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Reviving Ancient Stories and Crafts at Wangduechhoeling

In Bumthang, centuries of dirt was meticulously removed to reveal a dragon’s eye etched into an ancient Jamji (tea kettle). Ms. Utsa Gurung and her team from the Department of Conservation have restored many such artifacts in the past months, marking the start of the second phase of the Wangduechhoeling Palace Project, which will bring together museum galleries, exhibition designs, and a working royal residence to tell the story of Bhutan’s national origins, and provide a touchstone for its future.

THE WANGDUECHHOELING PALACE WAS ONCE a vibrant home to Bhutan’s first Kings and Queens. Located in the Bumthang Valley, Bhutan’s spiritual heartland and geographic center, it centered a network of caravan routes that criss-crossed the country before the advent of motorized travel, and was in a strategic position from which the country’s monarchs could rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Palace served as a symbol of victory and the beginning of a prosperous and peaceful future for the nation.

After decades of disuse, the Palace had fallen into a state of disrepair. The Foundation, together with the Department of Culture, has since embarked on a multi-year project to restore and conserve the Palace to its original brilliance. With structural repairs, painting, and other restoration work and renovations complete, the project has now entered its second phase – the documentation and conservation of artifacts, as well as the planning and design of museum exhibits.

A team of conservators, exhibition designers, master craftsmen, contemporary artists, and tech developers are collaborating to recreate the stories of Jigme Namgyel, father of Bhutan’s first King, Ugyen Wangchuck, and his retinue. Visitors will be able to immerse themselves in these stories in the King’s chamber and antechamber, as well as other galleries where they will discover the Wangduechhoeling Mela (Fair) – a widely attended celebration initiated by His Majesty Jigme Wangchuck, the second King of Bhutan.

These stories are further brought to life through an extensive collection of 415 manuscripts dated from 1850 to 1870, of which 39 have been translated from Tibetan to English. These texts contribute to a growing body of literature on Bhutan’s history and will serve as a valuable reference for scholars.

The team is now acquiring and commissioning items for the galleries, offering guidance and support to the artists and companies who are contributing their expertise. To preserve

Wangduechhoeling Palace’s intricate paints have been fully restored with traditional techniques that are no longer used in Bhutan.

and promote the unique basketry techniques that are used to hold treasured items, the team is collaborating with a master Tsharzo weaver, one of the last remaining master basket weavers in Bhutan, to revive this art form and create products for the museum shop. To further immerse guests in the local culture, the Museum will feature a café offering a selection of traditional Bumthang cuisine.

Through this collaboration of passionate conservationists, stories and art forms are being revived for visitors who will gain a deeper understanding of life in ancient Bhutan, the monarchs who lived in the Palace, and cultural traditions that continue to shape the country today.
In the aftermath of the pandemic, the country is witnessing a whirlwind of economic, social and political reforms. It’s not only a time where Bhutanese are called to come together under a shared identity and mission, but one where creativity, participation and capacity building at the local level are of utmost importance.

**Project Citizen Takes Inclusive Planning to Rural Bhutan**

In Paro, a group of young people from Shaba High School have come together to clean a drinking water source in Kiso village. And in the southeastern part of Bhutan, in Samdrup Jongkhar, college students from Jigme Namgyel Engineering College have solved an open defection problem at their local monastery by building seven public toilets. How have these groups managed to coalesce around collective issues so effectively?

Young Bhutanese are increasingly taking collective action to address their community issues, spurred on by Project Citizen – an initiative of the Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy (BCMD). At the core of this project is the Gross National Happiness-based Toolkit funded by the Bhutan Foundation which serves as the cornerstone of their participatory planning process workshops. This new approach to local government planning is enabling citizens to create meaningful and lasting changes in their communities.

Each district in Bhutan is made up of gewogs – communities with their own distinct demographics, economies, and challenges. Unfortunately, local governments have long taken an un informsed approach to planning, leading to a lack of consideration for the unique needs of their communities. Project Citizen updates this traditional view by giving community members a voice in the planning process — and it’s working.

Group consultations guided by this new approach have sparked powerful insights among their participants, particularly young people. As Bhutan’s social landscape has changed, a growing divide between the challenges faced by young adults and their elders has become apparent. Young people who took part in these trainings were thrilled for the opportunity to express their needs and government officials also gained valuable insight into their blind spots, resulting in tangible policy changes.

Since its inception in 2015, over 1,700 Bhutanese citizens have been trained in Project Citizen’s participatory planning process, from teachers and elected local leaders, to local government administrators and young people.

