

An Environmentalist's View - Managing Numbers

Environmentalist and sustainable tourism development activist, Karma Tshering believes that progressive development can be easily met simply through pragmatic approaches, consensus, and partnerships.

The Druk Journal: You believe that the Bhutanese identity, stemming from our environment and our culture, has made Bhutan a tourism hotspot?

Karma Tshering: Exactly. Basically, every travel destination tries to create/promote its attractions and niche. Bhutan has been very fortunate that, because of our visionary policy, we have emerged as a very exotic tourism destination. And why? The two main pillars of culture and nature. The world knows about Bhutan's rich culture and nature, for example, the significant over-72 percent forest cover with half the country defined as protected areas.

The Druk Journal: We are talking about the Bhutan brand -- our identity?

Karma Tshering: The Bhutan brand has emerged because of our rich biodiversity and unique and intact culture. Our culture is not a commodity to showcase to tourists. It is a living culture. We were hardly known 10 to 15 years ago but we have now come into the limelight because of this identity. Identity is so important -- and the vision of GNH – negative carbon -- all these have made Bhutan a “must go, must see” destination. These have given us a special brand.

The Druk Journal: People are beginning to worry about a growing trend towards mass tourism. What impact is this going to have on Bhutan's cultural and environmental heritage?

Karma Tshering: While tourism can generate huge benefits for the economy, the environment, the culture, it has a lot of negative impact if not managed properly. There is a rapid increase in visitation numbers -- we are just a small country, our absorption capacity is limited; further limited

because of our economic status. Some small countries like Iceland get a five-fold visitation in terms of their total population and yet they are able to offer quality experiences, because they have the economic power and systems in place to manage. It may seem that we don't have the capacity and techniques in place so, in this current situation, 300,000 or 400,000 becomes a high number. However, we have the opportunities to positively benefit from the increasing numbers if we are smart enough to focus on proper planning and management. We have opportunities to even handle greater numbers.

The Druk Journal: Looking at current trends, it seems like we are moving away from the policy of high value low volume tourism and going for mass tourism.

Karma Tshering: I don't think the current numbers are so high that we should start becoming alarmed. In fact, we should take it as an opportunity. I am very passionate about the environment, about responsible tourism that can generate positive benefits for our environment, culture and economy. But to really have effective positive benefits, we are reliant on viable numbers. With low volume, it's very difficult for the economy to become vibrant. So I don't see 300,000 to 400,000 tourists being high. In 2018, we saw the highest number -- 275,000 tourists -- of which a little over 200,000 were regional tourists and 70,000 plus were international. Now many people think this is too much, especially the regional tourists, and that we need to start downsizing. But I think it's because we do not have the system to absorb that capacity, and if we can minimise impact by having infrastructure and facilities in place, we can still afford to go beyond those numbers.

The Druk Journal: So what is happening? People feel that we are going into mass tourism... they are worried... why?

Karma Tshering: Not properly managing our sites gives the impression of mass tourism. People say what they see. Mass tourism is building up, but mass tourism, in my opinion, in Bhutan is related to site visitation and this is where we need to focus on -- proper management. Taktshang is one of our key iconic sites, where 99 percent of tourists who come to Bhutan visit. Places like Taktshang have mass tourism. Another example is the National Memorial Chhorten in Thimphu. It is a very small space, and even with 100 people it looks overcrowded. But we have way beyond 100. If you go to

central or eastern Bhutan, there is no issue of mass tourism -- the numbers are so small. It's because numbers are concentrated in a few areas. So it is not an issue of mass tourism or over-tourism; rather, it's the concentration of visitation in a few sites, and the lack of proper site management.

The Druk Journal: Apart from numbers, what are the other issues? Opening up different regions?

Karma Tshering: Yes, seasonality and geographic spread. One way to spread is seasonality. A problem with Bhutan's marketing strategy is that we have the most ridiculous way of marketing. We tend to say that Bhutan is six months' peak season and six months' off season. It is ridiculous because countries and destinations look into ways to even promote "off season" as "on season". We classify as off-season the three winter months -- December, January, February -- and June, July, August, because of the rains. If we look at our winters, for many people in Europe our winters are quite luxurious -- to see blue skies, sunshine every day, and day temperatures of 15, 16 degrees C, good views of mountains. In summer Bhutan is green and lush. Of course we have the monsoons, but we can handle it because of better roads... before, we would get stuck at landslides and road blocks, and we had no machines to clear them. Now, it is great time for a visit. So all seasons are good.

