

Participation and governance challenges along the Nabji community-based ecotourism trail in Bhutan

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Entrance to the Nabji Community-Based Ecotourism Trail

Abstract

The Nabji Trail was created in 2006 in Bhutan's Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park as the country's first community-based ecotourism project. The goals of the Nabji Trail were to extend tourism to remote communities in need of socioeconomic opportunities while also building local capacity to manage ecotourism activities and stewarding environmental resources. This study examined participation and governance during the first five years of its operation (2006–2010). Participation in the

Nabji Trail ecotourism activities was found to differ between villages comprised of the two key ethnic groups, Monpa and Khengpa. The Monpa villages are located deep within the forest and had relatively few income generating opportunities, low food security and were more willing to engage in Nabji Trail tourism activities than residents from the Khengpa communities. The Khengpa are located closer to the main road and have alternative income generating activities and higher food security. Developing fair and consistent pricing for tourism activities, maintaining

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stable leadership in “community tourism management committees” and following transparent and democratic processes to allocate “community development funds” were challenges found in all Monpa and Khengpa villages; as a result, ecotourism providers were questioning and even resisting paying 10% of their tourist earnings to community development fund accounts. This paper discusses the factors within and across villages, as well as with national tourist operators, which complicate widespread participation and stable governance, and recommends greater attention be paid to monitoring and backstopping from supra-community collaborators involved in the project.

Keywords: Community-based ecotourism, Bhutan, governance, participation

Introduction

Ecotourism has been widely touted in developing countries as a means to enhance rural livelihoods while supporting biodiversity conservation in and around national parks and protected areas (Fennell 1999; Weaver 2001; Garrard 2003). Bhutan has followed a policy of controlled tourism known as “high value, low impact” since 1974 in an effort to avoid problems associated with mass tourism (Royal Government of Bhutan [RGoB] 2002), and it has more recently encouraged ecotourism in the hope that it will contribute to national socioeconomic and conservation objectives (Rinzin et al. 2007). Tourism in Bhutan in general faces many challenges, including seasonal fluctuations in the number of tourists, few repeat visitors, and reliance on a few key tourist attractions and sites (Wangmo 2008). Rural communities and villagers in Bhutan have benefitted little from tourism, even along the most popular trekking routes such as Jomolhari and Gangkar Puensum (Gurung & Seeland 2008).

To extend the benefits of ecotourism to rural communities in need of socioeconomic opportunities and to support national conservation objectives, “community-based ecotourism” has been promoted on the assumption that it will better enable local

residents and communities to participate in the design and governance of ecotourism activities and thereby derive higher benefits (Ross & Wall 1999; Campbell 2002; Scheyvens 2002). The Nabji Trail was established in Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park (JSWNP) as Bhutan’s first community-based ecotourism initiative. The decision to establish the Nabji Trail in JSWNP was based on a number of factors. First, cultural and ecological resources in the area were thought to be of considerable interest to international tourists, notably the two ethnic groups, Monpa and Khengpa. The forest-dwelling Monpa maintain relatively traditional lifestyles as well as extensive forest cover with diverse wildlife species including golden langurs (*Trachypithecus geei*), tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), Himalayan black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*), leopards (*Panthera pardus*), sambar deer (*Cervus unicolor*), rufous-necked hornbills (*Aceros nipalensis*) and numerous reptiles. Second, households participating in the Nabji Trail have among the lowest incomes anywhere in Bhutan (Wang & Macdonald 2006). Third, local livelihoods in both ethnic communities have been adversely affected by JSWNP policies, particularly prohibiting hunting and resin collection, and by livestock predation and crop damage. In response to the above, JSWNP personnel developed Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDP) to develop supplementary income generating opportunities supportive of conservation including introducing improved cattle breeds for dairy production, providing metal roofing to replace wood shingles, assisting with marketing non-timber forest product handicrafts, and most recently, promoting ecotourism through creating the Nabji Trail (Spierenburg & Namgyel 2002).

The Nabji Trail has been celebrated as the first community-based tourism project in Bhutan utilizing a participatory management approach involving local communities and multiple stakeholders (Wangmo 2008). It was created by an array of consultants from SNV Netherlands Development Organization, Yellowstone National Park (USA), the Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO), and Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) Nature Conservation Division (SNV 2014), and would

involve management across different and linked levels.

