Tourism Development: The Challenges of Achieving Sustainable Livelihoods in Bhutan’s Remote Reaches

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ABSTRACT

Merak–Sakteng is a remote area of Bhutan, which is targeted for development of tourism owing to the unique culture and way of life of the semi-nomadic local ‘Brokpa’ people, whose livelihoods depend on herding yaks and sheep. These livestock enter forests where local residents and government see their grazing as threatening their crops and causing environmental degradation. The seminomadic life centred on livestock, which has long been essential to Brokpa culture and economy, thus comes under threat. The opening of Merak–Sakteng to tourism is intended to address this conflict by lessening the Brokpas’ economic dependence on livestock. This paper reports on research into the potential of tourism to transform this ethnic minority’s economic way of life through the introduction of tourism into the local livelihood mix. Sustainable livelihoods issues are investigated through a consideration of both economic and socio-cultural aspects of the local way of life, based on observation, and the findings of a survey of local people, semi-structured interviews with village leaders and government officials concerning development of the area. The survey found that despite land-use conflicts and limited grazing land, Brokpas still aspired to spend money gained from tourism on purchasing more yaks, which may escalate land-use conflicts and threaten environmental sustainability. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a small Himalayan kingdom with a well-preserved culture but a lack of good quality of tourism infrastructure. The Bhutanese government has adopted a cautious approach to developing tourism, opting for the high-spending market and a policy of ‘high value, low volume’. Although Bhutan does not explicitly restrict the number of tourists, the high daily tariff set by the government implicitly controls the number of tourists who can afford to come to the country, as well as the length of their stay. Bhutan possesses unique and spectacular cultural and natural attractions that draw tourists to the country. Despite the low numbers of visitors, tourism has increasingly become an important source of income. It is the largest economic sector after hydroelectric power, a major source of foreign exchange and is also seen as an important tool to alleviate poverty in Bhutan.

In 2009, the Bhutanese government employed McKinsey, the global management consultancy company, to plan strategies for economic development and for creating jobs for local people. With these new strategies, the Bhutanese government has adopted the aim of attracting more tourists to visit Bhutan and opening more remote regions of the country for tourism with the hope of developing tourism in a sustainable manner to bring economic benefits to parts of the country far from established tourist routes.

Mountain environments tend to be particularly marginalized and isolated from socio-economic development (Jansky et al., 2002). Given the natural beauty of many mountain regions, tourism presents an opportunity for bringing economic development to these areas (Friedmann, 1966; Aimilia et al., 2012), improving accessibility (Godde et al., 2000) and also potentially contributing to economic diversification (Zapata et al., 2011). While the development of tourism in remote areas around the world has been successful in spurring economic development and aiding in environmental conservation (Ritsma et al., 2010), the introduction of the multifarious forces of modernization brought by tourism to isolated communities has also been shown to present particular challenges to local values and ways of life (Flannery, 1998; Wearing & McDonald, 2002).

The villages of Merak and Sakteng, in the remote and mountainous east of Bhutan, are among the places that were off-limits to tourists in the past but have recently been opened for tourism. These two villages have their own unique way of life, festivals, rituals, traditions and language. The residents of the two villages are semi-nomadic with yaks at the centre of their economy and culture. Because of the importance of these animals to the local society, the number of yaks in Merak–Sakteng continues to increase, although grazing land is becoming increasingly restricted due to land-use conflicts with other uses. The Bhutanese government hopes that tourism will bring extra income to alleviate villagers’ economic dependence on livestock herding and reduce the overgrazing of shrinking pastureland, contributing to the conservation of the environment.

Recent research into the effectiveness of government initiatives to introduce tourism to remote areas of Bhutan has found that such measures have indeed been successful in

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bringing economic development to the area (Ritsma et al., 2010). However, these programmes have not been effective in ensuring an equitable distribution of benefits among the local people or improving their living standard (Hummel et al., 2013). That is to say, while measurable macroscopic economic development has been achieved, there has been little empowerment of local people. To address this issue, this paper applies the sustainable livelihoods perspective to investigate the potential of tourism to provide a secure and sustainable alternative way of life for individuals in these remote communities. The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions of the villagers of Merak and Sakteng on the development of tourism in their villages and to understand whether the introduction of tourism to Merak–Sakteng can indeed contribute to the minimization of land-use conflicts and to a sustainable diversification of local people’s livelihoods.

SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

The sustainable livelihoods approach considers the assets and strengths available within a disadvantaged society and the potential of working with these assets and strengths to satisfy the unmet needs of local people. This approach aims at building local capacity that will alleviate the need for reliance on outside aid. The idea of sustainable livelihoods emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, as development models shifted focus from economic expansion to well-being and sustainability. Robert Chambers at the Institute for Development Studies is generally credited with originating the concept of sustainable livelihoods (Chambers, 1986). The Brundtland Commission Report to the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development introduced these issues for the first time formally into the global policy debate (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987).

Livelihood security refers to the certainty of maintaining a given way of life, including access to the required resources, possession of the right skills and capabilities to provide oneself and one’s dependents with sufficient monetary and food resources to meet essential needs (Chambers & Conway, 1991). Tao and Wall point out that livelihoods do not strictly correspond to jobs, but rather to a broader understanding of one’s ability to meet the needs of oneself and one’s dependents. Scoones (1998) distinguishes four kinds of capital that constitute the tangible and intangible assets at the disposal of people in pursuing a particular livelihood strategy: natural capital, economic or financial capital, human capital and social capital. A livelihood can be considered sustainable if it does not deplete the capabilities and assets that it utilizes or erode the resources on which it relies. It must also be sufficiently resilient to overcome adversity, through short-term coping mechanisms and long-term adaptive capacities (Chambers & Conway, 1991).

