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Escaping the Concrete Jungle: An Exploration of Ecotourism Development in Dzongu, North Sikkim

Katrina Kniss
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Escaping the Concrete Jungle:
An Exploration of Ecotourism Development in Dzongu, North Sikkim



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School for International Training India: Sustainable Development and Social Change Program

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT)

Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA)

Concerned Lepcha of Sikkim (CLOS)

Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS)

Eco-development Committees (EDC)

Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU)

Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

Kanchendzonga National Park (KNP)

Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP)

Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF)

Travel Agents' Association of Sikkim (TAAS)

The International Ecotourism Society (TIES)

The Mountain Institute (TMI)

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

Youth Hostels Association of India (YHAI)

ABSTRACT

The state of Sikkim in northeastern India is a place imbued with a sense of mystery. It is partially this spirit, as well as its pristine Himalayan landscapes and vibrant cultural diversity, that has established Sikkim as a major tourist destination in the region. In the Northern district of the state, the Dzongu reserve is inhabited by the indigenous Lepcha group, who hold the status of “Most Primitive Tribe”. Over the past decade, however, this primitive tribe has shown their strength in staging large-scale protests and hunger strikes in a movement against mega-hydropower development along the Teesta River. Employing their identity as indigenous environmentalists, the Lepcha have made a case for conserving their land and way of life from the modern forces of assimilation. The afterlife of this struggle has begun a conversation about what sustainable development can look like in a place like Dzongu. In this context, different stakeholders, including state-level NGOs and practitioners, as well as motivated local community members and organizations, have been developing various models of ecotourism. This study aims to understand the case of ecotourism development in Dzongu through exploring motivations, outcomes, and agency. Towards this end, I conducted personal interviews and participant observation among different stakeholders in Gangtok and Dzongu. My exploration seeks to find the meaning of ecotourism in the context of Sikkim, the motivation and goals for ecotourism development in Dzongu, the values informing these motivations, how ecotourism is currently operating to meet these goals, and the effects of ecotourism for the collective agency of its proponents in Dzongu. Ecotourism means different things to different stakeholders, and it is exactly these definitions in action that reveal the motivations, goals, and values behind them. The motivations I found were income generation, environmental and cultural conservation, and the sustainability of the anti-dam movement. Those models which promote the self-determination of the community create the most autonomy. Through this research, I intend to reveal a lay of the land which can spark questions for ecotourism practitioners and benefit future research.

INTRODUCTION

The northeastern state of Sikkim in India is situated among the Himalayan mountain range, and is a diverse population of different ethnicities, languages, and cultures, influenced by centuries of migration from the surrounding region. Nepali is the ethnic majority, with Bhutia and Lepcha as the largest minority groups, both of whom hold special reservation status with the government. In recent popular awareness, Lepcha living within the Dzongu reserve have become synonymous with protest against large dams. In 2005-2009, through collective actions, hunger strikes, and other *satyagraha*¹ tactics, Lepcha activists called upon their perception as a “vanishing tribe”, as well as their indigenous connection to sacred landscapes to stage a largely successful protest against the construction of four out of six dams zoned for the Teesta River in Dzongu reserve (Arora 73). These protests reached a scope and meaning far greater than the confines of Dzongu, as they reaffirmed Dzongu as the Lepcha holy land and revived Lepcha cultural identity (McDuie-Ra 86). Questions still remain, however, about the future sustainability of Lepcha culture and livelihood within Dzongu. With the disappearance of the cardamom crop and youth leaving in large numbers for outside education, the options for sustainable livelihood options remain small (94). Some members and organizations within Dzongu and in the broader Lepcha community are in fact advocating to open up the reserve to larger development and modernization, thus preserving the culture by allowing Lepcha to remain in Dzongu with economic opportunities (92). Stakeholders in the development process from all corners of the conversation have promoted the possibility of tourism in Dzongu, or more specifically ecotourism (Arora 74, McDuie-Ra 95, Roshan 3). Ecotourism in Dzongu has been developed at

¹ Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence. Roughly translates to “truth force”.

the initiative of both NGOs and motivated individuals, and the state of Sikkim also places a large importance on tourism's role in the state's economy.

This study seeks to explore the various motivations behind and potential effects of ecotourism development for the collective agency of the Lepcha living in the Dzongu reserve.