At the community-level is the Community Tourism Management Committee (CTMC). Five CTMCs were developed along the Trail, two in Monpa and three in Khengpa communities. Each CTMC would comprise 5–6 elected representatives (both men and women); each would have a Secretary and Accountant with the remaining serving in supportive roles. The main functions of the CTMC are to arrange public meetings to involve local residents in the project including to organize and recruit labor to build and maintain campsites, and to offer tourism services. The key tourism services include providing pony transport and serving as porters, guides, and cooks, and offering cultural entertainment, hot stone baths, and the sale of local farm products and handicrafts. Each CTMC is authorized to collect 10% of tourism earnings by residents to deposit into a “Community Development Fund” (CDF). Formal bylaws stipulate that each CTMC is to equitably and transparently distribute tourism revenues held in the CDF through various schemes including providing individual loans, supporting local or community activities, and compensating farmers for crop damage and livestock depredation by wildlife as funds are available.

To arrange for tourists, ensure community benefit-sharing, and align tourism with local and national socioeconomic and environmental conservation concerns, the organizational structure of the Nabji Trail called for the CTMC to be further linked to Bhutanese private tourism agencies and foreign donors who would provide assistance with governance, monitoring and general back-stopping. The Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators was to assist with marketing, local tourism training, logistical arrangements, and managing budgets. Bhutanese officials from JSWNP and the Nature Conservation Division (NCD) were to provide training related to natural resource management and conservation. Finally, SNV Netherlands would provide advice regarding policy and strategic development, community mobilization, business training, and environmental conservation. The

cumulative impact of these linked and multi-tiered governance actors were advocated to strengthen the capacity of Bhutan’s Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry, to enhance local economic benefits from tourism. Finally, a project steering committee was to be established comprised of representatives from all levels to oversee the Nabji Trail project (SNV 2014; Dorji, S. no date).

But how has the intended structure enabled participation and effective governance in practice? There are no published studies to date that examine these processes within the Nabji community-based ecotourism effort or for other burgeoning community-based ecotourism efforts in Bhutan. As such, this study asked how the project has fared with regard to community participation and effective governance along the Nabji Trail. A second objective was to identify lessons learned from the Nabji Trail, which could possibly inform other community-based ecotourism efforts being developed in remote, rural areas of Bhutan.

Background

Studies around the world suggest that despite optimism and significant investments, community-based ecotourism often fails to meet intended conservation and community development objectives (Belsky 1999; Kontogeorgopoulos 2005; Nault & Stapleton 2011). The reasons for their shortcomings are multiple and range from challenges with regard to implementing programs to critical concerns related to their appropriateness to particular contexts, and how they engage environment and development paradigms and priorities (Buscher & Davidov 2013).

Income generation and other types of benefits in ecotourism programs are linked to participation and type of tourism activities offered (Tosun 2000). Internal divisions based on class, family affiliation, and political ties have resulted in a few well-connected households participating and disproportionately benefiting from ecotourism, which can exacerbate socioeconomic differentiation and social

conflicts within communities (Belsky 1999; Cousins & Kepe 2004). Community involvement alone will not ensure secure or equitable benefit sharing in remote communities (Blackstock 2005; Kontogeorgopoulos 2005; Li 2006; Simpson 2008). Even where households benefit financially, ecotourism earnings are often unpredictable, fluctuate seasonally, and are highly sensitive to broader economic and political events (Stem et al. 2003). Additionally, whether tourist activities replace or supplement historic livelihood activities and income sources is an important element in indigenous ecotourism and its role in promoting sustainable development (Ramos & Prideaux 2014).

Tourism scholars are increasingly paying attention to governance in tourism activities (Bramwell & Lane 2011). Governance refers to an array of actions and practices that can provide direction and potentially enhance democratic practices and benefits or not. Effective governance is that which enables goals and objectives to be met, and requires tailored institutions, decision-making rules and enforcement practices as well as coordination across different scales and over time. Effective governance in tourism is challenging because it threads through layers of formal and informal socio-political processes and relationships in any given context, and which are often complex, uncertain and contentious (Bramwell & Lane 2011; Buscher & Davidov 2013).

