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Waking the Watchdog: Needs, Opportunities, and Challenges of Environmental Advocacy in Modern Bhutan

Hilary Oliva Faxon

In a half-century, the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan has emerged from isolation to achieve international recognition as a model of alternative development. The small country's Gross National Happiness philosophy emphasizes sustainable development, cultural preservation, environmental conservation, and good governance over the long-favored global metric of success: Gross Domestic Product. Bhutan's historic environmental record has been strong, but modernization and the 2008 transition to democracy are changing the ecological and socio-political landscape, requiring the adaptation of conservation strategy.

This paper draws on historic and policy analysis, ethnographic observation, and qualitative interviews with 20 of Bhutan's key stakeholders to identify needs, opportunities, and challenges to public environmental advocacy in Bhutan. While Bhutan is often characterized as a static, serene Buddhist kingdom, its recent history has been dynamic, marked by major political change, economic growth, and active cultivation of a specific and uniform national identity. Accelerating

ecological degradation due to development, vulnerability to global threats such as climate change, and transformation of the governance system create a need to advocate for creative and effective solutions. The rapid rate of change within Bhutanese society allows unprecedented opportunities for powerful civil society action.

Interviews with major environmental figures from government, international organizations, and domestic groups show a common call for new, dynamic actors who can serve as a "watchdog" for the environment. Their tasks include producing scientific research and translating it into policy, mediating effectively between government and citizens in the fledgling democracy, and overcoming traditional cultural deference to publically challenge actions that threaten the environment. Thoughtful, responsible, and public environmental advocacy is both necessary and possible, and holds potential to enhance the environmental and democratic integrity of modern Bhutan.

Keywords: Bhutan, Himalaya, advocacy, democracy, environment, governance.

Introduction

With its pristine mountain landscape, Mahayana Buddhist culture, and innovative approach to governance, Bhutan has achieved an international reputation for sustainable development. United Nations (UN) diplomats, academics, and adventure travelers alike laud Gross National Happiness (GNH) as a case study from which the world can learn. As the country reaches the threshold for graduation from UN Least Developed Country status, the World Bank declares it, “a development success story” (World Bank 2013). Bhutan’s early and vigilant prioritization of environmental protection, spearheaded by the Fourth King, included Constitutional protection of forest cover, strong natural resource management legislation, and the creation of vast Protected Areas.

Today, new politics and culture are transforming the social and ecological landscapes of modern Bhutan. The peaceful 2008 transition to democracy created ongoing processes of governmental change. Rural-urban migration, high youth population, and international exposure are reinventing Bhutanese society. Meanwhile, increasing development brings threats of environmental degradation. In order to remain effective, conservation strategy must adapt.

This paper will argue that new forms of public environmental advocacy from civil society are appropriate and necessary for successful environmental protection in the modern era. It first provides relevant historical context, emphasizing the roles of hydropower and GNH in driving Bhutan’s recent development. Next it turns to interviews with major environmental stakeholders calling for new forms of environmental advocacy, examining the responses themselves as well as their context in past environmentalism and emerging needs and opportunities. The paper then considers some of the challenges of creating a watchdog in Bhutan and potential directions for environmentally effective, culturally appropriate advocacy.

Motivation and Approach

This paper seeks to illustrate the radical nature and direction of change in Bhutan’s current environmental governance framework through participant observation, document analysis, and stakeholder interviews. This article is not a standard scientific research paper, but rather a report drawn from an eight-month immersion in the sector and country that it describes, situated in existent literature. There are two main reasons for this approach. First, it is impossible to enter or conduct research in Bhutan without the invitation of a national

organization or individual. My affiliation with the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), the country’s first environmental non-governmental organization (NGO), allowed me to access major players in the conservation field. The qualitative interviews described here served not only to advance my personal research questions, but also to help me author a publication commissioned by the organization for its 25-year anniversary. While interviews were conducted for RSPN, question development, interviewing, and response analysis were entirely independent. These aspects, as well as all other observations and opinions expressed in this paper, are my own. Second, formal social science loses in breadth what it gains in depth and exactitude: given the rapidity of change in Bhutan and the lack of contemporary literature and opportunity for research on these topics, it is my hope that this preliminary study can help briefly sketch the world in which I lived and worked, enabling myself and others to identify major trends and opportunities for further study.

Bhutan’s Modern History: Dynamic Development

Modern Bhutan is a product of a long history and a recent, conscious development push. Early Bhutan was endowed with tremendous topographic and ecological diversity, which in turn gave rise to a collection of villages and autonomous valley-states with separate languages and leadership. These populations were connected by trade networks, but largely isolated from the outside world. Buddhism arrived around the 7th century A.D. and was followed a millennium later by the first *Shabdrung* from Tibet. This ruler initiated unification efforts that were only completed in 1907 with the crowning of the first hereditary Wangchuck king.

When Bhutan’s development began under the Third King in 1961, the nation had no roads, postal service, electricity, modern education nor health facilities. The First Five Year Plan (1961-6) prioritized construction of roads, schools, and hospitals with aid from India. Later plans focused on improving agriculture, industry, telecommunications, infrastructure and energy. Rapid development continued under the Fourth King, with agricultural production and income growth, expanded health care facilities, free basic health care for all, and increased access to education. Life expectancy increased by 30 years from 1961 through 2008 and infant mortality and malnutrition dropped (UNDP 2008).

