

Bhutan

Biodiverse Diamond of the Himalayas

Text & Photographs: Robin Smilie



Like a jewelled bracelet crusted with large and small stones, the Himalayan Mountains stretch for 1,500 miles from Kashmir to Assam. The tiniest diamond of the four countries that make up the Himalayas is Bhutan. In terms of biological diversity and retention of native habitat – acre for acre – Bhutan is the richest country in Asia. Christened as the “Land of the Thunder Dragon”, it is one of the most biological diverse countries in the world, on par with Madagascar and the tropical rainforest countries in Central and South America.

While the meaning of the word Himalaya is “abode of snow”, one should not think that Bhutan’s landscape is made up solely of permanently covered snowcapped peaks or alpine scrub zones. Several distinctly different biological realms converge between the low-lying rain forest in the south and the alpine meadows in the north — the altitude difference is nearly 24,000 feet.



Christened as the “Land of the Thunder Dragon”, it is one of the most biological diverse countries in the world, on par with Madagascar and the tropical rainforest countries in Central and South America.

Situated in the heartland of Bhutan, between these two regions, are vast rhododendron and conifer forests. With heavy rains of the monsoon season and different climates associated with varying altitudes, it is easy to see how biodiversity has been able to take hold of the country.

Within the scientific community, Bhutan’s list of rare and endangered wildlife and fauna is legendary: Bengal tigers sighted above 2,900 metres, snow leopards, golden langoor, blue sheep, red panda, takin, black-necked crane, over 600 species of birds – 70 discovered in the last ten years, over 5,000 plants, many of which contain medicinal properties, rare orchids, carnivorous plants,





and 50 species of rhododendrons round up the list. One species of bird, the Satyr Tragopan, was once thought to be extinct but was recently sighted in Jigme Dorje National Park. Several white bellied heron, one of the fifty rarest birds on the planet with a population estimated between 20 and 200, have been recently sighted a number of times.

The challenge of conserving these national, indeed, world treasures, has fallen on various government agencies that are charged by the King and the National Assembly with policies that mandate strict conservation of Bhutan's natural wonders. A trust fund has been set up for environmental conservation. In 1995, the National Assembly passed a resolution that the country must maintain no less than 60 per cent of its area under forest cover. (Bhutan currently has approximately 70 per cent of its area under forest cover.) These forests are home to some of the rarest plants and animals in the world.

For many conservations, the crown jewel of Bhutan's effort to maintain biodiversity are the "biological corridors" that connect four national parks, four wildlife sanctuaries, and one nature preserve. These nine areas make up 26 per cent of the country's total land area, with the corridors accounting for another 9 per cent.

The purpose of these biological or ecological corridors is to prevent fragmentation of natural habitats by preserving the connection between protected areas. The parks and conservation areas might otherwise be separated by human activities such as farming and other developments. When a species is cut off from its main



population, i.e. its genetic pool, sub-species begin to develop. The genetic survival of the new and smaller population is more difficult. By designing this system of interconnecting corridors, Bhutan has made significant strides to promote the survival of future generations of its diverse ecosystems.

Presently, the most significant ecotourism areas of Bhutan is Jigme Dorje National Park, the largest protected area within the country, where popular trekking routes cross rivers at 1,400 metres and traverse mountains that soar to 7,000 metres. Visitation within the park is confined to visitor zones. Bhutan is approaching development of ecotourism even more cautiously than it has approached general tourism, recognising that areas of tiger habitat and rare medicinal plants cannot withstand any measure of an onslaught of tourists.

In an effort to pursue ecotourism, while protecting the environment, new efforts are being implemented to promote community-based tourism and trekking. This new approach actively engages the local community in development and management of ecotourism, as well as promoting conservation of nature.

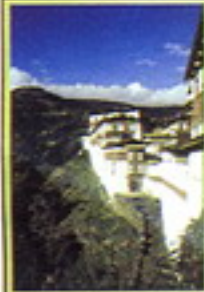
Religion plays a role

Bhutan remains the only surviving Mahayana Buddhist country in the world. To live in harmony with the mysteries and complexities of nature is a crucial Buddhist practice. One has only to look at acid rain, the ozone hole, and contamination of the earth's waters to realise how mankind harms itself by harming nature. The Buddhist approach to nature is to show reverence and compassion to all forms of life, as well as limiting consumption to basic needs, i.e. food, shelter and clothing.

The Buddhist philosophy, coupled with longstanding belief that the key ecological areas are inhabited by underworld spirits, gods and goddesses, as well as a variety of deities have served to protect much of Bhutan's landscape. If the local people believe that a powerful deity resides in a certain lake, then they will not pollute the stream originating from it. Likewise, if a certain forest is thought to be the home of gods and goddesses, the trees of that forest are not hewed. Since habitat preservation is a key element in preservation of species such belief encourages a culture that supports biodiversity and conservation of natural resources.

The world scientific community recognises that Bhutan has a significant portion of the planet's remaining rare and endangered species. It is, therefore, actively assisting the kingdom in its efforts to balance environmental management and economic development.

With the help of these worldwide stakeholders, the government and people of Bhutan, and every person that visits Bhutan, we do hope that this biodiverse diamond of the Himalayas will continue to shine forever. ❖



For a memorable trip through all the wonders of Bhutan

Visit:
Lhomen Tours & Trekking Co. Pvt. Ltd.
Post Box No. 341, Thimphu,
Kingdom of Bhutan
Ph: (975)-2-324148(O), 323797(R)
Fax: (975)-2- 323243, 323108
E-mail: lhomen@druknet.bt