Community-based tourism by definition involves a high level of participation by destination communities, but its effective governance requires multi-level support and coordination from local to higher levels. The principle of subsidiarity argues that tasks should be accomplished by the lowest organizations that can do them, with larger or higher organizations assuming them only when they fail. But Lafferty and Coenen (2001, 296) suggest that in promoting community management (or subsidiarity)... “What at first appears to be a clear-cut norm in favor of decentralization emerges on closer investigation as a very elastic norm in favor of integrated, multi-level pragmatic governance”.

They suggest that where local residents and communities lack management capacity, it will be very problematic if higher levels do not provide support, especially when management models based on external and unfamiliar governance institutions are employed. While their research was conducted in the European Union, research elsewhere suggests their findings ring true there as well. For example, based on long-term work in Mongolia, Nault and Stapleton (2011) conclude that community-based ecotourism development in remote areas necessitates close collaboration and sustained support from trusted community leaders and from knowledgeable and committed outside stakeholders. Wearing and McDonald (2002) also highlight the importance of relationships between tour operators and development agents as intermediaries in assisting isolated, rural communities with ecotourism activities.

Study sites

The Nabji Trail is located in southern Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park about two hours' drive south from Trongsa or six hours from the international airport in Paro. The trail starts and ends at highway roadside points and traverses six villages inhabited by two different ethnic groups: Monpa and Khengpa. The Monpa reside in the villages of Jangbi, Wangling and Phrumzur, while Khengpa live in Nimshong, Nabji and Korphu (Fig. 1). The villages are located 1100–1500 meters above sea level in subtropical broadleaf forests and Chir pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) forests.

There are significant demographic, socio-economic and administrative differences between the Monpa and Khengpa. The Monpa villages are smaller than Khengpa communities, more remote and more dependent upon forest livelihoods. The Monpa are thought to be the earliest inhabitants of Bhutan and one of the most traditional in terms of their culture and livelihoods; they speak a unique dialect, share joint family, mutual exchange forms of labor, and remain a close-knit community. They are also among the least formally educated and poorest inhabitants of Bhutan. The Monpas were historically hunters, forest product gatherers

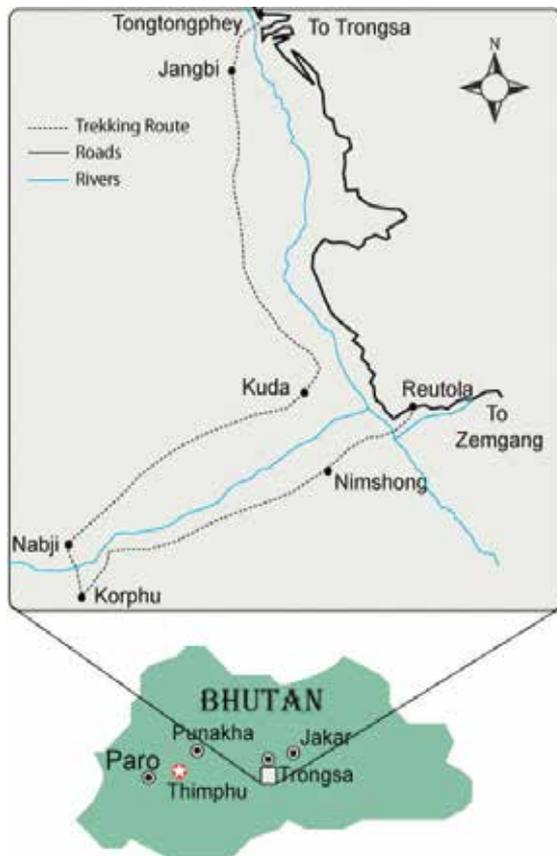


FIGURE 1 Map of the study area.

and swidden farmers and thus depended upon forest resources. However, many of their historic livelihoods including swidden, hunting, and chir pine resin tapping have been prohibited or altered by RGoB policies and regulations that were adopted to protect forest resources within the national park. Most recently, the Monpa subsist by selling cane and bamboo handicrafts and off-farm wage labor when available (Spirienburg & Namgyel 2002; Giri 2004; Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry 2007).

