective is useful in understanding indigenous thought so that we do not minimize or lessen its significance as something similar to or less valuable than a western style of thought; rather, it remains something unique and useful in making decisions about the environment. This experienced based wisdom and practice has evolved into strategies for resource management, as seen in numerous indigenous communities in Mexico managing tropical rainforests (Toledo, 2003). The strategies of these Mexican communities were shown to be more sustainable than modernized mono-crop strategies and shared characteristics such as; maintaining high levels of biodiversity, resilience, and long periods of usability (Toledo, 2003).

The landscape as a whole serves as an important focus in ethnoecological research. The landscape in which people live contains elements that have become important and allowed people to make a living. The cultural landscape can be described as follows:

*Landscapes are created by people-through their experience and engagement with the world around them. They may be close-grained, worked-up, lived-in places, or they may be distant and half-fantasized. In contemporary western societies they involve only the surface of the land; in other parts of the world, or in pre-modern Europe, what lies above the surface, or below, may be as or more important....The landscape is never inert, people engage with it, rework it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed (Bender, 1993, p.1)*

This was certainly the case in Khampa Tibetan communities where they placed much significance on the mining activities taking place on their landscape by Chinese mining companies. While mining was a boost for the economy, the local Tibetans had difficulty getting past the fact that they had harmed the heart of the earth in a significant way. This understanding was similar to the Yucatec Maya who saw the land as a living being (Barrera-Bassols and Toledo, 2005).

It is this distinct way of understanding the landscape that is expressed through cultural features, or ‘folk ecotypes,’ that develop significance in a given culture (Johnson and Hunn, 2010). The relationship between culture and these folk ecotypes does not remain static, but rather changes over time as the land/resource potential changes as well as changes in human adaptive capacity (Johnson and Hunn, 2010). These folk ecotypes may very well be anthropogenic in nature, however they have been understood and developed in a systems way of thinking, in which humans are a necessary element in the changing landscape. Examples of folk ecotypes include regions for berry harvesting, fishing sites, livestock grazing areas, etc.

Relevant to my research in Bhutan are the mythological stories that dominate the landscape and advocate particular subjectivities that challenge the neoliberalism of ecotourism (see Chapter 8). As such, landscape ethnoecology provides a framing for exploring these subjectivities. Toledo (1992) also notes the important role that myths

have in how resources are managed in a particular place. His work in the Amazon and New Guinea found intimate exchanges when conducting slash and burn practices in which the communities had to convince Mother Earth that the harm caused would result in a greater harvest later on. There was a state of equilibrium that must be maintained otherwise Mother Earth would be angry. Such respect for nature is not something that can be found within *knowledge*, but is well exemplified through respect, or *wisdom*, that is gained through a perceived interaction with the environment (Toledo, 1992). In Bhutan, I show that the perception of deities that reside and dominate the landscape drive particular behaviours and subjectivities. Landscape ethnoecology, therefore, melds well with governmentality/environmentality as I show how these appeals to cosmological powers represent a *truth* environmentality (see Chapter 8). The *truth* environmentality proves useful in my analysis by conceptualizing subjectivities related to appeals to the nature of reality. As such, the use of a *truth* modality expands the environmentality literature by looking beyond disciplinary functions that focus on ethical norms and values that guide behaviours.

Therefore, while *dwelling* provides a useful starting point for understanding how one perceives themselves in the environment, landscape ethnoecology provides the context of resource management and strategies for investigation. A ‘storying’ process emerged as a critical element to the data gathered in Bhutan, in which informants explained perceptions and human relations through local myths. These myths revealed worldview framings, understandings of human and nonhuman hierarchies, values, and subjectivities. Landscape ethnoecology allows me to explore these subjectivities through the storying process and creates avenues for exploring the *truth* environmentality that emerged.

### 3.4 Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

This chapter displays a novel integration of governmentality, ecotourism, *dwelling*, and landscape ethnoecology that has not previously been attempted. While *dwelling* and landscape ethnoecology certainly have a complimentary history within the literature, it is governmentality that seems opposed to these fields that promote more subject-oriented perspectives. However, it is this void in governmentality perspectives that I seek to strengthen through this integration. Dealing seriously with critiques of governmentality/environmentality that call for increased emphasis on agency I merge Foucault and Agrawal with theories that espouse perception, identity, and values. Further, this allows me to explore novel forms of power and subjectivity that manifest in the context of ecotourism in Bhutan. It is within this context that I find convergence of multiple governmentalities (i.e. sovereign, disciplinary, truth, neoliberal) producing a novel variegated form of governance.

The multi-scalar approach I adopt relies on each of the theories in order to make sense of complicated relations of power and subjectivities. In the chapters that follow I use this integrated theoretical framework to make sense of the Bhutanese experience as the nation negotiates their global role within neoliberal capitalism and how the day to day experience of individuals is influenced through discourses of ecotourism. Chapter 5 will primarily rely on governmentality to assess the role of GNH as it is contested by both local and global neoliberal influences. The chapter will promote a variegated perspective to governmentality in which multiple modalities merge and produce a novel form of biopower I call ‘Buddhist Biopower’. Chapter 6 then continues this portrait of a variegated governmentality, but transitions to an emphasis on environmentality and

outlines how contesting rationalities compete within the context of ecotourism. Chapter 7 then makes a transition to *dwelling* theory by providing a portrait of local perceptions, and how local values and beliefs are challenged by ecotourism discourse. Finally, Chapter 8 will integrate landscape ethnoecology practice through the analysis of mythological storying of the *Shokuna* landscape, which has recently become a site for ecotourists in the western region of the country. Before exploring this data, however, the following chapter will provide details on the methodologies and case studies adopted.

## 4 Research Methods

While the following chapters represent stand-alone pieces containing justification for the particular methodologies adopted, the purpose here is to provide a broad general overview, but with specific details on three sites that served as field locations for the majority of fieldwork conducted. The research entails a multi-site ethnographic study employing participant observation, semi-structured interviews and secondary data collection. Fieldwork proved critical in gaining an understanding of the basic structure of ecotourism implementation and the institutional arrangements and to allow for a critical assessment of these dynamics. The first phase of the research, represented in Chapter 5, addressed how Bhutan has negotiated neoliberalization through a review of secondary data sources and targeted interviews with the goal of mapping out a trajectory of neoliberalization. Secondary data sources included historical and current government policy documents, parliament discussions, and news articles. Targeted interviews were conducted with government officials, interest groups, advisory groups and non-government organizations. The majority of these individuals were located in Thimphu, the capital city, which serves as a hub for policy creation. In addition, responses from such informants were interpreted through the backdrop of experiential reflections of community members in rural areas. These communities included Phobjikha, Haa, and Phajoding.

The second phase of the research explored how neoliberalization has influenced environmental governance in particular, and specifically in the context of ecotourism policy and promotion (Chapter 6). Methods for this phase were similar to phase one but were targeted at policies and interviews within the environmental policy and ecotourism context. The third phase of the research, Chapters 7 and 8, involved in-depth ethnographic fieldwork to explore how local socioeconomic and ethnoecological relations are influenced by ecotourism development, but also exploring perceptions and subjectivities. Ethnographic and ethnoecological methods used included interviewing, free listing & ranking exercises, photographic projective discussions, and participant observation (Gerique, 2006; Albuquerque et al., 2014). The three case studies adopted are explained in more detail in what follows.

### 4.1 Researcher Positionality

As a foreign researcher in Bhutan, it is critical to acknowledge my own limitations in terms of cultural awareness and to develop a sensitive approach to methodology. Smith (1999) addresses a history of research steeped in colonialism in which white-western researchers develop “experiences and observations...constructed around their own cultural views” (p.8). As a result, local perceptions and values are bypassed, only to reify hegemonic trends of data collection and interpretation. Therefore, in order to produce reliable and valid findings, it is critical to acknowledge my positionality, and to adopt a more collaborative approach.

I arrived in Bhutan in July 2013, hired as a lecturer at the Royal Thimphu College. After working in the Environment department for a period of two semesters I approached the college with a proposal to conduct research in the country. After further discussion, it was agreed that such an arrangement must benefit the larger college community and student body. After formal acceptance as a PhD candidate at

Wageningen UR in 2014, I then collaborated with the college in developing a research training program in which student researchers would be recruited and trained. Subsequently, student researchers were supervised in the field while collecting data, which was later analyzed back on campus. This collaboration was essential as data gathering was largely conducted in local languages (i.e. Dzongkha, Nepali, etc.), which I as the primary researcher had minimal capacity to communicate in. While I was able to conduct interviews in English with a number of informants near urban centres, gathering rural perspectives largely relied on the abilities of student researchers. Interviews were recorded in the field, then later translated and transcribed into English by student researchers. Additionally, student researchers were able to understand cultural nuances that went undetected by my own observations and understandings, resulting in profound insights when interpreting data sets.

This collaborative approach worked to achieve benefits for the Royal Thimphu College, the student body, and myself as a PhD candidate. A number of the student researchers have been included as co-authors for chapters in this dissertation, as well as for additional peer-reviewed articles (see Appendix). Additionally, a number of these researchers have gone on to further their academic careers through Masters programs in Bhutan, India, Japan, and Australia. In this way, this dissertation represents an effort to decolonize methodologies, avoiding data extractions that work to solely benefit western researchers as they enter the developing world context. Further, this approach serves to deepen and broaden the findings of this work as they represent not only my own understanding as a foreign researcher, but also those of Bhutanese nationals who collaborated in the research design and analysis.

## **4.2 Methodology**

### **4.2.1 Collaborative Research**

As noted in the preceding section, collaborative research was critical to producing valid and reliable data. I partnered with local Bhutanese researchers, incorporating them into conceptual and field related discussions. Student researchers and colleagues at the Royal Thimphu College played a role in advising and directing how the research evolved. Two rounds of student research training were conducted. In the Fall of 2015 student applications were accepted and reviewed by the college's research committee, with a total of nine students recruited based on interest and academic performance. These students were incorporated into a three-semester program in which I trained them in research methodology, fieldwork, and data analysis. Fieldwork with these students was conducted from November 9-13 (2015) in the Phobjikha valley, December 14-18 (2015) in Haa, and April 24-30 (2016) at the Phajoding Eco-Camp and Druk Path Trek. The second round of students were engaged in a similar manner in the Fall of 2017 in which five students were recruited. These students underwent a similar training program and conducted fieldwork from October 13-15 (2017) at the Phajoding Eco-Camp, October 21-28 (2017) in Laya, January 11-16 (2018) in Haa, and March 19-25 (2018) in Phobjikha.

### **4.2.2 Document Reviews**

Documents reviews were conducted in order to provide historical context and to establish trajectories in policy formulation. Government documentation played a

primary role and was easily accessible through the internet, otherwise I was able to locate materials within government ministry offices located in the capital city of Thimphu. Key documents enrolled in the analysis included numerous Five-Year Plans, Economic Development Policies from 2010 and 2016, multiple GNH Survey Reports, and Bhutan Tourism Monitor reports produced by the Tourism Council of Bhutan. These documents were supplemented with *Kuensel* news articles and a plethora of articles produced by the Centre for Bhutan Studies that focussed on GNH, ecotourism, and governance more generally. While these documents represent an internal Bhutanese perspective, which I used to build a portrait of situated values, it was also necessary to engage critical perspectives. As such, I reviewed research outputs from foreign researchers, including journal articles and PhD/Masters theses.

#### 4.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

Informants were determined through both targeted and snowball sampling. While initial stages of the research required an exploration of broader policies and governance rationalities, it was critical to engage policy makers located in Thimphu. Through a networking of relations developed through my employment at the college I was able to identify individuals who could speak to the issues of concern. From there, these individuals suggested additional informants to provide supplementary perspectives. Government officials, previous government employees, and non-government organization workers were the focus of these initial stages. Interviews with these individuals were conducted in the English language through a semi-structured process in which questions were prepared before the interview process and used to guide, rather than dictate, conversation. Informants were asked for consent to record conversations, for which only one informant declined. I informed them that recordings were to be used for later transcription purposes only, and that anonymity would be ensured. Recording interviews allowed myself as the researcher to be more present in conversations, absolving the need to rapidly dictate responses in real-time.

In later phases of the research, which were more ethnographic in approach and required data from rural settings, interviews were conducted with the aid of Bhutanese student researchers. These interviews also adopted a semi-structured approach and were primarily conducted in the national language of *Dzongkha*. In a few instances rural interviewees requested that local dialects be used as the medium for conversation, which required the hiring of local interpreters who had knowledge of the specific dialect as well as *Dzongkha* and English. These interviews were also recorded for transcription purposes, for which student researchers were employed to provide translation and transcribing services.

All interview data, after translation and transcription, was then analyzed through the use of NVivo11 software. NVivo is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) that aids in the organization and analysis of qualitative information such as interview data. Interview data in Microsoft Word format was imported into NVivo and was then coded based on research related themes. Themes included biophysical environment, conservation, cosmology, economy, ecotourism, external organizations, GNH, historical change, social relations, gender equity, socio-ecological relations, and stories/narratives. Further, interview data was coded according to the individual characteristics of the informant such as age, gender, location

and type of informant (i.e. homestay owner, family member of owner, community member, event attendee).

#### **4.2.4 Free-listing Exercises**

In the final stage of the research, particularly represented by Chapter 8, landscape ethnoecology served as a primary theoretical framework. This required the exploration of local perceptions regarding the landscape. To undertake this, free-listing exercises were employed in order to generate a comprehensive list of landscape features, that could then later be used to prompt discussions around use-values, toponymy (naming of landscape features), resource acquisition, flora/fauna, and cosmology. This was primarily conducted in the Haa region, for which a list of 60 landscape features were generated, and were further organized into topographic, forest ecology, grassland, and hydrographic sets. While these categories were not used as a critical component in the contribution of this thesis, they served as an entry point to discussing the landscape in terms of cosmology. Free-listing exercises highlighted the role that hydrographic landscape features played in terms of hosting local deities, leading to a 'storying' process in which informants shared local myths that incorporated various landscape features.

#### **4.2.5 Photographic Projections**

In order to aid in free-listing exercises photographs were employed. Beforehand, I generated a number of photographs that portrayed land features such as lakes, hills, mountains, scree slopes, valleys, bogs, and so on. These were presented to informants through electronic media (i.e. cell phone screen) in order to initiate conversation regarding local landscape features.

#### **4.2.6 Participant Observation**

As a part of an ethnographic approach to investigating rural perceptions and subjectivities, I also used participant observation as a key data gathering strategy. While in the field, observations were made regarding home activities, social interactions, engagement with ecotourism, resource use, gender roles, purchasing trends, food consumption patterns, and time allocations. Observations were recorded in field notebooks multiple times per day and were later transcribed. These observations were made by myself as the primary researcher as well as student researchers.

### **4.3 Case Study Justification**

With neoliberalism playing a dominant role in development practice and global discourses, social scientists have picked up the challenge of exploring its subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, impacts on policy, economics, and society. However, as an amorphous concept, neoliberalism is difficult to understand through clearly defined boundaries or characteristics (Springer et al., 2016; Belsky, 2014). The way that neoliberalism manifests is context specific, creating a number of hybrid or 'actual existing' neoliberalisms throughout the globe. As such, there has been a call for "multi-sited comparative ethnography within a global perspective" (Büscher and Dressler, 2012, p.367). The research conducted here is established in this larger neoliberal

theoretical discussion and provides a unique ethnoecological perspective through the case study of ecotourism in Bhutan.

The adopted case studies were originally chosen to explore differing management regimes present in the country. The three management regimes explored are private, represented by Haa Valley homestay, NGO supported, represented by the Phobjikha Homestay Network, and government facilitated ventures, represented by the Phajoding Eco-camp. While the original intent to explore the impact of regimes was not conducted in the present research, this stands as an opportunity for future investigation. Regardless, the variability within the three case studies provided unique perspectives from each host community.

In Bhutan's tourism history, the national government traditionally took the lead and dominated industry management. The Royal Government was heavily influential in tourism development, especially in the National Parks and Protected Areas System. This remains the case today in that the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests is the primary ministry serving as a facilitator of tourism activities within protected areas of the country. This management regime existed at the beginning of Bhutan's short history of tourism and remains a dominant force today. However, when tourism was privatized in 1991, the industry slowly developed a more liberalized market-based system. This opened the doors to additional management regimes. In particular, local NGOs were developed which championed environmental concerns.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN) has had a large influence specifically in the realm of sustainable tourism. The RSPN has been active in community engagement, building capacity and advocating for both livelihood concerns and conservation efforts. The flagship project of the RSPN is the Phobjikha Homestay Network, which has attracted funding from the Royal Government, international organizations, and individual donors. Through such efforts the RSPN has established an ecotourism network that is strongly community-based and has often been highlighted as a success story for the promotion of ecotourism in the country.

Individual entrepreneurs have also become active in the ecotourism market. While the Royal Government has dominated in Protected Areas, and NGOs have collaborated with communities in biodiversity hotspots, many individuals have developed unique business ventures to access benefits from the industry. Such privately led ventures range from homestays and trekking guides to other service providers (i.e. food, hotels, etc.). This management regime is unique in that it has had less time to develop and has been less organized. In many cases such private initiatives have failed due to lack of market access and poor planning. However, there are also a number of business minded individuals who have been able to sustain their place in the market.

#### **4.4 Case Study Selection**

##### **(1) Haa Valley Homestay**

The Haa Valley Homestay is a single-family venture that was initiated by a family that previously used yak herding as their primary source of income. This homestay offers an array of activities for visitors including archery, *Kuru* (traditional darts), hot stone baths, farm work, yak herding and the experience of rural Bhutanese life. The homestay has catered very much to a tourist's comforts yet has maintained an



authentic experience of traditional life. A Yak Herding Trek, which explores the highlands of Haa, which have been managed through yak herding activities for many generations, is also an optional experience. This venture is completely self-funded and managed by the owner and family. It has developed a successful business model in a rural area of Bhutan that was otherwise untouched by the tourism industry until recently.

This case study was chosen as it emphasizes the single entity management regime in an area of Bhutan that is becoming well-known for its forested areas, biodiversity, and highland communities. The single entity management regime is the newest form of ecotourism administration that we find in the country, and it may provide great insight to the future direction of ecotourism implementation.

## (2) Phobjikha Homestay and Black-necked Crane Habitat Conservation

The Royal Society of the Protection of Nature (RSPN) drafted an Ecotourism Management Plan for Phobjikha, which was declared a conservation area for Black-necked Crane habitat (Dorji, 2001). Dorji (2001) claims “the programme aims to promote the development of alternative energy, eco-tourism, conservation and education programs, Black-Necked Crane research, and monitoring and development of infrastructure for ecotourism” (p.99). He also mentions that this is the first organized attempt at ecotourism within Bhutan.

This program is in close partnership with the International Crane Foundation (ICF) based in Wisconsin, USA. A large portion of the program is aimed at educating tourists and a percentage of tourist fees are directed to the program, which distributes funds to a Phobjikha community development organization and RSPN conservation efforts (Dorji, 2001; Reinfeld, 2003). The RSPN has also committed resources to capacity building of local residents to provide homestay opportunities to tourists (RSPN, 2013).

This model shows a unique collaboration between an international organization, local NGO, local tour operators, and the local community (Dorji, 2001). Partnerships between the government, private sector, and communities seem to be the preferred model for such large ecotourism ventures. While community decision-making may be less than desired in a community-based model, the government hand allows strict control over cultural and environmental preservation, while the inclusion of the private sector ensures a working business model.

This case study has been selected due to the major role that RSPN plays in the overall management of the ecotourism destination. While the Homestay Network is not a single entity, it incorporates a collaboration of 15+ homestay owners. RSPN has further explicitly linked activities to conservation efforts and livelihood concerns. This case has largely been successful in terms of meeting its expressed objectives and highlights the role that an NGO can play in facilitating conservation activities in the country.

## (3) Phajoding Eco-Camp

Phajoding is a monastery located approximately 3-4 hour hike from the capital city of Thimphu. This monastery has become a popular destination for locals and foreign tourists, as it serves as a base for a number of day hikes, or as part of the

longer 4-6 day Druk Path trek, which is very popular and advertised as an ecotourism activity. The Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division (NRED) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests initiated the construction of an Eco-camp in 2012, with the hopes that the monk body could adopt management responsibility and use revenues for conservation efforts and monastery improvement.

## 5 Buddhist Biopower? – Variegated governmentality in Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Agenda<sup>1</sup>

Jesse Montes, Shiva Raj Bhattarai

### Abstract

*This chapter employs a “variegated governmentality” framework to analyse Bhutan’s well-known Gross National Happiness (GNH) agenda. GNH is both a philosophy and form of governance that the Royal Government uses to guide national policymaking. While previous research frames GNH in terms of Foucault’s early discussion of governmentality, it does so by establishing monolithic characterizations of governance rationalities and positioning them against one another. By contrast, we suggest that GNH can be more productively understood in terms of Foucault’s more recently translated work as embodying multiple governance rationalities situated alongside each other and locally understood as complementary. From this perspective, recent promotion of neoliberalism within the country can be understood not as an intrusion of “western rationality” upon a distinct GNH but rather as a component of the complex bricolage that GNH has become. We suggest that this produces an indigenous form of biopower, which we term ‘Buddhist Biopower’, appealing to a combination of Bhutanese tradition and religious belief to legitimize the state’s claim to govern in the interest of the population. A policy review of Bhutan’s GNH Index and Eleventh Five Year Plan is conducted to illustrate this analysis. In this way, the chapter brings together research concerning multiple governmentalities and variegated neoliberalization to illuminate the complex ways that biopower can be exercised in the contemporary world.*

*Key words: Bhutan, Gross National Happiness, Governmentality, Biopower, Neoliberalism*

### Introduction

Bhutan, a small kingdom dominated by Buddhist ideals in the south-eastern Himalayas, has drawn substantial popular attention due to its attractive cultural and natural heritage, resulting into mythologized portraits of ‘the Last Shangri-La’ (Schroeder, 2011). International attention increased recently due to a growing disillusionment with ideals of democracy and development within the context of a neoliberal capitalist economy, with Bhutan creating hopeful space for constructing an alternative known as Gross National Happiness (GNH). Interest in Bhutan spans numerous fields of research, but predominantly Buddhist and GNH studies. Much of the work consists of historical analyses to explore unique specificities held intact through a history of isolation spurred on by both geo-physical barriers, due to the Himalayan landscape, and purposeful policy implementation in order to preserve culture and retain autonomy. While many small nations/kingdoms in the Himalayan region dissolved due to various geo-political circumstances<sup>2</sup>, Bhutan remains, making it an attractive focus of inquiry.

Since its self-initiated transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 2008, Bhutan, now a young democracy, continues to pursue its homegrown GNH model of governance, which has confounded many as it integrates multiple ideologies and yet

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was published in *Geoforum* 96 (2018), 207-216.

<sup>2</sup> Most notable is Tibet after the Chinese invasion in the 1950’s, but also Sikkim and Ladakh in India, and the Mustang region in Nepal.

retains a particular Bhutanese flavor. In terms of governance, GNH can be understood as a specific ‘governmentality’, having its own form and substance. While limited research draws a connection between governmentality and GNH (see Teoh 2015a; 2015b), the present study employs a variegated governmentality framework (Fletcher, 2010; 2017) to explore this connection more extensively. As opposed to Teoh’s characterization of GNH, which he frames as an expression of a monolithic governmentality, we argue that GNH can more productively be understood as embodying multiple governmentalities that overlap and are locally understood as complementary. Whereas Teoh contrasts GNH with an oppressive neoliberal agenda, thus promoting a dichotomy between ‘neoliberal’ and ‘not-neoliberal’ forms that many scholars have questioned (see Brenner et al. 2010), this research pursues a more empirically-nuanced understanding. To do so, the analysis builds on recent scholarship (see e.g., Youdelis, 2014; Boelens, 2014) that draws on Foucault’s (2008a) more recently translated work complicating governmentality studies by understanding it as a variegated phenomenon encompassing multiple forms. In this way, the analysis builds on research exploring variegated neoliberalization as well (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009; Springer 2012; 2014). As such, neoliberalism in this research is conceptualized, not as a monolithic entity, but rather a “perplexingly diverse and shifting” (Castree, 2009, p.1792) concept “that is marked by unevenness and variety as much as it is by similarity—that is to say, it is a set of interconnected local, regional, and national neoliberalizations” (Castree, 2010, p.13). From this perspective, we frame GNH as a variegated governmentality inclusive of neoliberal tendencies that nonetheless maintains a disposition towards particularistic historical circumstances and cultural values. We explore how select residents who have engaged in projects or policies promoted by the GNH framework experience governance. Historical cultural values in Bhutanese society provide breeding ground for a host of governance rationalities that do not so much mimic global trends as undergo “modification in the face of some newly identified problem or solution, while retaining certain styles of thought and technological preferences” (Rose et al., 2006, p.98).

With multiple governmentalities at play, multiple forms of biopower manifest and overlap as well. Biopower in Bhutan, or what we will call ‘Buddhist Biopower’, exhibits strong connections to cultural traditions and religious beliefs, and works towards establishing Buddhist principles within circulating governmental discourses. While Foucault’s own discussion of biopower focused on modern western<sup>3</sup> states arising in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and hence described biopower as grounded in scientific rationalities and analysis, limited research extends this to explore how biopower manifests within non-western societies. Additionally, Foucault developed a governmentality/biopower framework that was primarily based on western conceptualizations in which subjects were largely viewed as individual rational agents, a notion foreign to many Asian contexts with communitarian leanings. Previous work on the Asian continent (see Samaddar, 2013; Jha et al., 2013) employed concepts of governmentality and biopower to interpret governance but failed to conceptualize novel configurations that have emerged. Such configurations are based outside the scope of the Enlightenment, a philosophy that serves as a base for the western governance models that Foucault critiqued. Thus, non-western governance configurations demand attention. To address this gap in the literature, and to contrast tendencies towards monolithic understandings of governmentalities, the pages that follow offer an analysis

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<sup>3</sup> We adopt Hall’s (1992) description of ‘western’, understood as a historical concept, rather than geographical, that describes a society that is ‘modern’.

of Bhutanese policies (the GNH Index and the Eleventh Five Year Plan) to illustrate the variegated nature of a novel governance constellation in the country and how this manifests in a situated form of biopower embodying non-western (Buddhist) spiritualities.

We begin by providing contextual background to the Bhutanese state, including a specific emphasis on the state's development and governance model embodied in GNH. We then outline a variegated governmentality framework by drawing on recent advances in governmentality literature. Using this framework we situate GNH as a 'variegated governmentality' and explore the specific mode of biopower it promotes. This is followed by an analysis of specific Bhutanese policies that reflect a variegated governmentality and Buddhist biopower, revealing potential avenues for application into future Bhutanese and GNH studies. We conclude by discussing a process of neoliberalization within the GNH agenda, framing it, not as a transition to a more 'pure' neoliberal state, but as a component of the larger variegated governance model.

The information and analysis we provide in this research is based on fieldwork spanning from 2013-2018 that explores environmental governance/attitudes in Bhutan and how they relate to the GNH agenda. We combine stakeholder interviews and secondary literature reviews in order to triangulate accounts for how GNH governance is conceived, promulgated, and legitimized. Interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders from government officials (at National and *Dzongkhag*<sup>4</sup> levels), academics, private-entrepreneurs to local community members and were identified through both snowball sampling via social networking and purposive sampling by targeting key informants. However, the research was limited in scope only incorporating informants from western *Dzongkhags*. This limitation was related to issues of access and workplace proximity. That being said, it is critical to acknowledge that the experience of governance will vary greatly depending on the region of the country explored, as well as the level of practice/implementation (i.e. national, district, and village levels). Therefore, the findings of this research should be understood in terms of GNH governance in the western region of the country. This interview data is complemented by analysis of the corpus of texts within Bhutan that define and promote GNH policy. The literature includes material associated with local research centres (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Commission) and planning documentation produced by the Royal Government of Bhutan. These texts were selected because they act as critical planning documents that drive the development trajectory of the country while serving as indigenous accounts/critiques of governance practice.

## **Development and Governance in Bhutan – A Historical Perspective**

Bhutan's development trajectory is of specific interest amongst researchers largely due to Bhutan's historical effort to distance itself from 'western' influences and the present-day context in which the nation negotiates a transition to global integration with both apprehension and welcoming curiosity. Before 1961, which saw the inception of Bhutan's five-year plans, Bhutan was characterized as a 'traditional society' in terms of W.W. Rostow's trajectory for development (Mehta, 2009) awaiting 'take-off' into modernity (see Rostow, 1956). However, Bhutan, recognizing the pitfalls of

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<sup>4</sup> *Dzongkhags* are administrative units in Bhutan, for which the country has 20.

conventional development, paved its own course, struggling to meld traditional culture with a prosperous development agenda.

In terms of an early governance model, Givel and Figueroa (2014) provide a historic analysis of an ‘unwritten constitution’ made of a conglomeration of texts throughout 1619 to 1729 that establish state authority, while also prescribing obligations and moral characteristics for future leaders of Bhutan. This analysis includes the *Nga Chudruma* of 1619, *Tsa Yig Chenmo* of 1629, the first Bhutanese Legal Code of 1652, and the second Legal Code of 1729. The second Legal Code is of specific interest as it states:

*if there is no law, happiness will not come to beings. If beings do not have happiness there is no point in the Hierarchs...*

The resemblance to GNH policy, which came 250 years later, is striking. Givel and Figueroa (2014) thus conclude “happiness policy in early Bhutan promoted a view of a wise ruler providing governmental support so citizens may become enlightened due to Mahayana Buddhism. Happiness policy in Bhutan has evolved from an early Buddhist focus” (p.1). This sentiment is repeated by others (see Priesner, 1999; Mancall, 2004), for which the prime responsibility of the Bhutanese state is to create conditions for enlightenment on behalf of its citizens. Such conditions, while not defined specifically in these early documents, include spiritual as well as socio-economic and material conditions.

In 1907, after years of warring factions, the First King of Bhutan came to power, thus establishing the royal monarchy that continues today. At the inception of the monarchy, Bhutan was isolated in many respects, although production and trade were present on a limited scale with neighbouring states in order to meet the needs of the populace. Sarkar and Ray (2012; 2015a; 2015b) provide an analysis of exports, imports and trade balance over the years of 1907-1926, revealing an active economy and early foreign engagement. This trend would continue, with India becoming a dominant player in Bhutan’s economy and foreign affairs.

The geo-political context of the Himalayas during the 1940-1960’s, with tensions between India and China at a high, as well as the growing governmental discourse to address poverty, forced Bhutan to reconsider its default isolationist approach. In 1961, Bhutan created its first Five Year Plan, which was entirely funded by India, and initiated a series of plans that would guide Bhutan to modernity. It is at this point in Bhutan’s history in which conventional development could have served as the standard. While the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, is rumoured to have stated, “Gross National happiness is more important than Gross National Happiness” in the early 1970s, it was not until 1980 when the concept was first documented, and it was not until 1996 when the concept began to serve as an overarching policy guide (Munroe, 2016). The establishment of GNH marked a unique development trajectory for the country. Mancall (2004) postulates:

*it is reasonable to suggest that in the context of the early 1970’s, this goal, stated baldly and boldly, fit the circumstances both inside Bhutan and in the international context within which Bhutan had to develop at the time. Internally, the Fourth King pursued development in many directions in such a way that the social changes already under way,*

*urbanization, for example, were accelerated, and at the same time he moved in new directions and pursued new policies of transformation (p.9).*

Introducing GNH, then, constituted a pronouncement of a distinctive Bhutanese identity in the face of geo-political struggles taking place, with China and India aggression over Himalayan states causing much concern. GNH served as an alternative form of development “instead of ranking various societies at different stages of development” (Masaki, 2013a, p.71).

Mancall (2004) notes that it was during 1907-1998 that “coercive power, this is, the power to make things happen, was increasingly concentrated in the person of the King” (p.35). In 1998 the 4<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan ceded power to the National Assembly, giving up his role as head of the government in favour of an elected cabinet. This trajectory in the separation of powers continued under the guidance of the 5<sup>th</sup> King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, with the formalization of a constitution and the first democratically elected government in 2008. The constitutional monarchy and parliamentary government that exist today are a result of a historical concentration of power combined with modern globalizing forces asserting democratic trends.