In addition to these adaptive strategies, participation and empowerment of local individuals and local communities is an essential characteristic of sustainable livelihoods (Helmore & Singh, 2001). The sustainable livelihoods approach concentrates on the levels of the individual and the community (UNDP & Wanmali, 1999). In order to propose interventions within a livelihood system to improve the lot of people by judicious introduction of ‘modern’ or ‘outside’ elements, it is first imperative to understand the existing livelihood activities and their relations to the socio-cultural substrate of the locality (Helmore & Singh, 2001). The ‘livelihood diversification’ (Ellis, 1998; Hussein & Nelson, 1998) brought by the introduction of such new elements into a local economy must be achieved in such a way that traditional livelihoods and the core values of the society are not threatened by the new livelihood options, raising the issue of the ‘cultural sustainability’ of a livelihood mix. There are also equity issues, such as the fair distribution of the benefits gained from such diversification among all members of the society.

‘Sense of place’ is an important consideration in tourism studies, which can be applied in different ways to understand the relationship of tourists, and of the local people, to the localities in which tourism takes place (Ashworth & Goodall, 1990; Walsh et al., 2001; de la Barre, 2013). From a cultural geography perspective (Shurmer-Smith, 2002), local livelihoods can be seen as a component of the way in which people relate to the place where they live. However, sense of place is progressive and always in flux (Massey, 2005), and the sustainment of livelihoods does not imply stasis, but rather must also be seen as an evolving relationship between people and place.

The potential of livelihood diversification through tourism to help in preserving traditional livelihoods has been documented in cases such as Shanmei, Taiwan, where indigenous farmers combine tourism activities with their farming in their livelihood mix. Tourism in the area has also created a demand for small markets for the sale of local farm products and has encouraged the preservation of local resources and culture as tourism assets (Tao & Wall, 2007). The well-meaning introduction of new employment sectors into traditional societies can also, in some perspectives, be seen as leading to lower livelihood security, by changing the economic dynamics of the local society in such a way that threatens traditional livelihoods. Participating in second occupations related to tourism or conservation, e.g. can occupy time that would normally be spent on traditional daily activities, leading to a decline of some aspects of the traditional way of life. This was for instance found to be the case in a study of the introduction of community-based natural resource management in the Okavango Delta in Botswana, where livestock production fell, individuals employed in the initiative had little time to engage in the ‘traditional chores’ of the society’s day-to-day life and foreign foods, household goods and construction techniques were introduced as local people had access to such products and the financial wherewithal to obtain them (Mbaiwa, 2010: 1050–1055).

Introducing tourism into the livelihood mix of a traditional culture acts as a force of modernization (Harrison, 1988), in bringing such a culture in contact with global cultural trends and economic systems and exposing local people to modern technologies and products. Livelihood diversification through the introduction of tourism can bring a number of benefits, including allowing accumulation of financial resources, the spreading of risk, facilitating adaptation to unavoidable
long-term declines in income from other sources, alleviating the imperative to exploit endangered lands and augmenting family income (Tao & Wall, 2007: 91). In all cases, sustainable tourism must be judged by its contribution to sustaining the intrinsic cultural and ecological values of the local context upon which it impinges (McCool & Moisey, 2001).

The development of remote areas and isolated communities, such as Merak–Sakteng, presents particular challenges in terms of the sustainment of livelihoods. Traditional ways of life that have evolved and sustained themselves over centuries in relative isolation can be thrown into disequilibrium as they come into contact with forces of development and globalization. Population pressure and industrial and commercial exploitation of natural resources (of which tourism is one manifestation), as well as the very concept of conservation itself (as a principle for the regulation of these various modes of exploitation), multiply the contextual constraints of the lives of individuals in such communities (Wearing & McDonald, 2002). Thus, the potential effects of tourism development on livelihoods are amplified all the more in the case of remote areas such as Merak–Sakteng.

Although the concept of sustainable livelihoods has been shown by past research to be somewhat idealistic, this concept is seen by the Bhutanese authorities as an essential facet of development initiatives, as the government seeks to introduce tourism into the livelihood mix of local people in Merak–Sakteng and similar areas, without compromising the cultural values of the local societies.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BHUTAN: ‘HIGH VALUE, LOW VOLUME’

Bhutan is a formerly isolated country with a ‘well-preserved culture’ and a population of just over 700,000 as of 2011. Bhutan welcomed tourists for the first time in 1974, the year of the coronation of His Majesty the Fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. The tourists – referred to as ‘paying guests’ – arriving in that year entered Bhutan overland through India with each tourist paying a flat daily tariff of USD130, which covered all accommodations, internal transport, tour guides, meals and other necessities during their stay. It was not until 1983 that the first (and until today still the only) international airport in Bhutan began operation. In 1988, the national carrier Druk Air was founded and followed by the establishment of the Tourism Authority of Bhutan in 1991 when the government monopoly on tourism was lifted and the tourism industry became privatized. Initially, tour itineraries were restricted to Thimphu (the capital city) and Paro (location of the international airport).