In contrast, the Khengpa villages of Korphu, Nabji and Kuda are located closer to the road and have access to a wider array of modern resources and livelihood opportunities. Unlike the Monpa, the Khengpa have access to agricultural and grazing land, cultivate irrigated rice as well as corn, and have more cattle, which they rely on to produce and sell

dairy products. In the 1990s Khengpa farmers grew substantial amounts of cardamom, which, until a disease eliminated the crop, provided income to construct new houses. The Khengpa also engage in off-farm wage labor when opportunities are available (Giri 2004; Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry 2007).

Methods

The data upon which this paper is based are largely qualitative and collected from numerous sources including review of existing reports, newspaper accounts, published articles and face-to-face interviews conducted in 2010–2011. Qualitative methods were selected because they are suitable for studying new phenomena and for providing in-depth understanding of phenomena rather than testing hypotheses and forming highly

generalizable theories (Guba & Lincoln 1989). We developed two semi-structured questionnaires: one for interviewing CTMC leaders and one for use with households. The questionnaire for CTMC leaders asked about personal roles, responsibilities, activities and governance concerns whereas the household questionnaire inquired about household livelihood activities, knowledge of and participation in different ecotourism activities including service provision, CTMC meetings and allocation of the CDF. The questionnaire ensured consistency of topics and questions while permitting conversations to range in response to the interests and concerns of individuals being interviewed. The questionnaire was pretested and revised accordingly. The first author (a native Bhutanese) conducted the interviews with translation assistance as needed. The long-term involvement of the first author with the communities involved in the study ensured that the questionnaire was both relevant and culturally sensitive (i.e., as a long-term employee of the national park in charge of integrated conservation and development programs).

We attempted to interview every CTMC leader in 2006; we were able to interview 12 (86%) of 14 current CTMC members since two members were unable to be interviewed due to illness or absence from the village. We re-interviewed leaders from Nabji and Wangling in 2012 and 2014 to assess general changes over time. We conducted interviews with community members, following the sampling design outlined by Nyaupane & Thapa (2004). This involved selecting every third household from a list provided by the national census registry office to reach approximately 25% of households in each village. This sampling scheme was employed in villages with more than 15 households (Khengpa villages of Nimshong, Nabji and Korphu and Monpa village of Wangling). In villages with less than 15 households, we spoke with every household. Where the selected sample household could not be interviewed, we selected the next household on the census list. A total of 68 households were interviewed, which represented 28% of all households in the study area ($N = 244$).

We interviewed 27 (40%) Monpa and 41 (60%) Khengpa households. Interviews were conducted with either the elder male or female in each household depending upon who was available and willing to speak at the time.

The data were analyzed for key themes and linkages across the data sets. A limitation of the study is detailed attention to micro-dynamics within villages and across the two ethnic communities may be difficult to follow. Also as consistent with case study and qualitative studies, they do not result in broad generalizations. Nonetheless, as used here, we suggest they provide in-depth understanding of actual “lived” experience along the Nabji Trail community-based ecotourism effort, however messy this may be.

Results and discussion

The Nabji Trail opened in November 2006. The Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry (2007) and ABTO (Dorji n.d.) conducted socioeconomic impact assessments after the first year of operation and Gurung and Seeland (2008) evaluated the project in 2007. Dorji (n.d.) reported investing US\$ 74,775 to establish the Nabji Trail. Data on the number of tourists and revenue received by different stakeholders are available only for 2006 and 2007. These data reveal that tour operators and the RGoB (through required tourism royalty payments) captured most of the revenues during the first two years of operation (Table 1). The data also reveal that the number of tourists declined from 65 in 2006 to just 19 in 2013.