Masaki’s work (2013a; 2013b) distinguishes Bhutan’s ‘turn’ to democracy, not as a realization of the merits of modern democratic trends, but an actualization of collective values already present in Bhutanese society. As such, democracy, in this context, is an incorporation of local specificities and a historical progression rather than an act of Eurocentric mimicry. In particular, Masaki (2013a) notes that Bhutan assembles a ‘gross’ perspective of freedom, one that acknowledges the needs and interdependency of the collective, rather than a focus on the individual. While liberal democracy’s “unrestrained individualism is seen as detrimental to the social fabric” (p.53), Bhutan forwards its own interpretation of freedom, which promotes social harmony and cohesion through the support of religion and culture, aspects that “would conventionally be interpreted as impediments to individual liberty” (p.54). Phuntsho (2013) further elaborates that GNH, “works with the premise that happiness is a collective public good and it can be sought through public policies” (p.597) and extends his analysis to the internal emphasis of GNH, “external material comfort does not necessarily lead to internal happiness” (p.597).

Initially GNH was conceptualized as four integrated pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, environmental conservation, and good governance. These pillars served as a philosophical guide providing “a useful framework that defines the broad areas of development activity through which GNH can be pursued” (RGoB, 2008b, p.18). However, after conducting two national GNH surveys in 2006 and 2008, a number of additional indicators emerged and were deemed critical for the GNH agenda (RGoB, 2008b). As such, the four pillars were expanded into an associated nine domains: psychological wellbeing, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, and ecological diversity and resilience. The formulation of nine domains was intended to facilitate a more “strategic perspective and framework to operationalize GNH and guide development planning more effectively” (RGoB, 2008b, p.18) and would allow for the expansion of bureaucratic instruments to shape development outcomes in ways consistent with GNH (Schroeder, 2018). While the pillars and domains were appropriated simultaneously throughout the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>

Five Year Plans, a coexistence that proved perplexing, it was not until planning for the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan that the nine domains became the dominant framework (RGoB, 2017).

## **Analyses of Bhutanese Governance**

A criticism voiced by GNH research is the difficulty pertaining to the measurement of happiness. As such, the majority of the research concentrates on the development of GNH as a well-being index. Numerous works by the GNH Commission and the Centre for Bhutan Studies have been created to legitimize the index, which is critical to Bhutan's project as it confronts conventional measures of development (see Ura et al., 2012a; 2012b; CBS, 2015; Moharir, 2016). Ura et al. (2012b) note:

*GNH aims to create a society in which the collective happiness of the people is the ultimate desired outcome. The indicators will help to determine GNH policies and track GNH progress through time. So the indicators need to reflect all the relevant aspects of life which are vital to the concept and practice of GNH (p.16).*

The indicators then, which were determined through a number of pilot surveys and stakeholder consultation processes, serve as key markers for assessing 'happiness' amongst the populace and for justifying policies and programs meant to address deficiencies in GNH index values. Ura et al. (2012b) further comment:

*to increase happiness one needs to identify people who are not yet happy. Once this segment of the population is identified, one needs to know the domains in which they lack sufficiency. This two-step identification procedure provides the basis for analysis that is of direct relevance for policy (pp.53-54).*

Schroeder (2018), however, provides an analysis of GNH as a form of governance. While characterized by decentralization and a democratic state, in which partnerships between state and non-state actors are promoted and formed, governance remains a complicated set of interactions that complicate the intentions of GNH thus requiring the creation of instruments to guide such interactions. Schroeder (2014) notes:

*priorities are open to being reshaped in emergent and unexpected ways through complex policy implementation interactions among governance actors. The GNH image of the state is subject to being acted upon in potentially subversive ways. This situation has not gone unrecognized by the Bhutanese government. Indeed.....GNH policy structures and instruments have been designed to navigate and shape the process of designing, implementing and measuring GNH policy. As a whole, these GNH tools attempt to shape the agency of governance actors with potentially competing priorities and pressures in a manner that successfully generates GNH outcomes (p.97).*

These tools that shape agency, with the purpose of retaining the essence of GNH amidst competing interests, include; the GNH Commission, GNH Index, GNH Policy Screening Tool, GNH Project Screening tool, GNH committees, Five Year plans, and the GNH Check (Schroeder, 2014). This governance framework ensures that local planning, development, and production activities are coordinated with GNH policy objectives determined by the state. While Schroeder's (2014, 2018) analysis of the GNH governance model reveals disconnect between policy intention and operationalization, he concludes that GNH intentions are maintained. "Where GNH outcomes are being



successfully achieved, it is occurring despite the GNH governance framework” (Schroeder, 2014, p.299), the success of which is attributed to religious-cultural values that underlie the societal framework. While Schroeder’s analysis concentrates on formal structures and policies, recognizing the contribution of a cultural base, it lacks a concrete framework for understanding governance rationalities of the GNH agenda. It is to address this limitation that a governmentality perspective proves critical.

## **Governmentality and Biopower**

The term ‘governmentality’ has come to mean “the way in which one conducts the conduct of men,” which Foucault explained “is no more than a proposed analytical grid for these relations of power” (Foucault, 2008a, p.186). Foucault’s early perspective characterizes ‘government’ as a distinct category that is related to ‘sovereignty’ and ‘discipline’, all three of which were understood as a triad of related forces (Foucault, 1994). However, in later discussions we see a transition to an integrated understanding in which sovereignty and discipline are seen as specific rationalities adopted by government. With the *sovereign* and *disciplinary* states serving as the main subjects of analysis, Foucault later explored new liberalisms (i.e. neoliberalism, ordo-liberalism). It was this more western expression of neoliberalism upon which he comments, “it seems to me that we are seeing the birth.... of a new art of government” (2008a, p.176).

Hartwich (2009) notes, regarding the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1950s, that the concept served as a critique to *laissez faire* economics and “was clearly established as something quite different from the ‘free market radicalism’ with which it is usually associated today” (p.24). However, current literature acknowledges that neoliberalism changes over time in a processional fashion depending on the context. Peck and Tickell (2002) discuss “roll-back” and “roll-out” mechanisms in which state policies transition from neoliberalism as restoring the free market to neoliberalism as active manipulation. Foucault also acknowledges this procession, “neoliberalism should not be identified with *laissez-faire*, but with permanent vigilance, activity and intervention” (2008a, p.132). This *neoliberal* governmentality is a form of governance that “seeks merely to create external incentive structures within which individuals, understood as self-interested rational actors, can be motivated to exhibit appropriate behaviours through manipulation of incentives” (Fletcher, 2010, p.173). Comparatively, a *sovereign* governmentality forces subjects to conform to various expected standards of conduct; a *truth* governmentality works to impose specific truth/religious claims as moral imperatives; while a *disciplinary* governmentality works to inculcate social norms in subjects through fear or observation (Foucault, 2008a). Each mode of governance is unique in its methodology for obtaining conformity, and power is expressed in different forms. Rose et al. (2006) point out that these multiple rationalities are not intended to be conceived as ideal types that can then be used to categorize states as ‘this’ or ‘that’. Such thinking has led to “accusations that governmentality is guilty of homeostasis – that provides rigid models of government...merely creating abstract ideal types whose explanatory power is doubtful despite their attractiveness as generalized descriptions” (Rose et al., 2006, p.98-99). Rather, governmentality constructs need to be understood as theoretical tools for the “mapping of governmental rationalities and techniques” (p.99), something that is actively being pursued by Fletcher (2017) in exploring multiple/variegated governmentalities.

Gupta and Sharma (2006) explore governance by looking at the intersection of multiple governmentalities. They promote a flexible understanding of neoliberalism that accounts for local variations by specifically looking at welfare and workfare policies in postcolonial India. The authors show how the two policy programs have coevolved to support one another showing little signs of phasing out/in of one policy or the other (also see Gupta, 2012). This context shows strategic flexible arrangements that accounts for local specificities revealing an “unevenness of neoliberal transformation” (Gupta and Sharma, 2006, p.291). Boelens (2014) has a similar aim in his work showing how multiple governmentalities converge in Andean water politics to legitimize existing power relations. Likewise, Youdelis (2013) reveals a capricious relationship between *neoliberal*, *disciplinary*, and *truth* governmentalities in Thailand’s ecotourism sector. Therefore, such work reveals an array of rationalities that defy ideological categories, recognizing what McKee (2009) calls ‘shifting governmentalities’.

In regards to neoliberal rationalities, a host of scholars (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Castree, 2009; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009; Springer, 2012; 2014) have resituated neoliberal scholarship to avoid simplistic categorizations of ‘neoliberal’ versus ‘not neoliberal’, to account for a more nuanced approach to understanding neoliberal trends within broader constellations of governance models, a process of neoliberalization. Springer (2014) notes:

*notions of neoliberalism as inevitable or as a paradigmatic construct have long been debunked by human geographers replaced by protean notions of variegation, hybridity, and articulation with existing political economic circumstances. A discursive understanding of neoliberalism further reveals it as an assemblage and thus to hold neoliberalism to a sense of purity is little more than a straw man argument (p.154).*

The discussion of neoliberalization is critical as it constitutes one component to the multiple governmentalities framework. As such, the variegated neoliberalization and governmentality perspectives can be brought together to make sense of situated governance constellations. While a variegated governmentality perspective has shown strong explanatory power over existing socio-political relations (see Fletcher 2010; Boelens, 2014; Youdelis, 2013; McGregor et al., 2015; Lloro-Bidart, 2015; Erb, 2012), this current research synthesizes the variegated neoliberalization element providing a novel contribution to both governmentality and neoliberal studies.

Multiple governmentalities, then, also result in multiple forms of biopower (Fletcher et al., forthcoming). Foucault conceptualizes biopower historically by exploring inefficiencies within a sovereign form of power. Sovereign control must always enforce and induce fear through a ‘take life and let live’ approach. However, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries a transition begins in which governors work to discipline behaviours so that the populace governs itself. ‘Make live and let die’ (Foucault, 2003, p.241) becomes the new mode of operation in which the purpose of the state is to ensure life of the citizenry. Understood as complementary to a disciplinary form of governance, which emphasizes ‘man-as-living-being’, a new foci emerges in which ‘man-as-species’ becomes the primary objective (Foucault, 2003). Biopower, literally ‘power of life’, “takes life as both its object and its objective” (Foucault, 2003, p.254) legitimizing state rule by appealing to its ability to foster life. Therefore, while governmentality refers to an abstract rationality and techniques for how a state conducts the conduct of target populations, biopower is a state’s claim to promote life used to justify particular actions

in exercising this governance. In exploring these two concepts, Foucault explains that complementary forms of governmentality and biopower will materialize in any given context (2008a). Foucault expanded the breadth of governmentality beyond his sovereignty-discipline-government triad to encompass numerous forms of state conduct and suggested this would imply multiple forms of biopower as well. Not only would such rationalities and biopower modalities emerge as complementary entities, but multiple forms of biopower would also “overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other” (2008a, p.313).

In the following analysis we explore the confluence of multiple governmentalities and multiple forms of biopower, inclusive of a limited degree of neoliberalization, in Bhutan. Through this, we show the manifestation of a unique governance constellation. The research contributes to Bhutan studies by offering a nuanced means of analysing governance in the country, while also contributing to governmentality studies by exploring how a multidimensional variegated perspective can enrich empirical analysis.

### **GNH as Variegated Governmentality**

With a variegated framework one can begin to characterize non-western societies, something that Foucault himself aspired to as he looked towards the “East” for inspiration late in his life (Foucault, 1999). Teoh (2015a, 2015b) analyzes GNH in Bhutan commenting:

*the art of government wants to promote happiness and wellbeing as a common goal through the conduct of conduct of the government by creating the necessary enabling conditions. The government uses policy-making, planning and development to facilitate this (2015b, p.196).*

Teoh’s assessment of GNH as a governmentality focuses on the art of government and enabling conditions that are incumbent on the state to provide. He then limits his analysis to tourism development in the country, particularly a 2009 debate regarding increasing tourist numbers in the country, to show how numerous tourism stakeholder decisions collided to subvert GNH objectives:

*the conduct of conduct of the government to increase tourist numbers contradicted the GNH philosophy of slow-paced and value-led development, and resulted in disagreements.....and as such has resulted in tensions between those governed and the governor (2015b, p.200).*

One interviewee<sup>5</sup> supported this perspective by noting:

*they were going to doom the future of Bhutan's tourism with the priority being to rapidly increase the visitor arrivals by significant numbers within a very short period of time.*

Teoh’s work reinforces the view of these tourism stakeholders for whom GNH must be actualized through specific actions that “provide conditions for happiness and wellbeing” (2015b, p.197), and is understood to be provided for in a particular culturally relevant way. However, Teoh’s analysis lacks the application of a variegated approach

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<sup>5</sup> 45-year old male, business owner. Interviewed due to experience with environmental governance. Interview conducted in Thimphu in January 2018.

forcing him to characterize GNH as a function of governmentality opposed to neoliberalism, understood as a monolithic economic entity. This perspective assumes that factions of support and resistance to GNH can be carefully delineated rather than recognizing GNH as a broader political constellation characterized by a host of actions and policies for achieving state objectives. This is exemplified by Teoh's framing of neoliberalism as an external western influence that opposes GNH. Teoh comments:

*External influences such as globalisation, neoliberalism and consumerism continue to intrude (2015b, p.219)*

*Respondent H7 appears to favour the neo-liberal market approach rather than the GNH ideology (2015a, p.128)*

This dichotomy between GNH and neoliberalism is also intensified by discourses surrounding Bhutan's consideration of World Trade Organization (WTO) membership. With Bhutan gaining observer status in 1999, it was not until 2008 when the government decided against pursuing full membership (Hayden, 2015). With an initial vote of 19 to 5 in favour of WTO membership from the GNH Commission Secretariat, this was reversed to 19 to 5 against membership after consideration of GNH indicators. The Prime Minister was quoted, continuing in this thread, "we have considered everything already and one of the biggest constraints is that right now WTO is seen as being anti-GNH and so it could really distract us from creating conditions necessary for GNH" (Lamsang, 2017). Regardless, Hayden (2015) comments, "the idea of WTO membership has not entirely disappeared" (p.168). While the current government continues to refrain from WTO membership, proponents remain. Sonam Tshering, former Secretary for the Ministry Economic Affairs, states, "our ministry has generally been saying that we should become a member" (Mallet, 2013).

What this situation illustrates is that ideas regarding GNH and WTO compatibility are variable, allowing many to rationalize multiple strategies for achieving the GNH agenda. Another recent trend that emphasizes this variability is the "GNH of Business" initiative proposed by Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay (Zangmo et al., 2017). The initiative works to integrate GNH values into a capitalist framework dominated by competition and profit maximization. While the initiative is in early stages of development, it demonstrates a creative strategy to deal with complications already present in the Bhutanese economy. A variegated lens accounts for such complexity. The following analysis approaches GNH as a variegated governmentality promoting a particular form of biopower as well. From this perspective, newfound neoliberal trends will be considered part and parcel of the variegated governmentality framework. Again, this framework is solely explored from the western region of the country, and may not be indicative of the country as a whole.

### **Emergence of Buddhist Biopower**

From a variegated perspective, diverse forms of governance can be seen to operate simultaneously in Bhutan. For example, a more sovereign form of governance was pivotal to the creation of the Bhutanese state from Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who first united the country in 1634, and into the current monarchy, yet we also see elements of truth, disciplinary and neoliberal arts of governance taking root within the current modernization period. In the case of Schroeder's (2014, 2018) analysis regarding the

creation of GNH tools, there is a strong linkage to Foucault's *disciplinary* governmentality, in which there is an "internalisation of social norms and ethical standards to which individuals conform due to fears of deviance and immorality, and which they thus exercise both over themselves and one another" (Fletcher, 2010, p.173). The *truth* governmentality also has strong resemblance to the GNH agenda through its self-consciously Buddhist nature. Fletcher (2010) explains the *truth* governmentality approach as one in which "authority and prescriptions for appropriate behaviour derive not from rules, norms, or even incentives but rather from the claim that such prescriptions accord with the fundamental nature of life and the universe" (p.176). In this manner, underlying the GNH approach is a commitment to a certain understanding of spiritual truths. GNH then can be situated within Foucault's *sovereign*, *truth* and *disciplinary* forms of governance as a hybrid constellation.

As GNH evolves and incorporates multiple rationalities within its framework, a particular biopower based on Buddhist philosophy also materializes. Adapting the original starting point of Foucault's rational subject, interdependence and co-existence are emphasized. Biopower is reconstructed within the context of GNH by adopting a new conceptualization of the political subject accommodating Buddhist concepts such as Dependent Origin. Yeh (2006) comments:

*According to the Buddha's teaching of Dependent Origination, everything, including the psychological compound that we call individual, exists only in relation to other beings and things and undergoes constant changes responding and reacting to them....since everything within a human being (including physicality and thoughts) depends on other things to exist, nothing within this human being is genuinely independent (autonomous). (pp.91-92)*

Jayasuriya (2008) also notes:

*The Buddhist ethic places limits on an unbridled individualism by acknowledging the interdependent relationship between the individual and society (p.60)*

Foucault, while criticized for his Euro-centric focus (Dillon, 2013), also recognizes the limitations of western thought regarding the individual:

*What is very impressive concerning Christian spirituality and its technique is that we always search for more individualisation. We try to seize what's at the bottom of the soul of the individual. 'Tell me who you are', there is the spirituality of Christianity. As for Zen, it seems that all the techniques linked to spirituality are, conversely, tending to attenuate the individual (Foucault, 1999, p.112)*

These latter 'eastern' leanings of Foucault and the emergence of new governance rationalities in global societies provide grounds for exploring GNH through a variegated governmentality lens. One interviewee<sup>6</sup> supports this conceptualization by noting that society is:

*seen as part of a machine, not about self-interest.*

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<sup>6</sup> 43-year old female, non-government organization employee. Interviewed due to previous experience with GNH policy making. Interview conducted in Thimphu in August 2017.

Another interview<sup>7</sup> reflects:

*we can't exist as individuals, [GNH] is about interdependence. This comes from the cultural core of Bhutan, which is influenced by the Buddhist teachings....engrained are the ideas of coexistence and reciprocity, this is the GNH perspective.*

This emergent form of biopower is unique in two respects. First, it diminishes the individual in favor of interdependence. This is also exemplified in the 'gross' nature of GNH that was previously discussed. Supporting Phuntsho's (2013) perspective, understanding happiness as an internalized collective good, an interviewee<sup>8</sup> comments:

*through our policies and planning matters, importance [is given] to the cultural identities, not only the tangible, external....but something to do with the spiritual, culture, inner values....the way we live based on spiritual beliefs.....those people who are becoming the victim of the crime, becoming criminals, are the ones who are not able to cope and reconcile between their inner self and themselves. In a sense, the external and internal, there is a conflict. So they see problems based on the physical, material point of view, and again they are trying to solve these problems by doing bad things...we are looking from the inner. Our approach, when we say GNH.....it is the inner value, reflecting yourself, understand[ing] yourself.*

It is interesting to note that the criminal in this case is said to be a 'victim of the crime'. This novel framing pays special attention to an internal nature that is not to be equated with the outer actions of a subject, and yet still impacts the condition of the populace. An interviewee<sup>9</sup> comments:

*Happiness not from the state of mind point of view, but the gross, the holistic happiness point of view. I can be happy by abusing drugs, that is also a state of mind. [It is a] very short, temporary myopic pleasure, but we have to look for the enduring long term, because [if] I become a drug abuser, my mother, parents are suffering. I'm in the hospital, they have to come. That's why we have to say, happiness is deeply personal, can be felt and experienced at the individual level, but the pursuit of happiness is collective.*

Another interviewee<sup>10</sup> also emphasizes the importance of GNH as a mechanism for providing communal support:

*GNH to me is being happy in whatever one does and everybody supporting each other...I think of terms like teamwork, cooperation, togetherness.*

Therefore, the GNH state model, based on a strong Buddhist set of values, adopts a strategy of reconciling the inner nature with outward actions for the purpose of improving the condition of the broader populace.

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<sup>7</sup> 45-year old female, non-government organization employee. Interviewed due to experience with GNH education. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2017.

<sup>8</sup> 32-year old male, government employee. Interviewed due to his familiarity with GNH as a form of governance. Interviewed in Thimphu in May 2016.

<sup>9</sup> 32-year old male, government employee. Interviewed due to his familiarity with GNH as a form of governance. Interviewed in Thimphu in May 2016.

<sup>10</sup> 21-year old female, student from Paro. Interviewed in Thimphu in July 2016.

Secondly, biopower associated with GNH seeks to create a society of enlightened individuals with the purpose of the state being to provide conditions for achieving such enlightenment. This drives a political rationality that contrasts western rationalities built on the Enlightenment project, the very sort of rationalities explored by Foucault. This shift from the Enlightenment to spiritual enlightenment signals the emergence of a distinct rationality and set of strategies. Such a modality, that incorporates a Buddhist ethic, could be termed 'Buddhist Biopower'. Therefore, while GNH may be characterized as a variegated governmentality, it also constitutes an innovative form of bio-power.

As a form of biopower, then, the GNH index tool seeks to categorize the population according to specific indicators that guide future policy development and implementation. Such indicators vary in nature from traditional economic measures to social, environmental and religious indicators as well. GNH indicators such as household income, crime, health, literacy/education, and political activity share commonality with what may be considered a traditional statistical indicator system that characterizes other biopower modalities. However, there is a departure from such conventionality expanding the family of indicators to include such items as community relationships, environmental responsibilities, working/sleep hours, values, emotional balance and spirituality (Ura et al., 2012a). And it does so in a specific Buddhist understanding, as seen in the emphasis on karma: "the question of the consideration of karma asked people to what extent they take into account their own volitional impulses and actions as having moral consequences in future just as they did on the present" (Ura et al., 2012b, p.132). As Ura et al. (2012a) explain, "the [GNH] measure and its component indicators aim to capture human well-being in a fuller and more profound way than traditional socio-economic measures of economic development, human development or social progress have done" (pp.9-10). Here we see that the GNH state takes a proactive role in developing a set of population management strategies, strategies that resemble a unique relation to a *truth* biopower modality based on Buddhist spirituality.

### **Variegated Governmentality in Practice**

To better illustrate this analysis, we now examine specific Bhutanese policies and programs, driven by a GNH philosophy, that reveal a variegated governmentality nature. The following analysis focuses on the GNH Index (with the associated GNH Survey) and the Eleventh Five Year Plan.

#### *GNH Index*

The idea for a national index to characterize GNH in Bhutan was introduced in 2007, for which nationwide surveys were conducted in 2007, 2010 and 2015 to determine GNH index values. The initial survey, conducted in 2007, included indicators from each of the nine GNH domains: psychological wellbeing, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity/resilience, time use, and ecological diversity/resilience. These survey results then informed adaptations for future surveys. The purposes of developing a GNH Index were multiple, including: establishing an alternative development model, providing indicators to guide development/policy making, determining proper allocation of resources to meet

planning objectives, measuring the happiness of citizens, and comparing progress across the country (Ura et al., 2012b).

The 2010 and 2015 surveys contained 33 indicators, distributed across the 9 domains (Ura et al., 2015), and reveal particular preferences of the Bhutanese state for categorizing 'success' in managing the populace. Here we highlight two particular domains to show how they resemble multiple governmentalities, yet coalesce within the GNH framework. First, the domain of 'psychological well-being', with its four associated indicators: life satisfaction, spirituality, positive emotion, and negative emotion. Spirituality is divided into a number of questions in which the respondent is asked to subjectively assess their spirituality, consider their moral actions that may have karmic implications, determine their level of involvement in social engagements, and report on meditation practices. Wangmo and Valk (2012) make distinct linkages to these spirituality indicators and Buddhism commenting:

*It is therefore important that a GNH society take account of Karma daily to promote wholesome action for a happy society. The indicator of taking account of Karma daily is thus a reflection of Buddhist principles and is consistent with GNH values (p.73).*

With the spirituality indicator being a part of the Bhutanese State's agenda to measure psychological wellbeing, it also comes with an assumption that spiritual practices/knowledge (karma, meditation, etc.) is key to a successful society. Thus we see a key element of Foucault's *Truth* governmentality manifesting within the GNH Index. Certain religious practices and knowledge are seen as beneficial and are promoted as moral imperatives.

Next we turn to the Cultural Diversity/Resilience domain of the GNH Index. As was the case with Psychological Wellbeing, we find four associated indicators; language, artisan skills, cultural participation, and *Driglam Namzha* (Bhutanese Etiquette). Each of these promotes a particular aspect of culture deemed important by the State. Chopel (2012) comments, "as culture influences, and is influenced by, the policies of the government, one of the policies of the government should be to create conditions conducive to vibrant culture and happiness" (p.83). He continues:

*policies need to encompass values. The development of national educational curriculum in Bhutan that incorporates values of Gross National Happiness is a good example.....The challenge for Bhutan is to incorporate values into private sectors as value laden initiatives and interventions are still in its infancy if not lacking (p.93).*

Chopel's comments promote a governance strategy that inculcates social norms. He is, however, cautious by recognizing the potential for conflict in a state dealing with a breadth of diversity and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the Bhutanese State has created a normalizing structure within the GNH framework that promotes particular cultural practices. These practices are then seen as 'normal', are promoted and assessed by means of the GNH Survey and then reinforced through social sanction. The parallels to Foucault's *disciplinary* governmentality are evident, revealing a strategy that is "taking charge of the behavior of individuals day by day" (Foucault, 2008a, p.67) with the GNH Index and Survey serving as an "apparatus for observation" (Foucault, 1990, p.55).



Still within the Cultural Diversity/Resilience domain also rests an element of a *sovereign* governmentality. *Driglam Namzha* is an ancient form of Bhutanese etiquette that is monitored through the GNH Survey. While it was originally developed amongst the cohort of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, it survives as a code of conduct, prescribing behaviours that one must employ when in the presence of royalty, clergy, or other esteemed individuals. Phuntsho (2015) notes, “unfortunately, *driglam namzha* was viewed in some quarters as an authoritarian imposition of official culture, which reinforced hierarchy and existent power structures”. These contestations that Phuntsho alludes to are most notably experienced by minority groups such as the Lhotshampas, the majority being Hindu, and Sharchops, who follow the Nyingmapa Buddhist tradition (Bothe, 2012).

While this notion is contentious, some would thus argue that the GNH Index and Survey encompass structural components that reinforce ancient hierarchies. Therefore, we find elements within the GNH Index that create expectations and standards for community engagement that resemble elements of *truth* and *disciplinary* governmentality, while also evidencing a *sovereign* power. While this is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the GNH Index, the above analysis suffices to show how multiple governmentalitys manifest within the Index, which was introduced with the hope that it would serve as a key guide for policy direction of the country.

### *Eleventh Five Year Plan*

Bhutan’s Eleventh Five Year Plan (2013-2018) was released in two volumes, the first detailing plans for key sectors and local governments (RGoB, 2013a), while the second provides specific program information for meeting established priorities (RGoB, 2013b). What is of particular interest is the range of programs that exhibit multiple governmentalitys, and yet are not understood as being in conflict with the overarching GNH agenda, and reveal a commitment to a *Buddhist Biopower*. To portray this we highlight the ‘Strengthening of *Dratshang*’ program detailed in volume two of the plan. The ‘Strengthening of *Dratshang*’ program refers to rebuilding the capacity of the central monastic body (*dratshang*) in order to further spiritual practice throughout the country. The program calls for improved monastic facilities, improved nutrition/sanitation, and an increased capacity to manage more students at higher-learning monastic schools, with the primary national goal for “strengthened Bhutanese Identity, social cohesion and harmony” (RGoB, 2013b, p.315). Expected outcomes for this program include enhanced quality of spiritual education and improved access to resources for spiritual practices. For instance, the program makes specific mention of the GNH Index spirituality indicator, which aims to increase meditation practice among the populace from a baseline of 10% to 30% by the end of the plan period (2018). Worth noting, here, is the underlying assumption that spiritual practice is critical for the populace, with Buddhism as its primary vehicle. The program looks to “promote Buddhist studies and also facilitate the development of *tsamkhangs* [retreat hut] and meditation centers” (p.315). Again, what we see is a strong reliance on motivating particular behavior by promoting religious claims characteristic of a *truth* governmentality.

The above analysis reveals a concerted effort of the Bhutanese government to promote specific types of behavior in the populace through a variety of rationalities. An investigation of both the GNH Index and the Eleventh Five Year Plan reveal the multiplicity of approaches advanced within policies and strategies of the government

that reveal the variegated nature of the GNH agenda, rather than signifying a transition from one mode of conduct to another, yet maintain a commitment to the Buddhist Biopower modality. The next section extends this portrait of GNH by also infusing neoliberal trends as a component of the broader governance constellation.

### **Negotiating Neoliberalism in GNH Governance**

While certainly not resembling an archetypal ‘neoliberal’ state, Bhutan has undergone a neoliberalization process in recent years as its economy has become more integrated with neighbouring India, and the larger Asian and global markets. The five-year plans contain a history of discourse, which actively negotiate between a previously held isolationist policy and a more globally-attuned Bhutan. ‘Self Reliance’ and ‘GNH’ are common themes of discussion that work to distinguish the Bhutanese state from globalizing market forces while conflicting themes such as ‘international competitiveness’, ‘competitive advantages’ and ‘private sector development’ actively seek to engage a global audience. As such, a number of foreign actors have exerted influence on the local economy. While the Government of India is the most dominant, an array of actors and agencies are present including the World Bank, United Nations, World Wildlife Fund, SNV, and other donor bodies including states such as Norway, Sweden, and Japan. Such actors have established programs and funding strategies that resemble a neoliberal governmentality, influencing various sectors such as tourism, rural development, park creation, and so on. The question follows then, to what extent do these external actors have influence in the Bhutanese context? And more specifically, how have such actors pressured the Government of Bhutan to liberalize?

Much of Bhutan’s growth in the last 20 years relates to hydropower sector investments, mainly from India, which additionally provides support for secondary sectors such as construction. The nature of these investments creates spikes in productivity, which corresponds with installation periods (Mitra et al., 2014); however such volatility has been highlighted as a key weakness of the Bhutanese economy. Mitra et al. (2014) note “this trend, along with a narrow domestic economic base, makes the economy vulnerable to cyclical swings and external shocks” (p.30). CBS et al. (2004) confirm this precarious circumstance, “two major sources of development and growth – foreign aid and export earnings from hydropower production – point to the excessive dependence of the national economy on these sources and its resultant vulnerability” (p.80). An interviewee<sup>11</sup> supports such vulnerability related to hydropower claiming, “we have limitations...we usually depend on external resources, either through debt or through grants”. This vulnerability within the Bhutanese economy has resulted in reliance on foreign actors for aid and investment capital in order to meet development goals and further resulted in neoliberalization trends.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) is a particular case for which this scenario is underscored. Bhutan became a member of the ADB network in 1982, with a resident mission office opened in Thimphu in 2014 to oversee a number of funded projects (loans, grants, and technical assistance) in the country, an amount that was near \$764 million in 2015 since membership inception (ADB, 2015). Throughout the ADB literature on Bhutan, there exists a consistent discourse of liberalization in order to deal with the narrow economic base and volatility of the economy. In terms of developing a

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<sup>11</sup> 42-year old male interviewee, economist, government employee. Interviewed in Thimphu in April 2016.

robust trade policy framework in Bhutan Cheong et al. (2015) suggest “comparative advantage and specialization are the source of economic gains” (p.21), thus Bhutan “requires trade liberalization and a reduction in excessive regulations, as well as improved international competitiveness...Bhutan should try to adopt the best package of economic policies including reforms and trade liberalization” (p.22). This theme continues in ADB’s (2014) Bhutan Country Strategy: “fostering a business-enabling environment for private sector development, and increasing competitiveness and productivity. Much of the assistance in infrastructure development will be anchored on the South Asia Subregional Economic Cooperation program as part of the on-going support to enhance cross-border connectivity and trade” (p.9). These suggestions for liberalizing trade policies are also incentivised: “Bhutan may receive additional resources from the ADB subregional pool for projects that strongly support regional cooperation and integration” (p.9).