As Bhutan recovers from the pandemic, BCMD is bringing Project Citizen to the country’s rural districts, where local leaders are often illiterate, demands are higher, and community needs are more complex. With support for this initiative going directly toward training local government officials and residents on the participatory planning process, proactive changes to local government planning are making a huge difference for communities across Bhutan.

**The Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy conducting a participatory planning workshop for teachers and students**

**Gross National Happiness-based Participatory Planning Toolkits used during a workshop with Bhutan Centre for Media and Democracy**

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**Image:**  A participatory planning workshop featuring a wide range of local stakeholders

**Recovering Together | Page 5**

Scan here for more about this project.

**Update 2023 | Page 6**
Coming Together for Inclusive Education

Deputy Chief Pema Chhogyel of the Ministry of Education and Skills Development closed an orientation in Thimphu on a somber, yet hopeful note. A visually impaired man himself, Pema spoke at length about the challenges and discriminations he has encountered throughout his education in Bhutan. He recounted his story of losing sight at the age of three, and how, if he had the right support, early intervention and an inclusive education, he might have retained a majority of his vision. While distributing certificates to the educators who took part in the inclusive education workshop, Pema emphasized the need for collaboration and shared responsibility in order to achieve a truly inclusive early childcare.

PEMA’S STORY IS NOT UNIQUE.

Many children with disabilities in Bhutan face similar obstacles and early detection and intervention are crucial to helping them reach their potential. The Bhutan Foundation recognizes this and has focused its special education program on providing teachers and schools with the resources they need to help children with disabilities early on. Early Childhood Care and Development centers (ECCD) are the first step in this process, as they are the first form of learning institutions children enter. These centers serve as an important platform for identifying non-visible disabilities and encouraging interventions that can benefit the child.

A training on inclusive childhood care and development in February was one such example of the capacity building work the Bhutan Foundation and its partners are spearheading. At orientations and workshops, the focus is to educate teachers on effective strategies for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. Oftentimes, this includes adapting classrooms to increase accessibility, as well as making necessary modifications to school infrastructures and facilities.

The effects of disabilities reach far beyond an individual and can be felt in all aspects of society. To this end, the Foundation is working with civil society organizations to promote and develop functional programs, skills development, and entrepreneurship for older children with disabilities. The Foundation also partners with the Phensem Parent Support Group to empower parents to advocate for their children and create awareness of the issues they face. Through these collective efforts, families are better equipped to access essential healthcare, education, and other services.

The largest barrier in effectively supporting children with disabilities remains a gap between policy and implementation. To bridge this divide, the Foundation and its partners have convened disability conferences to facilitate dialogue between service providers, policy makers and people with disabilities. At the most recent National Disability Conference, stakeholders issued a call for urgent action to strengthen coordination and collaboration across sectors, review the current model of SEN schools to ensure that inclusive education goes beyond enrollment, bolster teacher and ECCD facilitators’ capacity, expand health, referral, and intervention services to rural communities, and create support systems for families and caregivers of persons with disabilities.

Image: Teachers at the training on inclusive childhood care and development with expert Dr. Namitha Jacob, from Jesuits International

Participants at an ECCD center during a training on inclusive childhood care and development in Thimphu
Six Small Grant Projects Underway

As we enter into the spring season, the Bhutan Foundation is excited to share our latest updates from the Small Grants Program. This unique program supports a diverse range of impactful initiatives with a shorter timeframe and a smaller budget for immediate and emerging needs across the country.

EXPANDED MUSTARD OIL EXPELPER
The Samdrup Jongkhar initiative is expanding their mustard oil expeller unit at Garpaexong Organic Farm to improve the hygiene and quality of the mustard oil by promoting sustainable agriculture and the use of indigenous crops such as mustard, the project empowers community-led sustainable peri-urban farming.

JIGMECHU’S NEW CAMPSITE
A group of young graduates formed the Jigmechu Ecotourism Group, believing in the potential of this once-abandoned village to become a hub for ecotourism. With funding support from the Foundation, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature is implementing a community-based ecotourism project at Jigmechu that aims to promote hiking, birdwatching, and camping.

The campsite has the potential to bring economic benefits to the communities in the area. Currently, residents do not have any reliable source of income other than the sale of oranges and working as laborers for community contractors. Therefore, the ecotourism initiative at Jigmechu is an avenue to diversify and provide an alternative source of income and job opportunities for the local communities and promote small-scale enterprises in the area.

BHUTAN SIGN LANGUAGE APP
At the Wangsel Institute for the Deaf, a mobile phone application for Bhutanese Sign Language (BSL) is being developed to improve BSL proficiency of teachers of the Deaf. This will enable early access and acquisition of Bhutanese Sign Language in Deaf children, improve communication between parents and their deaf child, and establish a wider reach of BSL across Deaf communities in Bhutan. In addition, this will also enable hearing community members to learn BSL and promote a culture of inclusivity in the country.