During the same period Bhutanese governance increased in transparency, participation, and complexity. The first 50 years of the Wangchuck monarchy had fairly simple aims: political centralization, maintenance of the

socioeconomic status quo, and isolation from extraneous influences (Rose 1977). In the 1960s the nation began the processes of separating powers, modifying the centuries-old *Shabdrung* laws, and creating a proto-parliamentary body (Rose 1977). A period of planned decentralization and increased participation, institution building, and distribution of power began in 1974 (Velasquez 2004), laying the foundations for the first democratic elections and enactment of the Constitution in 2008. While the Wangchuck monarchy still exists under the popular and influential Fifth King, today's Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) is characterized by separation of powers and multi-level governance, coordinating ministries in the capital with *Dzongkhag* (district) and *Geog* (sub-district) administrators. National political reform has been accompanied by increased participation in international and regional affairs and networks and the country's increased accessibility to foreign guests. For a map of current RGoB structure, see figure below.

Two distinctive components have characterized Bhutan's recent development: rapid economic growth fueled by hydroelectricity and the monarchs' commitment to GNH. While studies of GNH often downplay the importance of Bhutan's ballooning Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in fact these two developments have gone hand in hand in modernizing society.

Bhutan's GDP growth in the past decade has been tremendous. Bhutan had the fourth-fastest growing economy in the world in 2011 and growth is projected to continue at 9.9%, 13.5% and 10.7% for 2012, 2013, and 2017, respectively (International Monetary Fund 2012). Hydropower is the main engine of this economic expansion. In 2011, electricity and water accounted for 17.6% of GDP, the single largest source, even without taking into account associated activity such as plant and road construction (National Statistics Bureau 2011). The vast majority of generated power goes to India, which

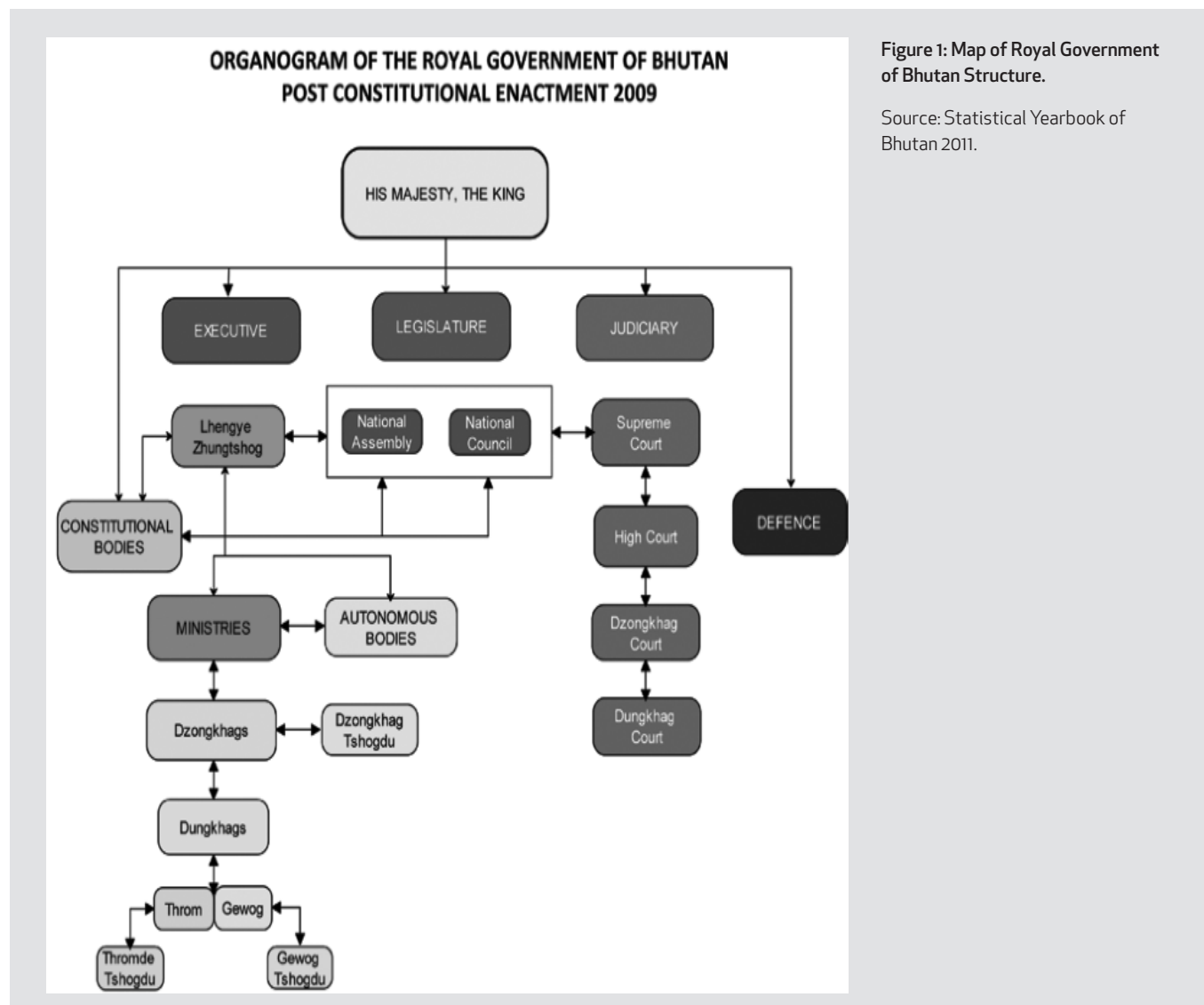


Figure 1: Map of Royal Government of Bhutan Structure.

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Bhutan 2011.

funds most construction of hydro projects: Bhutan exported 5.5 billion kWh in 2009, in comparison to only 1.161 used domestically (Central Intelligence Agency 2013). Hydropower's economic stimulation will continue in the immediate future with significant planned increases in installed capacity.