The role of foreign actors is a growing factor in the Bhutanese economy as capital investments are sought for infrastructure projects. While this necessarily creates a dependency on foreign actors, which Bhutan regarded warily for many years, the government claims a ‘cautious liberalization’ strategy. Centre for Bhutan Studies et al. (2004) state:

*Bhutan’s development strategy reflects its recognition of the benefits of globalization and increased participation in international trade while taking the cautionary path against impulsive liberalization – it demonstrates that the move towards opening up its economy has been gradual and weighed against unwarranted corruption of its own cultural heritage (p.80).*

While global capitalism and neoliberal trends have been critiqued as neo-colonizing and acculturating forces (Marglin, 1990; Rogers-Vaughn, 2016), Bhutan has negotiated such developments within its already variegated governmentality, thus absorbing and hybridizing what may be conceived as competing ideologies, such as ‘traditional’ and capitalist rationalities. As seen in the Centre for Bhutan Studies et al. (2004) quote above, neoliberalization is not seen as contrary to a GNH form of governance. While the Bhutanese state comprises of factions that perceive incompatibility between GNH and western neoliberal strategies, others identify neoliberalization not as a reflection of foreign influence, but rather as a complementary form of conduct that, when employed in a cautious manner, may meet the objectives of GNH. Therefore, the resulting nexus of cultural values, social practices, and neoliberal trends is a historically situated and accepted form of governance. This also melds well with the findings of Gupta and Sharma (2006) who argue against sequential patterns of governmentalities. Rather, multiple governmentalities are seen to act simultaneously and locally understood as complementary.

Highlighting this point further, the Eleventh Five Year Plan contains a number of ‘neoliberal’ initiatives that are couched in terms of achieving GNH. The ‘Strengthening Trade Policy and Regulatory Framework’ program works to provide legal instruments to promote healthy competition and improve the efficiency and productivity of business operations in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency. In line with this the government is promoting an increase in industrial private sector operations that will increase economic diversification with the ‘Promotion of sustainable and environment

friendly industrial development' program. In both these programs we see the active hand of the state to create enabling environments for market interactions.

Additionally, a number of programs with neoliberal leanings also aim at conservation efforts, which is a key priority that aligns with the pillars of GNH. These programs share a particular neoliberal governmentality, and more specifically a neoliberal 'environmentality' (Fletcher, 2010), by providing "incentives sufficient to motivate individuals to choose to behave in conservation-friendly ways....encouraging economic growth as the means to include concerns for social justice within conservation policy" (p.176). The 'Targeted Highland Development' program, for example, imposes external motivators to promote particular actions. The program recognizes the decline in nomadic practice, which partially intensified the rural to urban migration concern in the country, and works to rectify livelihood difficulties by increasing efficiencies and improving income stability. To accomplish these goals the program calls for the creation of a nodal agency to address the needs of nomadic communities, increase efficiencies in the management of rangelands and watersheds, promote livestock products, increase the use of alternative energy, and promote ecotourism (RGoB, 2013b, p.29). While the outputs are predominantly development focused, there is a distinct focus on neoliberal mechanisms. Ecotourism and Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES), both of which are characterized as neoliberal mechanisms within conservation literature (see Büscher and Fletcher, 2015; Duffy, 2002; West and Carrier, 2004; Büscher and Arsel, 2012; Fletcher and Breitling, 2012), are promoted within the program in order to generate outside sources of funding.

Bhutan has thus incorporated a neoliberal trend into an existing bricolage of governance strategies, manifesting in a variegated neoliberalism. In this analysis, therefore, the GNH state not only reflects *sovereign*, *disciplinary* and *truth* governmentalities, but also incorporates a *neoliberal* modality as a component of the larger governance framework. Complementing but also complicating previous research, our analysis suggests that this neoliberal 'intrusion' does not represent a transition to a more 'pure' neoliberal state; rather it signifies a novel understanding of neoliberal rationality that has become infused with the concept of a variegated governmentality. As such, neoliberalism operates as just one component amongst many within the overarching GNH governance rationality.

## Conclusion

In this analysis we advanced a conceptual framing for understanding GNH as a variegated governmentality and unique mode of biopower. In understanding GNH as governmentality, we stress that what has evolved does not, nor should it be expected to, fit Foucault's preconceived categories, which were shaped by his perspective as a French academic drawing upon notions of state conduct of western civilization from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward. Furthermore, Foucault himself recognized that his modes of governmentality produce hybrid forms in particular contexts. What we find in the GNH project that has evolved in the western region of the country, then, is a variegated governmentality that reveals elements of Foucault's *sovereign*, *truth* and *disciplinary* modalities. Additionally, through a series of geo-political decisions and economic integration, the GNH state has also negotiated a process of neoliberalization. However, the adoption of neoliberal trends should not be viewed as Eurocentric mimicry, but rather an effort to absorb new ideas/tools into an existing form of conduct. In this case,

GNH is understood as an evolving form of conduct that adopts western ideas such as 'neoliberalism' and 'democracy' but redefines them through a historically constructed cultural lens that understands these as complementary rather than in opposition. The result is a highly adaptive and culturally attuned governmentality that reflects a contemporary social science framing of neoliberalization as a variegated process. We have therefore argued that the variegated governmentality framework must integrate a variegated approach to understanding neoliberalization in order to offer more nuanced analyses going forward. Based on this framework, we have also argued that Bhutanese governance embodies a unique form of biopower. Grounded predominantly in Buddhist ideals of pursuing enlightenment, such a novel modality could be termed 'Buddhist Biopower', which draws upon religious-cultural values with the express purpose to create conditions for enlightenment on behalf of the populace, in stark contrast to modern governance rationalities framed on the Enlightenment project.

To conclude, the variegated governmentality/biopower framework creates new avenues for investigating emergent governance rationalities. Within Bhutan, GNH as an evolving rationality warrants further attention to make sense of modernizing and globalizing trends in the country. Furthermore, while limitations of this research resulted in analyses restricted to western portions of the country, much more could be said about governance rational and experience in other regions, specifically those in the south and east. Additionally, environmental governance could be explored through such a lens as many neoliberalization trends are becoming apparent within forest conservation and tourism promotion activities. Beyond Bhutan, this framework allows for more nuanced analysis of other emergent rationalities that defy western modalities. Such modalities may be based on alternative spiritualities or communitarian ideals that challenge hegemonic discourses surrounding governance and development.

## 6 Neoliberal environmentalism in the land of Gross National Happiness<sup>12</sup>

Jesse Montes

### Abstract

*This chapter explores how a growing trend towards neoliberalization throughout Bhutan manifests within environmental governance in particular. Bhutan's well-known Gross National Happiness (GNH) development strategy can be seen to represent a shift towards a variegated governmentality more generally that increasingly exhibits neoliberal tendencies as the country seeks to negotiate its further integration into the global economy. Part of this integration entails efforts to promote ecotourism as a key element of the country's future conservation strategy. Ecotourism has been described as a growing manifestation of a 'neoliberal environmentalism' (Fletcher, 2010) within environmental conservation policy and practice, and hence Bhutan's promotion of ecotourism can be seen as contributing to the promotion of neoliberal conservation. Yet in practice, my analysis demonstrates that environmental governance in Bhutan is a complex of external neoliberal influences filtered through local formal and informal institutions, specifically a Buddhist worldview, a history of state paternalism and the GNH governance model, all of which express contrasting governance rationalities. This study thus contributes to governmentality studies by promoting a variegated environmentalism perspective that calls for more nuanced analyses beyond "variegated" neoliberalization. This perspective also affords a holistic understanding of discrepancies between the vision and execution of neoliberal conservation that can be attributed to the articulation of alternative rationalities in policy formulation and implementation.*

*Key words:* environmentalism, governmentality, Gross National Happiness, Bhutan, ecotourism, neoliberalism

### Introduction

Sandwiched between economic giants China and India, Bhutan has long resisted external forces of colonialism and encapsulation both through purposeful policy and geo-physical isolation. What has evolved, then, is a uniquely situated society, based on a Buddhist theocratic governance model initiated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, strengthened through monarchical rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a 21<sup>st</sup> century democratic transition with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary system. Through this evolution, Buddhist philosophy has thrived beyond the realm of religion and serves as a basis for cultural practice, governance, and state legitimacy more generally.

Bhutan has become internationally renowned for its promotion of Gross National Happiness (GNH), which serves as a development model that incorporates environmental conservation and cultural preservation into mainstream policymaking. This has resulted in a unique trajectory that is seen to contrast conventional economic development models, and is attributed to a home-grown set of values and beliefs. As such, Bhutan has also developed as an idealized representation in the western imaginary as other states also seek alternatives to the hegemonic form of global capitalism and ideas surrounding 'progress' (see Helliwell et al., 2012; UN, 2013; OECD, 2011). Part

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of this development model involves the promotion of ecological values that drive conservation policy and practice in the country.

With an emphasis on these novel ecological values and conservation practices, in this chapter I position recent trends in environmental governance within Bhutan's overarching GNH project with the growing global promotion of neoliberal conservation (Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016; Dempsey and Suarez, 2016; Igoe and Brockington, 2007; Brockington and Duffy, 2011). The proliferation of neoliberal conservation has been criticized for continuing to obfuscate and legitimize capitalist hegemony while ignoring contradictions intrinsic to capitalist accumulation. While such efforts aim to 'sell nature to save it' (McAfee, 1999; Dempsey and Suarez, 2016), this results in creating "new types of values" (Igoe and Brockington, 2007, 432), that potentially disrupt the goals of GNH. To address this convergence of conservation strategies and values literature addressing a variegated governmentality framework is emerging, in which multiple governance rationalities and their articulations are investigated. Fletcher (2017) appeals for nuanced analyses of variegated 'environmentalities' to examine the vision and execution of environmental governance in particular. With the literature around variegated neoliberalisms only providing partial investigations of neoliberal conservation, variegated environmentality allows a more nuanced analysis of additional rationalities at play. Through policy analysis and the adoption of a variegated environmentality framework I explore these articulations manifesting in governance constellations that variegated neoliberalism lacks language for, and am thus also able to address concerns from critics regarding the usefulness of neoliberalism as a construct. Thus, I am able to underscore local specificities that account for discrepancies in the vision and execution of neoliberal conservation, but go beyond this to express what also exists. I show that indigenous efforts prove critical when re-interpreting conservation strategies and warding off external dynamics that promote possibly dangerous hegemonic neoliberal trends.

In what follows, I begin by summarizing research concerning neoliberal conservation and the 'environmentality' concept (Luke, 1995; Agrawal, 2005; Fletcher, 2010). While neoliberal conservation serves as a dominant discourse for understanding global conservation trends, 'environmentality' is a framework for understanding multiple rationalities within conservation and how they manifest in both vision and practice. I then position Bhutan within these trends and frame GNH as a variegated governmentality more broadly (Montes and Bhattarai, 2018), juxtaposing this with the recent trends in conservation that have primarily been neoliberal in nature. I then use the variegated environmentality framework to illustrate how environmental governance in Bhutan operates through a complex of external neoliberal influences filtered through local formal and informal institutions that represent opposing rationalities. I apply this analysis to the recently adopted 'Bhutan for Life' program, a collaborative environmental conservation effort by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Royal Government of Bhutan. This is followed by a closer examination of ecotourism as a key strategy for implementation under the plan. The analysis will challenge the concept of variegated neoliberalization by revealing contestations from non-neoliberal rationalities, resulting in a synthesized environmental governance model.

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork, which included semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document reviews conducted from 2013-2018. Interviews were conducted with employees of both government and non-government

organizations, primarily from the Thimphu area. While regional offices may also have relevant data, Thimphu serves as a hub for policy creation. Specific informants were selected based on their experience with environmental policy formulation. Targeted and snowball sampling techniques were adopted to reach the most relevant informants. Additionally, rural community members were also interviewed to ascertain experiential components of environmental policies in the country. Such informants were primarily from western *Dzongkhags*<sup>13</sup> due to access restrictions within the country. Discussions focussed on conservation policy and practice, but also explored perceptions of efficiencies, contradictions, and spaces for improvement. Data analysis stressed common emergent themes within local conservation discourse.

## **Neoliberal Conservation**

### *Neoliberal Logic and Environmentality*

Tracing the history of modern development and discourses associated with it, Büscher and Fletcher (2015) provide an analysis of conservation trends driven by capitalism that move from Fortress conservation approaches driven by Keynesian ideology and state funding to the age of neoliberalism in the post 1970 world. Each of these phases of capitalism works to resolve limits of the previous phase, dealing with systematic contradictions. Such limits may be biophysical in which accumulation is limited by availability or access, but also include limits of efficiency and the expediency for which capital can be accumulated. What manifests in each phase is an intensified reliance on capitalist logic despite previous failures (Li, 2008; Büscher and Fletcher, 2015). As such, what we see in modern conservation efforts is the goal of assuring “capital will be ‘allocated’ properly, meaning that it conserves the resources underlying the capitalist mode of production, rather than destroying them” (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015: 281). Therefore, rather than addressing systematic failures, what we find is “the ultimate denial of the negative environmental impacts of the capitalist mode of production...an effort to obfuscate the daunting implications of capitalist production by claiming that capitalism has the ability to effectively address these problems through the same mechanisms that created them” (293).

Following such logic, the current neoliberal rationality is rampant within conservation discourse and is quickly becoming the hegemonic view of state governments, NGOs and businesses in many places (Brockington et al., 2008; Igoe et al., 2011). Igoe et al. (2011) describe a modern historic bloc, defined as “a historic period in which groups who share particular interests come together to form a distinctly dominant class. The ideas and agendas of this class thus come to permeate an entire society’s understanding of the world” (20). What has resulted, then, is a pervasive discourse that frames itself as ‘green’, and may even seem counter-hegemonic in that it promotes the health and vibrancy of environmental components that were previously ignored by economic interests, and yet lacks significant challenge to capitalist logic and its contradictions. Moreover, the strategies employed under this conservation rationale promote the capitalist system of accumulation by reifying tensions of existing social and human-environment relations.

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<sup>13</sup> *Dzongkhags* are administrative units in Bhutan, for which the country has 20



One component of neoliberal conservation is the emerging rationality, or 'environmentality'. Based on the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, Luke (1995) proposes the concept as a result of locating "the emergence of 'the environment' as a nexus for knowledge formation and as a cluster of power tactics" (66). Agrawal (2005a) expands on this to define it as "an approach to studying environmental politics that takes seriously the conceptual building blocks of power/knowledges, institutions, and subjectivities" (8). Fletcher (2010) then builds on this seeing environmentality as a sub-analysis of broader governmentalities. As a rationale for environmental governance, environmentality translates to multiple strategies that correlate with a particular mode of conduct. Thus, a state that operates on a sovereign governmentality, compelling subjects to obey a set of rules, will likely be accompanied by a sovereign environmentality (i.e. Fortress conservation). A state that operates on a disciplinary governmentality, inculcates social norms allowing subjects to govern themselves, would be accompanied by a disciplinary environmentality (i.e. what Agrawal calls 'creating environmental subjects'). And a state that operates on a truth governmentality, appealing to religious claims or beliefs about the nature of the world, will be accompanied by a truth environmentality (i.e. Deep Ecology). Fletcher, however, concentrates his analysis on a 'neoliberal environmentality' stating, "within a neoliberal framework conservationists would simply endeavor to provide incentives sufficient to motivate individuals to choose to behave in conservation-friendly ways...altering the cost-benefit ratio of resource extraction so as to encourage in situ preservation" (176).

As such, neoliberal environmentality, characterized by decentralization, privatization, and price-based market mechanisms, is contrasted with disciplinary, sovereign, and truth approaches (Fletcher 2010; Montes and Bhattarai, 2018). This rationality for environmental governance is more broadly manifested in modern conservation discourses that promote a 'green economy' and 'green growth' (Wanner, 2015), via which the "'sustainable development' of neoliberal capitalism is maintained" with an effort to "revive growth while changing the quality of economic growth" (Wanner, 2015: 21, 27). Specific strategies associated with a neoliberal conservation model include ecotourism, payment for ecosystem services (PES), and tax structures that motivate particular behaviors through economic incentives, a return to the *Homo economicus* rationality (Fletcher and Breitling, 2012; Fletcher, 2014;). Foucault (2008a) reflects on *Homo economicus*, the economic man, and differentiates between the Liberal 'partner of exchange' and the Neoliberal 'entrepreneur'. While the Liberal conceptualization is one that entails a subject that seeks utility based on needs, the Neoliberal subject seeks the maximization of profit at the expense of societal goals thus requiring state intervention, or external incentive strategies, for managing behaviors (Fletcher, 2010).

An exploration of neoliberal logic and its articulations has been greatly advanced by literature concerning variegated neoliberalisms (see Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009; Springer 2012; 2014). In such work, neoliberalism is conceptualized as an uneven and varied process (Castree, 2010) lacking a straightforward implementation of strategies that have become associated with a neoliberal rationale. Therefore, the variegated neoliberal concept acknowledges a processional nature that more accurately reflects the realities of neoliberal manifestations. Incorporating environmentality into analyses of conservation frameworks allows for a nuanced analysis of multiple rationalities that coalesce, recognizing both neoliberal and non-neoliberal rationalities. While variegated

neoliberalism literature explores the former, it does so at the expense of the latter. As such, I extend critiques of neoliberal conservation by adopting a variegated environmentality framework to identify these alternative rationalities and explore unique articulations. This will be conducted with a specific analysis of ecotourism, which conservation literature has underscored as a neoliberal strategy for conservation.

### *Ecotourism as Neoliberal Conservation*

Ecotourism works towards *in situ* conservation by appealing to the value of natural capital through tourism profits. This strategy is also associated with a 'roll-back' approach (Peck and Tickell, 2002), as opposed to 'roll-out' approaches such as PES and 'green' tax structures that resemble an intensified green neoliberalism (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015). While the latter is associated with a commitment of states to create market friendly policy environments for which conservation strategies are built into the systematic operations of institutions, the former are an earlier strategy in which states pull-back and allow market incentives to operate unfettered. Roll-back mechanisms characterize an earlier stage of this environmentality, with roll-out mechanisms signalling an intensified commitment to neoliberal capitalist logic. Therefore, while roll-out mechanisms can also be seen as a further abstraction of nature by dislocating the value of nature from any particular location, ecotourism maintains the connection to a physical space (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015) but aligns with the larger neoliberal strategy by altering value schemes based on capital accumulation.

Ecotourism has served as a nexus for development, foreign aid, and conservation, and has largely served as a reaction to the negative impacts of the tourism sector. As such, a number of agencies including the World Bank, USAID, Inter-American Development Bank, and the World Wildlife Fund have promoted ecotourism as a key strategy for the developing world (Honey, 2008). Honey (2008) provides a comprehensive definition of Ecotourism as "travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It helps educate the traveller, provides funds for conservation, directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights" (33). Ecotourism under this definition is based on a set of principles rather than a focus on a type of activity or experience and may manifest in a number of ways. Regardless, the aim is to benefit local communities while conserving the environment, thus producing 'win-win' scenarios. But again, as with a neoliberal rationale, we see the implications of usurped human-environment relations. Conservation efforts are linked to economic incentives and serve as the primary motivator for ecotourism (Honey, 2008; Fletcher, 2009). This 'Stakeholder Theory' (Honey, 2008) asserts that in order for Ecotourism to be properly promoted, one must argue that it makes economic sense, thus "ecotourism, like other forms of business involved in green capitalism places profit at the forefront of its operations" (Duffy, 2002: 155). This emphasis, then, undermines alternative conservation frameworks, which are less economically motivated. In addition, social relations continue to be transformed due to imposed decentralization and privatization schemes 'required' for conservation, and thus ecotourism, activities (West and Carrier, 2004; Barnett, 2010). Stronza (2007) also shows how new values develop altering social relations as a result of local communities becoming involved in ecotourism operations that serve as new livelihood opportunities. So while an 'ideal' form of ecotourism may be characterized by Honey's (2008) definition, what materializes is:

*a mixture of positive and negative impacts on host societies, and that it is far from the ideal of a culturally and environmentally sensitive form of travel.....like conventional tourism.....it is not the cost-free strategy that its advocates suggest. Rather, it is a highly politicized strategy that does not offer a neutral path to sustainable development (Duffy, 2002: 155-156).*

Fletcher and Neves (2012) conclude that ecotourism is far from being the development panacea that it is claimed to be and they question:

*the extent to which ecotourism can truly fulfill its overarching promise to facilitate sustainable development on a global scale by reconciling economic growth with both environmental protection and poverty alleviation within a capitalist framework.....the process of ecotourism development purports to reconcile a number of contradictions intrinsic to capitalist accumulation, the process is itself contradictory in many respects, not least in terms of its ambition to harness the same market mechanisms in large part responsible for many of our social and ecological problems (72).*

Again we see an intensification of capitalist logic within ecotourism in order to deal with inherent systemic contradictions.

Nevertheless, Ecotourism serves as a critical juncture for the capitalist project. Working to resolve preferences for resource extraction and on-going accumulation, ecotourism serves as a strategy to solve the dilemma of ecological limits yet shares a similar base logic. Büscher and Davidov (2016) speak to an 'ecotourism-extraction nexus' that highlights apparent contradictions of ecotourism and extraction activities while providing a more nuanced analysis revealing commonalities between the two processes that are mutually reinforcing. Ecotourism provides the 'greening' necessary for capitalism to continue and transform to new modalities for on-going accumulation. Therefore, capitalism avoids being abandoned as the hegemonic strategy for forming social relations and evolves to adopt new strategies that serve as intensifications of neoliberal logic (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015).

*But does Neoliberalism exist?*

While ecotourism as a neoliberal strategy has been extensively addressed in conservation literature, this is challenged by perspectives claiming that in practice ecotourism lacks neoliberal modes of implementation, often resulting in state controlled/funded programs lacking privatized ownership and decentralized decision-making mechanisms. Similar accusations have also been made of PES strategies (Fletcher and Breitling, 2012). Furthermore, some theorists claim that neoliberalism in general may be a fiction and "perhaps we should try to do without the concept of 'neoliberalism' altogether, because it might actually compound rather than aid in the task of figuring out how the world works and how it changes" (Barnett, 2005: 10). Such theorists question whether neoliberalism even exists as it is characterized by numerous concepts/ideals that never materialize in pure form (Barnett, 2005, 2010). Rather, they frame the term as encompassing "everything the author doesn't like...the catchall concept for its anguished concerns" (Laidlaw, 2016: 20).

While new scholarship in neoliberalism has done away with totalizing characterizations of the concept and speaks to emergent practices with "variations across different places" (Birch and Myckhnenko, 2010: 6) that maintain shared features, this is further criticized

as a strategy “to create a hermetically-sealed conceptual framework impossible to falsify” (Fletcher, in press; see also Barnett, 2005; 2010; Ong, 2008; Bakker, 2009). Yet proponents of the term insist that ‘wave’ like neoliberal trends (Simmons et al., 2008; Birch and Mykhnenko, 2010; Brenner et al., 2010) result in “important cumulative impacts” (Brenner et al., 2010: 3) that require ongoing critique, and that to think otherwise “risks blinding ourselves to the contemporary realities of structural violence and the substantive abuse that neoliberalism unleashes” (Springer, 2014: 157). Understanding neoliberalism as a process of neoliberalization (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Castree, 2009; Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2009; Springer, 2012; 2014) results in a more nuanced approach to analyzing its articulations in a given context (Fletcher, in press), and yet limitations of this perspective remain. As Barnett (2005) states, “theories of ‘neoliberalism’ are unable to recognize the emergence of new and innovative forms of individualized collective action because their critical imaginations turns on a simple evaluative opposition between individualism and collectives” (11). Further, Barnett (2010) questions, “what is it that makes the hybrid compounds through which these specific ideologies make themselves felt always liable to be named ‘neoliberal’, if this is only one of their components?” (8-9).

Thus, what is required is a framework that accounts for the multiple rationalities that merge and articulate with neoliberalism in a wave like muddled approach. A variegated environmentality approach recognizes the contribution of neoliberalization to conservation regimes while also providing language for contesting rationalities. I propose the use of such a framework to create a middle ground for both proponents and critics of variegated neoliberalisms. In such a framework, neoliberalization is but one element and need not dominate analysis at the expense of other critical components. Fletcher (in press) has previously applied such a strategy to understanding neoliberalism generally, with an “effort to chart middle ground between...retaining a focus on variegated neoliberalization but contending that there are limits to the utility of analysis in these terms”. In the subsequent analysis, I follow this trajectory by honing in on the context of neoliberal conservation in Bhutan and address neoliberal environmentality and its variants specifically. What will be shown is that neoliberal components characteristic of the modern conservation movement manifest in the Bhutanese context in a novel manner that accounts for local specificities. Additionally, the variegated environmentality framework will account for the gaps between vision and execution of neoliberal conservation strategies. While ecotourism is commonly deemed neoliberal by nature, the execution of this strategy in Bhutan proceeds in a not entirely neoliberal fashion. Such discrepancies can be accounted for once a proper theoretical framework is adopted which accounts for neoliberal articulations with contesting rationalities.

## **Environmental Governance in Bhutan**

### *A Variegated Nature*

From its introduction in the 1970-80s, GNH represents a historical governance tradition rooted in Buddhism (Givel and Figueroa, 2014) that is still an evolving model of development (Schroeder and Schroeder, 2014). Simeon Teoh (n.d., 2015a) was the first to highlight GNH as a specific ‘governmentality’. His characterization of GNH puts it in direct confrontation with other such governmentalities (i.e. sovereign, disciplinary, neoliberal, and truth) (Foucault, 2008a). However, GNH should be seen

not as a specific governmentality category, but as a variegated governmentality that has incorporated multiple strategies of governance. Elsewhere I show how GNH as a particular art of government can be characterized as a fusion of sovereign, disciplinary, truth, and neoliberal governmentalities, which are also accompanied by a specific 'Buddhist' biopower that works through disciplining strategies within the populace (Montes and Bhattarai, 2018). 'Buddhist' Biopower, then, works within the GNH governmentality framework, adopting specific normative strategies that, based on Buddhist/GNH ideals, aim to reconcile one's inner nature with outward actions with a focus on spiritual and communitarian ideals. Likewise, GNH serves as a variegated governmentality that shares commonalities with Foucauldian approaches and yet reveals emergent properties of its own.

In recent times Bhutan has struggled through the process of development, working to establish progress without compromising cultural values, beliefs, and practice. The modernization of Bhutan began in 1961 with the initiation of the five-year plans, which have dominated development agendas since. The first of these two plans were heavily influenced by the region's largest economic power, India. The plans served as a means to establish India as a major source of financial aid (CBS and IDE, 2004; UNDP 2001) and began a series of infrastructure projects, initially roads and moving to large-scale hydro projects in the 1980s. This relationship not only succeeded in meeting development objectives of poverty alleviation but also began a process of intimately tying the fates of both economies. As a result, Bhutan's economy began to mimic both regional and global trends (CBS and IDE, 2004).

In terms of conservation governance, a historical progression reveals movement from sovereign to more community-integrated approaches, and then to more market-based strategies. After the initial five-year plan Bhutan enacted its first modern piece of legislation, the 1969 Forest Act. The Forest Act brought all forest resources under state control with the purpose of deterring exploitative practices (NCD, 2004). This was followed by the nationalization of logging operations in the country in 1979 as well as the creation of a number of protected areas. With the first protected area established in 1966, six were added in 1974, and five more in 1983 (Penjore, 2008), with a current protected areas systems that includes five National Parks, four Wildlife Sanctuaries, one Strict Nature Reserve, and multiple biological corridors making up 51.44% of the country's land base (NEC, 2016). Over this progression, however, state control transitioned to account for more inclusive consultation with local residents and resource users. In 1995 the Forest Act was repealed and replaced with the Forest and Nature Conservation Act (FNCA), which provided opportunity for such engagement (NCD, 2004) signaling a more integrated model of conservation. The National Environment Commission stressed "specifically the integration of development, environmental protection, and community participation" (NEC, 1994: 14). While this trend towards engagement continues, recent strategies for conservation strongly resemble a neoliberal approach. The 2010 Economic Development Plan (RGoB, 2010), the 2013-2018 Eleventh Five Year Plan (RGoB, 2013a; 2013b), and the 2014 National Biodiversity Strategy (MoAF, 2014) all strongly promote tax incentives, Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Ecotourism as key strategies for furthering the conservation agenda. The Biodiversity Strategy highlights key action points which include *Action 3.2.2* calling for an exploration of PES and ecotourism opportunities, *11.2.1* seeking to implement REDD+ initiatives, *11.2.2 & 11.2.3* looking to upscale existing PES and ecotourism programs, and *11.2.4* which seeks to "explore additional innovative financing

mechanisms” (MoAF, 2014: 99). The following quote from the second five-year plan reveals a subtle shift in conceptualizing the environment:

*as no census has been taken nor has any detailed statistical information been collected so far it is difficult to assess the resources and potential of the country and to formulate a coordinated development plan (RGoB, 1966: 1).*

Here we see an effort towards determining potentiality. The country’s resources are equated with development potential, and as such, are framed as sources of capital. The government continues to promote such a ‘natural capital’ rhetoric appealing to competitive advantages related to natural resources in the region and internationally. The 2010 Economic Development Policy (RGoB, 2010) extends this conceptualization:

*The success of the country’s environment conservation efforts shall be one of the main drivers for developing the ‘Brand Bhutan’ theme.....a broad range of economic opportunities have been identified and these will be based on developing the ‘Brand Bhutan’ in natural resources, tourism, culture, handicrafts, textiles and agro produce. The other opportunities lie in building on the existing comparative advantages of location, natural resource endowment and availability of clean energy (5-6).*

*The Royal Government shall create an enabling environment and develop institutional framework to promote tourism.....create conditions to allow more competition, improvement of services, greater choices for visitors and equitable spread of benefits. Sustainable tourism shall be promoted for socio-economic development by minimizing negative impacts and taking advantage of the country’s unique cultural and spiritual heritage as well as natural environment through high value tourism (16).*

What we see here is the manifestation of a neoliberal logic, which, again, is not outside the realm of the GNH variegated governmentality. With the variegated perspective in mind, it is not altogether surprising that neoliberal trends manifest in Bhutanese policy. However, numerous researchers and politicians often portray GNH as an alternative to hegemonic development and governance modalities that prioritize an economic rationale (see Thinley, 1998; Kinga et al., 1999; Hargens, 2002; McDonald, 2003; 2005; Hirata, 2003; 2005; Tideman, 2011; Masaki, 2013a; Ura et al., 2012b; 2015). Such emphasis in these studies appeals to popular sentiment as opposed to political praxis and fails to understand neoliberalism as a variegated entity/process or as a single component to the larger governance framework. Regardless, there are numerous appeals in state policy to prioritize a liberalization of the economy, as shown above. But what we will also find is that multiple competing environmentalities emerge to drive conservation policy in the country.

#### *External Actors and Global Conservation Discourse*

An additional factor contributing to such trends is the influence of external actors. Near the beginning of Bhutan’s Tenth Five-Year Plan (2008-2013), there was a perceived need to increase economic activity in a number of waning sectors including agriculture, trade, and tourism. Initiated by the first democratically elected government, the *Druk Phuensum Tshogpa* (DPT) (Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party), McKinsey & Company was hired as a consultant to provide recommendations for planning in the country. However, the government was criticized for looking to external consulting firms and not hiring local consultants that would be better positioned to incorporate societal

values. On July 1, 2009, McKinsey & Company began the newly awarded contract, amounting to \$9.1 million (USD). The project, entitled 'Accelerating Bhutan's Economic Development', aimed to create jobs for the 90,000 unemployed and targeted a 9% growth rate during the Tenth Five-Year Plan period (Kuensel, 2009). What ensued was a series of liberalizing policy recommendations that challenged not only the status quo of development in Bhutan, but also underlying cultural values. Paramount to the new recommendations was an emphasis on liberalizing the tourism sector, which was already a primary source of foreign currency in the country. McKinsey recommended policy alterations that would allow 250,000 tourists per year by 2012. Due to a perceived anti-GNH flavour voiced by numerous stakeholders the proposal was amended to 100,000 tourists, however this initial proposal began a shift in rationalities (Teoh, 2015a). Teoh notes, "in 2009, the [tourism] policy shifted from high value, low volume to high value, low impact...the subtlety lies in the conflicting rationale to replace low volume with low impact. This shift in policy or conduct is the legacy of the McKinsey Report that has impacted on the practice of sustainable tourism" (122).