WASTE MANAGEMENT MECHANISMS
At Tendruk Central School, Wangdi is leading a community waste management project to institute better waste management mechanisms and practices. The project will educate students and local communities about the importance of proper waste disposal, sorting at source, and reducing consumption, and will construct a waste segregation unit on the school grounds.

WOOD VINEGAR PRODUCTION UNIT
Jamyang and the Happy Farmers Group are setting up a wood vinegar production unit in their village. Wood vinegar is a natural and effective fertilizer and pest repellent, and it can improve soil health and the quality of crops. The wood vinegar production unit in the Bartsham community will allow the Happy Farmers Group to produce an organic and safe fertilizer for the villagers, thereby promoting sustainable agricultural practices and improving the quality of their food production.

A NEW MINI-FISHERY FARM
The Panbang Youth Cooperative is introducing a mini-fishery farm to promote sustainable fish farming practices and diversity farm produce, thereby increasing the cooperative’s income. This initiative supports youth-led farming enterprises to enhance food security in Bhutan and also aims to improve access to nutritious food for the community.
Ensuring Food Security in Rural Bhutan

Bhutan is predominantly an agricultural society, with the majority of its population relying on farming for their livelihood. Most of the country’s agricultural land is owned by smallholder farmers, who practice subsistence farming. These farms suffer from a lack of mechanization, making farm work labor-intensive, and are often hindered by limited irrigation water and increasing incidents of human-wildlife conflict (HWC). This has created a pressing need for innovative solutions to improve agricultural productivity and ensure food security in Bhutan.

**IN RESPONSE TO THIS NEED,** the Bhutan Foundation, in partnership with local NGOs and community-based organizations, has been implementing a series of food security projects across the country. They have been particularly beneficial during the pandemic, when both global and local food supply chains were disrupted by supplying vegetables, cereals, and fruits to frontline workers and people stuck at home during lockdowns. Additionally, they supported various initiatives such as organic farming in Dewathang, an integrated commercial farm in Paro, Bhutan, Organic Farm in Gelephu, climate-adapted agriculture in Dagana, Mongar, Zhemgang, Punakha, and Trashigang, and diversification of crop production in Ngawang Dratshoe under Chukha district. Going forward, the Bhutan Foundation is exploring new projects and initiatives that could be implemented in other parts of the country to further increase agricultural productivity. This includes providing farm mechanization, crop protection, strengthening irrigation systems, and promoting organic agriculture. The Foundation is also working to improve the efficiency of existing projects, helping to ensure that Bhutan’s agricultural industry is able to meet the current and future needs of its citizens.

The Bhutan Foundation is investing in agri-technology and implementing effective food security projects to create a more secure and sustainable future for the country. Through local NGOs and community-based organizations, these projects have had a wider reach and greater impact, making a real difference to the nation’s food security. To overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic, this community-based approach is essential, and by engaging local stakeholders and providing them with the necessary training and resources, the projects are more likely to ensure a more prosperous and food-secure future, and to bring about a lasting positive change.
Nomad Health Camps Aid Bhutan’s Remote Highlanders

The remote highland region above the Bumthang valley in the heart of Bhutan is home to one of the country’s few remaining nomadic communities. These highlanders rely on their sheep for their livelihood and traverse the mountains in search of grazing grounds throughout the year. Until recently, their isolated location has left them unreachable by mainstream healthcare programs, and without access to much-needed medical care.

THE MOST COMMON HEALTH PROBLEMS encountered by nomads are a direct result of their traditional way of life and living conditions. Musculoskeletal and joint diseases such as osteoarthritis and chronic low back pain, infectious diseases such as cystic echinococcosis, skin infections, and tuberculosis, as well as emerging noncommunicable diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and chronic respiratory conditions, are all major concerns. Poor hygiene and sanitation practices, including inadequate hand washing and open defecation, especially during summer grazing periods at higher altitude pastures, contribute to the spread of such diseases. Moreover, the use of indoor open fires for cooking and heating in poorly ventilated huts increases indoor air pollution and has a detrimental effect on their health.

It is thus essential to take a multi-sectoral approach to tackle the underlying issues and the health sector in Bumthang is making great strides with limited resources. Through health advocacy and education, as well as the provision of healthcare services driven by compassion and empathy, nomads are being empowered to take control of their own health.