Hydropower revenue, along with foreign aid from the Government of India and other partners, has enabled RGoB spending on social projects aimed at improving the wellbeing of the population. The success of these initiatives is demonstrated in Bhutan's impressive progress towards the UN Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight goals to help eradicate global extreme poverty by 2015. While most of the world is behind schedule, Bhutan had already surpassed several targets in 2008, and was making good progress towards all (UNDP 2008). At the same time, rapid development means changes in land use and livelihoods: rural-urban migration, increased construction, and the growth of an educated, modernized youth population present potential problems for both environmental and societal stability.

Despite its impressive economic achievements, Bhutan prides itself on not focusing on GDP. The Fourth King first expounded Bhutan's GNH philosophy in 1972 as an alternative to GDP as a measure of national wellbeing. GNH rests on the four pillars of equitable and equal socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of cultural and spiritual heritage, conservation of environment, and good governance, with strong emphasis on maintaining balance among the four. This philosophy, the traditional values it rests upon, and the Fourth King's personal commitment to long-term planning and conservation were promoted as part of what Bhutan scholar Michael Aris calls, "a deliberate government policy aimed at cultivating an official ideology of national identity" (Aris 1994). While this approach has been problematic with respect to ethnic diversity, it serves here to wrap environmental conservation into the modern Bhutanese identity.

Bhutan's impressive modern environmental record builds on the Fourth King's public commitment. The nation is endowed with rich and diverse natural resources and is recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot. Historically, resource users practiced environmental management at the community level. After the unification of Bhutan under the Wangchuck monarchy, power was concentrated in the monarchy, the Buddhist clergy, and a small governing elite, without an organized civil society. As a result, the conservation interests of a few powerful individuals drove the creation of early environmental policy. The

1998 Middle Path National Environmental Strategy set the tone for thoughtful environmental legislation and action, emphasizing balance between immediate development and ecological and biological sustainability. Subsequent major legislation has included the Environmental Assessment Act (2000), the National Environment Protection Act (2007), the Waste Protection and Management Act (2009), and the Water Act (2011). Under the 2008 Constitution, 60% of Bhutan's surface must remain under forest cover in perpetuity. The amount currently stands at 72%. Currently 19,750 square kilometers, almost half the nation's land area, is part of an expanding network of Protected Areas linked by biological corridors to enable animal migration (National Statistical Bureau 2011). Several government departments are tasked with aspects of environmental management, including the National Environment Commission and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests. This demonstrated commitment to conservation has received deserved international recognition.

In contrast to Bhutan's frequent portrayal as static, serene, and homogenous, the country's modern history is characterized by significant political, economic, infrastructure, and cultural development. Ecological and linguistic diversity, challenging terrain, and conscious isolation from the outside world combined to delay national unification until the turn of the 20th century and modernization until the early 1960s. Major political reform culminated in the 2008 transition to democracy and new international relations, a massive shift from the absolute monarchy and isolationism of the past hundred years. Economic growth fueled by hydropower and the creation and codification of Gross National Happiness combined for a rapid and distinctive development path. These factors demonstrate a society in transition, with a demand for innovation in all aspects of governance to match the pace of change. Bhutan has a strong environmental record, but a new modern landscape requires a shift in conservation strategy.

Calls for a New Environmental Advocacy

Literature examining environmental NGOs since the 1990s has found them increasingly important actors at local, national, and international scales.¹ Princen et. al. (1995) argue that these groups serve to mediate between the biophysical and the political, and the local and the global by "tugging and pulling at states" while simultaneously acting as agents of broader "social learning" (Princen 1995). Jasanoff describes the fundamental role of environmental NGOs as follows:

At the heart of environmental decision-making is an attempt to connect knowledge about the world (expressed often, but not only, as scientific knowledge) with actions designed to advance particular visions of natural and social well-being. It is this link between knowledge and action that provides environmental NGOs their primary point of political intervention (Jasanoff 1997).

The “point of political intervention,” Jasanoff describes can be understood as the opportunity for advocacy. Advocacy is defined here as active engagement of civil society parties in preservation and conservation measures, and implies speaking up publicly for issues or interests that would otherwise be overlooked or undervalued. Critical in this definition are the public aspect, the action component, and the acknowledgement of potential conflict between environmental and other interests.

Various strategies are available to NGOs in their ultimate goal of “disseminating ecological consciousness” (Wapner 1995). These range from “insider” strategies, which seek to directly influence decision-makers, to “outsider” strategies, which mobilize public opinion (Teegan 2004). They can take the form of partnerships with governmental and corporate actors (Brinkerhoff, 2002), or of providing criticism and language to reframe and emphasize an issue (Jasanoff 1997). While NGOs do not always play a confrontational role, their independence allows them the opportunity to stand up more stridently for environmental issues. Princen et. al. write:

NGOs do not have to be nice to anyone. They can be, and often are, in the business of monitoring, exposing, criticizing, and condemning. They need not compromise on either ecological or ethical principles, or at least they need do so much less than states for which the essence of maintaining good relations is, indeed, compromise, and for which industrial growth is central (Princen 1995).

As described above, advocacy can take a number of forms. In Bhutan, “insider” strategies and partnerships have historically been the major avenues for individuals and organizations seeking to influence policy. While these strategies remain important, I argue that changing structures of the RGoB and power relations require new “outsider,” or confrontational strategies.