In 1989, the Bhutanese Government increased the daily tariff for tourists to USD200. In 2012, a new tariff structure was imposed by which tourists pay a minimum of USD250 per day during the high seasons and USD200 during the low seasons. The tourist tariff was never in the form of an ‘entrance fee’ into Bhutan, as is often misconstrued (Ritchie, 2008). There is also no quota imposed on tourist visas, as is believed by some (Nyaupane & Timothy, 2010). The high daily fee serves to limit tourist numbers and length of stay. Tourist movement is still controlled by a government-decree list of places that tourists are not allowed to go. Those places on the list are usually important religious sites. Most tourist traffic occurs in the high seasons of March to May and September to November. This pronounced seasonality (nearly half of bed nights occur in April and October) (Rinzin et al., 2007: 115) leads to intense concentrations of tourists at certain times and underutilized tourism infrastructure at other times, although there are currently government initiatives to attract more tourists in the off-season months as well.

As Bhutan is a small country with a lack of good quality tourism infrastructure, the Bhutanese government has chosen to take a cautious approach to developing tourism. According to Tenzin (n.d.), tourism policy in Bhutan reflects the government’s protectionist philosophy and approach to modernization and economic development. Observing the path of tourism development and its undesired side effects in neighbouring countries such as Nepal, the Bhutanese government recognized the potential economic benefits of tourism, but also became aware of the potential negative impacts of tourism on society, the environment and culture (Brunet et al., 2001: 252). Developing mass tourism could lead to uncontrolled growth that would overburden an already poor-quality and low-capacity infrastructure and put strains on the social fabric and natural environment of the country. Consequently, the Royal Bhutanese government intentionally discourages low-spending tourists such as backpackers and opts for the high-spending market, leading to a policy of ‘high value, low volume’ for international tourism.

Bhutan’s Minister for Economic Affairs, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, has stated, our tourism policy is inspired by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, and emphasizes the harmony between tradition and modernity, between Man and Nature, and the importance of preserving our living local systems in an era of globalization (Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy, Bhutan, 2005).

Ecotourism is a focal concept in the Bhutanese government’s tourism strategy, to minimize negative effects on the country’s cultural and natural inheritance while optimizing economic and social benefit (Royal Government of Bhutan, 1999). The concept of gross national happiness (GNH) was developed by the fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who in 1972 declared GNH to be more important than gross national product (GNP) in gauging the quality of life in the kingdom. GNH measures national progress in a more holistic way than GNP. The GNH index includes nine domains: psychological well-being; health; time use; education; cultural diversity and resilience; good governance; community vitality; ecological diversity and resilience; and living standards.

CURRENT ROLE OF TOURISM IN BHUTAN’S ECONOMY

In 2012, there were 105,407 tourist arrivals in Bhutan compared with 64,028 in 2011 (Bhutan Tourism Monitor, 2011).
The tourism industry is Bhutan’s largest source of hard currency and is second only to hydroelectric power in generating revenue for the country. In 2012, tourism generated USD227 m. According to the Tourism Council of Bhutan, the tourism sector accounted for 28,928 jobs in 2012 (Bhutan Tourism Monitor, 2012). As an increasingly important sector for Bhutan’s national economy, tourism was given a priority status in the Royal Government’s 9th Annual Plan (2002–2007). The Department of Tourism (DoT) was founded as an agency under the Royal Government of Bhutan’s Ministry of Trade and Industry, with the responsibility for co-ordinating and encouraging growth and expansion in the tourism industry. In 2008, the DoT became autonomous and was renamed the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB).

In 2009, the Bhutanese government engaged the global management consultancy company McKinsey to develop strategies for economic growth and creating more job opportunities for local people. As tourism is seen as a tool for poverty alleviation in Bhutan, McKinsey also gave advice to the government on other aspects of increasing the income from tourism, such as product development and marketing. The list of places that are prohibited to tourists has been shortened correspondingly (Sonam, 2010).

Tourism is also a significant source of income at the household level in those areas of the country frequented by tourists. A later survey of households in established tourism areas of Bhutan found that 80% reported that they profited directly from tourism in some way (Rinzing et al., 2007: 91). However, there are still issues of leakages, in which a significant proportion of the financial benefit from tourism bypasses the local population of the host area. For instance, a survey of tourism operators in Bhutan (Gurung & Seeland, 2008) discovered that only a small amount (14%) of the food consumed on treks in Bhutan was purchased locally (in part because the available locally produced food was so limited and often not suitable for tourist menus). Local people were hired more often by trekking tour companies for porter-pony services, cultural entertainment and guide services, while further opportunities were perceived for local people to provide home stays.

TOURISM IN BHUTAN’S REMOTE REGIONS

Tourists travelling between different sites in Bhutan travel by car on the country’s single major road. With the rugged mountain landscape, travelling speeds are slow and routes are often tortuous, making travel within the country a time-consuming matter. Because the average length of stay in the country is about one week, most package tours concentrate in the west of Bhutan to minimize the proportion of this short time spent in internal transit. In order to bring more tourists to the eastern part of the country, three new airports are being constructed.

The aims of the TCB, as stated in its 10th five-year plan, are to ‘create employment opportunity, generate revenue, supplementing rural income to improve living standards and quality of life of rural communities in Bhutan’ (Gross National Happiness Commission, 2009). The government also plans to ensure the distribution of economic benefits from tourism to all regions of the country. Remote areas of the country, although largely isolated from outside influences through touristic or other contact, are nonetheless facing existential dilemmas. The high proportion of protected areas and biological corridors in Bhutan (over 50% of Bhutan’s area, the highest percentage of any country in the world) leads to constraints on rural people’s exploitation of land for their livelihoods and brings increasing conflict between humans and wildlife (Gurung & Seeland, 2008). Youth abandon their villages to find work. Phenomena such as these have led the government to identify these areas for the introduction of small-scale tourism in its current tourism development plan.