The studies by ABTO (Dorji n.d) and the Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry (2007) suggest strong initial local interest in providing ecotourism services but that there was disparity in revenues received by households in the two ethnic groups, Monpa and Khengpa. Gurung and Seeland (2008) reported that revenue earned from porter and pony wages, and the sale of local products was very low compared to off-farm wages in all villages. The Department of Tourism, Ministry of Trade and Industry (2007) study noted

TABLE 1 Revenue (US\$ and %) by stakeholder group.

| Year | Number of Tourists | Community | Tour Operators | RGoB (royalties) |
|------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|
| 2006 | 64 | 1,820 (3.5%) | 12,983 (25%) | 37,440 (72%) |
| 2007 | 35 | 2,680 (4%) | 16,432 (25%) | 47,385 (71%) |
| 2008 | 35 | | | |
| 2009 | 51 | | | |
| 2010 | 39 | | | |
| 2011 | 22 | | | |
| 2012 | 14 | | | |
| 2013 | 19 | | | |

conflicts in governance by CTMCs in two of the villages, particularly regarding the collection and use of community development funds (CDF); in Phrumzur and Nabji village residents voted no confidence in the capacity of their CTMC to manage CDF accounts. Our results reveal that these patterns continued and in fact, worsened in subsequent years.

Household participation in ecotourism activities along the Nabji Trail

Participation in ecotourism activities along the Nabji Trail were generally different between Monpa and Khengpa households. In Monpa villages, approximately 95% of those interviewed in 2010 reported high willingness to accept tourism work (e.g., serving as porters, cooks or providing entertainment) and to rarely pass up the chance to accept work when available. Only in the event of extreme illness did residents decline opportunities to work and so pass it to someone else. One Monpa man stated, “my household has never refused tourism work even when it is a busy farming season because we take it as an opportunity to earn revenue”. Another Monpa said, “I have always taken the work because firstly I am paid the wages and secondly it is very indispensable to build up the reputation with tour agents and tourists.” Only one respondent from the Monpa villages reported never accepting tourism work since the beginning of the project because there was sufficient income produced by a family member employed at the Jangbi Community School.

Interest in tourism work among Khengpa village households was mixed. The Khengpa villages of Nabji and Jangbi were similar to Monpa communities: 92% and 100% of respondents stated that they always accept tourism work whenever available because it provides much needed revenue. These respondents said they were eager to provide porter and pack pony services during the tourist season as they do not conflict with agricultural activities. One respondent stated, “I am interested to offer service. I never think porter service is a burden. Rather it is an opportunity to generate revenue because it rightly occurs during agriculture off-season”. Only one respondent had never accepted tourism work and that was because the household lacked available labor and had a family member receiving income as a cook in the Nabji Primary School.

In contrast, only 35% of respondents in the Khengpa village of Korphu said they would accept tourism work and interest has declined since the project began. In Korphu, 50% of households said they accepted at least one ecotourism activity since 2006, but the other half were not involved due to limited household labor and the availability of alternative income opportunities (such as serving as a teacher and cook in a school, or as village head lama). Korphu always received the fewest number of tourists among all villages due primarily to its location (i.e., it is close to Nabji and does not require an overnight stay or use of porters and access involves a steep climb). In addition there are reportedly fewer natural and

cultural attractions in Korphu than in the other communities and communication and payment problems between Korphu and tour operators were reported.

In the village of Nimshong, resident participation in tourism gradually decreased over time. Respondents noted that their interest in tourism declined due to their preference to provide porter services to visiting government and other officials outside the official Nabji Trail project because they can charge a higher daily rate and as independent workers are not required to contribute 10% of their earnings to the Nabji Trail Community Development Fund. Another interviewee stated that her household was actively involved in providing porter services to tourists in the first two years when she had a pack pony, but after the horse died she provided porter services (i.e., carrying goods on her back) only for government officials because she did not have to contribute to the CDF account.

One additional factor explaining the greater willingness of Monpa villagers to accept ecotourism work is their low food security and need for income to purchase food (Table 2). Low household food security here is defined as limited access to food and is due to small landholdings among villagers in all three Monpa communities in which to grow food or a commodity to sell and purchase food. Most Monpa households lacked sufficient food to meet

annual household needs even after purchasing additional grain. Enhanced food security and infrastructure development, particularly road access, have led residents in the Khengpa villages of Nimshong, Nabji and Korphu to engage in more contract work and less in tourism. Thus, alternative income opportunity is an important factor in determining household participation in tourism and differences in income earned by households.

Governance challenges associated with the Community Tourism Management Committee and Community Development Fund

A major reason for establishing CTMCs was to develop community-level capacity to implement and govern tourism activities including maintaining campsites and trails, equitably distributing pony and porter opportunities, collecting tourism surcharge fees, and managing the CDF. This study found important issues as well as differences between how CTMCs operated between Monpa and Khengpa villages, with the latter experiencing considerably more problems as described below.