While NGOs are not the only sources of environmental advocacy in a society, the historic concentration of power in the Bhutanese monarchy meant that, until very recently, relatively few organizations or individuals were available for this purpose. The most important non-governmental player in modern Bhutan’s environmental

sector has been RSPN. Founded in 1987 by Dasho Peljor Dorji, RSPN (Royal Society for Protection of Nature) was the country’s second NGO. Since the nation’s first, The National Women’s Association of Bhutan, was created by an act of the National Assembly, RSPN is arguably the first independently founded NGO. For the past 25 years it has been the primary domestic, civil society voice for conservation. The organization had a humble beginning, focusing on youth environmental art and writing competitions and an annual count of the endangered Black-necked Crane. It later expanded to other aspects of environmental education, species conservation, and integrated conservation and development. RSPN shared close ties to both the government and the international World Wildlife Fund for its first decade, until new leadership in the late 1990s and early 2000s resulted in a new strategic plan, one million US dollar endowment, and stronger organizational mission and identity. RSPN received a MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions in 2010 for its disproportionately large impact promoting conservation in Bhutan. In April 2012 it employed 27 Bhutanese and 1 foreign staff members at its two field sites and its new home office and Environmental Resource Center in Thimphu. The organization is divided into Program & Development, Communications & Membership, Conservation and Sustainable Livelihoods, Environmental Education, and Research units and is overseen by a Board of Directors.

Methods

In January-March 2012, formal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key environmental stakeholders for a project documenting the 25-year history of the RSPN. Respondents were selected to represent the views of key stakeholders. They included current and former directors, program managers, field officers, and board members at RSPN; members of other domestic organizations including The Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation and local consulting and eco-tourism businesses; RGoB employees from The Ministry of Agriculture, The Department of Forests and Park Services, and The National Environment Commission; and representatives of international organizations including the World Wildlife Fund, United Nations Development Programme, The Bhutan Foundation, and The International Crane Foundation. Subjects were either Bhutanese or, in a few cases, foreigners who had worked in Bhutan’s conservation sector for over a decade. Professional positions ranged from driver to director or president. Interviews were conducted fully in English, a language in which all respondents were comfortable, and lasted between twenty and ninety minutes.

Number of respondents	Characterization of response	Example quotations
7	Use of “watchdog”	<p>“RSPN is a watchdog, watching the activities of the government and if there are any critical issues they should bring them to the notice of the people.”</p> <p>“As the only local environmental organization, it has a voice, it can be a watchdog to many government plans and programs, it can be the opposition leader of the environmental front and movement.”</p>
6	Use of “advocacy” / “advocate”	<p>“With the new democratic government, as an NGO there is a really important role advocating environmental issues, and trying to bring in environmental issues to the policymakers.”</p>
3	Repeated or central theme of advocacy	<p>“For an NGO, what I think, action is the first thing.”</p> <p>“Moving forward we need a more active voice for civil society, RSPN would be one of them.”</p> <p>“RSPN can continue to grow and become increasingly effective especially in protecting the environment by promoting effective laws and helping to ensure that the laws are implemented and obeyed.”</p>

Table 1: Selected pro-advocacy quotations and their categorizations (interview sample of 20).

Results

Twenty respondents were asked open-ended questions about the organization’s role in Bhutan and/or what kinds of environmental activities were necessary in the future. Questions included, “What are some of the major environmental issues emerging in Bhutan today?” “Why is RSPN an important organization?” “What do you anticipate/hope RSPN’s role will be in the future?” Fifteen of these twenty respondents described the need for environmental advocacy.

Respondents who discussed advocacy were coded in several categories based on keywords or the repetition or centrality of advocacy themes. Seven used the word “watchdog.” One stakeholder claimed, “RSPN is a watchdog, watching the activities of the government and if there are any critical issues they should bring them to the notice of the people.” For another, the watchdog role carried aspects of both leadership and confrontation: “As the only local environmental organization, it has a voice, it can be a watchdog to many government plans and programs, it can be the opposition leader of the

environmental front and movement.” While the fierceness of watchdog varied, all respondents identified its purpose as policing human encroachment on environmental vitality, often monitoring government action specifically.

Another six respondents, including one “watchdog” respondent, used the words “advocacy” or “advocate.” These descriptions focused on an active promotion of environmental values, often alongside recognition that society was in a moment of transition and new approaches were necessary. One respondent remarked, “With the new democratic government, as an NGO there is a really important role advocating environmental issues and trying to bring in environmental issues to the policymakers.” Advocacy often involved this process of helping government recognize and understand pertinent environmental issues, while highlighting their importance to the public.

A further three respondents were counted in the watchdog/advocacy category despite using neither keyword because of the centrality and repetition of the advocacy theme in their responses. One narrative began

unprompted, “for an NGO, what I think, action is the first thing,” and continued describing the need for activism in civil society. Another stakeholder similarly envisioned the organization as part of a larger movement for public engagement, stating, “Moving forward we need a more active voice for civil society, RSPN would be one of them.” The third remarked, “RSPN can continue to grow and become increasingly effective especially in protecting the environment by promoting effective laws and helping to ensure that the laws are implemented and obeyed.” This response emphasized both the need for promotion of conservation (advocacy) and ensuring policy follow-through (being a watchdog). For pro-advocacy quotations and their characterizations, see the table on the previous page.

These responses demonstrate the desire for evolved environmental advocacy among key stakeholders. The next sections will provide context for how this form of environmentalism differs from past approaches, and illustrate the needs and opportunities for environmental advocacy in modern Bhutan.

A Departure

These descriptions represent a departure from traditional forms of Bhutanese environmentalism, which have their own strong history. Bhutanese and Buddhist values emphasize the power and beauty of the natural world while indigenous systems of natural resource management have long enabled sustainable livelihoods.² Early modern Bhutanese environmentalism took place through private conversations and personal lobbying among the governing elite. The Fourth King incorporated environmental concerns into early policies. He was encouraged by his cousin Dasho Peljor Dorji, whose personal intervention on behalf of the endangered Black-necked Cranes helped save their habitat, the Phobjikha Valley, from being drained for agriculture in the 1980s. Peljor Dorji went on to form several environmental groups, serve as Minister of the Environment, and help author the National Environmental Strategy. In interviews, he described his own aims as explicitly complimentary to those of the RGoB, to which he is deeply professionally and personally connected. This model of environmentalism, characterized by private negotiation among a few visionaries, was effective in its time. But as government and society become more democratic, the guidance of a few elites is no longer feasible or appropriate without new modes of public discourse.