Recent research evaluating other initiatives to bring tourism to remote areas of Bhutan proposes that tourism has been effective in incentivizing sustainable environmental practices among the host society (e.g. reducing encroachment on protected forests) and providing an alternative source of income (Ritsma et al., 2010) but that there has been little improvement in terms of poverty alleviation, empowerment of local people or increase in the overall market (Hummel et al., 2013).

Despite nature tourism being one of the two main motivations for tourists to Bhutan (the other being cultural tourism), trekkers accounts for only 4.5% of arrivals (Ritchie, 2008: 276). The high daily tariff is a disincentive, and travellers to Bhutan tend to be older than the typical trekking age group, decreasing their proclivity for such strenuous types of travel (Gurung & Seeland, 2008). Although small in absolute tourist numbers, trekking tourism is instrumental in the government’s plans to expand tourism into remote areas of the country, in a low-scale, low-impact manner requiring minimal new infrastructure. It is thought that this will allow the country to capitalize on its rich potential as a nature tourism destination, rather than ‘overselling’ the already popular cultural offerings (Norbu, 2009). The geographical focus of this paper, Merak–Sakteng, is a formerly undeveloped area that has been newly identified as a potential destination for this type of tourism.

MERAK–SAKTENG

The remote Merak and Sakteng valleys lie between 3000 and 4000 m above sea level in high mountains in the Trashigang province in the eastern part of Bhutan (Figure 1). The people of Merak and Sakteng, also known as Brokpas (highlanders), pursue a semi-nomadic lifestyle and possess a culture distinct from the Bhutanese mainstream, with their own unique festivals, rituals and traditions. The language of the Brokpas is different from Dzongkha (the official Bhutanese national language). According to Chand (2004), little is known about these semi-nomadic people except that they are different from the rest of the Bhutanese. Thought to be descended from ancestors who migrated southward from Tibet in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the Brokpas are more akin to the Monpas of the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh in India than to the inhabitants of other areas of Bhutan. Their traditional dress is also completely different from that of other
Bhutanese. Throughout the year, the Brokpas wear thick hand-woven clothes made from yak hair and sheep wool. Sometimes, animal skins are also worn.

Just over 4000 people live in Merak and Sakteng. The Nakchung La Pass (4140 m above sea level) divides these two villages, which are 25 km apart. These villages are largely cut-off from the rest of the country. Merak can be reached by foot from Radhi where the motorable road ends. The distance from Radhi to Merak is 35.5 km. The distance to Sakteng from Phongmey, the closest point of road access, is about 36 km. Nearly three-quarters of the area of the Merak and Sakteng gewogs (village groups) lies within the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS) (whc.unesco.org).

Yaks are at the centre of the Brokpas’ economy, religion and culture. The Brokpas consider yaks as their heart and soul (Wangchuk et al., 2013). The yak is not only the backbone of the local economy but also an indispensable part of their culture (Chand, 2004; Chettri, 2008), to the extent that ‘To separate the Brokpas from their yaks would endanger their livelihood’ (Chand, 2002). A Merak villager stated in an interview with a local newspaper, Kuensel, ‘Our animals are our only means of survival. If they don’t survive, then we’ve nothing left’ (Palden, 2008). The Brokpas depend on yak for their clothing, food, transportation and shelter. Yak milk and cheese are the products with which they enter into a barter economy with lowland valley dwellers. Brokpas measure their wealth by the number of yaks they possess, and people who do not own yaks are considered poor (Chand, 2002). Poorer Brokpas who do not own a yak usually work as carpenters, blacksmiths or farm labourers.

The economic livelihood of most Brokpa households is therefore dependent on livestock herding, which accounted for 83% of household income in the region in 2008 (Participatory Zoning for Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary (SWS)). The Brokpas can only grow maize and buckwheat for less than six months of the year due to the mountainous environment and harsh climate. Starting around May, the Brokpas begin to move to higher, colder altitudes with their herds, moving from place to place until August or September. From October until January, the Brokpas graze their herds at lower altitudes. During this period, the Brokpas visit lower valley villages to barter their goods, such as cheese, butter and dried meat, for food grain with valley dwellers in an age-old practice called ‘drukor’. It is common that the Brokpas will be lodged and given meals by ‘Nepos’ (village hosts) during this period. Nepos provide accommodation for their Brokpa guests and barter to trade butter and cheese for grains on their guests’ behalf. The Nepos are usually compensated by their guests in kind by gifts of butter and cheese (Chand, 2002: 244). Through this traditional trading bond, the Brokpas maintain ongoing social contact with lowlanders. This relationship is both economic and cultural and is an essential component in the society and calendar of the Drukpas.

According to a 2010 report from the Tourism Council of Bhutan, this tradition has declined in recent years (Proposal on Tourism Development in Merak–Sakteng, 2009). Even though drukor remains an important element of the Brokpa way of life, its economic significance is being undermined by the increasing prevalence of a cash economy. Chand (2004) noted that the Royal Government of Bhutan has made efforts to integrate the Brokpas with the rest of Bhutan and raise them to the same developmental standard. However, this task has proven to be difficult since the Brokpas are persistently resistant to any development initiatives, for fear of the threat that such initiatives would bring to their traditional herding-based livelihoods. However, these practices are becoming less and less sustainable in themselves. The number of yaks in Merak–Sakteng has been increasing, which is not surprising, given the importance of these animals in the local culture and society. This occurs even as the grazing land (tsamdro) becomes increasingly restricted due to land-use conflicts between the nomadic herders and the farming lowland villagers, as well as...
overgrazing leading to the degradation of the quality of the pastureland (Palden, 2008) and an increasing number of unproductive animals. Increasing numbers of local youth are also choosing to eschew herding as a livelihood and are leaving Merak–Sakteng for jobs in Bhutan’s population centres (Chand, 2004).