What is evident in this context is that while neoliberal logic was already a contributing rationality to GNH, the influence of foreign actors seems to have made a significant emphasis on its prevalence, but not without controversy. As Teoh (2015a) describes, "tensions arose as not all tourism stakeholders and members of the public agreed with the focus of fast-paced tourism development aligned with neoliberalism proposed by the McKinsey consultants" (142). An interviewee<sup>14</sup> comments:

*They were hired to help accelerate the economic development of Bhutan. They were directly recruited by the Government to assist in different sectors.*

Specifically related to tourism the interviewee notes:

*They just talked mass numbers, how they could increase, and it looked attractive to politicians because they were under pressure to create jobs and bring more revenue, to meet their promises...McKinsey was speaking their language.*

*[McKinsey] wants to make huge revenue and profits, and Bhutan is not all about profits, its more about GNH which goes beyond commercialization, there are a lot of other cultural and spiritual values that we value more.*

As an internationally renowned consultant firm, McKinsey & Company has developed a reputation for implementing neoliberal strategies for economic development more broadly (see Lund et al., 2013), including liberalizing banking practices in China (Ngai et al., 2016) and labour practices in India (Lewis et al., 2001). In terms of conservation specifically, McKinsey has actively promoted an 'innovative' form of financing known as Project Finance for Permanence (PFP) calling upon private investors to meet the shortage of conservation funding (Credit Suisse et al., 2016; 2014). The PFP mechanism has also been applied to the Amazon Region Protected Areas in Brazil, the Great Bear Rainforest Project in Canada, and the Costa Rica Forever project (WWF, 2015). This has allowed McKinsey to broaden its portfolio by integrating green neoliberalism and conceptualizing market alternatives to resource extraction practices, again intensifying capitalist logic to deal with systemic contradictions. In a report co-

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<sup>14</sup> 43-year old male interviewee, NGO employee, Thimphu. Interviewed in Thimphu in January 2018.

authored with Credit Suisse and WWF, (2014) the three institutions lay the groundwork for promoting the PFP mechanism:

*there are many unexploited private sector investment opportunities to increase conservation finance and deliver maximum conservation impacts while, at the same time, generating returns for investors.....provided it delivers measurable results, investor-driven conservation finance can create powerful incentives for true sustainable development (3).*

This 2014 document also provides a framework for how financial institutions and conservation organizations can collaborate to promote such new finance mechanisms:

*NGOs should aim to provide a sufficient supply of large-scale conservation projects that have clearly defined environmental benefits...they can act as verifiers of conservation project impact, which investors will value as a 'seal of approval' for their investment...the finance community has the opportunity to develop conservation products and distribute them to its clients (7).*

With this positioning of key actors, the rationale is further promoted by McKinsey and co-authors in a later 2016 report:

*Can nature pay for itself?...The disappearance of Earth's last healthy ecosystems is sadly no longer news. What is news is that saving these ecosystems is not only affordable, but profitable. Nature must not be turned into a commodity, but rather into an asset treasured by the mainstream investment market (Credit Suisse et al.: 3).*

While the document verbalizes the intent not to commodify nature, the language and actions do just the opposite. McKinsey partners with well-known conservation agencies in an effort to abstract nature so that natural capital becomes profitable and obtains market fluidity. In this, human actors are positioned in a way to conceptualize the environment from the perspective of rational actors (*Homo economicus*) in which natural capital accounting is the primary rationale for conservation.

From a variegated perspective, neoliberal strategies can be seen as part and parcel to the conservation governance framework. Yet while both external actors and a larger global conservation discourse promote the vision of neoliberal conservation, a number of formal and informal institutions mediate this influence producing an execution of something altogether different than what the neoliberal environmentality may envision. I now turn to these local institutions in order to highlight competing rationalities and the emergent articulations with the neoliberal environmentality.

### *Formal and Informal Institutions*

Neoliberal Conservation works to create nodes for accumulation that were previously unrealized in previous epochs of capitalism (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015) and promotes a particular neoliberal environmentality for ensuring conservation minded behaviour (Fletcher, 2010). However, the Bhutanese policy context reveals numerous opposing rationalities that restrict the straightforward implementation of neoliberal conservation strategies, revealing a muddled approach to environmental governance indicative of a variegated environmentality perspective. What manifests, then, is an environmental governance complex in which the neoliberal rational is mediated by; a Buddhist worldview, a history of state paternalism, and GNH policy tools. While this complexity



in practice resonates with variegated governmentality literature more generally, the following paragraphs seek to outline these mediating institutions to provide a framework for understanding additional rationalities and environmentalities beyond neoliberalism, even if understood in variegated terms, within the GNH agenda.

Bhutan, dominantly a Buddhist country, incorporates Buddhist philosophy into much of its conservation work. As an informal institution, Buddhism lays a foundation for societal values, practices, and expectations in the country. An appeal to compassion and the care for sentient beings is a common discourse, but also translates to a pervading environmental ethic. It also assumes the nature of human beings to be very different than that of the *Homo economicus* model. Rather, humans are seen as in need of enlightenment, imprisoned by ignorance and material fascinations. The Buddhist tradition of *Terma* also illustrates a unique environmental ethic. The *Terma*, or ‘hidden treasures’, tradition is based on the teachings of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Guru Rinpoche, who foresaw a time in which Buddhism would be suppressed, seeing the need to hide various treasures (both physical and supernatural) that would be revealed at a later date by *Tertöns*, ‘Treasure Seekers’ (Hargens, 2002). *Terma* have been found in various features of the natural landscape as Tshewang et al. (1995) comment, “the entire landscape bears marks and memories; the *Terma* could also be seen more generally as specific manifestations of the living landscape itself, of the forces available to those whose attitude to their environment is one of constant mindfulness and deep reverence” (13). Hargens (2002) also notes, “the *Terma* tradition illustrates that even common-place rocks, lakes, and trees can contain the highest spiritual truths. Indeed the Bhutanese landscape comes alive through the *Terma* and their beloved revealers” (67). With the understanding that *Terma* may be present in the landscape, it produces a reverence that motivates conservation-minded behavior. Therefore, the *Terma* tradition, along with other cultural beliefs and values, promote a particular morality towards the environment.

Buddhist influence not only operates in the realm of moral obligation and societal sentiment, but in policy creation. The Constitution (RGoB, 2008a) under Article 3 promotes the Spiritual Heritage of the country, specifically referencing Buddhism, while Article 2 Section 2 makes it incumbent of the King to protect Buddhism in the country (see also Givel, 2015). Assumptions of Buddhist philosophy also drive programs promoted in the Five Year Plans, such as the “Strengthening of *Dratshang*” program that seeks to increase meditation practice (RGoB, 2013b), promotion of an International Buddhist University (RGoB, 2008b), and the promotion of spiritual tourism that builds on Buddhist philosophies (RGoB, 2003). The Seventh Five Year Plan specifically calls upon Buddhism as a key tenant of the country’s environmental ethic, “The Buddhist faith, which plays an important role in all aspects of Bhutanese life, also stresses respect for all forms of life and thus the preservation of natural resources” (RGoB, 1991: Section 4.3).

Therefore, the neoliberal environmentality of the neoliberal conservation discourse contests the underlying worldview of the majority of Bhutanese. Yet instead of a complete rejection of this foreign capitalist rationality, what we see occurring is that Buddhism works to dominate the starting point, manipulating the neoliberal assumption of rational independent actors and concentrates on developing an interdependent compassionate society that is cognizant of socio-ecological relations. As

such, Buddhism as an informal institution operates as a *truth* environmentality within the GNH bricolage.

With a new foundation, the neoliberal environmentality then confronts the second component of the environmental governance complex I propose, a history of state paternalism. With the inception of the monarchy in 1907, power was concentrated within the formal institution of the monarchy (Mancall, 2004), and the government generally, in which we see a strong sovereign governmentality at play. Even today as we see a more liberalized form of government in which power has been disseminated through a parliamentary democratized system, the monarchy and government maintain a great deal of control.

The paternal nature of the state, however, should not be viewed as oppressive. Rather, the populace has traditionally been indifferent to politics (Priesner, 1999) with the State resembling a “welfare state, through [which] a paternalist approach of political organization is a prolongation of the feudal organization that was prevailing in traditional self-sufficient local communities. This ideology works as a legitimization factor of the monarchy” (Mathou, 1999: 241). An interviewee<sup>15</sup> echoes this sentiment:

*In Bhutan there’s no questioning or reasoning on any decisions that are made by officials. People tend to accept everything as it comes and don’t want to change anything that already exists. But I personally take it as a positive [characteristic]; it doesn’t create chaos and division of minds.*

Another interviewee<sup>16</sup> justifies the nationalization of certain mining operations:

*Very recently a state mining corporation was created, and in that area, some of the people may complain, why is the government nationalizing things that already used to be privatized? There are certain resources that belong to all the citizens, and those benefits should also trickle to all citizens, and not only to a few individuals.*

What is found is that “the current role of the state contradicts a flourishing private sector. Rather than a paternalistic state, which directly interferes in all parts of development, private sector development calls for the retreat of the state” (Priesner, 1999: 43). While a neoliberal environmentality might call for a decentralized system of governance and privatized land holdings, the government holds 51.44% of the land within the country’s protected areas system. This competing sovereign environmentality resembles much more the fortress conservation model previously discussed. Therefore, the global neoliberal discourse confronts a particular context in Bhutan in which state control and provision are dominant and continue to be legitimized through populace support.

Finally, the neoliberal conservation discourse and external actors are confronted with the formal institution of GNH. As a development model and overarching philosophy, GNH has been translated into a number of policy-making tools (Schroeder, 2014) with the purpose of promoting good governance, socio-economic growth, cultural preservation, and environmental protection (known as the four pillars of GNH). Based on Buddhist principles and societal values, GNH challenges conventional development

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<sup>15</sup> 21-year old female interviewee, university student from Paro. Interviewed in Thimphu in July 2016.

<sup>16</sup> 42-year old male interviewee, economist, government employee, from Samtse. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2016.

by prioritizing environmental matters at par with competing criteria. Therefore, while the neoliberal environmentality works to incorporate environmental components as sources for accumulation, GNH instills a more holistic ethic in policy making.

Cognizant of the country's engagement with external market forces and neoliberal paradigms, an interviewee<sup>17</sup> comments regarding the emergence of GNH:

*GNH is an outcome of the realities of liberalization and globalization. And when you produce using local resources for global production, you end up compromising your own environment. And, so when Bhutan started globalizing, and neoliberalizing in the 1990s, the fear was 'how would Bhutan tackle this issue?'*

Both policy and project screening tools, then, emerged to ensure that GNH was accounted for in general development practice, but also with a keen focus on environmental conservation. These tools include screening factors such as impacts on air/water pollution, land degradation, flora/fauna disturbance, and biodiversity. An interviewee<sup>18</sup> emphasizes:

*We have a framework in place in Bhutanese economic development. We've reached a situation where any economic development plan will have to first pass the GNH values, the policy [screening] tool. And one of the GNH values is environmental aspects. You may come up with any kind of project with lots of economic gains, but if they fail [the] environmental test, [it] will not be supported.*

GNH, value laden in nature, has thus been institutionalized and used as a means to direct the conservation behavior of individuals, corporate entities and the government, resembling a disciplinary environmentality. The creation of environmental subjects is facilitated through an appeal to align with Bhutanese values that are formalized within GNH and associated policy mechanisms. Through this legitimization process, GNH plays a critical role in directing neoliberal trends.

With these formal and informal institutions acting as filters, the neoliberal environmentality is contested creating a novel environmental governance complex. The vision of neoliberalism is manipulated creating a new mode of execution. It is not enough to explore variegated neoliberalisms, as such a perspective reifies totalizing characterizations of neoliberalism and avoids the exploration of the numerous rationalities at play. Rather, the variegated environmentality lens makes sense of the bricolage that is created as competing conservation rationalities merge. In what follows, I provide examples of Bhutan's environmental governance complex that exhibit this variegated character.

### **'Bhutan for Life'**

The Bhutan for Life (BFL) program was initiated by WWF as a collaborative effort with the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) to establish a working PFP model for conservation funding in the country. The proposed project establishes a conservation

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<sup>17</sup> 50-year old male interviewee, economic consultant, private sector employee, from Thimphu. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2016.

<sup>18</sup> 42-year old male interviewee, economist, government employee, from Samtse. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2016.

fund, approximately \$40 million (USD) seeded through various international donors, which is to be used in a transitional manner over a 14-year period. WWF projects that while the RGoB spends \$2.6 million (USD) annually on protected areas management, an increase to \$6.97 million will be required to maintain the chosen level of protection. Therefore, the transitional funds will be used more heavily in early years of the program, allowing time for the RGoB to establish alternative funding mechanisms, with the goal of being self-supporting by the end of the project period. While the RGoB has flexibility in adopting alternative funding mechanisms to meet this goal, WWF has proposed for consideration the following: ecotourism, payment for ecosystem services (PES), and a green tax. While these mechanisms have been previously implemented in the country, BFL serves as a way to institutionalize these mechanisms and intensify their use across the country for conservation financing.

What is apparent is the neoliberal nature of the proposed strategies, serving as external incentives stimulating behaviours congruent with *in situ* conservation aiming to “compel nature to pay for itself” (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015: 275). Previously employed in the country, ecotourism has been supported financially by both NGOs and government offices. For example, in the Phobjikha Valley, protecting Black-necked Crane habitat is a primary conservation goal of the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN). This local NGO has established an ecotourism homestay network in which communities are encouraged to refrain from wetland encroachment (i.e. potato crops) in order to receive economic benefits from visiting tourists. In order to broaden persuasive efforts, a fund has been set up in which homestay owners deposit a percentage of ecotourism earnings to be applied to school upkeep, road maintenance, and other community efforts. PES has also been promoted by SNV (Netherlands) and the Department of Forests (DoF) through proposed sites to attract private investment collaborations with local communities. The Wochu Watershed PES program, while unsuccessful, was piloted in the Paro region, in which the Wochu community was promised a portion of future hydroelectric profits for their part in ensuring both water quality and quantity of upstream tributaries to the larger Paro and Thimphu watersheds. A number of monitoring stations were established and the DoF conducted community consultations in order to establish terms of agreement. However, downstream hydropower proponents never materialized. Regardless, the pilot project serves as a hopeful investigation into future programs. Therefore, while these strategies are not novel to the country, the BFL program does package them in a concerted effort towards a large-scale conservation effort.

The BFL program will allow the government of Bhutan to rely less on government expenditures, an interviewee<sup>19</sup> comments:

*right now there is funding for running the recurrent expenditure and expenses. But really if you want to do this, upscale ecotourism opportunities, then you really need a good injection of capital in the beginning. And this will start to reap returns from the parks. And then you can see that, ten, [even] seven years down the road, after starting BFL, parks can begin to start generating revenues.*

An additional interviewee<sup>20</sup> comments:

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<sup>19</sup> 38-year old male interviewee, project manager, government employee. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2016.

<sup>20</sup> 46-year old male interviewee, government employee, from Thimphu. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2017.

*I think you are also looking at protected areas as engines of growth, not just for conservation but for economic activities.*

These comments are framed in terms of seeing the protected areas of Bhutan as economic resources that are yet to be managed properly. Therefore, the BFL program is seen as a step in adopting a neoliberal environmentality in the country with the hopes of relieving the central government from economic burdens of management activities. However, this is done with the intention of meeting underlying societal goals such as moral and spiritual imperatives, as mentioned by an interviewee<sup>21</sup>:

*in the process of fulfilling that pillar of GNH [socio-economic development], there is of course no doubt a cascading impact on, in terms of promoting effective governance, which is also one of the milestones here. And the whole initiative is underpinned on a very high moral imperative, because trying to protect resources that are very important, not just for the animals, but there are also spiritual centers, which are located within these national parks.*

From this comment, we find an expression of societal values based on the Buddhist ethic and GNH philosophy that confront the neoliberal elements, both the actors in terms of WWF and the PFP model promoted by McKinsey and others, but also the discourse around natural capital. The conservation strategies, which have neoliberal tendencies, are very much embraced, and yet an ethic emerges that accounts for interdependence and intrinsic value in environmental components. The neoliberal environmentality, with its vision of *Homo economicus* and the use of external incentives motivating particular behaviours, is not sufficient as GNH and cultural values are appealed to as paradigms for rationalizing conservation policy. As such, multiple environmentalities emerge as critical components to an integrated conservation philosophy. The formal and informal institutions previously discussed work to incorporate neoliberalism producing a novel articulation. It is only through this legitimization process, in which truth and disciplinary environmentalities are appealed to, that neoliberal strategies are adopted. This results in confounding neoliberal vision and execution, thus requiring a new framework (variegated environmentality) for analysis. With this initial framing of the BFL program, I now move to explore ecotourism specifically to highlight the amalgamation of these competing rationalities.

### **Ecotourism in Bhutan**

Ecotourism in Bhutan has developed out of the need to reconcile the negative impacts of the larger tourism industry in the nation. Various social and ecological impacts associated with tourism (Honey, 2008; Chatkaewnapanon, 2011) and the limitations of the sector to distribute financial benefits to rural areas (Gyamtsho, 1996; Reinfeld, 2003; Rinzin et al., 2007) prompted the RGoB to address the sector's shortcomings. Therefore, the development of ecotourism in the country was primarily driven by the state to meet rural livelihood concerns, with conservation goals, which are already entrenched in state policy/legislation, seen as an associated benefit. With a National Ecotourism Strategy developed in 2002 to establish goals for the sub-sector, an Ecotourism Development Guideline followed in 2012. The Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division (NRED) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests defines

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<sup>21</sup> 38-year old male interviewee, project manager, government employee. Interviewed in Thimphu in August 2016.

ecotourism as “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” (NRED and TCB, 2012: 15).

This diversification of the tourism sector is supported by key policy documents including the Eleventh Five-Year plan that states, “as a means of linking environmental conservation to development, ecotourism activities will be strongly pursued in the protected areas” (RGoB, 2013b: 329). The plan concretely establishes a goal to increase the number of nature based ecotourism ventures from 13% to 30% in the 2013-2018 timeframe and commits funding to do so both in and outside of the country’s protected areas. The NRED and TCB (2012) reveal the government’s strong commitment to this strategy:

*the question is no longer whether ecotourism works as a way to protect nature and sustain the well-being of local people – many successful ecotourism case studies have documented its success around the world. Rather, the question is now how far can ecotourism go in being a catalyst for local economic opportunity and for safeguarding cultural and natural heritage (11-12).*

These captions are significant in that they reveal a strong intention of the central government to act as an implementing body for ecotourism, rather than merely facilitating market conditions for the private sector. This is reflective of the state paternalism, or sovereign environmentalism, previously mentioned, constituting a more ‘visible’ hand of the state in management and operations. Therefore, while the tourism sector was officially privatized in 1991, what materializes is a ‘controlled tourism’ model (Rinzin et al., 2007).

Additionally, GNH continues to be appealed to as the development model for which ecotourism will be implemented. The 2012 Guidelines (NRED and TCB) state “the Government of Bhutan tracks indicators through its monitoring of GNH, and this information can also be used as part of the baseline information that is considered in the development of an ecotourism project, and in monitoring impacts over time” (52). This reference to the GNH policy/project screening tools ensures that all ecotourism development will do so in conjunction with the established values and goals of the GNH philosophy. Reflecting on their experience with tourist impacts at *Taksang* (Tiger’s Nest), a famous Buddhist monastery attraction, an interviewee<sup>22</sup> recalls:

*When I was younger I found it too quiet, I liked noise. But now, the crowds have picked up so much. Now, I’m amazed and shocked about so many people there. It made me feel that I enjoyed other places, so I don’t like to go there anymore. These experiences dilute the attraction of the destination.*

As a result of such sentiments, new strategies have been piloted to deal with sites such as *Taksang*, to ensure that cultural and ecological integrity are preserved. For example, certain holy sites are closed to all foreign visitors, other sites have been restricted to certain days of operation, and tour guides are trained to educate tourists on proper conduct in spiritual, cultural and ecological settings.

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<sup>22</sup> 43-year old male interviewee, NGO employee. Interviewed in Thimphu in January 2018.

While ecotourism may also import concepts of competition that were previously absent, local practitioners have actively worked to promote communitarian ideals in ventures consistent with social cohesion indicators of the GNH development index. One ecotourism practitioner<sup>23</sup> notes:

*We are a socialist country, where the government is giving hand-outs. They [communities] are not used to competition. Now with ecotourism we are caught up in between. They think the government should do something to ensure proper distribution.*

The Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), for example, has actively promoted Homestay 'Networks' in the valley of Phobjikha, which attracts visitors to view winter grounds for the famed Black-necked crane. This network of homestays works through the RSPN as a central marketing and reservation agency in which guests are cycled through each member homestay providing equity, and also establishing benefit sharing mechanisms in which a portion of profits are committed to community development projects. Therefore, we find a nexus of multiple environmentalities in which a disciplinary rationale through GNH promulgates local values, a sovereign rationale justifies active manipulation in the market to provide equity and distribution of profits, and a neoliberal rationale that executes ecotourism as the primary implementation strategy. As previously mentioned, the formal and informal institutions (Buddhist belief/values, history of state paternalism, and GNH policy tools) play a significant role in how ecotourism is envisioned and put into practice.

In this manner, sovereign, disciplinary, and truth environmentalities contest framing of ecotourism as purely a neoliberal strategy, complicating both vision and execution. Spiritual and communal paradigms that are more in tune with the direction of GNH policy, along with the sovereign guidance of the state, create a variegated complex that can neither be seen as simply 'neoliberal' or 'not neoliberal'. Rather, we find multiple environmentalities engaged at the level of vision, in which alternative philosophies and principles interact, but also at the level of execution in which strategies are implemented.

## Conclusion

Bhutan has been hailed for its holistic approach to human development embodied in GNH, one that seeks to improve not only economic conditions but also mental, spiritual, cultural and ecological health (Ura et al., 2012b). What my analysis has shown is that numerous values and rationalities are at play within environmental conservation in Bhutan, revealing a limitation in critical research concerning neoliberal conservation that often fails to account for multiple environmentalities at play in specific contexts. Through a complex of informal and formal institutions, a Buddhist worldview, a history of state paternalism, and GNH policy, all of which correlate to competing rationalities, the neoliberal environmentality exists as an integrated, but by no means dominant, component. This emergent complex goes beyond neoliberalism's appeal to *Homo economicus* as the primary lens to understand human behaviour and incorporates intrinsic and moral motivators for conservation practice. Trends to commodify nature, which is also an exercise in abstracting nature and ignoring the full socio-ecological value of nature (Nelson, 2014), are complimented by indigenous ways of knowing and interacting. Embedded in the BFL discourse is a process of financialization. Nature is

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<sup>23</sup> 43-year old male interviewee, NGO employee. Interviewed in Thimphu in January 2018.

abstracted to produce a commodity (natural capital) that can be properly managed within the market system. And yet, principles such as “care, responsibility, and interdependence” (Singh, 2015: 57) are preserved, thus achieving the four-fold agenda of GNH of preserving culture, protecting Bhutan’s environmental heritage, providing equitable economic development, and establishing good governance practices.

The proposed ‘Bhutan for Life’ program and ecotourism in Bhutan provide policy case analyses illuminating how the neoliberal environmentality has been disseminated, which largely manifests in particular neoliberal strategies at execution stages, but with the vision and philosophy for conservation transformed by additional rationalities. These findings serve as a critical contribution to governmentality research by illustrating the usefulness of a variegated environmentality framework, while also addressing critics’ concerns over the usefulness of the neoliberal concept by providing language to highlight articulations between neoliberalism and alternative rationalities for conservation. Additionally, the framework addresses calls to explore the relationship between vision and execution of variegated governance models in the context of environmental management (Fletcher, 2017).

What remains to be explored are the social, socio-political, and biophysical impacts of such an environmental governance complex. By mapping out the various rationalities at play the variegated environmentality framework will allow for more targeted policy interventions that address societal and environmental concerns inherent in conservation governance. It is to this aim that future research can provide a more nuanced analysis of conservation policy and program implementation in Bhutan.

Finally, the case of Bhutan emphasizes the worth and advancement of the environmentality concept. While Luke (1995) conceptualizes a set of “managerial designs” to which “all the world will come under watch” (75), Bhutan represents a localized application integrating resident praxis, values and spiritualities with global discourse/actors. Dissecting this integration illustrates the multiple modes of conduct proposed by Fletcher (2010) revealing an innovative articulation. As such, a new ‘environmental subject’ is born in which “residents come to think about and define their actions...in relation to the environment” (Agrawal, 2005a: 17), but in the context of Bhutanese customs and a Buddhist worldview that propose novel human-environment relations and ethical/moral obligations.



## 7 Ecotourism discourses in Bhutan: contested perceptions and values<sup>24</sup>

Jesse Montes, Bhuwan Kafley

### Abstract

*Ecotourism has often been characterized and employed as a panacea for sustainable development. Bhutan, a small Himalayan kingdom, follows suit promoting ecotourism within the framework of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a home-grown development philosophy derived from a Buddhist ethic and Bhutanese values. The investigation of three ecotourism ventures in Bhutan provides ethnographic evidence of divergences from previous social and human-environment relations. These divergences are representative of an underlying neoliberal logic and discourse driving the ecotourism sector. Departing from conventional analyses of ecotourism that emphasize its material nature, we treat it as a discursive process that has critical sociocultural implications. Employing a dwelling perspective (Ingold, 2000) we conceptualize evolving perceptions of Bhutanese communities that engage in the sector, finding that ambiguity related to the GNH concept allows a neoliberal logic to infiltrate local understandings and practices. Part of this entails promotion of a particular environmental subject (Agrawal, 2005a) that manifests in local people's evolving perceptions of the environment.*

*Key words: Bhutan, ecotourism, neoliberalism, Gross National Happiness, dwelling*

### Introduction

Ecotourism has been heavily promoted as a development panacea, and may be defined as “travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (often) small scale. It helps educate the traveller, provides funds for conservation, directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights” (Honey, 2008, p.33). As such, numerous state and non-state actors have adopted ecotourism as a strategy, often relied as a positive component to development frameworks. Likewise, in Bhutan, ecotourism has emerged as an approach taking advantage of the ecosystem wealth of the country while also managing issues of poverty and inequality. With a focus on the material impacts, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) promotes ecotourism through policy initiatives. However, negative material impacts and broader discourses promoted by ecotourism are rarely challenged. This chapter seeks to address this lacuna by framing the sector as a discursive process that impacts both social and human-environment relations.

In many respects, ecotourism in Bhutan resembles global trends, aligning with hegemonic conservation discourse. Such discourse pursues *in situ* conservation applying a neoliberal logic and commodification processes in which resources are deemed more valuable intact (Büscher, 2013), thus discouraging an extractionist imperative that plagues many developing nations (Arsel et al., 2016). While such an outcome is initially attractive for environmental governance purposes, the continued reliance on such logic serves “as a denial of the negative environmental impacts of ‘business as usual’

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capitalism” (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015, p.273). Therefore, the logic of neoliberal capitalism is harnessed within conservation discourse to solve the very environmental problems that were caused by such logic. Ideals that drive such logic include competition, privatization, and efficiency driven profit maximization.

Ecotourism discourse in Bhutan is driven through appeals to Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Sustainable Development (Author, forthcoming). GNH is a home-grown development philosophy that combines a situated cultural identity with value-laden strategies for progress and is often put in contrast to contemporary development practice that prioritizes economic evaluation. GNH consists of nine domains (psychological wellbeing, standard of living, good governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, and ecological diversity and resilience) and is derived from a Buddhist ethic of interdependence and Bhutanese values that are communitarian in nature. As such, the ‘gross’ nature of GNH is understood as a societal goal of equality that facilitates not only material happiness, but also spiritual enlightenment. However, both GNH and Sustainable Development are not without contestation, as multiple actors promote conflicting policy directions ‘in the name of’ both concepts. While other research highlights how multiple actors appropriate GNH with different policy agendas (see Schroeder, 2015), this research builds on previous work (Author, 2018) providing an analysis highlighting the expansion of neoliberal discourse that has troubled the GNH agenda. As a result, GNH has developed into a hybrid phenomenon incorporating a neoliberal rationale (Author, forthcoming), which has also manifested in policy tools such as the GNH index, policy and project screening tools, and the GNH Commission. In what follows, multiple cases reveal resonance with underlying principles of GNH and yet conflicts are produced as an underlying neoliberal logic strives towards dominance.

This chapter mobilizes ethnographic evidence showing how ecotourism influences both social and human-environment relations within Bhutan. Our research departs from the majority of ecotourism literature that treats the sector as a material practice by addressing it as a discursive process influencing local values and perceptions. As such, this work responds to the call of Fletcher (2009) to “explore locals’ response to and engagement with ecotourism discourse and to evaluate the effectiveness of this discourse in terms of encouraging conservation-friendly attitudes and behaviour” (p.281). In particular, this study contributes to ecotourism literature by addressing the discursive nature of the sector through a rarely employed *dwelling* lens (Ingold, 2000) to explore the changes in understandings of human-environment relations that result from introducing a neoliberal logic. The *dwelling* perspective contests this logic that frames humans and the environment in a dualistic manner in which humans, as rational agents, act upon their surroundings. As a quintessentially neoliberal conservation practice, ecotourism tends to introduce competition and privatization, which in otherwise communitarian populations may disrupt social institutions, causing change in community cohesion and traditional perceptions of the environment (Stronza, 2007; Youdelis, 2013). These divergences signify new forms of human-environment engagement and potentially putting at risk broader goals of GNH. The *dwelling* approach will be used to highlight these evolving perceptions and values generated through western neoliberal discourse. Furthermore, this research contributes to GNH studies by juxtaposing the ideal of GNH with the neoliberal conservation paradigm, revealing opportunities for adapting the country’s ecotourism strategy.

In what follows, we first describe ecotourism as a discursive process that tends to inculcate a particularly western cultural perspective, contrasting it with conventional analyses concentrating on the material nature of the sector. We then introduce the *dwelling* perspective as a framework for analysing Bhutanese perceptions of the environment and how these change through engagement with ecotourism. We then move to the context of ecotourism in Bhutan, describing both the GNH and Sustainable Development discourses used to legitimize the sector. We then introduce three cases, highlighting new perceptions and values regarding social and human-environment relations. Following this we discuss ambiguity of the GNH concept and how the ideal of GNH is contested by current ecotourism practice in the country.

### **Ecotourism as Discourse and Dwelling**

The 1990s saw a conservation paradigm emerge relying on decentralization “offering win-win solutions” (Bixler et al., 2015, p.166). This paradigm relies on discourses of participation and local resource rights, but also serves to entrench neoliberal logic into conservation practice. Within this perspective, the state is seen as incapable of meeting conservation challenges, inviting individual market entities to exercise influence through privatization schemes in which state-owned goods/services are partitioned off to private actors (Barnett, 2010; West and Carrier, 2004). Additionally, it is accompanied by strategies such as payment for ecosystem services, tax structures, and ecotourism.

Ecotourism, while promoted as a development panacea, has produced numerous critiques over the last few decades, with a strong emphasis on economic, social and environmental impacts (see Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1996; Honey, 2008; Fennell, 2014). In her analysis of Mayan communities’ experience with ecotourism Duffy (2002) states “the very political and economic structures within which ecotourism operates constitute a barrier to effective sustainable development” (p.159). Such emphasis on the material nature of ecotourism highlights contradictions within the sector in which beneficial claims rarely materialize resulting in both economic loss and environmental degradation.

Fletcher’s (2009) work highlights this common framing of ecotourism as a material practice in asserting that the sector should also be understood as a “discursive process, embodying a culturally specific set of beliefs and values” (p.269). Discourses embodied in the promotion and practice of ecotourism promote beliefs and values that are often alien to host communities within which ecotourism is promoted. Such new value schemes lead to new conceptualizations of the surrounding environment (West and Carrier, 2004). Stronza (2007) emphasizes such changes in a Peruvian context, recognizing the need to move beyond economic analyses of ecotourism. Ecotourism characteristically promotes a dichotomized view of the environment in which humans are seen as separate and ‘against’ the environment. Thus, it is rationalized, humans seek experiences and ‘connection’ with an environment that is conceptualized as ‘other than’ one’s day-to-day experience (Fletcher, 2014). This conceptualization contrasts the view of many cultures that intimately rely on their surroundings for sustenance perceiving symbiotic relations, lacking a dualist framework (Berkes, 2008). These new values and perceptions that are introduced are commonly framed as ‘western’ and accompany larger trends of globalization.