The terms “watchdog” and “advocacy” have a history within RSPN, though their use has evolved significantly.

The word “watchdog” first appears in the opening letter of the organization’s first annual report of 1994-5. President Sangay Thinley writes that RSPN is evolving “from mere watchdog to a wider sphere of activities” (Royal Society for Protection of Nature 1995). RSPN’s three five-year strategic plans all reinforce the organization’s commitment to advocacy, coupled with, though not always differentiated from, their longstanding environmental education program. Today, the organization’s mission is to “inspire personal responsibility and active involvement of the people of Bhutan in the conservation of the Kingdom’s environment through education, research, and sustainable livelihood opportunities.” One of its four overall goals is “to increase the level of environmental awareness through education, advocacy and public participation in conservation,” and a core value is to “be proactive towards environmental issues” (Royal Society for Protection of Nature 2013).

While these examples show the preexistence of watchdog and advocacy rhetoric, their use now demonstrates increased strength and specificity. The “mere watchdog” of the 1990s is a friendly, passive beast, though its very existence is remarkable in a country with, at the time, only two NGOs. The organization’s current mission, values and goals mention increasing public involvement and information without specific definitions or ideas of lobbying, protecting, or whistle blowing. Verbs such as “enhance,” “increase,” and “contribute” in RSPN’s goals point toward a collaborative orientation.

The blurred line between RSPN’s education and advocacy programs indicates similar affinity for “soft” action, focused on generating awareness. In categorizing stakeholder responses, those which spoke of generating a passive “awareness” in an educational context without a companion “action” component were not considered endorsements of environmental advocacy. Since RSPN has traditionally combined education and advocacy, this distinction is blurry. In interviews, one respondent said,

Many people outside, foreigners, see Bhutanese as environmentally educated... but we are not actually. We have policy rules and regulations but these are not education. We want to build a citizen concerned about their environment.

While this statement shows a deep understanding of contemporary challenges, and increasing the public’s knowledge is an important part of many environmental campaigns, responses like this without an explicit intention to push for change could not be considered a clear departure from past strategy, and so were not included as pro-advocacy responses.

New Needs

There are now new needs for a different kind of environmental advocacy in Bhutan. The first of these arises from the exponential increase in opportunities for development and associated environmental degradation. The tension between development and conservation was first captured in the 1991 Paro Resolution on Environment and Sustainable Development, which states:

Our nation will soon face a question that others already confront: whether we can maintain a development path that allows us to meet pressing current needs without compromising the prospects of future generations. This is the challenge of sustainable development: to raise the material well-being of all our citizens and to meet their spiritual aspirations, without impoverishing our children and grandchildren... we recognize the potential of new technology and industries, but... no amount of technology or monetary assets can make up for a razed forest, depleted soils, polluted waters or ravaged climate (National Environment Commission 1994).

Two decades later, Bhutan is indeed facing sustainable development challenges. RGoB documents, international and domestic NGOs, and academics all point to increasing environmental degradation due to development. Two of the most pressing issues are infrastructure expansion and urbanization.

Expanded road networks bring both tremendous opportunity for human and capital development and inevitable, if often unknown or unquantified, ecological consequences. These include increased erosion, landslides, and habitat destruction and fragmentation. Since building its first roads in the 1960s, Bhutan's network has grown significantly but is plagued by significant erosion concerns and construction difficulties. Demand is increasing for road access and projects have already been proposed bisecting protected areas.

Other challenges stem from the impacts of lucrative large-scale hydropower. Under the 2000 Environmental Assessment Act, such works must submit Environmental Impact Assessment reports before construction and create and implement an Environmental Management Plan (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2008). Still, concerns remain about pollution, erosion, water scarcity, and habitat destruction associated with the construction process and long-term effects. For example, changing geomorphology upstream of the Punatsangchu project may threaten the habitat of the endangered White-Bellied Heron, driving

the bird out of the area and closer to extinction (Royal Society for Protection of Nature 2011). Bhutan will see significant construction in this sector going forward, with plans to jump from 1,488 MW of installed capacity in 2008 to an estimated 10,000 MW by 2020 (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2008). This nearly seven-fold increase in generating capacity, along with a recent announcement to allow private, commercial hydropower, means impacts from projects will also rise.

The high rate of urbanization of the past few decades has created major solid waste and sewage management problem that municipal authorities and the RGoB have struggled to effectively address. Private firms, including Greener Way, a for-profit recycling service in Thimphu, have moved in to fill the gap left by outgrown municipal services. Other problems include traffic congestion and pollution, which prompted the enactment of monthly no-car "pedestrian days" in the spring of 2012, as well as increased deforestation.

Beyond direct impacts from development, several environmental issues pose major, complex problems for contemporary Bhutan. It is widely acknowledged by scholars, international organizations, and local environmental groups that climate change will hit the Himalayan region especially hard. Often called the "Third Pole" due to its vast glaciers and the water resource they capture, warming temperatures are already increasing glacial melt, changing water supply patterns downstream and heightening incidents of glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs).³ Throughout the region, historically stable glaciers are retreating at rates ranging from 10 to 60 meters per year (Bajracharya et. al. 2007). Associated issues of water quality, quantity and seasonality will impact health and agriculture domestically and in the nations downstream. Changing temperatures and weather patterns will also impact Himalayan ecology, erosion, and livelihoods. The transboundary nature and inherent uncertainty of this problem handicap each state from addressing it alone. Both international networks and local projects and research are required for adaptation and mitigation.