CTMCs in two of the three Monpa villages were able to carry out their responsibilities to maintain campsites and arrange porters and

TABLE 2 Household food security* along the Nabji Trail (%).

| Village | Not enough | Just enough | More than enough |
|----------------|------------|-------------|------------------|
| <i>Monpa</i> | | | |
| Jangbi | 100 | | |
| Wangling | 100 | | |
| Phrumzur | 100 | | |
| <i>Khengpa</i> | | | |
| Nimshong | 79 | 21 | |
| Nabji | 36 | 28 | 36 |
| Korphu | 30 | 70 | |

* Food security here defines access to food over the course of a year. *Not enough* refers to insufficient staple grain from own production or purchase to feed the household over the prior year; *Just enough* means staple grains from own production or purchase were just enough to feed the household over the prior year; and *More than enough* denotes staple grain supplies lasted the year with a surplus.

pack ponies in a timely and equitable manner. CTMC members in two villages regularly met at the end of each tourist season with village residents to report the status of the CDF. The one exception was in Wangling where no CTMC meeting has ever been convened. In the Monpa village of Phrumzur, the three CTMC members were particularly active; the Accountant served as the acting Secretary, while the other two members served as guide and cook. No one from these Monpa villages raised concerns regarding CTMC members. The small size of Monpa villages, shared norms and labor exchange, and widespread interest in participating in tourist work may explain the relatively smooth operation of local governance committees in two of three participating villages.

CTMC membership in two of the Khengpa villages has been in flux and has adversely affected their ability to carry out tourism management responsibilities. In 2010, the Secretary of Phrumzur CTMC stepped down due to health reasons while leaders from Nimshong and Korphu resigned because they said there was a lack of cooperation among the committee and little incentive for them to serve as leaders.

Another contentious issue in both Monpa and Khengpa communities has been establishing and enforcing consistent and equitable wages for porters and those using pack ponies. There has been conflict over determining the number of days to be paid for portering (i.e., one way or round trip) and wages charged in the Nabji Trail project in comparison to the rates government officials will pay. For example, the government calculates the distance between Jangbi and Kuda campsites as two days even though it can be traveled in one day. Tour operators will pay for only one day, thus villagers are reluctant to accept the work. Despite several attempts by a concerned CTMC Secretary, specifically requesting involvement of higher level, back-stopping bodies (i.e., JSWNP, TCB and ABTO) as stipulated in project planning documents, none have provided assistance and the conflict persists.

On more than one occasion, porter and pack pony providers have not been paid or paid after

long delays. One particularly egregious example occurred in 2008 when a tour agent ran short of money and failed to pay porters for their services. This led the community to vote “no confidence” against the CTMC. Since the CTMC is responsible for collecting monies from tour agents and paying service providers, failure to address payment problems leads to suspicion among community members that CTMC members are misusing monies or that they are incompetent. The lack of external oversight or monitoring by supra-level governance authorities has contributed to governance dysfunction and warrants intervention.

A key responsibility of CTMCs is management of CDFs. CDFs were envisioned as a means for communities to collectively benefit and support tourism above and beyond what individual tourism service providers might earn. The primary source of CDF monies in both Monpa and Khengpa communities are campsite fees (i.e., US\$ 7/person/night). A secondary source is the 10% surcharge paid into the funds by tourism service providers.

Among the Monpa villages, 75% of those interviewed knew about the existence of the CDF compared to 90% in the Khengpa villages; but few members from either ethnic community were aware of the exact amount of money in the CDF nor how the funds were actually allocated. According to CTMC leaders, CDF monies in Monpa villages were used to purchase items for the tourist kitchens, propane petroleum gas for cooking meals for tourists, prepaid vouchers for cell phones used to arrange porter and pack pony services, as well as to construct a prayer wheel in the community temple. In the Monpa villages, CDF monies were used to provide interest-free loans to individuals in need. Approximately 20% of Monpa households reported having received CDF loans and the monies have been used for funeral expenses, to help purchase pack horses, and in one case, to construct a new house and upgrade a rice mill. Among the Khengpa, CDF monies were largely used to purchase goods and gas used in tourist kitchens and to maintain campsites; no funds were allocated to personal loans.