With the Land Act of 2007, the Bhutanese government took ownership of all of the tsamdro, which was previously traditionally owned by individual families for the grazing of their livestock, resulting in conflicts among families, some of whom grazed their herds on the land formerly owned by their family and others of whom let their herds roam freely (Bhutan Observer, 2011). The Bhutanese government has also banned the Brokpas’ traditional methods of clearing and renewing pastures through lopping, gridding and burning (Penjore, 2002; Wangchuk et al., 2013).

The high proportion of Bhutan’s territory that is protected land allows the government to maintain direct control over the preservation of ecosystems but also increases the incidence of land-use conflicts between protected land and local people who rely on exploitation of the land for their livelihoods. Following a flash flood in 2000, caused in large part by overgrazing, the government created the Joenshamlamdoksa Community Forest and forbade grazing on that protected land, further reducing the supply of grazing pastures (Gyeltshen et al., 2010). Current plans call for the further enlargement of the core conservation zone of the SWS, which would put further constraints on the Brokpas’ use of this land. This is to be accompanied by the establishment of other sources of income for the local people, to reduce economic reliance on livestock raising while acknowledging that such practices should never be completely supplanted because of their social and cultural importance to the local society (Palden, 2008).

One of the intentions behind the opening of this area to tourism was to provide alternative income sources to the local people, to reduce the economic need for yaks. However, as discussed, the significance of yaks to the Brokpas is partially economic.

The Brokpas’ traditional semi-nomadic way of life is central to their cultural identity. It is the foundation of their social bonds within their own society and with others in the region and is also fundamental to their relationship with the place they inhabit. As expressed by an interviewed Brokpa, who had become a tour guide,

To be out in Nature, with the open sky, I feel a sense of happiness and freedom. I enjoy it very much during the migration, when our family and other families join together to compete in various activities, like archery or singing. We would end up eating, singing and drinking together. It is so much fun for me (Interview, 2012).

Chand (2004) also stated that the carefree lifestyle is part of the nature of the Brokpas who will never miss any opportunity to sing and dance. This is indicative of the many ways in which the yaks, and the socio-cultural practices that surround them, are inextricably woven into the Brokpa identity and way of life. Thus, any potential intervention into this relationship, through the introduction of new activities such as tourism or through controls on the practice of herding, must take a wide range of factors into consideration, including but not restricted to economic livelihood.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MERAK–SAKTENG

The Bhutanese government has identified Merak–Sakteng for the development of low-scale tourism in the context of its programme of geographical expansion and diversification of the country’s tourism products to help in alleviating poverty and reducing the land-use conflicts that arise from reliance on herding as a primary livelihood. Potential tourism products that Merak–Sakteng has to offer include trekking, visiting local villages, dance performances, archery shows and many festivals including the yak dance. The first tourists admitted under this scheme arrived in Merak–Sakteng in 2010, and 120 tourists visited Merak–Sakteng in 2012 (Bhutan Tourism Monitor, 2012).

The government has proposed ecotourism development plans to the Merak–Sakteng locals, with promises of opportunities for income for local people through providing home stays, horses for transportation, sales of local products and other revenue-generating activities. Such opportunities, combined with the upgrading of the local school and health care facilities, are intended to entice local people to remain in Merak–Sakteng rather than leaving to earn a living elsewhere (www.moa.gov.bt, 2011). Based on weather considerations and the migratory calendar of the Brokpas, the TCB identified two periods, mid-March to the end of May and from September through November, as possible ‘windows’ for tourism in Merak–Sakteng (TCB, 2010), and proposed measures for the involvement of local communities in the planning and management of tourism, as well as provisions for income-generating activities for local people.

In 2009, the Tourism Council of Bhutan conducted a baseline survey with local people in Merak–Sakteng in order to record the current socio-economic conditions and to understand local people’s perception of tourism and willingness to participate in tourism activities. On a question as to whether the villagers of Merak and Sakteng have knowledge about tourism, nearly all respondents (93%) knew nothing or very little about tourism and only about one in three had ever seen a tourist. Despite this, 97% stated that they would be interested in participating in tourism. The most prevalent reason mentioned for the development of tourism was to create jobs (TCB, 2010). In actuality, though, local reception of tourism has been ‘lukewarm’, with some Brokpas perceiving the younger generation as being faced with a choice between maintaining their traditions and increasing their wealth through tourism (Bhutan Observer, 2011).

To promote tourism’s contribution to poverty alleviation in Merak–Sakteng, an agreement between the provincial administration of Trashigang, the TCB and the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators stipulated that tour operators running tours to Merak–Sakteng would hire local people as porters, guides and cooks. As of 2010, a number of Merak–Sakteng locals had received chef training through government programmes and six high school graduates from each of the two gewogs had been trained as guides. However, tour
operators were found to be in non-compliance with the agreement, even bringing their own food because of the lack of variety of agricultural products in these two districts. Local people are sceptical that they will ever see benefits from tourism (Wangdi, 2010).