The movements towards democracy, increased bureaucracy, and participation of numerous stakeholders also bring environmental governance challenges. As the long-term goal setting of the monarchy is replaced with short-term elected officials, the vision of sustainability may be eclipsed by immediate demands of new constituencies. Projects like local farm roads, which help secure votes but threaten habitat destruction, have new urgency. Over the past several decades, the Bhutanese

government, including its branches devoted to natural resource management, has grown increasingly complex. Today, several institutions including the National Environment Commission, various departments of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, and the Gross National Happiness Commission are engaged with aspects of environment at the national level. Local-level actors include municipal authorities such as the Thimphu City Corporation, education and research entities such as the College of Natural Resources, and the staff of forest outposts and Protected Area offices. Beyond the RGoB, major environmental stakeholders include international donors such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and various UN programs; regional networks such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development; and bilateral and NGO partners including the Danish government, the Swiss NGO Helvitas, and the World Wildlife Fund. The sudden increase in stakeholders means that jurisdiction and avenues to change may be in flux, indirect, or simply more confusing than under the previous system, requiring active coordination and communication.

The number, scale, intensity and diversity of these environmental and social challenges are unprecedented, and require decentralized, vigilant, and coordinated attention. The scope of these threats, capacity and information gaps, and conflicting interests of the government in certain cases heighten the need for non-state actors to bring their agendas and expertise to the table. The new rapidity of development and accompanying ecological degradation in Bhutan necessitate timely and decisive actions to protect the environment.

Emerging Opportunities

Along with new needs for environmental advocacy come new opportunities. Rising awareness and environmental threats have been met with increased legislation. As the Waste Protection and Management Act (2009), the Water Act (2011), and future regulations are crafted and implemented, there will be a number of opportunities to influence the degree to which the laws effectively protect the nation's natural resources. Advocacy within the RGoB, while beyond the scope of this paper, can play an essential role in ensuring that sound policy is appropriately constructed, implemented and adapted.

As these laws come into effect, civil society can work to improve their efficacy. Citizen influence on shaping and reforming environmental legislation already exists in the history of Bhutan's Community Forests. Bhutan has

strong, localized systems of indigenous knowledge and communal management of natural resources, especially forests and water, as documented by Tashi Wangchuck (2000), Lam Dorji (2003), and Sangay Wangchuck (2005). These same scholars have argued that Bhutan's first piece of environmental legislation, The Forest Act of 1969, disempowered local people by nationalizing all forest not privately held, disregarding traditional management systems for communally held natural resources. The Forest Act was repealed in 1995 by The Forest and Nature Conservation Act, which stated biodiversity conservation should be jointly based on two factors: first, the cumulative effects of biodiversity, and second, that natural resources should be used to meet the collective needs of the people (Velasquez 2004). In the spirit of this new approach, the modern Community Forestry program began in 2000 with the aim of strengthening the link between people and forests to improve both environment and livelihoods (Temphele and Beukeboom 2006). The program supports local people in managing their resources sustainably, decentralizing forest governance and returning stewardship to the resources' users, as advocated by the scholars who critiqued the previous system of nationalization. While the evolution of this program took decades, it demonstrates opportunity for effective constructive criticism and reform processes emerging from private actors.

New opportunities arise from recent socio-political shifts. Michael Aris has described historic Bhutanese society as having a tradition of consensus, in which confrontations are avoided and the monarch is seen as the great internal conciliator (Aris 1994). This idea is supported by traditions of hierarchy and deference, as well as the intensely personal nature of Bhutanese society and government, where many actors have known each other's families since childhood. It is therefore not surprising that during the first few years of democracy, vocal opposition was largely absent. This was also due to a landslide victory by the Druk Phuensum Tshogpa ("Bhutan Peace and Prosperity Party" or DPT), which captured 45 of 47 National Assembly seats in the 2008 elections.

With the second democratic elections coming up in July 2013, the nation has seen an unprecedented increase in political activity.⁴ Three additional parties have registered, making the 2013 race likely to yield a more dynamic body (Election Commission of Bhutan 2013). A November 2012 spat between the Prime Minister (PM) and the Opposition Leader (OL) over a bid for a non-permanent UN Security Council seat highlighted divergent views on the nation's priorities, with the OL urging more attention to domestic issues and the PM advocating Bhutan's role as a "thought

leader” abroad. When the PM accused the OL’s criticism as being “irresponsible and unpatriotic,” and not coming from a “loyal citizen,” the opposition party retorted that the PM lacked respect for the democratic institutions enshrined in the constitution (M. Dorji 2012). Public political debate of this intensity, broadcasted by national media and commented on online, is unprecedented in Bhutan, and points to an opening for similarly charged discussion on environmental issues and responsibilities.

Since the Civil Society Organizations Act of 2007 granted legal status to NGOs, the number and scope of these organizations has ballooned. The first to register was the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy, whose mission is “to nurture a culture of democracy by strengthening media, expanding public discourse, and providing essential training and education for key persons who will have a direct impact on Bhutan’s democratic transition and the creation of democratic institutions” (Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy 2012). Another early registrant was RSPN, which went through several iterations of murky legal status before the act was passed. As of March 2013 there were 30 registered “Civil Society Organizations,” up from 22 a year earlier (Civil Society Organizations Authority 2013).