A subset of the literature specifically frames ecotourism as an expression of neoliberalism. This is understood from both material and discursive perspectives in that ecotourism is used as a means for creating capital flows through strategies such as privatization and liberalizing policies (see Brockington and Duffy, 2011), but also as a means for inculcating norms and values associated with a neoliberal logic (see Fletcher, 2009, 2010, 2014; West and Carrier, 2004; Hutchins, 2007). Fletcher (2014) offers an ethnographic analysis of ecotourism origins in which key characteristics of the industry are traced to neoliberal ideals promoted by a stereotypical western white middle-class male. Therefore, in order for community-based ventures to be successful, they must market to a cultural perspective that is not their own, to meet the needs of the tourist ‘gaze’ (Urry, 2001) that comprises various expectations of purchased experiences. This is accompanied by the promotion of a particular ‘environmentality’ (Luke, 1995; Agrawal, 2005a; Fletcher, 2010), or rationale for managing the environment, which tends to be neoliberal in nature, working to create environmental subjects that respond to external market incentives (Fletcher, 2010). As Youdelis (2013) notes, in this way “local farmers are encouraged to live modest, conservation-friendly lives through discourses of ecotourism, while they are simultaneously encouraged to seize the monetary benefits associated with the production of natural, picturesque landscapes by running ecotourism businesses” (p.162).

West (2006) notes that neoliberal conservation strategies adopt markets as a primary tool for conservation and development and yet discursive elements of a neoliberal discourse working beyond the realm of materiality/economics are ignored. West’s work in New Guinea addresses the intersection of capitalism and conservation, focusing on processes of commodification noting that it “is the process by which things are drained of the social significance...fused with monetary value, and inserted into a social and economic system premised on hierarchies of value” (p.183). As a result, new valuation schemes emerge that impact both one’s surroundings and social relationships. It is thought that in order for ecotourism to be properly promoted, one must argue that it makes economic sense. However, such rhetoric may ‘crowd out’ (Singh, 2015; Fehr and Falk, 2002) alternative conservation frameworks that are less economically motivated. Hutchins (2007) notes that, “local nature is reordered as global commodity, and local meanings are reinterpreted to better align with consumers’ desires” (p.76). This critique not only highlights the neoliberal nature of ecotourism, but also calls for critical consideration concerning cultural influences entailed in its promotion.

In his research with Ecuadorians of the Upper Amazon, Hutchins (2007) comments, “the selective representation of indigenous culture is accompanied by a process that also redefines the forest in which they live. The mere presence of tourists...has an effect on how these places and practices are interpreted by local residents” (p.92). As locals reinterpret their surroundings, new meanings are attributed to the landscape, resources, and everyday life. Hutchins (2007) goes further to debate the issue of identity politics in which identities are imposed on local communities, not by any single entity, but through a series of globalized market interactions such as tourism. Thus, new subjectivities are formed by “appealing to economic rationales and altering values and ideologies” (Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016, p.206).

As a departure from this previous work, we will incorporate a ‘dwelling’ theoretical approach, which resonates with the discursive nature of the sector. Based on Heidegger’s (1962; 1971) notion of *being* and *dwelling*, Tim Ingold (see 2000; 2011)

developed this perspective that works to “overcome the entrenched division between the ‘two worlds’ of nature and society, and to re-embed human being and becoming within the continuum of the lifeworld” (2011, p.4). Koot (2013) claims that it “looks at organisms relating to material and immaterial things in their direct environment, of which they are a part instead of detached from it as a world out there” (p.2). This perspective works to make sense of perception, meaning making and identity formation by emphasizing individuals as actively engaged and part of the environment, rather than as actors that simply impose their will upon their surroundings. Accordingly, ‘environment’ should not be understood as a separate construct, but rather a relative relational term in which an organism and their surroundings are an ‘indivisible totality’ (Ingold, 2000, p.19) and are “continually under construction” (p.20). As such, there is no separation of culture and environment. This new ontological starting point for the relation between humans and their environment contests the neoliberal discourse underscoring ecotourism that seeks to commodify elements of an environment that are ‘out there’ (Ingold, 2000) to be controlled and managed by humans.

Only a few researchers have applied this perspective to tourism studies generally (see Prince, 2017; Palmer, 2018) as well as ecotourism in particular (see Jamal and Stronza, 2009; Koot, 2013). Prince (2017) works to make sense of mundane actions of artisans in Bornholm, Denmark by conceptualizing such actions as integral to the experiential landscape tourists encounter. Palmer’s (2018) work is more theoretical applying the approach to tourism at large, seeing the sector as a way of being and locating it “within the totality of life and of living” (p.21). Thus, Palmer frames the practice of tourism as a way of experiencing other cultures, but more broadly as a way of experiencing being human. Concerning ecotourism, Jamal and Stronza (2009) are more explicit in their focus on relational aspects and work to “re-situate ecotourism in a sociocultural paradigm where the performative space is also a space of *dwelling* in thoughtful relationship with the place and with those who inhabit it” (p.330). With their focus on *being*, they explore how local Peruvians interact and create new relations with both their surroundings and livelihood activities as a result of ecotourism sector involvement. Also focused on ecotourism, Koot (2013) provides an analysis of perception noting that for South African Bushmen “the duality of nature and culture does not exist, and they live in just one world in which they embrace human beings, animals, plants and features of the landscape they live and move in. In this one world they act as undivided beings” (p.37).

Lacking in these previous applications of a dwelling perspective is an emphasis on the ‘temporality of the landscape’, for which Ingold (2000) claims, “the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves” (p.189). The temporality of the landscape is conceptualized for the purpose of understanding the relational nature between landscape and agential actions, avoiding a dualist perspective that simply sees the environment as a substrate that is acted upon. Emphasizing a temporal dimension to the landscape recognizes the process of ‘incorporation’ in which “the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it” (p.191). In this sense, temporal is not to be understood as chronology or history, but rather the incorporation of human labor, what Ingold calls the ‘taskscape’, of which time is a measure, in the landscape (p.195). This relational aspect is critical to the context of ecotourism where new production activities result in new discourses promoting new perceptions and relations between actors and their surroundings. As

such, ecotourism actors create new realities, or ‘indigenous modernities’ (Sahlins, 1999; see also Robins, 2003; Koot, 2017), facilitating an evolution of thought that diverts from dichotomies “between traditional and the modern” (Robins, 2003, p.266) that commonly plagues characterizations of GNH. Therefore, while ecotourism promotes a neoliberal discourse that seems opposed to a GNH framework, dwelling provides the lens for understanding this uneasy integration. As a point of departure, we work to incorporate this temporality of the landscape as a framework for analyzing perceptions and divergences in social and human-environment relations.

Our research thus contributes to previous analyses of ecotourism, first by framing ecotourism as a discursive process, with specific emphasis on the neoliberal environmentality that drives the sector’s discourse, and then adopting a dwelling perspective to address how the perceptions of local Bhutanese are changing as a result of engagement in the sector. While neoliberal environmentality provides a frame for analysing the discourse, dwelling allows us to analyse evolving perceptions.

### **Ecotourism in Bhutan**

Bhutan has a unique reputation in the tourism sector creating an aura of exclusivity and otherworldliness through the application of various strategies and policies. Initially, a policy of ‘high value – low volume’ was introduced due to fears of negative impacts from unrestricted tourism (Dorji, 2001). This ‘controlled tourism’ model was adopted after witnessing the destructive nature of the sector in neighbouring countries (Rinzin et al., 2007). With high visa tariffs (\$200-250 USD/day depending on the season) and ‘high value – low volume’ policies in place, Bhutan recognized that it had created a niche for itself. However, as more citizens desired to take part in the industry the government conceded in 1991 allowing the industry to become privatised (Dorji, 2001). The system became ‘partially’ privatized, as tour operators remained under the supervision of the Department of Tourism, under the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Reinfeld, 2003). Tourism numbers, no longer restricted to a government quota system, rose regardless of the tariffs still in place. With the government’s release on ‘low volume’, the tourism strategy transitioned to ‘high value - low impact’ in 2011 (MAF and TCB, 2012). This new strategy focused on attracting wealthy customers, as opposed to strategies of neighbours such as Nepal that cater to ‘backpackers’ (Gurung and Seeland, 2008; Brown et al., 2007; Rinzin et al. 2007). Instead of an imposed predetermined number of visitors, the strategy allows the market price to restrict those who choose to visit Bhutan. This strategy also aimed at minimizing the cultural impact on local peoples (RGOB, 1999; Rinzin et al., 2007; Dorji, 2001). Rinzin et al. (2007) refer to Bhutan’s tourism policy as a ‘controlled liberalization’ that allows economic progress while also protecting national values including cultural and environmental preservation, which serve as GNH objectives. By 2017 tourist arrivals peaked at 254,704, an increase of 21.5% from 2016 (TCB, 2018).

While the tourism sector has thrived, there are concerns about impacts on the local ecology and culture, and about social inequalities mounting from an insufficient distribution of revenues (see Suintikul and Dorji, 2016a, 2016b). Therefore, the Royal Government has explored options to mitigate these impacts. Options proposed have been to diversify tourism products, establish more tourism opportunities outside peak seasons, and to divert industry benefits to rural populations. In 2002 the government developed a National Ecotourism Strategy laying a framework for how such a product

should be promoted in the country. This was followed in 2012 with a guideline for the planning and management of ecotourism (MAF and TCB, 2012). The document defines ecotourism as “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).

Building off the ‘high value - low impact’ policy, ecotourism extends this vision for development while ensuring protection of cultural and natural resources and creating avenues for tourism revenue distribution. Ecotourism in the country differentiates itself by providing opportunities outside the key tourist hubs located in Thimphu (national capital), Paro, Punakha and Bumthang. While these centres offer cultural engagements with festivals, Buddhist temples, and various arts, ecotourism promotes trekking, rural homestays, and wildlife viewing. Therefore, while traditional tour packages may include stays at expensive resorts, ecotourism as a product is used to encourage more ‘intimate’ stays within communities and other rural areas.

As a discourse, ecotourism has been legitimized through the principles of GNH and Sustainable Development. GNH was introduced in the 1970’s by His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, the 4<sup>th</sup> King of Bhutan, and serves as a guiding principle for development in the country. The GNH philosophy is used as a framework for development decisions and is in large part a reaction to conventional methods of measuring prosperity (i.e. GDP), which are seen as inappropriate measures for the country (Braun, 2009). Thus, GNH philosophy stands as a defining act of independence from the global community, in which Bhutan defines for itself what societal progress entails. Tourism, according to the country’s 2012 report to the UN on Sustainable Development, is seen as an “inter-connection between GNH and business because of the interactive and service-based nature of the work” (RGoB, 2012, p.16). GNH, then, serves as a rationale for promoting both tourism and ecotourism as both are seen to operationalize GNH objectives such as improving living standards and the promotion of culture. The use of GNH language appeals to a Bhutanese populace that shares common values and is sympathetic towards indigenous concepts.

The 2012 Guidelines for Ecotourism (MAF and TCB) link ecotourism to sustainable development by framing ecotourism as ‘sustainable tourism’ (p.13). The government recognizes the integrated nature of people and the environment shying away from a ‘Yellowstone’ protectionist model of conservation (MAF and TCB, 2012). A zoning strategy has been set up within protected areas, following IUCN categories, in which three zones exist. Core areas exist for strict conservation in which activities are extremely limited. Adjacent are multiple-use zones that work to account for traditional indigenous practices such as firewood collection, cultivation, and fishing. Finally there are buffer zones that also limit various activities, but are not as restrictive as multiple-use areas. It is within this integrated understanding that Bhutan strives for a robust ecotourism policy that meets development objectives of rural communities.

However, Karst (2016) found that ecotourism is largely misunderstood by community members in Sakteng and Merak (eastern regions of Bhutan). Regardless, many were drawn to be part of such initiatives, which were framed as being ‘sustainable’ and positive for the community, thus deterring critique from local community members. It is worth noting that more generally tourism development projects often claim an

element of sustainability, which is increasingly coming under scrutiny by researchers (see Scheyvens and Hughes, 2019). After critical inquiry, Karst (2016) found that:

*ecotourism held different meanings for different people and reflected the importance of inter-human relations and some human-nature interactions...however, almost a quarter of all interviewees...said they were 'unsure' or had 'no idea' of what ecotourism meant, and nearly half of all Sakteng interviewees could not distinguish between ecotourism and general tourism...the most common understanding of ecotourism reported by more than half of all Merak and Joenkhar households was that tourists come to visit a place, which would bring economic benefit to the community (p.7).*

Therefore, while GNH and Sustainable Development underpin ecotourism discourse, the ecotourism concept remains largely misunderstood. Further, Karst finds 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).*

*unequal distribution of benefits and lack of employment opportunities have fuelled resentment in communities where vast income disparity is not customary. The widening gulf of household incomes has weakened human relationships in the community towards...government agencies, who are blamed for raising expectations on the economic benefits of ecotourism (p.11).*

Ecotourism as a sector appeals to a 'rational' subject for motivating conservation behaviour, which has left locals aggravated when they are unable to access promised economic benefits. This paradigm of motivating conservation has led to frustrated community relations, harm to sacred sites, and a revaluing of the surrounding landscape. While Brooks (2013) perceives GNH as a way of actualizing Sustainable Development principles, and avoiding "Limits to Growth", negative consequences of capitalism continue to manifest in ecotourism, which is promoted as a key strategy for implementing the GNH agenda. We now move to present a case study in which three ecotourism sites in Bhutan are explored. While previous work has critiqued the operations of ecotourism in the country (see Karst, 2016; Nepal and Karst, 2017; Gurung and Scholz, 2008; Gurung and Seeland, 2008, 2011; Rinzin et al., 2007), we provide a nuanced analysis that situates the sector as a discursive process promoting new values and perceptions.

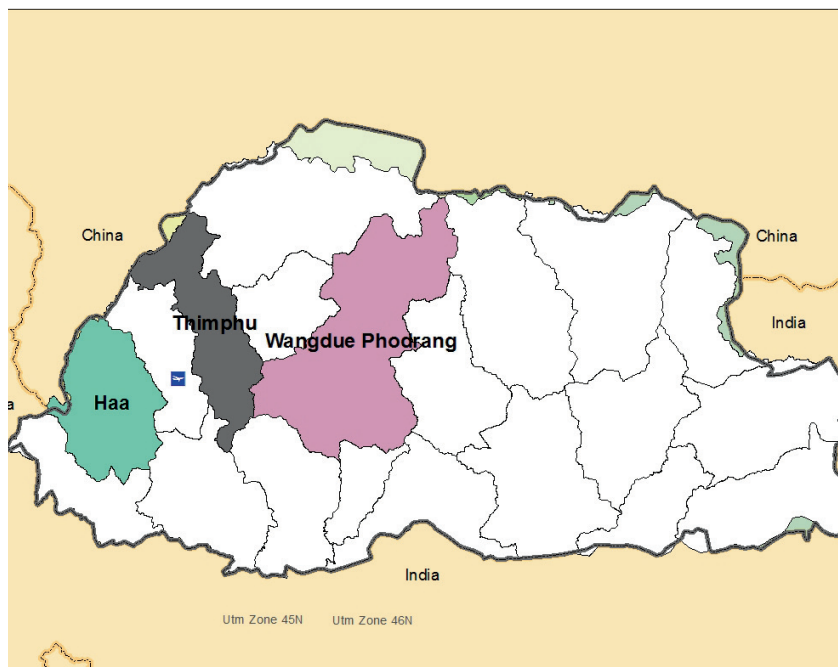
## **Methods**

This research is the culmination of fieldwork conducted from 2013-2018. Through our affiliation with a college in Bhutan we conducted research on environmental governance and ecotourism in partnership with a team of undergraduate researchers. Through a case study method of inquiry, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and secondary literature reviews are adopted as data gathering strategies. 229 interviews are conducted with local ecotourism operators, community members, and tourists in three specific locations; Haa Valley Homestay, Phobjikha Homestay Network, and Phajoding Eco-Camp. These locations are chosen based on recommendations from local ecotourism experts, but also based on their proximity to Thimphu and our ability to make frequent visits. In total, 18 site visits were conducted spanning from 3-10 days in length. Interviews were primarily conducted in the national language of Dzongkha and later transcribed, unless interviewees specifically requested



an alternative language such as English or Nepali. This information is supplemented by 18 interviews with local experts through targeted snowball sampling. In what follows, we provide context for each ecotourism site and reveal findings that highlight divergences in social and human-environment relations that originate from the promotion and practice of ecotourism and its associated neoliberal logic.

Figure 5: Districts of Bhutan



## Case Studies

### *Haa Valley Homestay*

Haa, a western *Dzongkhag* (District) of Bhutan (see Figure 5), was opened to tourism in 2002. Haa Valley Homestay is a single-family venture opened in 2013 initiated by a family that previously used yak herding as a primary source of income. The homestay offers an array of activities for visitors including archery, Khuru (traditional darts), hot stone baths, farm work, and the experience of rural Bhutan. The homestay deliberately caters to tourists' comforts (e.g., private rooms, western style toilets) yet maintains an 'authentic' experience of traditional life. The venture is independently funded and managed by the family. As a private entrepreneurship, the management of operations is substantially in line with a neoliberal business model incorporating competition and competitive advantages. The family has developed partnerships with local tour operators ensuring a constant flow of guests and has produced a website, resulting in a competitive marketing strategy.

The economic success of the operation has come with particular social conflicts that were previously absent. While traditional livelihoods (i.e. yak herding) also contained an element of limited resources requiring distribution strategies, the dominant mode of acquisition was not driven by a competitive nature. Rather, informal institutions were established to maintain equity. For example, grazing land ‘ownership’ is not based on tenure claims, but rather ritual dice casting that establishes usage rights, which are then re-established every 5 years. With a transition to sedentary living and alternative primary income earning strategies (ecotourism), this also resulted in new values and perceptions, and in turn new social relations. The dominant mode of production now requires a competitive outlook in order to provide economic security, which has come at the expense of social cohesion. While GNH and ecotourism policies in the country work towards “benefits to local communities” (MAF and TCB, 2012, p.11), employment opportunities are solely offered to family members, thus limiting benefit distribution. As a result, community members, who have expectations for such communal benefits, express angst towards the operation. As previously stated, GNH has become a hybrid phenomenon, and yet competing rationalities within ecotourism discourse continue to produce conflicts (see Youdelis, 2013). The operator of the homestay has also reported that signs advertising Haa Valley Homestay have been vandalized and torn down, likely due to angry competitors in the area. On the roadside next to her grocery stand, a 63-year old community informant commented:

*Only the homestay benefits from tourism, not the community as a whole, because the tourists stay in the homestay and sleep and eat there only. Thus, no one benefits from tourism except the home stay owners. The homestay owners hire their own relatives if there is any employment required. I have an unemployed son at my home that knows English, but he has never been employed in the tourism venture.*

The interviewee expressed concern over inequality, which is related to communitarian values inherent in local interactions but also broader societal goals.

In addition, family members who run the operation have experienced a divergence of values associated with human-environment relations. The primary owner/operator, a man in his 50’s, grew up on the grassland areas engaged daily in herding activities. With such exposure, the owner developed a set of practices and intimate knowledge of the landscape, which in turn promoted a particular identity and perception of human-environment relations. While sitting at nearly 4,000 meters of elevation and overlooking traditional grazing land, the owner quoted a common phrase among herders relating to the issue of finding yak fodder during winter months:

*If you know the forest well it is a cornucopia; if you do not know the forest well it is a killing machine.<sup>25</sup>*

The owner conveyed a sense of pride recognizing his capacity to operate and survive in an environment that requires specific place-based knowledge. Knowledge of his surroundings determines his ability to act in an environment that would otherwise be harsh and unbearable. Furthermore, in discussing the landscape, a cosmology underpins its characterization in which humans and the land are framed in relational terms. The owner recited a well-known story:

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<sup>25</sup> 38-year old male from Haa. Interviewed in Haa in July 2015.

*‘shingdo re lu lhasu re’, this means that in every tree there lies a deity. Once upon a time a man was traveling from one place to another. The journey was more than a day, so he had to spend a night on the way. He decided to sleep under a tree, and before going to bed he prayed to the tree asking the host to protect him. That night a demon visited the man to eat him, but the tree protected him saying ‘the man trusted his life with me’. So the demon went back and the traveler went home safely the next morning.<sup>26</sup>*

Similar stories are common among Haa herders and portray a relationship of reciprocity in which humans and the land benefit from one another. Such findings were also common in Eastern Bhutan where Allison (2004) notes that “fear created by the deity beliefs creates a negative feedback loop that limits behaviour, while the appreciation engendered by Buddhism and the biophilic values creates a positive desire to protect” (p.554). Allison’s findings support the role of religious worldviews in conserving natural resources and emphasize the limits of modern technocratic methods for conservation.

Such perceptions of the human-environment relationship, however, are renegotiated as new production relations become established. Ecotourism, and its associated neoliberal logic, produce a redistribution of power in which humans are no longer seen as inferior to the land and associated deities, but are elevated to a place of dominance. One’s knowledge of the landscape and capacity to act within an animated space of cosmic forces has been replaced by one’s capacity to successfully enter market relations and benefit from an inanimate landscape. This is portrayed by comments from the homestay owner’s nephew who has had a drastically different upbringing as the family has made a permanent transition from yak herding to ecotourism operations. Speaking with the nephew on the wooden floor near the family’s *bucari* (wood-fired stove) he commented:

*I feel like I have [taken] a huge step away from nature and lost the natural connection that my ancestors had with the landscape and forests during their time...I like visiting these places but I never think of living there. My uncle’s connection with the landscape is very deep as he didn’t just listen to what his parents and elders taught him, but it is also their lifelong experience of living in it...I think I am at the apex of this social transition of going from the farm life to a service-based lifestyle. In my family and in the families of most of my friends, our parents are the last generation to work on the farm and with herds.<sup>27</sup>*

This case is reflective of Ingold’s (2000) conceptualization of the temporality of the landscape in which the ‘taskscape’ (human activities/culture) is intimately tied to the ‘landscape’ (physical surroundings) and cannot be understood in separation. And as the ‘taskscape’, or human activity and practice, changes, it in turn changes perceptions and interactivity in the landscape. As the homestay owner’s nephew transitions to new modes of production this also manifests in new values and perceptions aligned with a neoliberal governmentality inherent in ecotourism discourse, which melds with traditionally held values/perceptions.

As the Haa Valley Homestay continues to prosper from new market advantages, the family will continue to negotiate new divergences in social and human-environment relations due to changing perceptions of the landscape. Additionally, with both national and international agencies further promoting ecotourism in the Haa region (see RSPN, 2017) such divergences will be exacerbated beyond this single operation.

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<sup>26</sup> 38-year old male from Haa. Interviewed in Haa in July 2015.

<sup>27</sup> 21-year old male from Haa. Interviewed in Haa in August 2017.

Phobjikha, found in the central *Dzongkhag* of Wangduephodrang (see Figure 1), has received international attention as a conservation area due to the valley serving as winter habitat for Black-necked Cranes. Cranes annually migrate to the Phobjikha Valley in early November and depart for their summer habitat in Tibet in March. Seeing the importance of protecting the Black-necked Crane and associated habitat, the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN), Bhutan's first environmental non-governmental organization, has actively monitored the habitat area since 1986 (Phuntsho and Tshering, 2015; Pradhan et al., 2014). Part of RSPN's management strategy is to address livelihood concerns and to incorporate community partnership in conservation work. This strategy has resulted in efforts to minimize encroachment of potato fields into wetland areas (Dorji, 1998), education campaigns for both locals and visitors (ICIMOD, 2014), and the establishment of a Community-Based Sustainable Tourism (CBST) marketing strategy. Dorji (2001) claims "the programme aims to promote the development of alternative energy, eco-tourism, conservation and education programs, Black-necked Crane research, and monitoring and development of infrastructure for ecotourism" (p.99).

Ecotourism is a single component to the larger CBST strategy and is described through the following principles: minimize negative impacts to nature and culture, educate visitors, employ responsible business practices, direct revenue to conservation, maximize economic benefits for local communities, stay within social and environmental limits, and rely on infrastructure that produces harmony with the environment (RSPN, n.d.). Following this rationale, a homestay network has been developed incorporating locals into decision-making and producing shared revenues. RSPN is explicit in the intention to make ecotourism an alternative source of income supplementing agriculture livelihoods (RSPN, n.d.; Phuntsho, 2010). Local villages are actively engaged by the RSPN and a committee has been developed to help manage homestay operations and establish a set of guidelines (see RSPN, 2013). This has resulted in approximately 15 homestay owners that coordinate with RSPN to accept tour group reservations. The reservation system is set up in a way that each homestay accepts tourists on a rotational basis to achieve an equitable share of revenue. While this management framework resonates with a community-based model, it also echoes the intent of the GNH agenda. 'Social cohesion', serving as one of the 9 domains of GNH, is maintained through the inclusion of benefit sharing devices. However, recent efforts of trans-local actors (i.e. beyond the Phobjikha Valley, both national and international) have complicated the efforts of RSPN, which also reflects the hybridization of GNH.

With increased tourism in the area, entrepreneurs from urban centres have purchased land and established private homestay operations, making it difficult for locals "to play the neoliberal game effectively" (Igoe and Brockington, 2007, p.446). Such operations are not affiliated with the RSPN homestay network, therefore serving as a new source of competition for limited tourism dollars. As the owners of such operations are not local, economic leakages result and are compounded by the fact that such operators have access to marketing resources in urban centres and strategically develop partnerships with tour operators based in centres such as Thimphu, Paro, and Phuentsholing. One manager interviewed reported that he and his wife operated a

homestay owned by an individual who also ran a tour operating business based in Thimphu. While the manager was happy to benefit from food services offered to guests, profits from accommodation were redirected to the external owner/tour operator. The success of the Phobjikha Valley in appealing to tourists has thus attracted trans-local capitalist actors looking to exploit *in-situ* conservation efforts that are provided by local residents. With such capitalists active, the RSPN Homestay Network has been drawn into competitive engagement that manipulates the communitarian intent of the strategy. Thus, new social relations have begun to develop due to these discursive neoliberal transformations.

Trans-local actors are also present in the form of international aid organizations. Various organizations, in the name of poverty reduction, have approached individual homestay owners under the RSPN network in an effort to provide additional marketing and website development services. Eager to align with ecotourism discourse, Homestay owners in turn see the advantages of such offerings, without seeing how such efforts undermine the communal nature of the RSPN reservation system. Therefore, foreign actors disrupt attempts to provide equity by further exacerbating neoliberal tendencies of privatization and competitive advantages. The conflicts that result are illustrated in a 2016 event in which a group of tourists, both Bhutanese and foreign nationals, entered a village and privately booked rooms with four different homestays. Homestays were casually arranged, without following RSPN guidelines, which resulted in Bhutanese and foreign nationals being separated and arranged in different homestays. Due to the fact that Bhutanese and foreign nationals have different per person rates, a conflict arose in which the homestay owners that received all Bhutanese nationals became enraged that they did not receive foreign nationals. The following is an account from one of the Bhutanese nationals<sup>28</sup>:

*there are issues among homestays when one homestay earns more than the other. It seemed like some homestays compare the money among others and complain about it creating misunderstanding amongst themselves and also with the guests.*

This, and similar events, convey new social relations emerging through ecotourism operations in the valley. However, these social relations are not solely dominated by the neoliberal environmentality that drives ecotourism. Existing social hierarchies have also played a role to exacerbate inequalities, despite the communitarian efforts of the RSPN program. When the RSPN initially sought volunteers to establish homestay operations, only particular homes with an existing standard of living were deemed appropriate for tourists. Therefore, despite ecotourism discourse that seeks to address issues of poverty, the more economically well-off families were positioned to benefit most. While it is important to recognize existing social hierarchies and to avoid essentializing the communitarian nature of a community (see Rigg, 1994), ecotourism has provided a new context for issues such as competition to manifest.

Likewise, this is accompanied by evolving human-environment perceptions and relations. Young adults within the homestay operations report disconnect in regards to their capacity to operate according to previous livelihood strategies. One young adult<sup>29</sup> commented:

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<sup>28</sup> 19-year old male college student. Interviewed in Thimphu in 2016.

<sup>29</sup> 25-year old male from Phobjikha. Interviewed in Phobjikha in May 2017.

*I spent a little time with yaks when I was young, but now I do other work. Grandpa knows many things because he spent this time with the yaks and others. They were herding together, shifting from one place to another, sharing picnic lunch and sharing, and so they know these things.*

What we find is that the current generation of Phobjikha youth are less likely, and less willing, to engage in herding or agricultural practices and are hopeful that ecotourism will fill the gap of production activities for the family. This has resulted in a loss of knowledge regarding local resources and less effort to understand the role of humans in the landscape, which has traditionally been viewed through a cosmological worldview. An elder of one village described the importance of recognizing local deities found within the landscape:

*If we don't recognize and appease the deities, then harm will come to our herds...we need to offer some food, water, and prayers to appease them. Whenever we perform pujas [rituals] we praise Lagodshenpo [the deity] and we find that sick people get well. We know about this deity because we are yak herders, and the deity would cause deaths in our herds. When we appease Lagodshenpo our animals become well.<sup>30</sup>*

The elder went on to describe a series of sub-deities that also impacted daily livelihoods in the area through their presence in lakes, mountains, and weather patterns. He also brought our attention to a nearby shrine in his field and reminisced the sickness of his daughter that was relieved after appeasing a local spirit. However, when the elder's grandson, who now operates one of the RSPN homestays, was questioned he had very little knowledge of the area's history and lacked a sense of identity that his grandfather conveyed:

*The elders have less interaction in the family, and even us children forget to ask about these things, the meanings of deities [and such], and we forget to ask about these things...so there is a lack of information.<sup>31</sup>*

These discussions show a generational gap in knowledge transmission that is creating new identities on the landscape. Young locals, as actors on the land, are framing new human-environment perceptions, with relations that contrast with the previous generation. While numerous factors are at play in these new identity formations, ecotourism is certainly playing a role in this specific community, as it has in many other contexts as well (see Johnston, 2014; Hutchins, 2007; Tsaur et al., 2006). Therefore, what we find in the case of the Phobjikha Homestay Network is a neoliberalizing process in which an initial communal framework has been transformed to follow global hegemonic trends for ecotourism.

### *Phajoding Eco-Camp*

Phajoding Monastery is located approximately 3-4 hours hike from Thimphu, located in Thimphu *Dzongkhag* (see Figure 1). It is an important cultural site that has received renovation funding through the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (RGoB, 2013), with the Government of India acting as the primary funding agency for 200 million Ngultrum<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> 60+ year old male. Interviewed in Phobjikha in May 2017.

<sup>31</sup> 21-year old male. Interviewed in Phobjikha in May 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Monetary currency of Bhutan. Approximately \$3.68 million USD.

(DoC, n.d.), and attracts both local and foreign visitors. While serving as a monastic residence, it also serves as the terminal point of interest for the Druk Path Trek, which runs between the Paro and Thimphu valleys (4-6 day trek). The Druk Path is the most popular trek in Bhutan, which received 1,137 in 2015 (TCB, 2016), 1,173 in 2016 (TCB, 2017), and 1,198 in 2017 (TCB, 2018). As part of a larger national strategy to establish and improve ecotourism facilities, the Royal Government, through the appointed Nature Recreation and Ecotourism Division (NRED), took on the task of constructing an Eco-Camp near the monastery grounds (Dorji, 2014). While NRED served as a lead in the development, it was a collaborative effort with the Phajoding Monastery, the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), and the Bhutan Trust Fund as the primary funding agency. Once construction was complete, management responsibilities for the Eco-Camp were given to the monk body, with the understanding that proceeds from the venture would be used for eco-camp operation, monastery needs, and conservation efforts.

It was the intent of the parties involved to develop a model site that would resemble the ideal of ecotourism in the country and to manifest the GNH agenda. Dorji (2014) comments:

*Models like the Phajoding campsite that promote sustainable tourism to increase people's appreciation and support for the conservation of our cultural and natural heritage, will go a long way in realising our national goal of Gross National Happiness. The model and its management will also help develop other ecotourism sites in the country with similar opportunities.*

As the monk body did not have the capacity to establish or manage such an operation, the NRED and TCB worked in consultation with the monastery to develop a management plan with an associated conservation fund. Dorji (2014) notes:

*A management guideline was also developed that considers minimal impact on natural environment and cultural & traditions. The fund management modality is in place. While this will encourage the monks to conserve our natural and cultural heritage, strict considerations have also been taken that the monks will not engage in any other tourism and economic activities that will deviate from their studies. The success of this campsite will act as model for other campsite developments in the country, both in terms of designs and management.*

This quote conveys apprehension regarding the integration of ecotourism and monastic operations. And while the management plan was framed in a way to deal with these sociocultural, as well as ecological, issues, after the project was initiated a number of concerns developed. The monk body reported that an influx of visitors caused issues in terms of capacity to deal with such volumes, conflicts with tour operators, increased waste generation, and disruptions of religious practices. Expressed sentiments amongst the monk body include:

*Monks cannot talk back and [argue] with the staff (tour guides) and the horsemen because we are conducting religious and spiritual practices<sup>33</sup>*

*People who visit Phajoding usually do not have proper beds and camps. The monastery*

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<sup>33</sup> 21-year old male. Interview conducted in Thimphu in April 2016.