The formal bylaws established by the project require joint approval by a CTMC Secretary and Accountant for CDF monies to be allocated. However, in practice funding allocations were made in more ad hoc ways. For example, over 50% of Monpa respondents stated that the CTMC Accountant alone decided and approved the allocation of CDF monies. In Khengpa villages, the majority of respondents stated that the CTMC Secretary unilaterally decided how to dispense CDFs. However, many did not approve of this practice and suggested that as a consequence CDF contributions should be discontinued; they did not want to pay 10% of their tourism earnings into the account because they lacked confidence in the CTMC and its governance of the CDF. This issue has not been addressed at any meetings according to those interviewed for this study and has resulted in growing frustration and distrust among CTMC members.

Efforts to resolve governance problems varied a great deal with no clear consensus among either Monpa or Khengpa communities as to how they should proceed in the future. Some in the Monpa CTMC suggested that involving a village *Tshogpa* (village head man) could potentially help resolve disagreements. Their rationale was that the village *Tshogpa* is elected by the community and is involved in community activities. This suggestion is surprising because the Monpa do not generally welcome higher level Bhutanese government administrative involvement, given their distrust of these administrators as foreign political bodies. Others suggested involving non-community members, specifically a JSWNP Ranger, on the assumption that a ranger is objective and, given his authority, could provide incentives for those who receive loans to repay them in a timely manner. However, not all respondents shared this view: one CTMC member felt that no one outside the CTMC should be involved in CDF decisions. One Khengpa community member suggested governance problems could be improved if the local *Gup* (local leader) was involved in CDF allocation decisions because this would increase CDF transparency. However, others disagreed, arguing that involving a local government official would

favor government development needs. For example, when consulted, the *Gup* instructed the Khengpa to use CDF monies to construct a residence for health staff at Nabji village rather than renovating campsites or trails.

In summary, within Monpa communities CTMC membership was stable and some individuals have benefitted from CDF monies, especially as interest-free loans. Nevertheless, concerns remain regarding how CDF funds are allocated and how loans are repaid. There were also concerns about the limited number of tourists. Among the Khengpa, CTMC membership was unstable and there was widespread community concern regarding the ability of CTMCs to ensure tourism payments and their ability to address community concerns. They also reported concern over the governance of CDFs. There was no consensus among either ethnic group regarding how to resolve conflicts related to the lack of accountability and transparency.

Additional governance challenges related to environmental impacts

There are additional governance challenges related to potential environmental impacts along the Nabji Trail. One is deteriorating trail conditions caused by migratory cattle herds coming to and from Bumthang, especially among the Monpa communities. Five migratory cattle herds use the trail annually (each October and April); they enter the Nabji Trail from Tongtophy and pass through Nabji village. Maintaining the trail requires a great deal of labor by Monpa residents, which, while mandatory, are provided on a volunteer basis. The amount of labor that is required to maintain trail conditions suitable for tourists concerns many villagers. The CTMCs of Jangbi and Phrumzur coordinate trail maintenance by requesting labor contributions from each household.

Further implications

While better governance is clearly needed, a further question is whether rural tourism along the Nabji Trail, or elsewhere in Bhutan, can be relied upon to generate sufficient

income to warrant continued capital and labor investments. The Nabji Trail is primarily a winter trek due to adverse weather, and insect and leech conditions in other seasons. In addition, the trail is moderately strenuous and involves rustic camping. The high cost of visiting Bhutan (\$250/person/day) attracts a clientele that is largely wealthy, elderly and not interested in trekking involving camping; most visitors to Bhutan come for cultural and religious purposes rather than for trekking. Those interested in trekking are likely to seek dramatic, high Himalayan vistas, which the Nabji trail does not offer and which can be accessed near Paro and Thimphu without the lengthy travel required to reach the Nabji trail. The time and cost of traveling to Nabji along with the campground fees (\$7/person/night) may also dissuade tour operators from booking clients to the trail as it will reduce their profit margins. In fact, one CTMC leader from the Nabji Trail reported that tour operators prefer to take clients to other areas to avoid paying the Nabji Trail camping fees. Thus, prospects for significantly increasing the number of visitors and revenue earned by households and communities along the Nabji Trail are likely to be limited. These constraints are relevant for the Nabji Trail and other community-based ecotourism efforts under consideration in Bhutan, especially in remote and distant places such as in rural ecotourism activities in Merak and Sakteng, as reported in Kuensel (Wangdi 2012). Here too it is only a handful of households with horses hired for portering that benefit from ecotourism; tour operators are even refusing to use services of local guides and cooks.