In 2012, the Bhutanese government submitted an application to inscribe the SWS as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The co-existence of a natural conservation area and the semi-nomadic Brokpa culture is one of the two qualities cited to justify the Outstanding Universal Value of the place (whc.unesco.org, 2012). The SWS is currently on the UNESCO tentative list.

**METHODOLOGY**

The field study for this research was carried out in October 2010. During this time of year, most local people of Merak–Sakteng were still in the villages. The second author, who is Bhutanese, conducted in-depth interviews with village leaders in order to understand issues in the villages and the expectations of the inhabitants regarding the opening up of their villages for tourism. The questionnaire was first developed in the English language and translated into Dzongkha by the second author. A survey questionnaire was conducted with 123 villagers (79 men and 44 women) to gain understanding of their perception of tourism, including whether they see tourism as providing a new potential for economic livelihood, what kind of tourism they desire to develop in their village and how they would spend the money they receive from tourism. The questionnaire survey and five semi-structured interviews with village leaders and a Brokpa tour guide and the director of a tour operator who offers trekking to Merak and Sakteng were complimented with on-site observation and informal interviews with villagers. The field study took about two weeks. SPSS was employed for data analysis of the survey questionnaire results. The interviews were used to triangulate the findings of the survey.

**FINDINGS**

The most prevalent reported occupation among the Merak–Sakteng villagers participating in the survey was yak herder. At that point of time, most of the respondents had no current economic involvement in tourism. The respondents expressed overwhelmingly welcoming attitudes towards tourists, with 83% declaring that they were ‘very happy’ that Merak–Sakteng is opening for tourists and 78% either ‘agreeing’ or ‘absolutely agreeing’ that the tourists’ presence makes their village more lively. Furthermore, 84% either ‘agree’ or ‘absolutely agree’ that everyone in the village, whether or not they personally benefit from tourism, should make tourists feel welcome.

**Economic and cultural aspects of tourism**

The economic potential of tourism was widely acknowledged among the respondents. About 84% ‘agreed’ or ‘absolutely agreed’ that tourism could be seen as a new source of economic income for their village (Table 1). While villagers tended to see tourism as providing them with economic opportunities, most did not perceive it as an economic necessity. While just under a quarter (24%) saw the development of tourism as ‘necessary’ for the economic sustainability of their village, the largest portion (62%) judged tourism as ‘beneficial’ and the smallest segment (11%) saw no potential economic benefit from tourism for the village (Table 1).

When asked what activities they could provide to tourists, most responses had to do with cultural shows, specifically the performance of various traditional dances (yak dance, masked dance and naked dance). Four suggested that they could teach tourists about the local language or cuisine, or educate them about how to behave in the local society. Only three mentioned the possibility of selling local products. Most (68%) believed that everyone in the village should benefit from tourism. Only 12% did not see this as a priority. Most of the remainder did not believe that it was possible for all to benefit from tourism. In terms of government measures for ensuring the equitable distribution of benefits from tourism, relatively high percentages of respondents were in favour of the government overseeing the fair distribution of tourism jobs (46%) and providing training (44%). Re-investing tourism earnings into community and infrastructure projects (22%) and setting up government-run tourism businesses to hire local people (21%) were less popular choices (Table 1).

For a question regarding the behaviour that they would expect of tourists, 35% desired tourists who would want to learn about and respect the local culture, somewhat higher than the percentage who wanted tourists to be environmentally concerned (28%), and far more than those who desired

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<th>Table 1. Summary of survey findings</th>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tourism can be seen as a new source of economic income to our village</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absolutely disagree</td>
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<td>Disagree</td>
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<td>Neutral</td>
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<td>Agree</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absolutely agree</td>
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<td>Tourism as economic necessity</td>
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<td>Tourism as not necessary</td>
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<td>Not sure</td>
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<td>Government measures to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits from tourism</td>
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<td>Government overseeing fair distribution of tourism job</td>
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<td>Provide training</td>
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<td>Setting up government-run tourism business to hire local people</td>
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<td>Mitigation of the negative impacts of tourism</td>
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<td>Providing cultural education for their children</td>
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<td>Sensitivity education for tourists</td>
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<td>Limiting where tourists could go</td>
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tourists to spend much money (5%); 37% expressed no preference. For the next question regarding mitigation of the negative impacts of tourism, respondents could choose more than one response. The results reveal that 55% were in favour of providing cultural education for their children and 40% favoured sensitivity education for tourists. Only 13% would agree with imposing strict limits on the number of tourists and 6% would be in favour of limiting where tourists could go, in order to minimize contact between tourists and locals (Table 1).

**Interviews**

All three of the interviewed local officials, including villagers, leaders, and locals (Table 1), expressed their opinions on the potential of the villages opening up for tourism. The village leader in Merak stated that ‘increasing population has led to more livestock, and there is pressure on already limited pastureland. More and more of the pastureland has been designated as protected land’. They expressed mixed opinions on the potential of the villages opening up for tourism. The Administrative Officer of Merak felt that ‘the people are not ready to face Western culture’ after the villages’ long isolation.

Similar to the majority of the survey participants, the local administrative officer and the village leaders saw tourism as a secondary source of income for the community. The interviewees saw cultural activities and shows, and the sale of souvenirs such as local clothing as potential activities that the villages could offer to tourists. All three saw a need for training for the local people, to allow them to take up tourism-related jobs.