For the regional spread, the government is trying to go beyond the "golden triangle" of Thimphu, Paro, and Punakha. Now tourism can spread way beyond this. Bhutan has come a long way with infrastructure and amenities -- roads and flights. The time is right to put management systems into place.

The Druk Journal: What do we need to do to protect the two pillars?

Karma Tshering: On nature and culture -- a recent media dialogue was organised on the theme "Is tourism heading in the right direction?" This is a good time to think about it -- are we heading in the right direction? If we are not, what do we need to do? To reflect on this, in my opinion, we can look at it logically. As a tourism destination, what is our attraction? Why do tourists want to come to Bhutan? We know that our two main attractions are the natural and cultural heritage. From a logical perspective, we can take two examples to represent these pillars and see for ourselves whether we are heading in the right direction.

For the environment, take Phobjikha valley, as Bhutan's largest wetland and the Black Necked Crane valley. It is a thriving tourism spot. For the cultural site, take Taktshang. To see how well we are doing in tourism, we can reflect on these two examples. I think we are not doing it right. There is a lot of adverse impact on both these areas. Taktshang is overcrowded and commodified. The moment the guest steps out of the car, he is confronted by 27 households selling artifacts, 99 percent of which, unfortunately, come from Nepal and India. It is an immediate deterrence to the spiritual journey of the guest. The trail is not very good -- muddy in the rain. Regional tourists come wearing office shoes. Inside the Lhakhang it is overcrowded. I saw the CCTV guy trying to keep watch on all the temples -- worried about artefacts being lost -- a lot of negativity.

Having been to Phobjikha many times, I am amazed at how we manage this most ecologically sensitive area, which we should be showcasing to outsiders on how we conserve Bhutan. They come with high expectations to see how we do it so well. Unfortunately, Phobjikha is one area where we are doing everything wrong. How they operate tours in Phobjikha is no different from how tours are operated in Thimphu. The hotels release their waste and detergents into the wetlands.

I went to a biosphere reserve in Iran -- in an arid place. When we reached there, we were briefed on the do's and don'ts. They explain the ecological significance, so as a visitor, I felt the responsibility of conducting myself well. Unfortunately, in Phobjikha there is no interpretation. In tourism, it's not about the guest learning from the host or the host from the guest; it is mutual. Guests who come to Bhutan should take back good things about Bhutan, and hopefully become more responsible global citizens. And likewise, we learn from the guests and the good things they do. These are the good things that tourism can promote. Phobjikha is really a platform to spread awareness and concern about environment conservation but, unfortunately, it's not being done. I'm not being pessimistic but I'm worried, apprehensive, anxious -- we have a lot to do to make sure that our pillars of culture and environment are protected.

The Druk Journal: Talking about Phobjikha, what do you think about the choppers that fly there?

Karma Tshering: I was doing research on Phobjikha, on its carrying capacity. Talking to local people, one of my questions was on the chopper, to hear their views. One villager gave a very good insight. He says this is a sacred crane valley, and he's very disappointed with the chopper. When the chopper lands on the school ground, the birds go crazy. They are traumatised by the huge machine. The school is within the wetland. The villagers become emotionally disturbed. I suggested to TCB that choppers should land away from the valley floor, and visitors shuttled or walk to the valley. Environmental donors also come to Phobjikha to see for themselves the state of the environment and to contribute. If you want to encourage donors to contribute, don't think that taking them by chopper right to the doorstep will please them. They'll know that we are getting it wrong. They feel guilty flying in there.

The Druk Journal: You are basically saying that current numbers are not alarming. They need to be managed. But management would also include numbers in proportion to the population.