*gives them shelter, food and a bed*<sup>34</sup>

*The tourists litter the surroundings as well as the route they take for trekking*<sup>35</sup>

With the monk body lacking management capacity, this weakness was exacerbated through the handing over of the project without significant on-going support. In addition, the fee structure for the eco-camp resulted in tour guides avoiding the camp and setting up alternative camps randomly in the area. These cost-cutting measures allowed tour operators to retain revenue but also expanded the footprint of tourists in the area and diminished the expected economic outcomes for the monastery.

Pressures from increased visitors, conflicts with tour operators, and distractions from religious practices have caused social conflicts amongst the monk body. The experience with managing the eco-camp, and the lack of significant revenue, has led a number of monks to question the perceived sustainability of the operation and the overall benefits for the monastery. While some monks enjoy exposure to visitors, others express frustration with not being able to conduct their regular duties. As a result, there are a variety of opinions about whether the eco-camp operation should continue under the management of the monastery.

Moreover, while social conflicts have surfaced, the same can be said for human-environment relations. Increased guests to the monastery have brought increased waste generation that has been difficult to manage, as well as increased pressure on resources such as firewood and grazing areas associated with use by tour operators and their horse caravans. Whereas ecotourism promotes a strong conservation discourse, the monks are finding that waste has only increased and that they have been left with less productive land with the introduction of the eco-camp. Overlooking the Thimphu valley one monk concluded:

*The impact on nature is more than the money the guests pay.*<sup>36</sup>

What makes this case unique from the others discussed is that a neoliberal logic to operations and management seems explicitly absent. The managing monk body has not expressed a desire to ramp up operations or to survey for competitive advantages, thus they have not incorporated the discursive neoliberal environmentalism promoted by ecotourism. The current economic loss that is being experienced by the operation, rather than promoting a further entrenchment of neoliberal logic and competitive outlook, has resulted in the managing monk body to consider a shutdown of operations and return to status quo.

## Discussion

The following section offers insight into how the discursive nature of ecotourism related to each of the cases continues to manifest and promote contestations. First, we discuss how GNH as a concept remains ambiguous, thus allowing many discourses, including capitalist contestations, to rally around the concept despite conflicting policy intentions

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<sup>34</sup> 37-year old male. Interview conducted in Thimphu in April 2016.

<sup>35</sup> 20-year old male. Interview conducted in Thimphu in April 2016.

<sup>36</sup> 37-year old male. Interview conducted in Thimphu in April 2016.



and outcomes. We then discuss how, due to ambiguity and diversity amongst GNH implementers, the achievement of GNH goals is put at risk.

### *Ambiguity of GNH*

In discussion with ecotourism actors, GNH was found to be a source of confusion and muddled policy intentions. Schroeder's (2015) analysis supports this sentiment, and confirms the ambiguity of the GNH concept. This ambiguity has allowed many to rally around both GNH and Ecotourism, appropriating the concepts in different ways that promote competing policy directions. Regarding the use of GNH, one interviewee<sup>37</sup> notes:

*People use the idea to back their own stance, and not necessarily looking at the issues holistically, maybe looking at just their sector, or just economic growth, or just culture.*

As a result, tensions have arisen amongst various actors producing governance realities that may be perceived as both congruent and incongruent with GNH, further complicated by neoliberal capitalist notions that come to characterize recent policy interventions in the country (Author, forthcoming). Although ecotourism is appealed to as the most appropriate mechanism for achieving rural development and GNH, this ambiguity diverts attention from potential negative social and human-environment repercussions. In the case of Phajoding, the Eco-camp project was justified by appealing to the GNH pillar of equitable socio-economic development. However, impacts on the monk body were either overlooked or viewed as insignificant. Both Haa and Phobjikha also present cases where a discourse of 'balance' is imposed to justify a concentration on economic rationality, and yet changes in perceptions and values have resulted in conflict. In the case of ecotourism, those in favour are often beneficiaries while negative attitudes are expressed by those lacking such advantages, revealing inequalities that diverge from the 'gross' nature of GNH. GNH, however, is not alone in this discourse, as Sustainable Development has also been plagued with critiques related to the proper 'balance' of multiple pillars. In this sense, both GNH and Sustainable Development share a common history in which multiple actors appropriate them for different ends.

Taking advantage of this ambiguity, a discursive neoliberal logic emerges within GNH discussions and establishes its legitimacy. Ecotourism, appealing to GNH, facilitates a positive societal consensus regarding the operation of the sector. Yet, the underlying neoliberal logic that drives ecotourism is masked, concealing negative consequences or at least attributing them to bad implementation. Thus, although the intent of GNH has been to offer a hopeful alternative to western development driven by market logic, Bhutan's vision has been undermined with the incorporation of such logic. To combat this trend, a broader consensus of what GNH is must be reached in order to retain socially sanctioned values and perspectives. Additionally, there must be a commitment to not only the adoption of 'successful' strategies, such as ecotourism, but also to the analysis of the logics and discursive processes that underlie such strategies.

### *Achieving GNH*

New perceptions and values regarding social and human-environment relations were key findings from this research. As such, they represent critical areas of concern for

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<sup>37</sup> 41-year old female government employee. Interview conducted in Thimphu in August 2017.

achieving GNH through ecotourism. In particular, out of the 9 domains that characterize GNH, Environment, Community Vitality, and Cultural Resilience encompass the majority of trepidation. Related to each of these three domains is the creation of environmental subjects/actors (Agrawal, 2005a) that perceive their role in particular ways that are translated into specific motivations and actions. Whereas ecotourism, based on neoliberal logic, promotes rational individuals driven by personalized economic concerns, GNH, based on Buddhist logic, promotes interdependence and moral actions that contradict a rational-actor approach. Personhood in the form of collectivism, nationalism, and other forms of community socialism are transformed to self-autonomy and individual actualization, resulting in the acculturation of indigenous communities (Talking Anthropology, 2013). As was seen in the case of Phobjikha, RSPN homestay owners were drawn into competitive relations with one another that transformed previous social and human-environment relations. Although Rinzin et al. (2007) claim that “the impact on culture and the environment is currently low” (p.109), their study recognizes that “the expected growth may, if it is not managed properly, erode the unique nature of tourism in Bhutan” (109). With their assessment being nearly a decade old, and with a massive increase in tourist numbers since, impacts on culture and perceptions of the environment are now apparent. However, the assessment of Rinzin et al. (2007) is important in relation to the temporality of the landscape, in that it recognizes the integration of human culture and the environment. One can expect that the discursive process of ecotourism will necessarily change perceptions/values, which translate into actions, and create avenues for both sociocultural and biophysical change. As Ingold (2000) states, “the rhythmic pattern of human activities nests within the wider pattern of activity for all animal life, which in turn nests within the pattern of activity for all so-called living things, which nests within the life-process of the world “ (p.201). In this passage Ingold imagines a fast-forwarding perspective of the globe in which the planet is seen to breath as it changes and reacts, or incorporates, human activity.

It should be noted that Bhutan’s state-controlled tourism approach offers some glimmer of hope. While “neoliberalisation is problematized most fundamentally for its creation or exacerbation of social, political and economic inequality” (Fletcher, 2010, p.172; see also Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016), Bhutan’s GNH agenda may facilitate equality through imposing value-laden corrective measures. Although the cases covered in this research do not represent the entirety of ecotourism practice in the country, broader GNH policy rhetoric promotes such active manipulation in the sector. Going forward we offer the following recommendations:

- 1) The case of Phobjikha highlights a cooperative framework initiated by RSPN, which was tainted by intrusions from external actors. Such a framework could be reinforced through government policy interventions that protect such initiatives.
- 2) Phajoding’s experience, characterized by strong initial government facilitation, could easily be corrected through prolonged capacity building and policy initiatives that support the monastery community.

Such policy efforts would embody corrective measures to avoid negative discursive impacts of neoliberalization and embrace GNH goals related to social cohesion, promotion of culture, and environmental protection.

## Conclusion

To maintain their goal of 'high value and low impact', the government of Bhutan will need to consider the unintended consequences of increased tourist volumes, not only for traditional tourism products, but especially for ecotourism in rural areas. Such a task demands a perspective in which ecotourism is critiqued, not only on biophysical and economic grounds, but also as a discursive process that contests local perceptions and values. This research has framed ecotourism discourse as a particular neoliberal environmentality and worked to analyse the country's incorporation of such logic.

The cases covered in this research reveal critical changes in perceptions related to social and human-environment interactions, which represent 'indigenous modernities' related to evolving livelihoods related to ecotourism. Regardless, this has resulted in strained relations that must be addressed in order to meet the intent of Bhutan's GNH agenda. Such conflicts are the result of a discursive process, an underlying neoliberal logic and environmentality that drives ecotourism, which insidiously promotes values and worldviews that are foreign to host communities. By framing these divergences within a dwelling approach, which incorporates a temporal aspect to the landscape, one can adopt a unified theoretical approach that make sense of how the sector is able to infiltrate not only the bio-physical arena, which has been a key emphasis of the literature, but also the socio-cultural and human-environment relations that then translate into new 'interactivity' (Ingold, 2000), or taskscape, on the landscape.

The cases of Haa Valley Homestay, Phobjikha Homestay Network, and the Phajoding Eco-camp reveal a breakdown of social relationships and increased inequality that work against the GNH goals of social cohesion, promotion of culture and the protection of nature. The introduction of competition and privatization has altered previous production and social activities, thus transforming societal values and interactions. Additionally, these cases indicate new human-environment relations. Livelihoods through ecotourism result in new ways of interacting with elders, ways of conceptualizing the self, and ways of perceiving and interacting with the landscape. The landscape has been demystified, resulting in a commodified landscape driven by conceptualizations in line with the global market, the 'new economic paradigm' (see United Nations, 2012) and perceptions of humans 'over' nature. Divergences materialize in the form of new resource extractions, degraded environments, and strained social interactions. Ecotourism will continue to be promoted and legitimized through GNH and Sustainable Development discourses, thus ignoring the negative consequences of neoliberal capitalism. In turn, social and human-environment divergences are either overlooked or attributed to causes other than the neoliberal rationale underpinning ecotourism.

Bhutan's ecotourism industry has been promoted as a panacea, an answer to the problems of traditional tourism, and a way to uphold principles of GNH in the country. Yet, ecotourism has the ability to modify society and the environment in significant ways. Ecotourism has certainly achieved poverty alleviation and established novel ways of distributing tourism economic benefits to rural areas of Bhutan, but with the consequence of establishing new perceptions and values that manipulate social and human-environment relations. As such, the material nature of ecotourism continues to be the focus of policy makers while discursive impacts are overlooked. While

sustainable development discourse continues to promote win-win solutions in which economic, social and environmental objectives are met, the reality for rural Bhutanese are divergences in societal values and practice that fundamentally change their way of life. The challenge for Bhutan is to determine how ecotourism can be employed to achieve 'progress', so that the values of GNH are promoted. To do this, there must be an explicit acknowledgement of the discourses that underlie ecotourism and how they can be adapted in order to achieve greater societal and ecological well-being.

## 8 Cosmological subjectivities: exploring ‘truth’ environmentalities in Haa Highlands<sup>38</sup>

Jesse Montes, Sonam Tshering, Tenzin Phuntsho

### Abstract

*This chapter explores local perceptions of the landscape in a small highland community near Haa, Bhutan. Through the lens of ethnoecology a storied landscape is revealed in which a Buddhist cosmology emerges as a driving force in shaping local subjectivities. We draw on this case to contest Agrawal’s (2005a, 2005b) depiction of a singular ‘environmental subject’ and instead outline the multiple forms of subjectivity sought by different governmentalities including neoliberal, disciplinary, sovereign and truth modalities. Within this framework, we identify in our case a truth environmentality based on appeals to and belief in a cosmological hierarchy, revealed through a storying of the landscape by the herding community, which motivates specific self-understandings leading to conservation behaviour. This brings our analysis into conversation with research on Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is often framed as lived/experiential knowledge. While much literature has emphasized TEK’s ethical dimensions, thus pointing towards disciplinary characteristics, we focus on cosmological elements of TEK to highlight its role in shaping truth subjectivities not yet addressed in the literature.*

*Key words:* Landscape ethnoecology, Bhutan, environmentality, Buddhism, Traditional Ecological Knowledge

### Introduction

This research employs landscape ethnoecology methodology to explore how “environmental” subjectivities are constructed in relation to cosmological ‘storying’ of the landscape. While a burgeoning body of scholarship related to conservation explores subjectivities related to Agrawal’s (2005a, 2005b) seminal work on ‘environmentality’, which emphasizes *disciplinary* forms of engagement such as participation and enrolment in government programs, there has also been a movement to explore alternative modalities for subject formation in relation to other forms of governmentality. Thus far, however, little attention has been devoted to conceptualizing the specific forms of environmental subjectivity related to systems of beliefs and practice concerning the fundamental order of the universe, what Fletcher (2010) calls a *truth* environmentality. We address this gap by exploring Buddhist spiritualities and cosmology within a highland community in western Bhutan, which reveals critical insight concerning perceptions, identity, and behaviors within and towards the landscape.

The concepts of land, perceptions, and identity create a unique nexus to consider environmental and socio-cultural issues (Ingold, 2000). Landscapes provide a tapestry in which human interactions are understood materially, socially, and metaphysically. As such, the field of ethnoecology, and more specifically landscape ethnoecology, provides a critical perspective that combines and explores these categories of inquiry. Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) define ethnoecology as the “study of how nature is perceived by humans through a screen of beliefs and knowledge, and how humans, through their symbolic meanings and representations, use and/or manage landscapes

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<sup>38</sup> This chapter was submitted for publication to *Conservation & Society*.

and natural resources” (p.11). In this sense, landscape ethnoecology proves a useful body of practice for exploring perceptions, knowledge, and resource management.

This study demonstrates that local herders perceive a hierarchical system in which supernatural actors require particular actions and behaviors from human actors within the landscape, thus promoting a particular “environmental subject” (Agrawal, 2005a). This worldview promotes identities that negate a conventional Buddhist promotion of peaceful interdependence in favor of hierarchical relations in which humans assume a submissive role in relation to a host of metaphysical entities. We argue that this case thus illustrates construction of particular subjectivities driven by a *truth* environmentality (Fletcher 2010). This concept builds on Agrawal’s (2005a) work to integrate Foucault’s introduction of a particular *truth* governmentality in his more recently published work (Foucault, 2008b). While Agrawal’s analysis emphasized a disciplinary approach to the “conduct of conduct”, in terms of which individuals internalize social norms through enrollment in environmental management programs, newer work has drawn on Foucault’s later discussions to differentiate neoliberal, sovereign, and truth environmentalities (Fletcher, 2010, 2017). While neoliberal and sovereign forms have been explored through a growing range of empirical case studies, the concept of a truth environmentality remains relatively little investigated thus far. Moreover, the few studies that have employed this concept do not provide in-depth analysis of how *truth* environmentalities may promote particular forms of subjectivity distinct from those promoted by disciplinary, neoliberal and sovereign forms. We show that the *truth* environmentality present at our research site promotes forms of subjectivity that differ from Agrawal’s *disciplinary* conceptualization. Through this analysis we thus further efforts to promote variegated perspectives regarding environmentality and contribute to this literature by providing a novel framing for a *truth* modality underdeveloped in previous research.

In the process, we also contribute to research exploring traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). While Fletcher (2010) briefly identifies TEK as potentially being a representation of a *truth* environmentality, this link also has not been developed. We show that a multiple environmentality perspective is useful for nuanced analyses of subjectivities promoted within TEK, dialoguing with literature that has explored ethical dimensions of TEK. While this previous work largely represents TEK as promoting disciplinary modes of subject formation, we emphasize an adherence to beliefs and cosmologies related to a *truth* environmentality as well.

In the following, we outline the growing literature on environmentality, highlighting critical reactions to its original formulation that work to promote individual agency and alternative forms of subjectivity beyond disciplinary forms. We then contest western discourses of the ‘environment’ that are emphasized within the environmentality literature, with an aim to recognize alternative perceptions that lack dualist perspectives of the human-environment relationship. This necessarily has overlap with discussion and literature around Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). Therefore, we provide a brief overview of this concept and how we work to dovetail this literature with discussion of environmentality. Following this, we review landscape ethnoecology as the methodology employed in our analysis. We then present our case study of landscape cosmology among *Shokuna* herders in the Haa highlands. We make a case for understanding this cosmology as a *truth* environmentality that draws on Buddhist belief to construct a particular environmental subject.

## Environmentality, Agency, and Novel Modalities

'Environmentality' has become a popular concept through which to understand how people understand and relate to the natural environment. Luke (1995) is attributed with originally conceptualizing the term, which understands 'the environment' as a battlefield of competing discourses and observations regarding human-nonhuman relations. As Luke phrases it, "nature's meanings always will be multiple and unfixed. Only these interpretive acts can construct contestable textual fields...and, once it is rendered intelligible through these discursive processes, it can be used to legitimize almost anything" (p.58). Notwithstanding the complexity and ambiguity of its referent, "the environment" nevertheless becomes a realm of politics, values and social control. In elaborating on Luke's formulation, Agrawal (2005a) thus frames environmentality as "a union of environment and Foucauldian governmentality," asserting that "the term stands for an approach to studying environmental politics that takes seriously the conceptual building blocks of power/knowledges, institutions, and subjectivities" (p.8).

Agrawal's work (2005a, 2005b) emphasizes the ways that environmentality works to shape "environmental subjects," emphasizing participation and enrollment in government programs. He asserts that "regulations, and villagers' practices and words, seem to be part of a process that has reshaped people's understandings" (2005a, p.12). Moreover, "varying levels of involvement in institutional regimes of environmental regulation facilitate new ways of understanding the environment" (2005b, p.161). For Agrawal, practice is therefore critical to an understanding of subject formation. Actors are enrolled into particular environmental management programs, resulting in a reshaping of values and understandings, allowing the state to "govern at a distance" as subjects "are willing to work upon themselves to become *environmental subjects*" (2005b, p.181, emphasis added), or "people who care about the environment" (p.262).

A substantial body of research has built on Agrawal's framework to explore how environmentality operates to shape subjectivity. However, some have critiqued the perspective for its primarily top-down approach, viewing it as an oversimplification that both discounts individual agency in subject formation and ignores the multiple governance rationalities at play in many situations. Concerning this first point of contention, scholars have criticized the emphasis on insidious subjectifying power relations that minimizes the agency individuals have to defy and contest efforts to conduct their conduct. These critics point out that such power differentials play out in much more dynamic ways wherein subjects react and respond in meaningful ways to express their own beliefs and values, rather than simply conforming to subjectifying pressures. Cepek (2011), critical of Agrawal's 'participation' thesis, shows in his work in Amazonia that despite such participation locals maintain their own perspectives and values related to the environment. Similar perspectives are expressed by Jepson et al. (2012), Faye (2016), and Cortes and Ruiz (2018), all of whom echo previous feminist critiques of Foucault (see Bordo, 1993 and Deveaux, 1994). Cortes and Ruiz (2018) note that "the formation of environmental subjects is in many cases an incomplete project that is manipulated and made messier by the capacity of people to negotiate, adapt, and combine different forms of practice, incorporating their own interests, affects, and habits" (p.240). These scholars complicate environmentality pointing out that subject formation is not a simplistic equation in which political actors merely impose

subjectivities to produce ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977) out of unruly subjects, a notion that Foucault himself later revised (Deveaux, 1994).

Regarding multiple governance rationalities, it is important to note the progressive publication of Foucault’s work over time. While his earlier works were translated and presented partial disclosures of his thought as it evolved, it laid a basis for understanding governmentality as contrasted with sovereignty and discipline. However, his later published work complicates a simplistic tripartite framework and instead “recognizes that these different governmentalities, while distinct, are not mutually exclusive, but may coexist in any given context” (Fletcher, 2010, p.177). From this perspective, Agrawal’s environmental subject is one defined by a specifically *disciplinary* mode of conduct that does not necessarily correspond with other environmentalities. Mawdsley (2009) applies the environmentality framework to urban space in India and finds that issues of caste and class division disrupt environmental sentiment of the urban population, thus limiting a simple application of participatory governance as a means for producing environmental subjectivities. Fletcher (2010) in particular works to differentiate multiple environmentalities, aligning with Foucault’s modalities for governmentality, thus expanding the application and usefulness of the concept. Fletcher explores sovereign, disciplinary, and truth environmentalities, giving special attention to a neoliberal manifestation. Novel forms of subjectivity characterize each modality. Montes (forthcoming), in reference to Fletcher’s work, notes:

*a state that operates on a sovereign governmentality, compelling subjects to obey a set of rules, will likely be accompanied by a sovereign environmentality (i.e. Fortress conservation). A state that operates on a disciplinary governmentality, inculcates social norms allowing subjects to govern themselves, would be accompanied by a disciplinary environmentality (i.e. what Agrawal calls ‘creating environmental subjects’). And a state that operates on a truth governmentality, appealing to religious claims or beliefs about the nature of the world, will be accompanied by a truth environmentality (i.e. Deep Ecology).*

Further, a neoliberal environmentality works “to provides incentives sufficient to motivate individuals to choose to behave in conservation-friendly ways” (Fletcher, 2010, p.176). This multiple environmentality perspective allows for more nuanced analyses exploring the intricacies of conservation policies and regulations. Youdelis (2013) applies this framework in exploring the context of ecotourism in Northern Thailand dissecting combinations of neoliberal, disciplinary and truth modalities; Montes (forthcoming) addresses the context of conservation policy in Bhutan that is increasingly neoliberal in nature and yet coalesces with sovereign and truth functionalities; and Fletcher (2017) outlines a number of avenues that environmentality scholarship has dissected and opened up for future inquiry.

While these scholars have primarily framed their investigations in terms of disciplinary and/or neoliberal environmentalities, it is the *truth* modality that has received relatively little attention thus far. Valladares and Boelens (2019) look at multiple governmentalities within mining discourses in Ecuador and address competing *truth* governmentalities. They show how multiple parties conflict as they appeal to different truth claims about the nature of reality. While the state and industry frame ‘science’ as a truth to promote mining operations, this is done in opposition to locals appealing to their own local knowledge and cosmology. Other works that address *truth*



environmentalities include Boelens (2014), Bluwstein (2017), and Erb (2012) who all illustrate how competing governance rationalities (i.e. disciplinary, sovereign, and neoliberal) come into conversation with and contest local perceptions and appeals to the nature of reality. While this work provides insight to the politics of differing cosmologies, there remains a gap in exploring how such truth claims promote particular forms of subjectivity. While Agrawal focused on one form of subjectivity, other modalities imply other forms that deserve examination. It is this lacuna that this work seeks to address.

We further complicate environmentality studies by problematizing underlying assumptions regarding how the ‘environment’ is commonly understood in a particular way within this discussion. Through a *disciplinary* environmentality, a particular relationship between a subject and their surroundings is promoted in which actors begin to see their role as ‘steward’ or ‘manager’, reifying modern dichotomies of humans and/vs nature. As the actors internalize discursive conservation norms, they take their place within the population by caring for and managing appropriately their surroundings. But, as Escobar (1999) asks, “Whose Knowledge, Whose Nature?”, a particular type of knowledge aligned with an Enlightenment perspective drives the dominant discourse. As such, the ‘environment’ is framed by a particular western discourse in which “nature and the earth can be ‘managed’” (p.328) and “no longer does nature denote an entity with its own agency...nature is confined to an ever more passive role” (Escobar, 1996, p.331). While Escobar does not have environmentality specifically in mind here as he critiques larger conservation discourses, his concerns remain relevant. Such a perspective does not represent local or indigenous *truth* claims that tend to be much more dependent on worldviews and spiritualities that dissolve divides between humans and nonhumans, all of whom may be animated by similar dynamics and forces (Berkes, 2008, Ingold, 2000). As originally formulated, then, environmentality is only one way to understand human-environment relations and is not necessarily reflective of alternative perspectives. To address this issue, we emphasize a *truth* perspective, acknowledging local appeals to the nature of reality and their “claims concerning humans’ essential interconnection with nature” (Fletcher, 2010, p.177). We frame local perceptions as new cosmologies that challenge hegemonic discourses and dualist perspectives.

### **Traditional Ecological Knowledge**

Truth environmentality as outlined above resonates with a longstanding body of research exploring the “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK) that different peoples employ to understand their relationships with the rest of the world. While Fletcher (2010) suggests that TEK can be understood as a representation of a *truth* environmentality, no subsequent research has followed up to explore this potential framing. Our analysis thus aims to integrate discussion of TEK and (truth) environmentality. Berkes (2008) defines TEK as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (p.7). It is experiential lived knowledge of the environment (Berkes, 2004) that is, a form of practice – that is cumulative, dynamic, historical, local, holistic, embedded and moral/spiritual (Menzies, 2006).

Turnhout's (2018) work is insightful concerning the politics of TEK, which often analyses the phenomenon as 'situated' and culturally specific. Turnhout recognizes that "all knowledge – local as well scientific – must be understood as situated and partial" (p.367, see also Haraway, 1988; Robbins, 2003; Agrawal, 1995) and that western scientific knowledge is not beyond scrutiny. Regardless, conventional discourses around conservation and development continually produce systematic barriers to the application of TEK. Hohenthal et al. (2018), in their work in the Taita Hills region of Kenya, adopt a political ecology approach to highlight asymmetrical relations between TEK and existing power structures that date back to the colonial period. They conclude that "relations of dominance and symmetric power relations between different groups cause assimilation of, rather than egalitarian recognition of, different knowledges" (p.4). Shackeroff and Campbell (2008) also show how, even when TEK is welcomed, it is often "oversimplified, or commoditized to fit into categories and disciplines for 'consumption'" (p.532), which denies its complexity and recognition of the dynamic context from which it was generated.

A critical element of TEK, also present within western scientific discourses, is the adoption of a systems mode of thinking. A systems approach views humans as an integrated component of an ecosystem, avoiding Cartesian models of humans and/vs nature (Ingold, 2000, Berkes, 2008), and is much more the norm as opposed to command-and-control styles of management in which various disciplines seek to manage elements of the environment (Berkes, 2004). Rather, TEK represents a "human strategy to adjust to and transform a given habitat which is the product of co-evolution between culture and nature" (Ruiz-Mallen, et al, 2011, p.11). Thus, TEK produces particular perceptions that can be understood as a guide for understanding human-environment relations. Providing a more integrated perspective, then, also complicates Agrawal's usage of "the environment", as it is a limiting frame for how non-western peoples understand and relate to their surroundings.

Further, the TEK literature promotes a perspective in which ethics plays a critical role in guiding conservation behaviour. These ethics are based on perceptions of particular human-environment relations, often appealing to a situated cosmology or belief system (Rappaport, 1979). Berkes (2008) emphasizes TEK as a form of lived ethics and quotes Anderson (1996) who notes:

*all traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources well over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management. The key point is not religion per se, but the use of emotionally powerful cultural symbols to sell particular moral codes and management systems (p.166).*

Menzies and Butler (2006) also comment:

*In many Indigenous cultures, TEK is grounded in a spiritual and reciprocal relationship between the people and their environment. The natural world is often understood as sentient and proactive and infused with spirit. Thus, there are right ways and wrong ways to relate to and interact with the environment (p.10).*

Here we find that TEK goes beyond conceptualizations of embodied experiential knowledge representing novel forms of human-environment perceptions and interaction, by formulating a basis for shaping subjectivity. TEK guides behaviors and forms identities as subjects align with particular values and codes of conduct.

While the literature often portrays such subject formation in positive light, the political context of TEK often confronts discourses that create potential for misrepresentation. In Nadasdy's (2005) work regarding the 'Noble Savage', he describes how 'environmentalists' portray indigenous peoples in a particular manner, projecting forced identities. In such a case, TEK is appropriated by western perspectives and misinterpreted as "they continue to evaluate indigenous people's actions according to a Euro-American ideal" (p.293). Western ideas around indigenous conservatism work to shape behaviors and conform indigenous peoples, even claiming that they are rejecting their own culture unless they act accordingly. In this manner, political discourses around TEK also represent a means of subjectivity.

From the above, we find that TEK is often framed, although not explicitly, as promoting a *disciplinary* form of subjectivity. Ethics, values and behaviors are passed down from one generation to the next, promoting a particular way of being that is deemed culturally appropriate. And even in the case of Nadasdy's (2005) assessment of environmentalist movements, they also promote a particular set of values intended to inculcate subjects. However, another critical element of TEK, cosmology, produces other forms of subjectivity. Appeals to the nature of reality are made, manifesting in spiritual beliefs and practice, that resemble subjectivities related to a *truth* environmentality. Therefore, within TEK, we find multiple modes of subjectivity at play, which integrates well with the multiple environmentality approach. An environmentality lens thus allows for a nuanced investigation of the multiple rationalities that promote different forms of subjectivity within TEK. For our purposes here, we have chosen to focus on a *truth* perspective to environmental subjectivity in order to fill the underexplored gap in the environmentality literature. Additionally, we provide a novel framing of TEK that goes beyond the treatment of behavior and identity as primarily ethical, and thus discounts truth elements to the conduct of conduct. As such, we explore not just how humans *should* act, in terms of ethics, but how they *must* act according to appeals, perceptions and beliefs about the nature of reality itself.

## Methodology

Our study employs a landscape ethnoecology approach to the *Shokuna* region of Haa, Bhutan. Landscape ethnoecology works towards an emphasis on "perception and understanding of the landscape, biota, and landforms, rather than focusing on specific resources or processes" (Johnson, 2010, p.11). With this perspective, one diverts attention from the complexities associated with resource specific knowledges/uses, and focuses on broader perceptions. These perceptions can be multifaceted related to the biophysical landscape, but also to how one perceives one's identity, practices and interactions within the landscape. As such, landscape ethnoecology hones in on perceptions as a critical arena for exploration. Of particular interest is how perceptions drive environmental subjectivities. The work of Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) illustrates the critical nature of such a context in their work with the Yucatec Maya finding "inextricable links between beliefs, knowledge, and management of natural resources" (p.9).

The researchers made a distinction between knowledge of 'proximity' and knowledge of landscape. While the majority of the research focused on the broader category of landscape knowledge, a portion involved rapid ethnobotanical appraisal (Gerique, 2006), with a potential to use this data for future inquiry. With ethnobotanical and

ethnozoological knowledge serving as the knowledge of proximity (Mark et al., 2012), the herders have also developed a macro-level conceptualization of their landscape in which they have developed schemata and an understanding of larger bio-physical patterns that help in resource use decisions. Patterns of rainfall, seasonal vegetation growth, presence of predators, and other site-specific details have helped herders cognitively map the usefulness of the landscape and its components (pastures, forest patches, streams).

Field research was conducted from July 2014-July 2017 involving in-depth interviews with four yak herders in the *Shokuna* region (see Figure 6), supplemented with focus group discussions with additional informants. The area is predominantly used during the monsoon season (June-September), which provides the warmest temperatures in the year allowing herds to access higher altitude grasses that have become abundant. The area is vast, and it is easy for herds to get lost in the folds of the rolling hills. While herders use their knowledge of grasses and water sources to estimate the likely whereabouts of their wandering herds throughout the day, our research team had a particular hard time locating one resident in our 2015 field stint. After locating the herd first, the accompanying herder, Tshering, showed up hours later to bring in the herd for the night and found us waiting for him.