The three interviewees had varying perspectives on what local people could do to make tourists feel welcome. The village leader of Sakteng suggested that tourists should be welcomed as guests typically are in the local culture through the traditional practice of offering alcohol to guests (chöd), while the village leader of Merak suggested that villagers should provide clean campsites, ensure tourists’ security and offer cultural shows for their entertainment. The Merak–Sakteng administrative officer was concerned with local people assuming an appropriate attitude, stating that ‘People should be frank and friendly to tourists, and they should be open-minded’.

The administrative officer of Merak–Sakteng was of the opinion that ‘there will be more negative impact than positive because of the threat to age old traditions’ brought by tourism. In order to minimize negative impacts of tourism, he stated that ‘the authorities have the duty to educate the public about potential impacts of tourism’ and that ‘a limited number of tourists should be allowed to visit Merak and Sakteng’. He also stated that those earning money from tourism should donate a portion of those earnings to the community, to ensure the distribution of tourism’s financial benefits.

Both village leaders also suggested measures such as public education and limitations on tourist numbers. The Merak village leader expressed that ‘there is a huge risk that our traditional way of life would be lost because of tourism development’, but the Sakteng village leader saw cultural change as going hand-in-hand with economic development, stating that local people ‘might want to have some of the things that tourists have. However, as they move along with development these things would be inevitable.’ He believed that it was the younger generation that would be most affected by the change.

**DISCUSSION**

**Livelihood diversification**

Tourism is welcomed as a supplement, rather than an alternative, to traditional livelihoods in Merak–Sakteng. Most of the surveyed villagers saw tourism as beneficial rather than necessary. While very few rejected the prospect of tourism employment outright, the largest group of villagers saw tourism as a secondary source of income, next to their traditional livelihood of yak herding. Although there was a broad interest among villagers in the potential of serving as providers and earners in the money economy brought by tourism, there was scant indication of interest in participation in consumer culture. None of the respondents mentioned a desire to use earnings from tourism to acquire consumer goods or other trappings of ‘modernity’. Indeed, the incursion of tourism into the local culture was met with apprehension by some, who feared that exposure of local youth to tourists would cause the youth to desire the material goods that tourists bring with them. As expressed by one respondent, ‘Children will be negatively impacted and want new things.’

Likewise, there was little interest in using the earnings of tourism for the development or modernization of the village. Government re-investment of tourism earnings into new infrastructure for the village was favoured by only 22% (compared with over 43% who would rather see the government involved in providing access to jobs and an even greater number preferring that the government provide training). Nearly all of the specific infrastructure improvements or facilities mentioned by survey respondents or interviewees (such as campsites and souvenir shops) were aimed at providing amenities for the tourism trade rather than local people.

For the question as how the money gained from tourism would likely be spent, 65% referred to the purchase of more livestock and yaks. That is to say, they believed the monetary earnings from tourism would likely be converted into the ‘currency’ by which wealth is measured in the traditional local economy – the size of one’s herd. While this provides insight into the motivations for involvement in the tourism economy to preserve the traditional economy, it also forebodes that the ‘livelihood diversification’ through introduction of tourism could potentially exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the problems of overgrazing and land-use conflicts, at worst even possibly leading to lower livelihood security.

This is not intended to detract from previous findings linking local people’s involvement in tourism to a decrease in the economic conditions that drive overexploitation of natural resources and other environmentally unsustainable practices (Tao & Wall, 2007; Ritsma et al., 2010). However, the insights gained through this study do demonstrate that the assessment of the sustainability of livelihoods necessitates a
broader systemic view of a society and its values. That is to say, the perspective of economics must be supplemented with the perspective of livelihoods.

In terms of Scoones (1998) model of livelihoods, some villagers perceive that the influx of financial capital through tourism will be won at the expense of social capital through perceived threats to local traditional values. There is also a perceived risk that this financial capital will be invested in a way that decreases the security of the society’s natural capital (by increasing the threat of overgrazing). There are thus implicit risks to the cultural sustainability of the livelihood strategy emerging from livelihood diversification through the introduction of tourism to Merak–Sakteng. Ironically, at least one element of these risks arises from the ‘success’ of this diversification in supporting the perpetuation of traditional livelihoods.

Benefits and empowerment
Most of the survey respondents believed that everyone in the village should benefit from tourism. In terms of the role of government in tourism in ensuring a fair distribution, respondents showed much higher preference for measures that would facilitate individuals’ employment in tourism (overseeing the fair distribution of jobs and providing training), more than measures that would involve government taking on a co-ordinating role in the running of tourism (by setting up tourism businesses to employ local people) or the investment of tourism earnings (to provide infrastructure for the villages). There was more concern for guaranteeing individual households’ access to tourism livelihoods and a lower acceptance for measures that would bring new forms of outside (governmental) organization or control.

At present, participation and empowerment of local people and communities, which is seen as an essential criterion for sustainable livelihoods (Helmore & Singh, 2001; UNDP & Wanmali, 1999), seems not to have been achieved in Merak and Sakteng. Respondents and interviewees were disappointed by the current lack of information on tourism available to them, as well as the lack of benefits from tourism for the local society. Despite having been trained in tourism skills, local people are not given the chance to earn a livelihood with these skills, and some cited a lack of communication and knowledge transfer to local people about tourism. As stated by one survey participant, ‘No information is distributed to villagers … They don’t know what tourism brings’. As mentioned earlier, at least one tour company brought its own food and used its own guides rather than employing or patronizing local people who have these skills. The director of a tour company stated that it would rather than employing or patronizing local people who have these skills. The introduction of tourism to Merak–Sakteng of the most challenging tasks for him is to impress upon the mountain villagers the importance of meeting the expectations of tourists in terms of hygiene, when cooking or hosting. Mattresses for tourists were not stored properly and often were damaged, such that money earned through the community-based tourism project had to be spent on buying new items to serve tourists, rather than being re-invested in the community or adding to the wealth of local people.

