

The *governmentality* approach to the business of sustainable tourism: Bhutan's tourism governance, policy and planning

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Abstract

Bhutan's unique '*controlled tourism*' model is based on the principals of *Gross National Happiness (GNH)*. GNH offers an alternative indicator to a nation's developmental outcomes. The traditional development indicator of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures only economic outputs of nations. The GNH measurement indicators include: 1. Conservation and preservation of the natural environment; 2. Cultivation and promotion of culture; 3. Good governance, and 4. Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development. The *GNH Tourism Model* has a minimum tariff system, that promotes the notion of '*high value, low volume*' catering to limited, high-end tourists. The aim of the paper is to examine Bhutan's tourism governance that focuses on the business of sustainable tourism. Using Foucault's theory of '*governmentality*' (Foucault & Senellart, 2008), the purpose is to highlight the shifts in policy directions of the '*controlled tourism*' model from '*high value, low volume*' to '*high value, low impact*' (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2009), that reflects a push for economic growth and increase in tourist numbers that is incongruent with the holistic GNH philosophy. A grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1973, Strauss & Corbin, 1990), applying a social constructivism approach (Charmaz, 2000), through interviews provide empirical data from 36 tourism stakeholders. Two key findings indicate the unwelcomed tourist increases because firstly, the existing infrastructure cannot cope with the increases, and second, the lure of economic development compromises the GNH philosophy. The paper offers tourism scholarship through critical discourse of the *GNH Tourism Model* for the greater '*common good*' (Etzioni, 2004), and how this translates into a holistic model in the business of sustainable tourism. A limitation of the study is the population size and the urban representation. Further research is recommended on the impacts of increasing tourist numbers in rural Bhutan.

Keywords: *controlled tourism, gross national happiness, grounded theory.*

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Introduction

Tourism in many countries appears to be an economic activity inspired by neo-liberalism and left to the device of market-forces. The main function is to provide goods and services for leisure activities that enhance the wellbeing of a person, as well as to cater to the needs of the business traveler. Tourism in Bhutan began with 274 visitors who were royal guests of the government attending the 4th King's coronation in 1974 (Basu, 1996). Since then, Bhutan has developed a State owned and run tourism operation until 1991, when tourism was privatized (T. Dorji, 2001).

Bhutan's tourism model has a minimum tariff system, with 32% of the tariff going towards the government coffers called the 'royalty fee', that is used to benefit its citizens directly by way of universal free education and health services (Nyaupane & Timothy, 2010). Tourist arrivals is controlled but has been increasing steadily and reached its peak of 64,028 international visitors in 2011, generating a revenue of USD47.68 million and USD14.89 million in

royalty fee (Tourism Council of Bhutan., 2011). Tourism therefore has a direct impact on Bhutan's socio-cultural development (Reinfeld, 2003).

Gross National Happiness

Bhutan's 4th King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, proposed the notion of *Gross National Happiness* (GNH), as an alternative to measuring the nation's developmental achievements, rather than based solely on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). GDP measures the output of goods and services of a nation in a given year (European Union., 2010), whereas GNH measures the happiness and wellbeing of a nation (Ura, Alkire, & Zangmo, 2012).

The GNH philosophy purports the idea that money is less important than the spiritual and mental wellbeing of its population, with the environment and socio-cultural integrity taking priority, ahead of material gains (Thinley, 2005). GNH is centered on the four pillars of: 1. Conservation and preservation of the natural environment; 2. Cultivation and promotion of culture, 3. Good governance, and 4. Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development.

The GNH measurements are distributed across nine domains of: living standards, health, education, time use, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience, cultural diversity and resilience, psychological wellbeing and community value. The nine domains are further divided into 33 indicators with 124 variables. (Ura, Alkire, Zangmo, & Wangdi, 2012). GNH is a developmental approach that seeks to,

achieve a harmonious balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional and cultural needs of an individual and society. GNH is based on the belief that since happiness is the ultimate desire of every citizen, it must be the purpose of development to create the enabling conditions for happiness (Gross National Happiness Commission., 2011).

Thus, GNH adopts a more holistic approach to measuring a nation's development outcomes that includes the environmental, cultural, governance and socio-economic outcomes, and not dependent merely on economics (Dakson, 2007).

Theoretical framework

Using Foucault's theoretical framework of the notion of '*governmentality*' (Foucault & Senellart, 2008), which is defined as, "the conduct of conduct" of the government (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991,p.32), this paper aims to examine Bhutan's tourism governance through its over arching GNH philosophy, that has its core policy and planning mechanism supporting the business of sustainable tourism. The governance of the GNH tourism model, or the 'art of government', has its legitimacy as it is situated within the GNH philosophy espoused by the 4th King. '*Governmentality*' is about how to govern" (ibid, p.7). In the western context, it is, "government in the name of the truth" (ibid, p.8).