The number and freedom of media outlets has skyrocketed since the start of democracy. As of February 2012 there were ten private and one government newspapers in Thimphu, partially because of generous revenues from mandated government advertising. These publications exercise increasing freedom of speech, for example exposing a land-grab scandal high up within the government in August 2011. One paper, *The Bhutanese*, explicitly stated in its first editorial in February 2012 its commitments to investigative journalism, transparency, accountability, human rights and promotion of a “vibrant democratic culture” (*Bhutanese* 2012). The recent rise in popularity and prestige of the political blog of the OL, Tshering Tobgay, similarly demonstrates the emergence of new operating space for discourse about and action towards new national priorities. In Thimphu’s many new cafes and its first boutique bookstore, ex-patriots and locals, many educated abroad, can now read magazines such as *Bhutan Youth* and *Bhutan Street Fashion*.

These trends point to an increasingly open society with growing opportunity for social and political commentary and engagement. While historically domestic voices for conservation were limited to a few departments of the RGoB and RSPN, there are increasing actors available now for advocacy, including politicians, other CSOs, and media. With increasing environmental threats and a rapidly shifting

natural and governmental landscape, there is both the need and the opportunity for new environmental advocacy.

What Breed of Watchdog?

Interviews with key environmental stakeholders and study of contemporary Bhutan point to a societal shift already underway with implications for environmental strategy. The long-term, elite-driven, idealistic, and generally successful environmental planning of last few decades will no longer serve. Democracy and an opening society invite a host of new voices and concerns to the governance arena. These new stakeholders will have to balance a full agenda while mastering a new form of government and continuing to chart a path for sustainable growth. Environmental concerns are rising in number, but have more competition for public and political interest. Bhutan’s new environmental managers will have to adapt their strategy to match the new socio-political landscape in order to maintain the nation’s environmental reputation. Active engagement of civil society in the form of advocacy will be an important component of this adapted approach.

In wondering what new environmental governance in Bhutan might look like, it is easiest to first say what it will not. According to the respondents of these interviews, advocacy should have “proper and good intentions” and not be “just shaming.” It “doesn’t have to be picket signs,” or “confrontational” and should follow traditional Bhutanese “respect for authority.” When questioned about when the watchdog should bark, one respondent replied, “You have a place at the discussion table that is for a watchdog, but not in the streets.” Bhutanese environmental advocacy will not look like radical Greenpeace protest, and probably also not like the loud, crowded public dissent seen in cities in neighboring India or the radical Chipko movement. While public, sometimes violent, protests have ignited in Nepal and India around projects such as the Narmada and Teesta Dams, Bhutan’s have been essentially unopposed. This difference can be attributed in part to a planning process that acknowledges environmental concerns and government distribution of hydropower revenue, but also to the complete lack of a tradition of any such activity in modern Bhutan. One respondent explained,

Before you bark I think you should give some warning, one should try to engage and change from within, start the dialogue. If at the end of the day there is no response, then you have to bark. It is the responsibility of RSPN.

This non-confrontational position was supported by repeated emphasis on the complimentary roles of various environmental stakeholders, backing up advocacy with strong reasons and research, and linking advocacy with other areas such as education, cross-agency coordination, and waste management.

Neither, however, can we believe in happy village people universally in tune with nature and devoid of desire for development – urbanization trends and the rhetoric of politicians are strong evidence against this fantasy. Studies by Jeremy Brooks (2010) and Chhewang Rinzin et. al (2009) on environmental attitudes among rural Bhutanese point to unevenness in individuals' investment in their natural surroundings, with environmental ethics being less strong than either author initially expected. Wang et. al. (2006) found 52.2% of local farmers surveyed disliked the Park and Conservation Act and 67.5% supported exterminating problem wildlife. Negative attitudes were especially strong among people under age 45. In contrast, three-quarters supported the Park's development programs with their anticipated economic benefits. Studies such as these provide academic support to anecdotal evidence that universal, unassisted environmental stewardship is also unlikely, necessitating direct advocacy.

While this article's limited research cannot outline the complete future of Bhutan's environmental governance landscape, repeated themes point towards directions in which environmental advocacy might be headed. Contemporary respondents who mentioned advocacy generally added strategies through which it could be achieved, including promoting public discourse and individual involvement and action, gathering data and translating research for policymakers, being a "voice for the people," bringing stakeholders to the table and participating in planning processes, and keeping watch and pointing out wrong-doing in order to safeguard the environment. This last strategy represents the most significant departure from the traditional socio-political status quo, in which civil society places more or less complete trust in government action. While there was a lack of consensus over what advocacy should look like, three directions for advocacy development stand out: building knowledge and legitimacy through research; mediating between people, government, and environment in a new democracy; and learning when and how to "bark."

Many respondents described a need to expand environmental research, which could then be translated into policy recommendations. A few institutions, such as RSPN, the government-run Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment, the College of

Natural Resources, and several government departments are engaged in research endeavors. As most of these institutions and their research foci are relatively new, strengthening their capacity will be essential. Links between specific government needs and research projects already exist in some cases, however, the link between research and policy adaptation could be expanded and strengthened. Ideally, the process would be iterative and coordinated: identify a need, obtain new data, translate implications for policy-makers, policy response, and subsequent monitoring and evaluation studies and policy adaptation. While this process is an important part of crafting future legislation, the current challenge in Bhutan lies more in implementation (Velasquez, 2004). This observation, along with the speed of change in Bhutan now, means even well-coordinated long-term research will by itself be insufficient to cope with immediate environmental threats.

Second, respondents discussed the challenges of operating in a democracy at a time when many people desire development over conservation. Some respondents suggested that, at times, the watchdog might have to oppose the citizens themselves, complicating the widely held belief in NGOs as a voice for the people. The increase in the types and numbers of environmental sector stakeholders leads to uncertainty of roles and communication gaps. The challenge is to invent effective mediators between the government, various citizen groups, and environment who can advocate for long-term sustainability in a rapidly changing society. This will require independence, credibility and vision, and may also require a constellation of different groups and individuals, specialized to represent specific concerns, constituents, and expertise. Ultimately, environmental advocacy could have a major role in building a healthy democratic society, as it has already by fueling a pioneer NGO.