Mitigating and negotiating
Despite all perceived threats and shortcomings, the survey nonetheless revealed a tendency towards an optimistic view of the likely impact of tourism on the local culture and a predominantly welcoming attitude towards tourists. Involvement in the tourism economy was greeted with interest and excitement.

Even as tourism becomes integrated into the livelihood mix of Merak–Sakteng, there are indications that the tourism economy is perceived as something other and largely separate from the traditional local economy, its skills and products. Over 80% were convinced that they would require training beyond their current expertise to participate in the tourism economy. Even when asked about which local activities they feel could be offered for tourists, few traditional livelihood-related activities were mentioned, with the vast majority of respondents suggesting performances such as singing, dancing and cultural shows. This implies a willingness to commodify their cultural assets to create a new economic niche but also indicates a clear division between the skills and products of their traditional livelihoods and those of relevance to the tourism economy.

Although concerned with sustaining their traditional way of life, some villagers saw change in their local culture and economy as unavoidable, even to the point of endangering traditional livelihoods. As one villager commented, ‘If more tourists come to the village, the nomadic lifestyle will disappear as villagers work more in tourism.’ The Sakteng village leader’s statement, that changes in society are ‘inevitable’ with the introduction of tourism, exemplifies this attitude. The case in Botswana, mentioned in the literature review (Mbaiwa, 2010), exemplifies the erosion of traditional livelihoods, practices and values that can be brought by such livelihood diversification. Concern for the sustainability of local livelihoods did not lead to an outright rejection of change through contact with tourists and their cultural values. One villager was of the opinion that ‘Tourists might bring positive impacts as they are concerned for the environment, so we can learn from them.’ The village leader of Sakteng believed that tourists would ‘create awareness of cleanliness’.
The villagers surveyed for this research, belonging predominantly to the current adult generation, display little motivation to take on the values or consumption practices of modern consumer culture. At the same time, several acknowledge the need to plan measures to secure a sustainable future for the local traditional culture and economy. Education emerges as a common strategy proposed for the protection and perpetuation of local cultural values while welcoming the development of tourism. Cultural education was seen by many villagers as important for tourists, to help them to appreciate and respect local cultural norms, as well as for local youth, to instil identification with the local traditional culture to counteract the lure of the modern lifestyles and commodities displayed by tourists.

PROSPECTS

This research has explored the perceptions and expectations of Merak–Sakteng villagers and local leaders regarding the introduction of tourism into the local livelihood mix. This paper does not claim to predict the likelihood (or propose the desirability) of any given outcome but rather has sought to investigate ways in which the cultural and economic value systems of the local society engage the challenges and opportunities brought by this incursion of a foreign system of economic and cultural practices and values. From the perspective of economic anthropology, this paper has demonstrated the enmeshment of economic and social factors in the traditional livelihood of Merak–Sakteng and in the opinions expressed in relation to the actualities and potentials of the nascent tourism economy.

For the present, the value system of the traditional local economy and culture, based on yak herding, predominates. In purely economic terms, the introduction of tourism into the livelihood mix of Merak–Sakteng might be seen as providing the promise of a sustainable future for this traditional livelihood, by removing pressures of overgrazing to make way to environmental sustainability and providing gainful employment for local youth to allow them to remain in the area and carry on the yak herding tradition. Understood in its cultural dimensions, this livelihood mix is characterized by at least two potentially destabilizing factors—the motivation to re-invest tourism earnings to grow one’s herd and increase land-use pressure and the temptation faced by the younger generation to abandon traditional livelihoods and the traditional barter economy for money-earning employment or entrepreneurship in the tourism industry, in order to purchase consumer goods in the money economy.

While the current adult generation strive for greater herds of yak to express their wealth (leading to overgrazing and land-use conflicts) and assign little value to the cash-based economy as such, the current young generation may be better able to operate within both of these value systems simultaneously. In view of this, it is crucial that the younger generation do not perceive that they must make a choice between their traditions and their aspirations for economic development but rather that they are given motivations to strike a balance, in recognition that the two can be (indeed must be) mutually supporting within a sustainable livelihood mix. The skills-building initiatives of the government are a necessary component of this, but these must be coupled with checks on the accountability of tour operators in patronizing local people and with competence-building and empowerment among the younger generation to allow them to take part in the planning and administration of tourism, not just the provision of services. This can allow them to appreciate the co-dependence of conservation, tourism and their traditional ways of life.

Livelihood sustainability does not imply livelihood stasis, and to suggest a choice between preservation and deterioration of a traditional culture and economy would be an oversimplification. The development of a sustainable livelihood mix in Merak–Sakteng will be an ongoing process of negotiation between cultural and economic values and value systems based in tradition and modernity, all of which are also constantly co-evolving. The outcomes of this process cannot be prescribed or predicted. However, certain shortcomings of the current situation, such as the lack of participation and empowerment of the Merak–Sakteng villagers in the planning and development of tourism, will need to be addressed as a necessary prerequisite for achieving a sustainable mix between the two livelihood niches and a sustainable livelihood future for Merak–Sakteng.

REFERENCES

Sustainable Livelihoods in Bhutan