Figure 6: Shokuna Homestead

The year before, our team had spent time with Tshering and others to create a landscape vocabulary, an exercise involving free-listing landscape features, which were then associated with flora, fauna, soils, hydrology, use-values, and cosmological features. The team divided the vocabulary into four lexical sets in order to better categorize topographic, hydrographic, forest and grassland classifications. The lists were then crosschecked with informants and re-characterized as to provide appropriate resonance with local understandings. It is interesting to note that the key informants placed primary emphasis on the grassland categories with a number of qualifying distinctions and expansive ethnobotanical knowledge, likely attributed to the mode of production in the area, solely reliant on pastoralism. With grasslands serving as the primary ‘folk biotope’ (Meilleur, 2012), the critical bio-physical space for human cultural and production activities, the remaining three categories served as lexical sets to draw further conclusions regarding the broader ethno-landscape, or ‘effective environment’.

of the herding community. Informants revealed a precise knowledge of the landscape through toponomic (place/feature naming) exercises that was characterized by both economic and cultural specificities. Economic modalities were expressed through knowledges linked to specific sites for material appropriation, both in terms of livelihood sustenance and profit earning potential. Cultural aspects were disclosed in terms of identity and cosmological framings. As discussions progressed with informants, the concept of 'storying' proved critical, which involved an animated story-telling process as a means to portray meaning and significance to the local landscape.

The following data show how perceptions of the landscape are cosmological in nature. While the researchers initially explore various elements of the landscape through technocratic compartmentalization, it is through the act of storying that an animated landscape is revealed. And it is through this act of storying that an understanding of local subjectivities is explored.

### **Storying the Landscape of Rigo Tsho**

With the northern portion of Bhutan dominated by the southeastern Himalayas, the harsh alpine steppe is home to unique flora, fauna, and sociocultural formations. Pasturelands span hills over 4000 meters in elevation welcoming herds and their caretakers. A cycle of semi-nomadic seasonal movements has occurred for generations developing precise ecosystem knowledge shaped by, and also shaping, an underlying worldview used to interpret the landscape. The number of herders is less than it was. With advances in education and modernization, particularly in urban areas, many have abandoned traditional livelihoods. Well-educated youth no longer return to the difficult pressures of agriculture and pastoralism, and are drawn to locations such as Thimphu, Paro, and Phuentsholing. The Royal Government is aware of the issue as a large number of unemployed college graduates congregate in urban centers competing for scarce jobs (RGoB, 2017). This transition has resulted in an abundance of space, land that is left fallow and no longer used. To increase production in these areas the Royal Government implemented the "Targeted Highland Development Programme" under the 11<sup>th</sup> 5-year plan. This program seeks to increase herd size and production, yet the herder population is not targeted for increase and aims to maintain an approximate population of 1039 herders in the country (RGoB, 2013b).

In the highlands of Haa, in the far western region of the country, a pastoral region exists called *Shokuna*, which includes the legendary *Nuptionapata* area, and is encompassed by the Jigme Khesar Strict Nature Reserve, previously known as Torsa Strict Nature Reserve. Traditional forms of land allocation persist despite the dramatic decrease of herders and herd size. Prime pastures are redistributed every 5 years through a ritual casting of dice, with the champion claiming first choice of the area's resources. This communal decision-making and use of land is indicative of the community relations that the herders in the region share. Modern policies stipulating land rights and usage are not required and would likely disrupt social relations. As Rowbotham (2004) comments in regards to land tenure, "people simply cannot be expected to adhere to traditional cultures and values if the link between land, labour and community is drastically or rapidly altered" (p.187). To date, the Forest Park staff that monitor the region have largely respected these traditional practices. However, the Land Policy Act of 2007, which was delayed in implementation until 2017, now changes such practice (see Tshering et al., 2016) and puts at risk these informal institutions.

*Shokuna* is an area of approximately 66 km<sup>2</sup> and is home to approximately 321 yak and 6 households (MAF, 2015), who primarily identify as Buddhists. While the herders of this region are semi-nomadic, many have winter homes, or at least some familial connection to the town center of Haa. These connections prove vital for marketing their products, mainly cheese, butter and yoghurt, which are distributed to Haa, Paro, and Thimphu. Seasonal movements are conducted to a number of pasturelands, with summer grazing being at remote higher altitudes while winter grazing is situated at lower altitudes where appropriate fodder can be accessed in forested areas. A culture has developed with specific knowledge related to land and resources, translating to situated practices for survival in such a harsh landscape. While nearby Haa town contains a certain remote charm of its own, the highlands of *Shokuna* lack any initial sign of human settlement. Some might even call it ‘wilderness’ (Cronon, 1996). However, as we spend time with the herders in the region and begin to see their imprint, we come to understand the landscape in new light. What seems an empty untouched space becomes animated with history as locals discuss grazing/fallow patterns, remnants of controlled burns, rock piles signifying previous residences, caves serving as firewood stashes, and so on.

While our intent was to further provide refined classifications, expand our lexical sets, and to develop insight to use-values, our 2015 trip revealed new critical insight to the findings. We particularly noticed within the hydrographic lexical set that proper names assigned to various water bodies had cosmological significance. As we explored the reason for this, stories about the *Shokuna* area were shared bringing new meaning to the surrounding landscape.

One afternoon, Tshering was joined by another herder, Ngawang, and we found a spot on a *potou*, a hilltop used for surveying the area for the presence of yaks, and the two jointly told the story of *Rigo Tsho*. *Rigo Tsho* (‘Treasure Lake’), was a nearby lake that held immense significance for understanding the topography of the area. Numerous other lakes dotting the landscape, many of which could be viewed from our *potou*, originated from the cosmic battle that the story tells. With names such as *Nga Tsho* (‘Drum’ lake), *Ngyaetoe Tsho* (‘Drumstick’ lake), *Dung Tsho* (‘Trumpet’ lake), and *Rim Tsho* (‘Cymbal’ lake), they all alluded to instruments used in Buddhist monastic rituals. As such, the story revealed a cosmology of the landscape that was absent from our efforts to classify the surroundings in terms of lexical sets. The story was told as follows:

*Tertön Sherab Mebar, born in mid 1200s in Tibet, visited Bhutan and he spent the rest of his life in Bhutan. While he was in Bhutan, he went to the lake called Rigo tsho, which is in the area where the famous lake Nub Tshona Pata is, to discover some treasures. He also took some attendants with him so that they could help him in transporting the treasures. When they arrived at the lake, the treasure discoverer instructed his attendants to chop the golden pillar and also told them that they can take the gold chips or pulp, which fall while cutting the pillar. Tertön Sherab Mebar then sucked the whole lake in his mouth and his disciples went in to chop the pillar and also take out other treasures. The attendants started cutting the pillars in such a way that they could get more golden chips. When the attendants started cutting more, Tertön Sherab Mebar yelled at them saying not to cut bigger chunks off the golden pillar and dropped the whole lake out of his mouth. Tertön then quickly grabbed what he could and flew over the mountains. The lake deity then followed him in the form of a storm. The lake was catching up with the Tertön. The Tertön had to drop some of the treasures so that he*

*could run away from the lake. First he dropped a drum and a drumstick. After that he dropped a trumpet. At last he just had a pair of cymbals. Still, the weight was too much for him to flee so he dropped one of the cymbals. After running from the lake for some time, Tertön met App Chundu (the famous deity of Haa). App Chundu then helped negotiate between the lake deity and the treasure discoverer. App chundu collected some dried yak and sheep dung and built five laptsas, or stupa like structures, as a border demarcation between the lake and the tertön. The Tertön went back with one cymbal. To this day we can see the cymbal in Paro Fortress and it is displayed only once a year to the public. We can also see lakes shaped like the instruments where the Tertön dropped the instruments.*

The primary actors in the story, Tertön Sherab Mebar, his attendants, the deity of Rigo Tsho, and App Chundu, all serve important functions. Sherab Mebar is an important historical figure in Bhutan and is known as a *Tertön*, or special ‘treasure seekers’ foretold by the 8<sup>th</sup> century Guru Rinpoche, who also plays an important role in many Bhutanese epics. It was Guru Rinpoche who hid treasures throughout the landscape, in preparation for such *Tertöns* (Hargens, 2002). As such, the story makes direct linkage to Buddhist tradition and portrays reverence for the landscape that contains hidden treasures throughout. Sherab Mebar’s attendants are characterized negatively in the story. They are understood to be acting in a selfish manner when they oppose the *Tertön*’s instructions, and thus embody traits that locals avoid. While this story tells of behaviors to avoid, another story told by Ngawang portrays ideal practice:

*If you worship, and believe in the holiness of the lake, they say you’ll be blessed. So when [an] elderly monk offered his sincere prayers, the lake offered him blessings for cattle. The lake told him to wish for however much cattle he could take care of.....the elder monk then thought about how he could only take care of about eight or nine cattle.*

Here we find the emergence of what could be characterized as an environmental ethic. As Tshering and Ngawang speak about Rigo Tsho and compare the actions of various historical actors, we find that moderation and frugality are upheld in contrast to desire for economic gain that negatively impact lake deities and grassland health. In continuation, Rigo Tsho, and its understanding as an abode of a deity, reifies this ethic. The Rigo Tsho deity is held in such regard that it puts fear into the famous Tertön Sherab Mebar. Here we see a hierarchical structure forming in which deities in the landscape oppose the will of human beings. In response, the local yak herders have developed an intricate set of actions and behaviors to avoid the wrath of Rigo Tsho, but also the numerous other deities in the area. While the number and nature of deities in the area was not explored exhaustively, our team learned that many of the objects in the story of Rigo Tsho that were dropped and formed lakes, also became the abode of additional deities.

While staying with Ngawang in the summer of 2014, below *Nga Tsho* and *Ngyaetoe Tsho*, one of the researchers finished drinking their yak tea and poured the remaining milk in the nearby fire. The researcher was quickly scolded and asked not to do this. It was later learned that the smell of burnt milk is offensive to the nearby deities and that the deities may curse the yak from which the milk came. This would result in the yak being unable to produce milk in the future. Additionally, upon our visit in 2015, Tshering and Ngawang were found conducting a ritual as they prepared to move their herd from one area to another. They reported that the local deities needed to be appeased and grant permission before movement of the herds proceeded. Ngawang states:

*[the ritual] is mainly to bless the cattle and the herder, and to avoid bad luck. It is like praying and asking for protection and guidance. Even if a herder arrives and moves to a new camp at dawn, he should perform it. It is mandatory.*

As well, in 2016 another herder, Tandin, was interviewed regarding the spirits in nearby woods. He comments “I urinate on all the normal trees but I would be scared and would feel very uncomfortable to urinate on a tree where we believe the deities reside”. What we find is that there are a host of deities in the area, associated with water bodies, trees, and mountaintops. This mosaic of spiritual territories demands specific reciprocities from human dwellers in which prescribed actions and behaviors must be followed in order to continue residing in the area. Some of these actions/behaviors include: avoid burning garbage, refrain from making loud noises, do not cut down certain trees, and conduct rituals to appease deities. Barrera-Bassols and Toledo (2005) found similar relationships with Mayan settlements in which the landscape was seen as a living-being requiring reciprocation of actions, where the land was treated in a particular way in order for the land to provide food and productive means for residents.

The final actor of the story, App Chundu, is the local deity of the Haa region and is portrayed as wrathful and powerful in many stories. App Chundu’s role as a mediator seems out of character to traditional characterizations in which he wields weapons while riding a stallion and demands annual yak sacrifices from Haa residents, a practice that lasted until 2013 after which the deity was consulted and agreed to be appeased through other means (Little Bhutan, 2013). Regardless, App Chundu intervenes on behalf of Sherab Mebar, creating a contract and physical barrier that still stands to this day (Figure 7). This physical barrier on the *Shokuna* landscape serves as a reminder to the local herders of this cosmic interaction and the importance of continued alignment with sanctioned behavior. The barrier, while initially serving as a contract between Rigo Tsho and Sherab Mebar, has transcended this conflict and now applies to the people of *Shokuna*, represented by Rigo Tsho, and the people of *Pangmisa* (region of Paro), the final resting place of Sherab Mebar and the stolen cymbal. Ngawang states “even the Paro Pangmisa people on the other side were asked not to cross it”. With reference to this story, Tshewang (2001) comments:

*Thus the followers of Terton of Paro Pangmisa do not have any relationship with the people of Ha Shogona [Shokuna]. In later time, a man from Shogona married a girl from Pangmisa. The couple gave birth to a child. The couple thought that there would be no harm in going to Shogona as [the] husband belonged to it. Accordingly, they set out. While crossing a footbridge over the river the knot of the wrapper in which the child was carried suddenly opened on its own in the middle of the wooden-bridge. The child fell into the river and was carried away. It is therefore believed that anyone attempting to break the agreement negotiated by Chungdue [App Chundu] does so at great personal risk (54-55).*





Figure 7: Laptsa structures created by App Chundu

Another female interviewee from the Paro region reflects on an additional marriage:

*The husband is from Pangbisa Paro [Pangmisa], and wife from Sombeykha Haa. They were known to have been in relationship for a long time, but it was after they officially got married, when she just started having mental breakdowns. Basically, she turned mad. There was one incident where she was home with her kid. The neighbors heard the kid crying and on checking, found the wife just staring at the kid, not responding to the kid's cries. On seeking advice from a lam [Buddhist monk], they were told it was because they had different 'Choe-suu/Choe-sung' [individual deities]. Later when they finally took the advice of the lam, and divorced, and started living separately, the wife started getting better. In fact, she is doing so well that she is now working as a teacher. The kid stays with the husband, and the wife visits them time to time.<sup>39</sup>*

Discussion of App Chundu's *laptsa* structures then led to referencing other *laptsas* in the area. Other *laptsas* were determined to not have relevance to the Rigo Tsho epic, however they retained both practical and spiritual significance. While the herders use the *laptsas* as a way to denote migration routes, as they are often found on passes to help reference locations and aid in orienteering, they also serve as waypoints for the spirits of humans that have died and are in transition to 'Bardo'. Describing *laptsas* and the significance of *Bardo*, Tandin comments:

*[a laptsa] is used as a border demarcation and also helps the traveler not get lost as some are also located on the pass where the travelers have to pass. Even herders themselves use these to get a sense of direction. No matter how much the herder knows his location, during the thick foggy summer they can get lost for a moment too, so, these help them. These not only help people find their path in this physical world but also help us find a path in the realm of the intermediate. Buddhists believe that when you die you enter into the intermediate realm or "Bardo", which is the dimension between the deceased's next life and the life he/she just lived. So in this intermediate world the deceased have to find a path to the next realm. So if someone has built laptsas like these on the mountain or contributed a stone on it like most of the travelers generally do, it is said that it will help you find a better path. You will see the laptsas as friends in the intermediate realm.*

<sup>39</sup> 29-year old female from Paro. Interview conducted in Paro in February 2019.

Discussion of App Chundu's role, then, opened up to a wider discussion of physical monuments and waypoints across the landscape. This bio-physical grounding provided insight to perceptions that did not regard cosmic forces as acting in a separate realm, but rather an integrated view in which the physical and spiritual are intertwined and dependent on one another. The role of App Chundu also reinforced a hierarchical structure of actors on the landscape that included multiple deities and humans. App Chundu is seen to have authority over Rigo Tsho, and has the ability to create agreements between (sub) deities and humans. The role of humans, and thus the identity of *Shokuna* herders, also becomes apparent. Humans are understood to operate at the bottom of this hierarchy, required to appease the cosmic actors in the landscape. Nevertheless, there is a relational aspect that dominates this perspective. Asking permission, seeking protection, and avoiding offensive action is conducted in a manner to interact, rather than ignore or operate according to one's own desire.

While our initial research worked towards classifications of the landscape in order to understand perception and identity, it was the process of storying that brought more critical insight. As Ingold (2011) claims "stories, always, and inevitably, draw together what classifications split apart" (p.160). The story of Rigo Tsho brought elements together making sense of herder interactions in and perceptions of the landscape. The story weaves together cosmological contestations and a working ethno-landscape in which humans play a submissive role.

## **Discussion**

### *Characterizing a Truth Environmentality*

The everyday engagement of actors on the *Shokuna* landscape calls for a novel framing that accounts for the relations of power that people experience, and which governs behavior within the landscape. There is a perception of an active cosmological landscape that produces a way of thinking and being, one that is in line with a *truth* environmentality. The story of Rigo Tsho entails a belief system in which herders perceive and daily interact with a host of deities. Deities have a realm of governance that they are able to control, outside of which is space belonging to another deity. Therefore, there are boundaries that dominate these interactions, in which herders are called into allegiance with localized deities who lay claim over the grasslands, water bodies and other resources that herds depend on.

While boundaries and forced allegiances are created, subjectivities are also created by appeals to an active host of cosmological actors that supervise and assess actions within the landscape. Prescribed behaviors to determine what is okay and not okay have developed over generations as herders learn to properly appease deities. As individuals operating on the grasslands, they perceive themselves as under the watchful eye of cosmological observers that "supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities and merits" (Foucault, 1977, p.143). These observations are understood to be all pervasive at all times, thus shaping individual behaviors as they make decisions about resource use, migration, and so on. Again, while seeming very disciplinary in nature, as herders learn to shape their own behavior, its core is an appeal to the existence of a particular cosmology in terms of which certain human actions are demanded.

A resulting hierarchy manifests. A network of relations, in which humans are submissive, is created and used to understand the role of humans and their surroundings. Subjectivities are driven by a worldview in which cosmological actors are intimately intertwined with production activities and daily life, inflicting harm and blessing and imposing their will upon human actors. This perception of the landscape drives particular practices, values, and behaviors that contrast with a western scientific model in which humans control, manage, and are perceived as 'above' the environment. *Shokuna* herders dramatically flip this power differential. Herders lack the perception that the environment needs 'management'; it is the herders themselves that are 'managed' by cosmological forces. Rather than the 'environment' being perceived as a passive space for actors to impose their will upon, the other-than-human realm is an integrated element of the overarching cosmology and cultural practices lacking a dualistic framework separating humans and environment. Cosmological actors dominate the hierarchy and motivate particular action within the landscape. While we frame this situation as reflecting a *truth* environmentality due to the claims made regarding the existence of such a cosmology, we also recognize the similarities to a *sovereign* mode of governance that is perceived in these interactions. Like human sovereigns, deities within this cosmology are attributed with "the right to take life or let live" (Foucault, 2003, p.241).

These cosmological perceptions, revealed through storying of the landscape, do not serve as mere cultural anecdotes or historical fables, but are lived relationships that continue to impact actors in the present. Herders identify with a cosmological hierarchy and the submissive role they play. Not only does this translate into distinctions between deity and humans, but further promotes identity formations between human populations. Ideas of belonging and not-belonging are promoted in the story of Rigo Tsho as the peoples of Haa-Shokuna and Paro-Pangmisa are separated and warned not to intermarry.

What stands out in the discussion above are two key elements that pertain to a particular cosmology that emerges. First, there is an appeal to *truth* through claims about the nature of humanity, manifested in a cosmological hierarchy of relations. Second, there is contestation to conventional dualist perspectives regarding human-nature relations. As discussed earlier in reference to Escobar's critiques, a particular framing of the 'environment' has dominated conventional conservation discourse. However, within this *truth* environmentality, as *Shokuna* herders make new claims to the nature of humanity, they also reveal new understandings regarding the nature of the "environment." Therefore, discussing 'environmental' subjectivities in this context is somewhat erroneous as it assumes a culturally specific understanding for the 'environment' as a particular construct. This does not mean, however, that there is a lack in behaviors consistent with conservation. On the contrary, numerous practices and behaviors could be framed in such a manner, however they are derived from beliefs and values foreign to conventional practice. Nevertheless, while current conservation programs in the country have largely adopted strategies from international institutions (Montes, forthcoming), they also adopt discursive framings of the 'environment', which may marginalize local understandings and practice.

When discussing the creation of an environmental subject, and in the context of Buddhist spiritualities, Buddhist philosophy/ethics is a critical component. While the issue of ethics seems inherently aligned with a *disciplinary* form of environmentality, it is useful to reflect on this topic in order to distinguish our argument from other works within the Buddhist literature. Highlighting worldviews and appeals to the nature of humanity is very different than promoting a system of values to be internalized by a population, and therefore promote different forms of subjectivity. Nevertheless, understanding Buddhist arguments regarding environmental ethics is useful to gain a broader understanding of how multiple rationalities are at play.

In developing a Buddhist perspective on environmental subjectivities, the concept of Dependent Origination, or Dependent Co-arising, is often appealed to in the literature. Dependent Origination has had a complicated development and has come to encompass both a 'general theory' of causality, sometimes used as means to understand human-environment relations, and a 'specific theory' of karma and rebirth (Cox, 1993; Shulman, 2008), which tends to be more anthropocentric. The former is understood as "Buddhist theories accounting for genesis in general" (Sopa, 1986, p.105) in which everything that exists has a cause and is dependent upon other things for its existence (Yeh, 2006). In contrast, the specific theory produces a framework for understanding the human condition and a remedy for suffering, bypassing a particular philosophy of the environment. Based on a more limited understanding of causality, *dukkha* (suffering) is determined to be caused by cravings or desire, which is caused by "attaching wrong values to things" (Gupta, 1977, p.163). Furthermore, the special theory extends this analysis to producing an understanding of rebirth, a concept that theorizes the human condition as one trapped in a continuous cycle of life and death (*samsāra*) due to this suffering and their potential release (Sopa, 1984; 1986). Sopa (1984) concludes, "whereas for Buddhism [dependent origination] represents a ground theory through which alone the genesis...of things both animate and inanimate can become adequately explicable, the special theory...refers only to the genesis of the living, sentient individual" (p.135).

With a number of scholars promoting the general theory, this has led many to theorize both behavioral and material understandings of dependent origination. Brier (2013) confronts the dilemma 'when people do bad things' and suggests "humans (and other beings) are embedded in a complex web of reciprocating conditions, actions, and reactions, across time, such that any given behavior may be influenced by a wide range of causes and conditions" (p.144). Bloom (n.d.) claims, "all existence is relational" and that "the conclusion of Buddhism is that nothing possesses its own irreducible self-nature". However, such claims are not without critique. Cox (1993) and Shulman (2008) warn against such interpretations as they represent latter interpretations of Buddhist *sūtra* (scriptures) that may not represent the original intent of early teachings, while Lharampa (2001) warns against expanding the general theory to incorporate a common materiality amongst beings. Regardless, more liberal interpretations of this general theory of dependent origination have developed, most exemplified in Macy's (1990) 'eco-self'. Macy claims "dependent co-arising...the core teaching of the Buddha on the nature of causality, presents a phenomenal reality so dynamic and interrelated that categorical subject-object distinctions dissolve...where one's sense of identity is understood as an ephemeral product of perceptual transactions" (p.43). Macy

conceptualizes the ‘ecological self’ serving as a metaphor to help one understand their “systemically interconnected existence” (p.46) and promotes moral action. This basis for morality is critical to the ecological self and is exemplified in Macy’s earlier writings where she claims “morality is grounded in this interdependence” (1979, p.138). Edelglass (2009) extends this appeal to morality claiming, “it involves choice. Choices can be made to identify at different moments with different dimensions or aspects of our systematically interconnected existence...with all life forms” (p.435-436). These appeals to an eco-self based on a morality grounded on dependent origination have further led to philosophers to attribute Buddhism with a robust environmental philosophy (see Paterson, 2006; Daniels, 2010a, 2010b). While Daniels (2010a), in his work on climate change, attributes Buddhist philosophy with the ability to “contribute effectively addressing climate change and other sustainability problems confronting consumer economies” (p.952), Yeh (2006) claims that a Buddhist perspective of interdependence is ‘the way to peace’.

What this shows is that much of Buddhist philosophy around the environment has been based in arguments around morality to build a robust ethic regarding human-environment relations. This *disciplinary* modality is fundamental to broader discussions around subjectivity, but also highlights the novel contribution that a multiple environmentality perspective offers. Other subjectivities exist within the lived experience of Buddhist subjects on the landscape, and the case study of *Shokuna* reveals the relevance of a *truth* perspective to how subject formation manifests.

Yü (2014) provides an interesting ethnographic account of Buddhist practices in the Amdo region of Tibet revealing a “hierarchical entwinement of place, humans, and gods” (p.483), which also reveals elements of a particular *truth* subjectivity, although he does not explicitly use this framework. He reveals an animated landscape, perceived by local Buddhists, in which deities were invoked and an understanding in which “the power relation between the Earth and humans is unequal...for the power to determine life and death resides with the Earth” (p.484). Regardless, humans retain some control through their ability to conduct rituals to appease local deities. And it is through these interactions that the locals perceive the landscape in an integrated manner in which the supernatural and biophysical realities are intertwined. Yü speaks to the ‘manadalizing’ act of the locals in which Buddhist images are used to cognitively map the physical landscape. For example, the local village of Rachekei is seen to be the ovary of a lotus flower, with the four deity mountains in the area serving as petals. This integrated perception of the landscape then motivates particular actions and behaviors on the landscape, which promote a “mutually beneficial relationship” (p.492) between humans and deities. While Yü recognizes the importance of Buddhist philosophy in promoting particular behaviors, he also comments “the canonic (or doctrinally orthodox) dimension of a given religion differs from the lived or enacted version of the practitioner” (Yü, 2014, p.486). Therefore, a *truth* environmentality perspective allows for a more nuanced analysis of subject formation that goes beyond philosophy and ethics in order to confront issues of worldview and cosmology that impact behaviors and lived experiences.

## Conclusion

Life in the *Shokuna* landscape is one in which material production activities are understood as enmeshed within an integrated cosmological and biophysical realm,

contradicting with dualist perspectives that dominate technocratic approaches to conservation. This research shows how cultural identity and subjectivity is an expression of the perceived landscape. Through the process of storying, and specifically the story of Rigo Tsho, an animate landscape is revealed that articulates cosmological linkages spanning material and metaphysical realities. This perspective is translated into daily rituals, social faux pas, and organization of the landscape, which points to specific environmental subjectivities.

We argue that previous discussions of environmentality lack a concerted effort to explore how a *truth* modality relates to subjectivity. While environmentality was originally conceptualized as a *disciplinary* framework, a variegated environmentality perspective creates new avenues for further exploring other subjectivities while also doing justice to Foucault's multiple modalities of governmentality. As such, through a case study approach, we develop an account of cosmological subjectivities within the *Shokuna* highlands. Hierarchical relationships perceived from a cosmology of the landscape outline numerous actors both metaphysical and physical. With humans playing a submissive role within the hierarchy, a host of deities require and motivate particular behavioral responses within an animated landscape. Herders perceive these metaphysical realities as the nature of reality, characterizing a *truth*-function to this form of environmentality. We also integrate discussion around TEK to show how multiple forms of subjectivity are also present within this concept. The variegated environmentality framework proves useful in providing nuanced analyses to tease out disciplinary elements pertaining to ethics, while also pointing towards a *truth* modality represented by worldviews and cosmologies that underlie TEK perspectives.

These findings are critical for management decisions going forward. As Bhutan deepens its commitment to conservation policy through projects such as 'Bhutan for Life' (see RGoB and WWF, 2019) and claims of "carbon negativity" (see Tobgay, 2016), this will require an understanding of subjectivities that have already proved themselves in developing a positive environmental track record. Can a *truth* environmentality be used as a framework for understanding subjectivity and promoting conservation initiatives? How can existing environmental subjectivities be harnessed within legislative frameworks? Could such framings be used to abuse power relations? While it is too early to know the impacts of the 2007 Land Act, due to its delayed implementation date, future research could explore the outworking of this legislation that has potential to drastically shape land management throughout the country. How are local perceptions incorporated? Are such amendments accounting for existing subjectivities necessary to provide cultural sensitivity and long-term benefits?

By understanding the landscape as a space of multiple interactions that tie intimately to aspects of culture and self-identity, future policy formations can incorporate locals as critical conservation actors. Pressures on local practices come in many forms including regional plans, development strategies, technological advancements, market forces, and imposed policy measures (Toledo et al., 2003). Rather than opposing local practice and tradition, as seen in conservation practice around the globe (see Vogler et al., 2017 and Chirikure et al., 2018), Bhutan has the opportunity to bridge divides between development, environmental management and cultural integrity.

## 9 General Discussion

### 9.1 Complicating GNH

Gross National Happiness continues to play a pivotal role in matters pertaining to policy/legislation, national identity, and societal values and practice. While its origins are debated among scholars (Munroe, 2016), GNH has emerged as a philosophy and development model that informs local practice and contests international hegemony. The Bhutanese are proud of their affiliation with a concept that has received international repute. However, this does not mean that the majority of citizens understand what GNH is. In fact, while not covered specifically in the articles comprising this thesis, there were a number of interviewees who commented on their lack of knowledge about what GNH is, consists of, or represents. A portion of interviewees responded:

*I don't really know much about GNH, but I think it has something to do with our people... I heard it being mentioned at the National Assembly, but I never really got the time to understand the meaning of it<sup>40</sup>*

*I have been hearing about GNH for a long time. But as an illiterate and simple villager, I don't know much details. I heard about GNH from my friends about four years ago.<sup>41</sup>*

*Everyone has heard it on TV when our Fourth King introduced it, so I heard it first from there. And when I ask people in Thimphu, most of them say they don't know.<sup>42</sup>*

*I don't know about GNH, but government officials do come around here to talk about GNH...we don't know much about it but I am sure it's a good thing since it talks about the country's happiness.<sup>43</sup>*

*I have never heard of it.<sup>44</sup>*

For many of these interviewees, who are primarily rural citizens, GNH is something they learned about in school or saw a commercial about on television but have no other connection points to understand its role/purpose. This confusion has been met with government efforts to educate people, through organizations like the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), and the Gross National Happiness Centre. Discourses in the country around GNH have primarily been positive and work to legitimate its use, promote societal embrace and create cohesive support for its promulgation.

Part of this discourse has involved framing GNH as the antithesis to neoliberal capitalism, which this dissertation challenges as a simplistic dichotomy. As shown in Chapter 5, governance practice does not align with defined characterizations of any particular rationalities. Foucault's governmentality concept provides a framework that allows for nuanced dissections of governance practice revealing a multitude of rationalities that coexist in this context. I primarily singled out the work of Teoh (2015a,

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<sup>40</sup> 36-year old female from Trongsa. Interview conducted in Phobjikha in November 2017.

<sup>41</sup> 26-year old female from Punakha. Interview conducted in Laya in October 2017.

<sup>42</sup> 37-year old male from Haa. Interview conducted in Thimphu in October 2017.

<sup>43</sup> 69-year old female from Haa. Interview conducted in Haa in January 2018.

<sup>44</sup> 37-year old female from Laya. Interview conducted in Laya in October 2017.

2015b), as he is the only one to previously identify GNH as a particular governmentality, and I critiqued his characterization as resorting to a silo-like approach in which GNH is seen as only ‘other-than’ neoliberal. As I have shown, in practice GNH is more complicated than this. It is variegated in terms of governmentalities, represented by multiple rationalities including disciplinary, truth, sovereign, and neoliberal modalities. What does such a proposition mean for the fate of GNH? After submitting chapters 5 and 6 for publication I had a number of reviewers who challenged my strong wording regarding ‘neoliberal tendencies’ that I had interpreted within the GNH agenda. To call GNH’s character into question and affiliate it with something widely considered abhorrent, something neoliberal, promotes a reaction. However, it was not my intent to demean GNH or to diminish the important role it has played in creating an imaginary alternative to conventional development practice. My purpose is to promote a realistic interpretation of governance practice that looks beyond hopeful characterizations, to provide nuanced empirical investigation and constructive criticism for refinement of the GNH concept and its operationalization as policy and practice.

Consequently, once a neoliberal element is recognized within the GNH bricolage, new avenues emerge for exploring how competing rationalities articulate and variegate. Do neoliberal elements in Bhutan look the same as they do in the United States? Certainly not. But why not? What other rationalities are at play? Understanding governance as a variegated process allows researchers to explore what also exists, and to avoid reductionist scholarship that seeks to deem things as either neoliberal or not-neoliberal. Current scholarship on this issue has evolved and is much more interested in understanding neoliberalism as a variegated process (or ‘neoliberalization’), but a variegated governmentality framework goes beyond this to provide the language for examining how alternative rationalities articulate with and are not simply irreducible to mere variants of neoliberal tendencies.

Additionally, a variegated governmentality perspective reveals emerging forms of biopower in Bhutanese governance, something that Teoh’s work also neglects. Chapter 5 introduces the concept of ‘Buddhist Biopower’, which stands as a novel conceptualization incorporating Buddhist spiritualities. The influence of this concept, while not explicitly referred to again in later chapters, is present throughout. Chapter 7 looks at the influence of Buddhist spiritualities influencing ecotourism discourse and promotion, while Chapter 8 emphasizes *truth* environmentalities based on Buddhist cosmological perceptions/beliefs. While the emphasis of the dissertation narrows from governance in general (Chapter 5) to environmental governance in particular (Chapter 6, 7, and 8), we find Buddhism throughout as an influential lens for understanding discourses, subjectivities, and governance legitimacy.