In Bhutan's context, '*governmentality*' is about how the ruling authorities turn to achieving happiness, along the same ideas espoused by Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) and John Mills' (1773-1836), '*utilitarianism*', in which utilitarianism is described as achieving the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Atkinson, 1969,p.8). In this regard, Bhutan's tourism model has an element of Etzioni's (1993) notion of '*communitarianism*" , by having social values built into policy-making with the interest of the community at heart.

The purpose here is to highlight the policies of Bhutan's '*controlled tourism*' model. In particular, to establish that there has been a shift in the policy direction of the 2008 democratically elected government, that reflects a push for economic growth and acceleration, which is incongruent with the holistic GNH philosophy.

GNH Tourism model

In Bhutan's case, the controlled tourism model originally focused on "*high value, low volume*", from 1974-2009. It was then changed to a policy of "*high value, low impact*" sometime during the 10th Five Year Plan (2008-2013), as a result of implementing the advice of a global development management consultant McKinsey & Co (Tourism Council of Bhutan, 2010). The study is the result of a lack of research on the change in Bhutan's tourism policy from that of "*low volume*" to "*low impact*". The study argues the rhetoric used in the business of sustainable tourism in Bhutan, since any increase in tourist numbers will surely have some corresponding impacts on the existing infrastructure.

The issue

Under the 10th Five Year Plan, the Tourism Council of Bhutan was mandated by the government to fulfill two objectives:

1. To contribute 15% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and,
2. To generate 25,000 jobs by the year 2013.

In 2009, the government employed a global management consultancy firm McKinsey & Co., that cost the government over Nu 430 million (Dorji, 2010). The two-year project had a mandate to identify ways to accelerate Bhutan's economic growth, with the aim to improve efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery, increase quality and reduce cost of service delivery, and to create 90,000 jobs. However, 'many Bhutanese both in the government and private criticize and question McKinsey & Co's involvement with the government' (Dorji, 2010), as there was a lack of initial consultation with its citizen at the start of the project. This led to discontentment amongst the public that resulted in one comment, in which,

the government's decision to hire a global consultancy firm McKinsey and Company was wrong. It was wrong for two main reasons. One, we do not need to pace up growth any faster than we already are doing it. [Two] Such wanton development as envisioned by the government predominantly could cost us dearly (T. P. Dorji, 2010).

Based on the above comment, this paper argues that the shift in policy directions by increasing tourist numbers in reality contravene the very heart of GNH because of the resulting impacts. However, such a decision is justified through the notion of 'governmental rationality' only in so far as it upholds the claim that economic achievements through tourism is vital for the country's development, turning a blind eye to the other socio-cultural and environmental indicators. This then leads to question of governance in the business of sustainable tourism.

Research question

The paper argues that increasing tourism numbers with limited resources clearly and invariably lead to unsustainable practices. This political realism in which, "whatever government choose to do or not to do" (Dye, 1978,p.3), has a direct consequence on the socio-cultural and environmental impacts as this paper will show, through empirical data from tourism stakeholders. The two key questions put forward are firstly, "what are your views on the government's expansionist policy to increase tourists numbers to 1000,000 by 2012", and second, "how do you view this as

compromising the four GNH pillars?"

Methodology

The research methodology applies 'grounded theory' (Glaser & Strauss, 1973; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), using the social constructivism approach (Charmaz, 2000). The grounded theory approach focuses on substantive evidence from interview participants that provides deeper qualitative insights to the socio-cultural realities on hand. The research method involves semi-structured interviews with 36 tourism stakeholders. Data is analyzed using NVivo 10 qualitative program (Bazeley, 2007). A limitation is the population size and urban representation.

Findings

Two key findings indicated that the move by the government to increase tourist numbers is not welcomed. Firstly, that the existing infrastructure cannot cope with the increases. Second, that the lure of economic development seems to be overshadowed by the government's decision to adopt an expansionist tourism policy, which is not aligned to the GNH philosophy. The disregard for public consultation has resulted in unpopular regard for the government's expansionist tourism policy.

Conclusion

Tourism is synonymous with neo-liberalism that allow competing market forces to dictate the commoditization of leisure activities, and tourist goods and services, leaving impacts through environmental and socio-cultural degradation. Whilst Bhutan's tourism policy appears to be in harmony with its GNH philosophy, in reality the evidence in the study suggests otherwise: that there is some discord in the manner in which the Bhutanese '*governmentality*' (Foucault & Senellart, 2008) pursues its agenda, which is at odds with the vision of a greater '*common good*' (Etzioni, 2004). The benefits of tourism scholarship the paper offers, is through a critical discourse in understanding the challenges of Bhutan's GNH Tourism Model and how this translates into a holistic model in the business of sustainable tourism. Such outcomes can provide fresh insights that can be used and transferred to other tourism models. Further research is recommended on the impacts of increasing tourist numbers in rural Bhutan.

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