With support from the Bhutan Foundation, a team of healthcare workers from Bumthang’s Wangdi Choling Hospital is making annual visits to these nomadic communities to provide routine and need-based healthcare services. All services are provided in a holistic manner, taking both preventive and curative aspects of healthcare into account, and include both allopathic and traditional medicine options.

The nomad health camps have been operating for the past six years, and our methods of delivering services have evolved in response to the changing healthcare needs of the population and the availability of hospital resources. For example, the health team provides cancer screening services to nomads during the health camps in accordance with the government’s flagship health project aimed at reducing the burden of cervical, breast, and gastric cancers.

In the 2021 nomad health camp, we tested all patients for Helicobacter pylori, a bacterium that causes gastric cancer. The screening revealed an alarmingly high prevalence of the infection, with more than 70% of the population testing positive. Traditionally, therapy was then used to treat all infected cases. Moreover, during the peak of the pandemic, the team was able to provide COVID vaccines to nomads, assisting the country in achieving remarkable vaccination coverage.

In the 2022 health camp, all eligible women received cervical cancer screening and those who tested positive for Human Papillomavirus (HPV) underwent a colposcopy. “As a male gynecologist, going to a remote community where women are assumed to be shy and introverted, I initially worried how far I would succeed in conducting colposcopy. However, after a talk on the importance of getting tested for cervical cancer, all the women came forward without hesitation. Not a single eligible woman refused the test,“ said Dr. Phurba Wangdi, a gynecologist involved in the health camps in 2022.

The annual nomad health camps contribute significantly to the nation’s goal of reaching the unreached and providing basic healthcare services to all, and have been made possible by the Bhutan Foundation’s support since 2017.

A resident receives a consultation from a traditional doctor (Drungtsa). A dentist from Trashigang Hospital treats a student during the Sakteng Health Camp in Trashigang, Eastern Bhutan.
THE SNOW LEOPARD PROJECT AIMS TO ENHANCE

the livelihoods of yak herding communities and improve community engagement in conservation through education and awareness programs, with an emphasis on bringing benefits from conservation to local communities.

In 2023, the project will distribute 81 improvised tents to yak herding communities of Thimphu, Paro, and Haa (falling within and adjacent to Jigme Dorji National Park). The tents will replace plastic tarps which are less sturdy and will have larger spaces with improved ventilation and better insulation against the cold. The project will validate the scale of yak calf predation, while also assessing the impacts of tarpaulin sheets used as tents. In order to understand the benefits offered by the modified tents.

The project proposes to upscale distribution of wire mesh coral fencing to protect juvenile yaks from snow leopards. A dedicated group with basic knowledge on snow leopards, called the snow leopard watch group, will be set up and linked up with homestays at yak pastures in promoting ecotourism and enhancing community engagement in snow leopard conservation.

improved tents will be provided to replace cheap plastic tarps. These tents have several benefits for the yak herders, such as increased space and durability, smoke outlets, improved insulation for colder weather, and metal frames for easier set-up and take-down when moving from one pasture to another. As an added benefit of their metal structures these tents also work to save trees by removing the need to cut down younger trees to be used as tent poles.

In 2024, the project will procure and provide dehydrators to dry cordyceps for the selected communities. It will address human-wildlife conflict, conduct an ecotourism program in the community, and provide snow leopard research support to Jigme Dorji National Park, the park with the highest density of snow leopards in Bhutan. The project will also provide internet connectivity and a play area for the Sce school to enhance learning opportunities for the children.

By engaging and supporting local communities, the project seeks to bring benefits from conservation and encourage them to actively take part in snow leopard conservation. Their participation is critical for the future of the elusive snow leopard which they often call Glang-ghi Norbu or ‘Jewel of the Mountains.’

Image: Top: Snow Leopard in Bhutan, courtesy of JDNP & DoFPS

Cheap plastic tarp tents used by highlanders in the past

An example of the improved tents to be provided
Bringing Light to Lunana

Imagine living in a community that is so remote that it takes eight days to reach the nearest road. For the people of Lunana in Bhutan, this is their reality. They are the last remaining communities without access to electricity in the country, but a new project led by the Bhutan Foundation aims to change that.

THE LUNANA COMMUNITY, located between 10,000 and 14,000 feet in Jigme Dorji National Park, is home to charismatic species like snow leopards, Bhutan takin and Bengal tigers. Connecting these remote villages to the national electricity grid would cause significant habitat destruction, is prohibitively expensive, and will be geophysically challenging. But the current use of fossil fuels and firewood for cooking, heating, and lighting is unsustainable and damaging to the environment.