Another critical point that I found in discussion around GNH, was that recent renditions of the concept have been influenced by a series of external actors. Again, while Chapters 5 and 6 refer to this, I want to re-emphasize that a number of interviewees feel that international actors have distracted from, and produced renditions that are contrary to, the grassroots origins of the concept. While some interviewees refrained from commenting on this issue, a previous government employee noted:

*What happened is it was more of a push for how to measure GNH, how to measure development. How do you actually measure and have indicators? That came from*



*Bhutanese interaction with scholars from outside. For the large part, GNH was intuitive, the 4<sup>th</sup> King guided the country across many development plans, and the values came through, culture and environmental conservation, equity, holistic and good governance. A lot of that was there in our plans and through leadership, without having to say GNH is this or how you measure it. But [with] more talk about the development philosophy, people wanted to know how to measure it...that had a profound impact from the outside scholars. I've gone through a process of mixed feeling about it. Initially it wasn't necessary, how do you find happiness? At one point there was that feeling, and others felt that way, even policy makers. Why do we need this?...we haven't had the national level discourse as to what GNH is and how it is really going to shape our development process and priorities.<sup>45</sup>*

A private consultant who was also involved in GNH policy formulation commented regarding their experience with collaborating international counterparts:

*We were working on a Bhutanese product, but what we were doing during that process was not necessarily Bhutanese. I mean yes they had alternative views, but does that mean they were Bhutanese views? I don't know. But of course it was helpful to have that help of experts. But there were certain points when I as an amateur regarding these issues could see how western some of these approaches were.<sup>46</sup>*

What I gather from these findings is that GNH is much more complicated than national and international discourses portray. The concept has evolved over the last 40 years and continues to evolve. It is well-defined by some, but interpreted differently or poorly understood by many. It is both neoliberal and not-neoliberal at once. It is a grassroots concept eagerly embraced by international proponents and has received their blessing as well as their manipulation. Again, this is not to discount GNH, but only to problematize it and work towards more effective pathways towards operationalization as the basis for policy and practice that honour the people of Bhutan, while also maintaining a hopeful imaginary for an international community hungry for 'alternatives' to conventional neoliberal models that are seen to have played out their potential to deliver on intended gains.

## 9.2 Ecotourism, discourse and neoliberal logic

As I reflect on chapters 5 and 6 in particular, ecotourism as a discourse emerges as a previously unaddressed issue within Bhutanese research. While much effort has been devoted to developing ecotourism as a strategy for development in the country, little attention has been given to understanding the neoliberal logic and discursive process that underpins it. This is the result of Bhutan's eagerness to address rural poverty and provide swift action to ensure equity across the nation. However, with a bulging body of literature around the negative impacts of ecotourism, this should compel critical attention to continued development of the sector, especially as the Royal Government makes commitments to transform tourism in general to an ecotourism model throughout the country.

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<sup>45</sup> 45-year old female. Interview conducted in Thimphu in August 2017.

<sup>46</sup> 43-year old female. Interview conducted in Thimphu in August 2017.

Ecotourism, as a discursive process, was shown in Chapter 7 to be influential in reshaping both social and human-environment relations. The negative tone of this chapter is in contrast to Chapter 6, which demonstrates that the underlying neoliberal rationality in ecotourism development is confronted and reshaped by alternative truth (Buddhist spiritualities), disciplinary (GNH policy), and sovereign (history of monarchy and state paternalism) rationalities. It is in these two chapters that I find a dissonance in the overall dissertation. There are existing structures within Bhutanese society and policy (Chapter 6) that represent capacity for making ecotourism something hopeful and altogether contrary to other countries' experiences, despite the presence of a potentially dangerous neoliberal rationality. However, the case studies of Chapter 7 (Phajoding, Phobjikha, and Haa) show the reality of ecotourism as experienced by rural residents who host and are impacted by the sector. While these case studies should not be generalized to the sector at large, as they represent only a small portion of ecotourism operations throughout the country, they do serve as warning signs. Have policy makers investigated the underlying logics of ecotourism? How might they incorporate the values of GNH into reframing such a neoliberal logic? How is ecotourism discourse changing the way people think and feel about their neighbors and their surroundings? It is to this last question that Chapter 7 highlights and explores. The expressed sentiment of rural residents regarding ecotourism in their communities is mixed. Some enjoy increased income and interaction with foreigners, but this comes at the expense of strained relationships and new ways of conceptualizing their surroundings, impacts that seem counter to preservation of culture that constitutes one of the four pillars of GNH.

Again, the intent here is not to dismiss ecotourism altogether as something foreign and inappropriate, but to raise concerns that deserve attention with respect to its further development. As the 12<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (RGoB, 2017) targets ecotourism as a key implementation strategy, the findings of this dissertation offer a cautionary note. More work is required to understand the impacts of ecotourism, impacts that go beyond conceptualizations of simple development strategies, and address discursive processes and power relations.

### 9.3 Dwelling, Buddhist Spiritualities and Subjectivity

Throughout my work in Bhutan I was continuously challenged to consider new ways of understanding concepts such as nature, environment, reality, being and identity. Being immersed in a particular segment of Bhutanese society, the college environment and rural communities, I interacted with individuals who came from vastly different backgrounds that challenged my underlying western assumptions. Forcing myself to be reflexive, I explored personal assumptions in light of new ontologies that confronted me in the field. The work of de la Cadena (2010, 2015) has been influential in this respect by challenging me to co-labour with informants as “an experiment in creating new understanding and knowledge practices” (Harris, 2017a, p.377). Research conducted by Harris (2017a, 2017b) has also been critical by providing novel perspectives on the interaction of knowledges and how these can be expressed. To make sense of these new ontologies, Ingold's (2000) *dwelling* framework and landscape ethnoecology methodological approaches (Johnson and Hunn, 2010) proved profound. With governmentality and environmentality providing theoretical groundings for much of the work, especially in chapters 5 and 6, *dwelling* and landscape ethnoecology provided insight to guide later work that proved much more ethnographic (described in chapters

7 and 8). The *dwelling* approach aligned with the non-western context and local understandings regarding human-environment relations. Challenging dichotomies between humans and the environment in favor of integrated socio-natures proved integral to analyses that sought novel framings related to perceptions of the environment, as well as identity and subjectivities.

Part of this integration incorporated a Buddhist lens, as the majority of informants identified as Buddhists. This research was confronted by a particular worldview and cosmology, and therefore works to do justice to this in portraying the lived experience and beliefs of the Buddhist practitioners. In Chapter 8 I briefly refer to the work of Yü (2014), who also explored cosmologies in a similar setting of Amdo, Tibet. Yü's work was inspiring as it made a distinction between canonical teachings and the lived spiritualities of practitioners. Why I found this fascinating is that Bhutan field experiences revealed parallel 'contradictions' regarding what certain Buddhist leaders propagated as correct belief/practice versus what many lay practitioners believed and practiced. For example, a particular Lama (teacher) in the Thimphu area was observed scolding university students as they 'prayed to God' to help with upcoming exams. The Lama questioned them, "aren't you Buddhists? Buddhists don't believe in God". Regardless, these students interacted through prayer and other rituals with a host of cosmological beings seeking favour. Upon a visit to Haa in early 2018 I had the opportunity to attend a festival known as *Bonko*, which was essentially a pre-Buddhist festival that sought favor from local deities to bless coming agricultural harvests and to seek social unity within the community. At this festival Buddhist monks could be seen observing from afar the rituals, offerings, and dances, and yet refused to personally take part. One of the monks claimed that the villagers were acting in ignorance and should not be carrying out the rituals prescribed for the festival. This sort of interaction can also be seen in the monk body's appeal to the Haa region to change the practice of animal sacrifice to the local deity Ap Chundu (Little Bhutan, 2013). A Bhutanese researcher that accompanied me to *Bonko* noted:

*Buddhism disregards these deities because they are 'not enlightened' and are still stuck in worldly activities. They might possess some supernatural power to benefit you but it's temporary and won't help you much in the long run. These deities can also harm you if you don't please them by giving you disease and other forms of illness which can be fatal. So, a lot of times in the history of Bhutan, spiritual masters have sort of subdued these deities, enlightened them or at least made them protectors of the area and the Buddhist religion. It's interesting how Buddhism was brought into the country very intelligently, without completely disregarding the [existing] religion and in-fact embedding the both of them.*

These sorts of interactions signify interventions of the monk body to 'tame' pre-Buddhist thought and practice in the region. Nevertheless, local villagers maintain such practices while still identifying as Buddhists. What this discussion shows is that lived experience involves much more than mere adherence to or understanding of spiritual doctrine.

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) also has relevance here, as this is another way to conceptualize lived practice and knowledge. Chapter 8 works to combine TEK and environmentality as a way to better understand subjectivities in light of a particular cosmology. The cosmology of the *Shokuna* area certainly had Buddhist elements, that then also opened to incorporate an embedded historical experience of herders

encompassing non-Buddhist elements. TEK of the local herders was interpreted as not merely producing a set of ethical values and norms (*disciplinary* environmentality), but also embodying a set of beliefs and appeals to a cosmological hierarchy that motivated particular behaviors (*truth* environmentality). Thus, subjectivities within this context are multi-faceted. While *dwelling* served as an overarching theoretical perspective to conceptualize field data, and Buddhism served as a specific religious tradition to which people identified, it was TEK that served as a tool for analyzing place-based perceptions and subjectivities.

The *truth* environmentality that emerges encompasses novel perceptions of human-environment relations in which humans are understood as submissive to an animated landscape, which has profound implications for conservation practice. What does such a nuanced analysis of environmentality and TEK offer? What role could Buddhist Biopower play in furthering Bhutan's conservation agenda? How do spiritualities contest and variegate with global and national neoliberal trends? This dissertation has offered theoretical contributions to these questions, which attests to profoundly transformative local perspectives and spiritualities.

#### 9.4 GNH as 'Revolutionary Imaginary'

While much of this dissertation focussed on elements of a poststructural political ecology emphasizing discursive structures, here I would like to briefly complicate this by including the diverse economies perspective of Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008; Gibson-Graham, Hill, and Law, 2016), and its application to envisioning the future of GNH. The portrayal of environmental governance in the country was made intentionally to avoid sweeping homogenous characterizations in order to explore multiple existing rationalities, working to dissect and pull apart the bricolage that exists. Regardless, throughout the dissertation, I expose fractures caused by neoliberal elements. While multiple governance rationalities contest these neoliberal elements, there is of course a risk of broader assimilation trends as Bhutan continues to modernize and integrate itself into the larger global economy. However, rather than assimilation, Bhutan's GNH agenda also has the potential and capacity to contribute to what Gibson-Graham (2008) call "the making of a new revolutionary imaginary" (p.659).

Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) characterize a new imaginary that contests global economic trends that conform and homogenize local spaces, what is referred to as a 'postcapitalist politics' or theory of community economies. In "A Post Capitalist Politics" Gibson-Graham (2006) reviews alternative economic models that illustrate:

*cases of economic experimentation in which collective actions are taken to transform difficult or dire (or merely distasteful) situation by enhancing well-being, instituting different (class) relations or surplus appropriation and distribution, promoting community and environmental sustainability, recognizing and building on economic interdependence, and adopting an ethic of care of the other (pp.xxxvii).*

What differentiates this view from classical Marxist critiques of global capitalism is that it does not call for, or at least not initially, sweeping systematic change to global capitalism, but rather asserts that there is "no system to be overthrown or cast aside before a new world can begin" (2008, p.662). This perspective recognizes that "places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something

other. Individuals and collectivities always fall short of full capitalist identity, and this lack is their availability to a different economic subjectivity” (p.663).

This characterization of a new imaginary, to begin a project despite and amidst global hegemonic trends of capitalism, is the hope that I have for GNH as it continues to evolve. As these trends work to homogenize global interaction, GNH has already contested and continues to promote alternative economic subjectivities. But with the fractures presented in this dissertation it is critical not to take for granted the vision and efforts that led to these previous successes. GNH cannot persist in name alone and must continue to inspire diverse local economies. This necessarily means that the Bhutanese economy must be driven by a local agenda, without the pressure to conform to transnational capitalist actors that reify the market as the medium for social and environmental interactions.

Gibson-Graham et al. (2016) call for a new ontology, a restructuring of human-environment relations in which economic discourse is dethroned in favor of ethical configurations placing socio-natures as a primary concern. This perspective has direct parallels to the findings in this dissertation. Chapters 7 and 8 reveal local perspectives that do just this, seeking to rearrange power differentials between humans and the environment, but going further to dissolve such distinctions entirely and challenge western-technocratic framings of ‘the environment’. Chapters 5 and 6 illustrate underlying values of GNH that also infuse such considerations for an environmental ethic. These findings underscore values, discourses and perceptions that contest neoliberal capitalism. Further, Chapter 8, with its emphasis on TEK and Buddhist ethical formations, highlights critical inputs for this revolutionary imaginary. These spiritualities can be used as dominant frameworks for valuing one’s surroundings, challenging traditional development discourses that frame spaces as “lacking”, and instead “restore visibility and credibility to what has been coded as backward, insufficient, or ‘non-existent’” (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p.169). Local ethics and spiritualities, then, promote the re-valuing of material space in terms of local perceptions, doing away with conventional economic/resource assessments.

Therefore, GNH represents a localized endeavor to challenge economic futures and subjectivities. It has the capacity to take on this challenge alone, or in concert with those who would follow such ambition. This local economic perspective empowers local space as significant locations for producing well-being “rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system” (2008, p.662). But how can this be encouraged further in view of the fractures presented in preceding chapters? As external actors, such as India or McKinsey & Company, work to commodify Bhutan’s resources, how can the country resist hegemony and embolden their commitment to a distinct GNH approach? As strategies like ecotourism are promoted and practiced, how can the values of GNH be used to dissect underlying logics and discourses of the sector? While these challenges can most productively be addressed through future inquiry, I offer some potential opportunities. While ecotourism promotes neoliberal rationalities, this can be tempered with the contesting rationalities highlighted in chapter 6. A more sovereign form of governance embodied in Bhutan’s monarchy that precedes global market integration trends provides avenues for interventions. Such interventions are accepted by local communities and legitimized through a history of development successes in fields of education, health, and energy provision. A disciplinary rationality, exemplified in the GNH policy tools and practice, also contributes to this revolutionary imaginary by

institutionalizing societal values. Finally, a truth rationality presents the profound application of Buddhist spiritualities in developing ethical foundations for communitarian ideals and relations with the non-human environment.

## 10 Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to map various environmental governance rationalities in Bhutan and to provide critical analyses of existing policies and practice. Through a multi-scalar analysis, I positioned Bhutan within global trends of neoliberal capitalism, dissected national level policies, assessed the operations of the ecotourism sector in three local communities, and provided an ethnoecological investigation of personal perceptions and behavior towards the environment within a rural herding community. This was done through the adoption of a poststructuralist political ecology theoretical framework integrating *dwelling* and landscape ethnoecology perspectives. Governmentality, and later environmentality, took a central role in the dissertation, working towards conceptualization through variegated perspectives that have emerged within the literature. What governmentality/environmentality, and the associated concept of biopower, offer is a way of assessing power, discourse, subjectivities, and the legitimization of policy trajectories within debates concerning appropriate strategies for environmental governance. While the concept of biopower arose to explain governance within modern Western societies seeking to rule via 'rational' scientific methods and institutions, and most subsequent research has continued in this vein, this work has offered a novel exploration, the potential to understand governance in Bhutan as a novel form of non-western biopower informed by a distinctly Buddhist spirituality and cosmology.

Conservation policy will continue to claim a central role in planning and development in Bhutan for years to come. Foundational documents, including the country's constitution, Five-Year plans, and international agreements, attest to Bhutan's commitment in maintaining a 'green' track record for conservation and environmental management that will continue to receive global attention. While Bhutan is often characterized by its formulation of GNH ostensibly presenting an alternative to capitalism, this dissertation has adopted a critical perspective to explore how the agenda is currently negotiating and accommodating the country's increasingly integration into the global capitalist economy. While this has merit within academia by providing a novel perspective on the country's development trajectory, my larger aim is to push the boundaries of Bhutan's efforts and to avoid stagnation due to a reliance on the successes of the past. It is my hope that Bhutan's ecotourism sector, and the GNH policy framework more broadly, can continue to employ creative solutions to conservation dilemmas. The objectives of this research were thus:

1. To understand how Bhutan has negotiated neoliberalization and how associated policy initiatives and practices have developed in the process.
2. To explore power relations involved in ecotourism promotion in Bhutan.
3. To examine the effects that engagement with neoliberalism has on community/individual relations and perceptions of the environment and local ethno-ecologies in the context of ecotourism.
4. To recommend policy avenues promoting the broader GNH agenda in light of neoliberalization trends fostered by the ecotourism sector.

In terms of objective 1, I have shown how there has been an incorporation of neoliberal logics promoted by both external and internal actors (Chapters 5, 6 and 7), but that an existing bricolage of governance approaches presents contesting rationalities with which these new influences must negotiate (Chapter 5 and 6). Additionally, power relations were explored (Objective 2) with a framing of ecotourism as a discursive process in which neoliberal values and perspectives were promulgated through the sector (Chapter 7). In regard to objective 3, therefore, I showed that engagement within the ecotourism sector has caused ruptures in social cohesion as well as human-environment relations (Chapter 7). Further, I explored perceptions of the environment and how these motivated particular conservation behaviors, further revealing the importance of a *truth* environmentality (Chapter 8). This *truth* environmentality represents an existing capacity for local people to successfully engage and promote conservation strategies adapted to local conditions, despite the logics of such a contrasting and seemingly altogether ‘other-worldly’ perspective compared to more hegemonic development approaches.

Objective 4 is addressed in Chapter 7 in which I encourage policy makers to learn from and find broader application for the cooperative framework that the RSPN initiated in Phobjikha. This framework works towards equitable distribution of ecotourism sector benefits to rural areas, but also requires policy support in order to protect it from capitalist actors who seek to profit from in-situ conservation efforts of local residents. Additionally, I point towards the failure of the Phajoding case study as a lesson to be learned regarding capacity building. There must be a concerted and prolonged effort to invest in management capacity, or at least a commitment to shared responsibilities amongst stakeholders. Chapter 8 also addresses objective 4, although it was not as explicit. In that chapter I made a case that the local cosmology and perceptions of the landscape drove particular environmental subjectivities (the function of a particular *truth* environmentality) amongst Haa *Shokuna* herders. Understanding these subjectivities, as well as the broader values and TEK that inform them, I believe, can help guide policy formulation that is more sensitive to local needs and values. Taking into account local perspectives and spiritualities, and prioritizing such criteria within decision-making, may, in particular, guard against unwarranted emphasis on market logics in conservation policy. This presents opportunities for creativity in Bhutan’s ecotourism sector. I don’t present a wholly negative account of ecotourism as a monolithic manifestation of neoliberal conservation, in order to foreclose it as a productive possibility for development. Instead I seek opportunities to mold and adapt it to the setting and needs of Bhutan. Rather than a blind adoption of ecotourism, this dissertation calls for a careful investigation of underlying logics in order to adapt and mold this development strategy to work within the values established by the people of Bhutan. What could a uniquely Bhutanese form of ecotourism look like? How can GNH values counter appeals for greater ‘competition’ and ‘efficiency’ in order to maintain social cohesion? How can a neoliberal logic and perspective, in short, be balanced with Buddhist spiritualities? As Chapter 6 outlines, many institutions (both formal and informal) are already in place to help the country navigate this process.

To conclude this dissertation, I would like to revisit the words of a few interviewees who made profound statements regarding their perceptions of the landscape. While this theme most reflects the material from Chapter 8, I feel that it is relevant to the broader trajectory of the thesis pointing towards a rejuvenation of situated knowledges and



practices, manifested in Bhutan's GNH philosophy and agenda, that work to provide creative and inspiring solutions to conservation and development programs.

*I think I live in a very spiritually rich environment, for example, I would, whenever I walk around, I would see these three mountains as very spiritual mountains, like the three bodhisattvas, I would view it as spiritual. I would never see it just as mountains. I would see, if there are places beyond like lakes, never would see them just as lakes, I would see them as lakes, but in back of mind would also know they have some spiritual values to them.<sup>47</sup>*

*In the past, when we were small, we were not allowed to go even near the lake. It is really scary and you hear really fierce noises. There would be deities and mermaids in the lake. They might or might not be useful to us. They have been living in such places from a very long time. So, because they have been residing in these places from a long time, we are dependent on them because we live near their residence. So, we need to treat them well, give the offerings and food to please them or else they might harm us.<sup>48</sup>*

*There are...deities all around the community and they should be worshiped and rituals should be performed as it has been performed for many ages. There are countless lakes...every year we have to go to the lakes with a lama to pay homage and conduct rituals, along with other stuff we also offer milk, and dairy products to the lakes....if I don't believe in them, they would cause us harm. However, if we believe in them and worship them...we receive good fortune and good happens to our family. We cannot cut down trees from areas where deities reside. We also cannot move stones, rocks and mud from the area. We should always worship them...If we are going to see and worship the deity the next day, we should stop consuming meat the day before...one should go to these places with a very clean body.<sup>49</sup>*

*We are comfortable in our own village. I guess we are attached because we have been living here since our parents' time. Well, there really isn't anything particularly different here in Phobjikha...it's just that we've been here for the longest time and our soul is attached here.<sup>50</sup>*

These statements depict a profound connection that exists between the Bhutanese and their surrounding environment. It is an environment that is not easily conflated to economic terms, or for which neoliberal capitalism can readily incorporate into a global system of value in motion. Rather, these perceptions, reflective of communitarian values and local spiritualities, portray a more intimate relationship that challenges western assumptions about human positionality and ethical duty towards the non-human environment.

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<sup>47</sup> 24-year old male from Haa. Interview conducted in Haa in January 2018.

<sup>48</sup> 50-year old male from Gasa. Interview conducted in Gasa in October 2017.

<sup>49</sup> 35-year old male from Laya. Interview conducted in Laya in October 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Focus group discussion with three males aged 27, 28 and 36. Interview conducted in Phobjikha in November 2017.

## Summary

This thesis explores how environmental conservation and subjectivities are influenced as Bhutan negotiates its increasing integration into the global neoliberal capitalist economy. Until recently, Bhutan sought to isolate itself to a large degree from international integration, instead relying on a strongly state-centred monarchic governance regime to deliver economic development domestically. In so doing Bhutan has developed an international reputation for forward thinking in regards to human well-being as the country contests dominant economic models for development practice through its promotion of its signature Gross National Happiness (GNH) agenda. Now, however, Bhutan is working to negotiate increased involvement in global market forces, causing fissures to emerge in this philosophy and ideology. One of the main forms of global market integration currently pursued by Bhutan is ecotourism, which has been described as a quintessential neoliberal project seeking to harness environmental conservation as a form of income generation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2015). While this promotion seeks to frame ecotourism as an economic strategy to balance environmental and development aspirations, how the sector influences cultural values and assumptions is unaddressed. In this way, ecotourism can be seen to promote particular cultural transformations and forms of subjectivities that challenge the broader goals of the GNH agenda to date.

This work explores these dynamics through a poststructuralist political ecology framework. Via this lens, an examination of discourse and power relations at multiple scales is conducted in order to gain critical insight into conservation paradigms operating in the country under the influence of newfound neoliberalization processes. Concepts of governmentality and biopower ground this examination by providing a framework for analysing emerging rationalities of governance. Chapter 5 provides insight into Bhutan's overarching forms of governance, placing the country within the context of global capitalism and associated discourses. A 'variegated' governmentality perspective highlights the coexistence of multiple rationalities that contribute to an emergent 'Buddhist' biopower grounded in situated values represented by a Buddhist worldview and the country's Gross National Happiness (GNH) agenda. Chapter 6 focuses on the national level, honing in on environmental governance in particular. 'Environmentality', an adaptation of the governmentality concept, is employed as a conceptual framework for understanding environmental discourses in the country. The cases of 'Bhutan for Life', a policy plan for implementing conservation funding, and the ecotourism this plan promotes, are examined to understand how neoliberal discourses interact with a Buddhist worldview, a history of state paternalism, and the Gross National Happiness agenda, all of which constitute competing rationalities contributing to Bhutan's unique environmental governance approach. Chapter 7 takes us to the community level, examining three ecotourism cases in the country, in order to explore ecotourism discourses present in each. Haa Valley homestay, the Phobjikha Homestay network, and the Phajoding Eco-Camp serve as select sites for this analysis. Drawing on *Dwelling* theory, the chapter shows that ecotourism conflicts with pre-existing local perceptions and values related to the environment. Divergences related to social and human-environment relations thus develop from enrolment in ecotourism programs, with contestations between the explicit goals of GNH and embedded communitarian values. Finally, Chapter 8 probes environmental subjectivities via a case study of *Shokuna* herders in the highlands of Haa *Dzongkhag* (district). Through a landscape ethnoecological approach, an animated cosmological landscape is revealed through the

process of storying, highlighting particular perceptions and subjectivities related to a *truth* environmentality. Foucault's 'art of distributions' (1977) are used as a scaffold for analysing this environmentality showing how subjectivities manifest through belief in a cosmological hierarchy, perceptions of an animated landscape, and a reversal of western technocratic and managerial perspectives. As such, herders within the landscape have developed specific beliefs, behaviours, and resource acquisition patterns attuned with a particular 'environmental' subject.

These four chapters are interconnected, acting in a nested manner to develop a multi-scalar analysis of Bhutan's engagement with and contestations around environmental discourses. As such, these chapters aim to provide a nuanced analysis of the problematic situation facing the country in which ecotourism, and its associated neoliberal rationale, challenge existing societal norms and values. With the ecotourism sector being appraised as an ideal strategy for the country it is critical to explore contestations that emerge with its adoption in order to provide a realistic assessment that addresses broader cultural impacts.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this work:

1. Illustrates the variegated nature of a novel governance constellation in Bhutan and how this manifests in a situated form of biopower embodying non-western (Buddhist) spiritualities;
2. Underscores local specificities that account for discrepancies in the vision and execution of neoliberal conservation but goes beyond this to express other rationalities that also exists within a variegated environmentality framework. I show that indigenous efforts prove critical when re-interpreting conservation strategies and warding off external dynamics, such as foreign agencies and global capitalist actors, that promote possibly dangerous trends putting at risk the goals of the GNH agenda;
3. Addresses the discursive nature of the ecotourism sector through a rarely employed *dwelling* lens, which is used to interpret indigenous perceptions of the landscape and their relation to it in order to reveal local contestations to neoliberal logic. While neoliberalism and ecotourism promote dualist perspectives in terms of humans and/vs nature, *dwelling* theory resonates with Buddhist and Bhutanese worldviews in which these divides are less concrete;
4. Contributes to GNH studies by juxtaposing the ideal of GNH with the neoliberal conservation paradigm, revealing opportunities for adapting the country's ecotourism strategy;
5. Provides an analysis of underexplored *truth* environmentalities based on cosmological subjectivities.

The political ecology of conservation in the country reveals a complex constellation of external and internal forces/actors that promote discourses of sustainability and well-being, with a concerted effort to respond to demands of the international community while maintaining a cultural identity grounded in spirituality and the concept of GNH. Driven by a need to facilitate development for a largely impoverished population, and the desire to uphold a reputation for strong environmental protection, Bhutan adopts

particular strategies (payment for environmental services (PES), ecotourism, and green tax structures) that align with a neoliberal conservation model. However, this adoption is conducted without a critical eye to underlying rationalities that drive such strategies. As a result, discursive processes promote particular environmental subjectivities and novel perceptions that cultivate new social and human-environment relations putting at risk the broader goals of the GNH agenda.

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## Appendix 1 – Other PhD outputs

### Additional Peer-reviewed articles

- Montes, J., Tshering, S., Phuntsho, T., Kagoda, D., Kafley, B., Wangmo, M., Subba, M.M., Wangmo, T., Jangchuk, and Dendup, T. (2018, Autumn). Assessing Sustainability of Ecotourism Ventures in Bhutan. *Rig Tshoei*, 1(1), 5-22.
- Montes, J., Kafley, B., Subba, D., Dema, T., Dendup, T. and Selden, P. (2019). Ecotourism and Social Cohesion: Contrasting Phobjikha and Laya Experiences. *Rig Tshoei*, 2(1), 23-44.

### Presentations

- Montes, J. (2015, August 28). Ecotourism in Bhutan [Presentation]. Delivered at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Research Symposium of the Bhutan Ecological Society, Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Montes, J. (2016, June 9). GNH as Governmentality [Presentation]. Delivered at the Insights Academic Series of the Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Montes, J. (2017, May 4). Sustainability of Ecotourism in Bhutan [Presentation]. Delivered at the Shared Natural and Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Tourism in the Kangchenjunga Transboundary Landscape conference hosted by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Montes, J. (2017, July). GNH and Environmental Governance [Presentation]. Delivered at the Space Place and Society Conference, Wageningen, Netherlands.
- Montes, J. (2017, August 31). Landscape Ethnoecology & Cosmological Toponymy of Haa [Presentation]. Delivered at the Insights Academic Series of the Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Montes, J. (2018, May 24). Ecotourism and Neoliberal Logic [Presentation]. Delivered at the Insights Academic Series of the Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu, Bhutan.
- Montes, J. (2018, June 21). Ecotourism in Bhutan [Presentation]. Delivered at the Political Ecology Network (POLLEN) Conference, Oslo, Norway.

### Blogs

- Montes, J. (2015, March). Ecotourism in Bhutan [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/ecotourism-in-bhutan/>
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- Montes, J. (2015, October). GNH as 'Governmentality' [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/gnh-as-governmentality/>
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- Montes, J. (2016, June). Druk Path Trek, a prime destination? [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/druk-path-trek-a-prime-destination/>
- Montes, J. (2016, August). Cartesian Dualism and Capitalism [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/cartesian-dualism-and-capitalism/>
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- Montes, J. (2017, July). Reconceptualizing the ‘Village’ [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/reconceptualizing-the-village/>
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- Montes, J. (2018, September). Buddhist Biopower [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/buddhist-biopower/>
- Montes, J. (2019, April). Bhutan, Carbon Neutrality, and SDG12 [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/bhutan-carbon-neutrality-and-sdg12/>
- Montes, J. (2019, May). Ecotourism Discourses in Bhutan [Blog post]. Retrieved from: <http://jessemontes.com/ecotourism-discourses-in-bhutan/>

## Appendix 2 – Training and Supervision Plan

**Jesse Montes**  
**Wageningen School of Social Sciences (WASS)**



Wageningen School  
of Social Sciences

Name of the learning activity	Department/Institute	Year	ECTS*
<b>A) Project related competences</b>			
PhD Proposal writing	SDC , WUR	2016	6
Political Ecologies of Conflict, Capitalism, and Contestation	Summer school, WASS	2016	3
Political Ecologies in/of the Anthropocene: value, life and critique	Summer school, WASS	2017	4
<b>B) General research related competences</b>			
Introduction course	WASS	2019	1
GIS Training Course	Royal Thimphu College	2016	4
<i>"Gross National Happiness: An Imaginary for Development and Governance"</i>	Bhutan Ecological Society Symposium, Thimphu, Bhutan	2015	1
Space Place and Society	Wageningen	2017	1
<i>"Neoliberal Environmentality in the Land of Gross National Happiness"</i>	Oslo POLLEN Network	2018	1
<i>"Neoliberal Discourse and the quest for a GNH Governmentality"</i>	Royal Thimphu College	2016	0.5
<i>"Topology and cosmology of Haa highlands"</i>	Royal Thimphu College	2017	0.5
<i>"Ecotourism and Neoliberal Logic: Social and Socio- Ecological Ruptures in Bhutan"</i>	Royal Thimphu College	2018	0.5
<b>C) Career related competences/personal development</b>			
PhD development Discussion Forum	SDC, WUR	2017-2018	2
Teaching	Royal Thimphu College	2015-2018	4
Organize Conference – Tri-Regional Ecotourism Conference	Sikkim University, India	2017	2
<b>Total</b>			<b>30.5</b>

\*One credit according to ECTS is on average equivalent to 28 hours of study load