Karma Tshering: Yes, like Taktshang. Keeping a limit on numbers is a form of management -- after conducting thorough research, we may say that Taktshang, on any given day, can handle only so many people. But we should not zoom straight into numbers. There are so many issues to tackle. We have nature, culture, GNH, low carbon...also transport is a major sector -- and the vehicle quota is becoming a threat to the low carbon destination. One area I wish we could transform is the transport system. Now, with electric cars, hybrid cars; as an environmentalist, it amazes me how long Bhutan takes to adopt these good changes. For example, so many government officials get duty vehicles; why not give them electric or hybrid cars? Visitors are excited to see Bhutan -- a low carbon destination -- but they come to Thimphu and see so many cars, like any other developing country.

The Druk Journal: In short, you are saying we should identify Bhutan's strengths and protect them as our brand.

Karma Tshering: Yes, tourism should be promoted to make a positive contribution to our cultural and natural heritage, while ensuring quality

experiences for guests and host. The role of government is to provide enabling conducive policies...tourism very much a private sector driven industry.

The Druk Journal: Is the awareness setting in? In the past it appears that there has not been much thinking and no decisions being made.

Karma Tshering: While I see a lot of negative things happening, I remain very optimistic. I think concerned people coming together can do so much for Bhutan. While I may sound pessimistic, I have huge hope. We are also blessed with local deities, etc. I always believe that whenever something is going wrong we are blessed with timely intervention.

The Druk Journal: Can you give an example of this?

Karma Tshering: In tourism, there is so much focus on numbers -- especially after we became a democracy -- to fulfill promises, for example, short-term promises like hotel occupancy, because people have invested a lot. When McKinsey was here, they made a presentation stressing on numbers of arrivals as an indicator of achievement in tourism, by saying they can take tourism from 60,000 to 300,000 within a short period of time. Personally, I was disturbed by McKinsey's approach, as firms like them are more suited for corporate and commercial entities, and a misfit for our philosophy of development. One of their recommendations was to break the pricing system which anchored the high value low volume vision. At the most critical time, when the government seemed almost fully convinced, there was a last meeting with the tour operators, where everyone insisted on maintaining the pricing system. That literally saved the industry. Now there are timely reminders from His Majesty the King.

The Druk Journal: Given the current situation, what makes you optimistic?

Karma Tshering: There are so many things that glorify our country. We are in a luxurious position because we don't have to cling to one aspect. Many people look up to us as a model, saying "you guys are doing everything right". But I say "no, we have the opportunity to be a model but we are not yet a model". In the west they are trying to recreate nature, and recreated things are not authentic, although they spend millions of dollars. For

Bhutan, we have it all in the authentic form -- all that we have to do is to manage it...it's right in front of our eyes. It's all about how we manage it; that's what makes me very impatient -- there aren't enabling policies for proper management.

But having said that, there's hope and, with new faces, there is growing concern that that sustainability is being eroded and we have to focus on proper management. As a concerned citizen, I have established the Bhutan Sustainable Tourism Society, an organisation supported by voluntary members, with the aim to foster partnerships among all tourism stakeholders in the country, believing that concerted efforts and effective partnerships are the first steps to start the journey of sustainability.

The Druk Journal: Isn't it that, in the past, we were fortunate to have inherited everything intact. Perhaps we became complacent and didn't learn management. Now it's time to wake up?

Karma Tshering: In the past, our lives were so basic that we did not need any management. We just went with the flow. Now, with changing times, as a developing country with so much commodities coming in, we have to adapt to these new things that are coming. The challenge is that we are still in the adaptation phase.

The Druk Journal: Some of us know the problems. Some people know what needs to be done. But generally, our people don't seem to have it in them. One theory is that you need discipline -- very strict regulations. Take the example of Singapore fining and punishing people who throw things on the streets. Also, even our former Tsilon who beat people who dirtied the drains, etc...is that what's needed?

Karma Tshering: I'm fully in for that. If we wait for transformation through awareness, it's going to take a very long time. For example, even western societies with strong civil sense still have issues. While they have educated people who are fully aware, yet there are people who don't care. That's why they have the penalty systems. So likewise, we should have the so-called carrot and stick system. We should award people who are walking the extra mile. At the same time, for those who are lagging behind the system, we need to use the stick. While I support awareness programmes, at the same time, I'm fully in agreement with the need for a penalty system.