The solution? A decentralized solar PV system. The International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) has found that Bhutan has better solar potential than many regions in the world that have already achieved a sizable share of power generation from solar energy. This project proposes the installation of nine solar PV systems to produce 656 kW of power to cater to the energy needs of the 12 villages in Lunana.

But the project doesn’t stop there. It also aims to enhance the livelihood of the community. Livestock rearing is the main source of income, so the project will work to improve winter fodder for yaks and enhance dairy production. It will also provide machinery and greenhouse technology to improve nutrition and health of the local community. Additionally, small businesses such as incense and cordyceps production will be supported with electric dryers.

The benefits of this project extend beyond just access to electricity. Women and children will be exposed to less indoor air pollution from burning wood, and children in the local schools will have access to improved teaching and learning materials. The project will also create jobs for youth in the village and reduce rural-to-urban migration. Most importantly, it aligns with Bhutan’s commitment to carbon neutrality and the country’s development principles of Gross National Happiness.

This project is a major milestone in Bhutan’s National Determined Contributions and contributes to Bhutan’s renewable energy targets. It also supports several Sustainable Development Goals, including delivering affordable and clean energy, reducing poverty, promoting sustainable economic growth, and protecting terrestrial ecosystems.

Most highlanders are dependent on livestock such as yaks for their livelihood.

The Bhutan Foundation is working in partnership with the Department of Energy under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan to implement, monitor, and evaluate this project.

As a testament to the power of innovation and collaboration, the Lunana solar energy project stands as a shining example of how sustainable, clean energy solutions can transform the lives of even the most remote communities. By empowering the people of Lunana with access to electricity and fostering economic development, the Bhutan Foundation is not only safeguarding their unique culture and environment, but also paving the way for a brighter, more sustainable future for all of Bhutan.
Ensuring a Future for Bhutan’s Tigers

Tigers are highly revered in Bhutanese culture and religion, portrayed through paintings on buildings, monasteries, dzongs, folk tales, songs, and prayer flags. Among other predators, tigers are worshipped as guardians of the wilderness, and it is still considered impolite to call them by their name “Tao” in remote communities.

Globally, the tiger population is rapidly declining, which can be attributed to loss of habitat and habitat fragmentation, prey depletion, and increased illegal wildlife trade. However, in Bhutan, over 70 percent of the land remains under forest cover, providing a safe home for the tigers and other wildlife to thrive. Bhutan plays a vital role in the success of tiger conservation efforts in the region, as historically, tigers roamed most Asian landscapes, but they are now sighted in just about 7% of their historical range.

Despite Bhutan’s conservation success, an issue has arisen – human-Tiger conflict. Over the years, many communities have reported livestock predation by tigers within their community, with Trongsa district alone reporting over 560 cattle killed by tigers in two years (2019-2021). Livestock predation by tiger causes substantial economic loss to the community members and raises the issue of possible retaliation.

The Bhutan Foundation has been assisting the Bhutan Tiger Center in developing a solid scientific knowledge base to oversee the tiger conservation program in Bhutan for over ten years. Through routine monitoring of tiger movement ecology, tiger population in the wild, their habitat uses, and their prey, the hope is to provide crucial information in both protecting the livelihoods of community members and planning a successful tiger conservation program. This coexistence is key to ensuring the success of this program.

Recently, the Foundation has taken additional steps to address human-Tiger conflict by supporting the Bhutan Tiger Center in piloting Gewog (local village) level tiger conservation funds through the provision of a seed fund to begin livestock insurance in three Gewogs (Sephu in Wangchhukha, Goemgang in Punakha, and Khamsum Gewog in Gasa). The objective is to garner community support in conserving tigers in Bhutan by insuring against livestock loss to predation.

Tigers play an essential role in maintaining the ecosystem’s health, making it important to secure the future of this iconic species. However, conserving tigers in Bhutan requires a concerted effort by all stakeholders, including farming communities. With the Bhutan Foundation’s continued efforts and support, it is hoped that the human-Tiger conflict can be minimized, and the tiger population can continue to thrive in the natural haven that Bhutan provides.
A Light in Darkness

With the introduction of community-based clean and renewable energy at Aja Ney, residents can now use electric cooking and heating appliances. The residents, who are mostly elderly, will benefit from better health and more time to spend meditating and reciting prayers without the need to worry about collecting firewood in chilly weather.

Watch A Light in Darkness, a short film that documents the first-ever 80 kW Decentralized Distributed Generation of Solar PV System in Aja Ney, commissioned by the Bhutan Foundation in collaboration with the Department of Renewable Energy, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Bhutan for Life, Bhutan Ecological Society and GEF-SPF UNDP Bhutan.

bhutanfound.org/ALightInDarkness/
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