The third issue is getting the watchdog to bark. The environmental sector is still intensely personal, discouraging argument. One respondent spoke directly about the need to overcome this:

We have to draw the line between being professional and being personal. Why is RSPN there? To safeguard the environment... with the elected government, we never know what will come. We need a strengthened stance in terms of advocacy.

Another respondent indicated that it might take a major violation to spur vocal opposition:

At the moment we're more into complementing government's effort, yes of course this is very important.

At the moment scene is different, we need to work together, but if something is really not of our desire, than it is time for RSPN to say that what you're doing is not right and play the role of watchdog.

RSPN did play that role in fall of 2011 when a farm road was proposed through the core area of one of the national parks and its Executive Director appeared on a national TV debate to respectfully encourage the government to reexamine their legal authority in construction. More road, urban, and hydropower construction are most likely to spur watchdog action in the near future.

Needs and opportunities to actively promote environmental interests and call foul if they are ignored invite the possibility of new actors and approaches. While the government is still the most prestigious career track for young Bhutanese, rising numbers of CSOs and entrepreneurs point to interest in creative private ventures. As more and more Bhutanese are educated beyond the borders they bring increased capacity and new ideas: several respondents compared RSPN with NGOs in the West or in India, where they play a much more vocal, oppositional role. The media is perhaps most likely to raise attention and inspire advocacy in the immediate future. There is also room for advocacy within the government, as regulations to support the broad legislation of the last decade are created and enforced. While there remains an aversion to confrontation and emphasis on collaboration, these findings point to increased opportunity for creative action to point out and fill in gaps in environmental policy and practice as Bhutan enters the next stage of its development.

Conclusion

Bhutan's pristine environment and progressive development ideology have established the nation on the international stage. As the country enters a new era of democracy and growth, its conservation strategy will have to adapt. While more research is required to forecast these changes in detail, new forms of civil society advocacy are an important part of the evolution. In the space provided by both increased environmental need and socio-political opportunity, thoughtful, responsible, and public advocacy can enhance both the environmental and democratic vitality of modern Bhutan. Interviews with key environmental stakeholders point to barriers while simultaneously highlighting the importance of building legitimacy through research, mediating between parties in a newly-complex democratic society, and overcoming traditional hesitation to become an environmental watchdog that will actually bark, if not bite.

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Endnotes

1. See, for example: Paul Wapner, 1995, Politics Beyond the State: Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics, *World Politics* 47 (3): 311-340; Tom Princen, Matthias Finger, Jack Manno, 1995, Nongovernmental Organizations in World Environmental Politics, *International Environmental Affairs* 7 (1): 42-58; Sheila Jasanoff, 1997, NGOs and the Environment: From Knowledge to Action, *Third World Quarterly* 18 (3): 579-594; and, more recently, Hildy Teegan, Jonathan P. Doh, Sushil Vachani, 2004, The Importance of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Global Governance and Value Creation: An International Business Research Agenda, *Journal of International Business Studies* 35 (6): 463-483; Betsill, Michele M. and Elisabeth Corell, 2008, *NGO Diplomacy: The Influence of Nongovernmental Organizations in International Environmental Negotiations*, Cambridge: The MIT Press.
2. For discussion of traditional communal natural resource management and environmental values, see: Tashi Wangchuck, 2000, Change in the Land Use System in Bhutan: Ecology, History, Culture, and Power, *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 2 (summer); Lam Dorji, 2003, *Assessing the Evolution, Status, and Future Implications of Forest Resources Management in the Inner Himalayas of the Kingdom of Bhutan*, PhD diss, Asian Institute of Technology; Sangay Wangchuck, 2005, *Indigenous Natural Resource Management Institutions of Bhutan*, Thimphu: DSB Publications.

3. For recent research on impacts of climate change in the Himalaya, see, for example: Uttam Babu Shrestha, Shiva Gautam, Kamaljit S. Bawa, 2012, Widespread Climate Change in the Himalayas and Associated Changes in Local Ecosystems, *PLoS ONE* 7(5) <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0036741>, accessed May 13, 13; Susanne Schmidt and Marcus Nüsser, 2012, Changes of High Altitude Glaciers from 1969 to 2010 in the Trans-Himalayan Kang Yatze Massif, Ladakh, Northwest India, *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research* 44 (1): 107-121; Takayuki Nuimura, Koji Fujita, Kotaro Fukui, Katsuhiko Asahi, Raju Aryal and Yutaka Ageta, 2011, Temporal Changes in Elevation of the Debris-Covered Ablation Area of Khumbu Glacier in the Nepal Himalaya since 1978, *Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research* 43 (2): 246-255; Jianchu Xu, R. Edward Grumbine, Arun Shrestha, Mats Eriksson, Xuefei Yang, Yun Wang and Andreas Wilkes, 2009, The Melting Himalayas: Cascading Effects of Climate Change on Water, Biodiversity, and Livelihoods, *Conservation Biology* 23 (3): 520-530.

4. This article was finalized in May 2013; since submission, the summer elections did in fact demonstrate a more dynamic, and contentious, political climate. The incumbent DPT party was ousted and PDP gained a majority in the National Assembly. Former OL Tshering Tobgay was elected by his party as Prime Minister for a five year term. The elections featured spirited social media campaigns, increasingly open political discussions and debates, and allegations of meddling by India due to a critically-timed withdrawal of fuel subsidies, seen as a slap on the wrist to the DPT for engaging too much with China.

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