Conclusion

There was great hope that the Nabji Community-Based Ecotourism Trail would inspire broad participation, generate income for remote and impoverished households, and increase community-based governance capacity. During the first two years of operation, the Nabji Trail did produce additional income; however, the majority of these earnings were captured by tour operators and the RGoB, and the funds

that reached the local level were not evenly distributed among households, villages or the two major ethnic groups, Monpa and Khengpa. As noted in Table 1, the number of tourists visiting the Nabji Trail has declined considerably since 2009, totaling just 19 in 2013.

Across the Nabji Trail, CTMC membership over the study's time period has been unstable and lacked ongoing and effective leadership. There has been little trust among residents in all villages that CTMCs are capable of managing tourism services, particularly setting and receiving fair prices for portering and using pack ponies. In addition, respondents in all villages expressed concerns that CTMC guidelines and bylaws have not been followed, that the allocation of CDF monies was problematic and not transparent, and that there has been a serious lack of monitoring of project activities. Indeed, there has been no external monitoring nor efforts made to resolve governance problems as proposed in project plans. As a consequence, village tourism providers are increasingly questioning and even resisting paying 10% of their tourist earnings to CDF accounts.

These findings have implications for the future operation of the Nabji Trail and for other efforts to develop participatory, community-based ecotourism in Bhutan. The need for effective, stable and committed local leadership, and the limited and inequitable distribution of funds earned from ecotourism are particularly challenging. There remains a need for the roles of different agencies involved in the Nabji effort to be clarified and strengthened, a finding echoed in a newspaper article on the project (Chetri 2011). Sustained collaboration from JSWNP, ABTO, the Tourism Council of Bhutan (TCB), and block levels of government occurred while the project was being established but has not been maintained; there has been little or no oversight (let alone adaptive learning and management) in the years that followed. As noted in the international literature, even decentralized, community-based tourism efforts require multi-layer assistance; it is particularly critical to assist isolated, rural

communities with no experience managing tourism enterprises. The long-term viability of community-based ecotourism in Bhutan and elsewhere as reported in the literature would be greatly enhanced by more active and sustained collaboration by trusted community leaders and knowledgeable and committed outside stakeholders.

In conclusion, the experience of the Nabji Trail should be considered in efforts to develop community-based ecotourism elsewhere in Bhutan. It calls attention to the challenge of not just envisioning and initially establishing good governance institutions and procedures, but providing ongoing monitoring and adaptation along the way. It also reveals how conditions for community and household participation and benefits connect strongly to site-specific, contextual characteristics including ethnicity, location, and access to strategic resources such as horses, household labor, and competing livelihood activities. This study suggests that community-based ecotourism in Bhutan under certain conditions can provide limited and supplemental income (i.e., to Monpa households) but most likely on a seasonal basis and only for some communities and households. Among the highly isolated Monpa with few means to earn cash, households (especially those with resources such as horses) had incentive to engage in ecotourism activities and monies provided from ecotourism-related community development funds provided much welcomed emergency loans and community projects. In addition, the number of tourists interested in visiting remote areas is limited and the high cost and relatively old age of tourists to Bhutan suggests limited possibilities for increasing visitation. This suggests that community-based ecotourism might, in some cases, provide limited supplementary income to some individuals and households, but is not likely to be reliable as a permanent, full-season livelihood. It also suggests that new income generating activities such as ecotourism should be careful to supplement and not compete or conflict with historic food production activities. Lastly, while this study

focused on participation and governance, attention to environmental conservation attitudes, behaviors and ecosystem processes is necessary as well to determine to what extent community-based ecotourism can result in the range of benefits advocated by its proponents.

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