Veronica Davidov, in her study of ecotourism among indigenous groups in Ecuador, explains:

A variety of different actors are conjoined by tourism: indigenous people for whom it may hold a promise of income, a platform for political mobilization, or a threat of disenfranchisement; NGO workers with plans for development; neoliberal states eager to monetize nature in a "green" way, while also "outsourcing" their economic obligations to their citizens into the domain of a market enterprise; tourists on a quest for a place where they will encounter radical alterity. They are all participating in a field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), a space where these actors negotiate agency and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. 47

Therefore, in order to address my stated aim, this study will consider the following questions:

What does ecotourism mean in the context of Sikkim? What are the motivations and goals for ecotourism development in Dzongu, among different stakeholders? The specific stakeholders focused on in this study will be homestay operators, community leaders, and state-level tourism practitioners. What values are informing these motivations? How is ecotourism currently operating to meet these goals? What effect does ecotourism have for the collective agency of its proponents in Dzongu?

Clarification of Terms and Framework

During my time in the field, I quickly found that there is no one universal definition of ecotourism that is agreed upon by all stakeholders. Each NGO, homestay operator, and government official has their own working definition. For example, according to The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), a widely-respected expert organization in the field, "Ecotourism is now defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the

environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" ("What is Ecotourism?"). The Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS) takes a more nuanced stance, stating its mission is to "define the concept of ecotourism in the context of the state of Sikkim. It believes that eco-tourism and conservation cannot exist without each other. These must go hand in hand" ("Vision and Mission"). The Tourism Department of the Government of Sikkim does not specifically mention ecotourism, as it instead lists more specific niches within tourism, such as village tourism, flora and fauna, and culture. Instead of evaluating the findings of this study against one definition of ecotourism, I have decided to analyze the way in which actions of different stakeholders reflect the values that inform their motivations for ecotourism development.

Motivation, in the context of this study, is conceptualized as the interplay between external and internal incentives – drivers and motivations respectively – which inform actions of agents (Ruiz-Mallén et al. 2). Similarly, the efficacy of these motivations to bring about the desired results reflect the interdependent relationship of personal agency and social structure (Bandura 77). The relationship between agency and structure is a largely debated issue, and many theories abound. On one end of the spectrum, methodological individualism, the foundation of neo-classical economics, recognizes society as a product of individuals' preferences and actions (Morselli 7). Gershon elaborates that this neoliberal conception of agency sees all actors as agents acting like businesses (individuals, communities, states), and he critiques the ignorance of scale present in such conceptions, as well as the lack of a set of moral guidelines (546). On the other end of the spectrum, in the methodological collectivism of Marxism, "actions and motivations are explained in terms of social phenomena and are determined by the structure" (Morselli 7). Neither of these extremes recognizes the

interdependence of agency and structure. A more useful framework is that given by institutional evolution, which claims “actions are the product of an interaction that reproduces itself over time in a process of social evolution” (8). Finally, motivation is important for informing frameworks of agency because autonomy can only be claimed when the resulting goals are internally generated, rather than adopted from other agents (Luck and d’Inverno 258). In this study, I will therefore explore and critique the ability of ecotourism, functioning within a neoliberal global economic structure, to bring about collective agency and autonomy for the Lepcha living in Dzongu. By approaching my fieldwork analysis through these frameworks, I will seek to answer my research questions by engaging individuals and groups from all relevant stakeholders in the conversation, including homestay operators, community leaders, and state-level tourism practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an increasingly globalized world, the relationship between time and space is becoming more distant, as the origins of material and cultural products are further removed from their points of consumption, and simultaneously more compressed, as technology creates instantaneous global connections (Cater 48). In this context, the assertion of indigenous identity is a radical act, as it “establish[es] claims to places at a time when global flows of capital, labor, and culture are producing a place-less world” (Aikau and Spencer 4). Understanding the power of the Lepcha claim to place in Dzongu, North Sikkim requires a broad exploration of the deeply contextual history, current reality, and future hopes of a people as they negotiate their relationship to their culture and land within the larger global forces of modernity, even through their involvement with ecotourism.

A Brief Overview of Sikkim

In present-day Sikkim, the three main ethnic categories are Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali. The Lepcha are viewed as the indigenous people of Sikkim, historically surviving as shifting cultivators and hunter-gatherers. Beginning in the 17th century, Bhutias immigrated from Tibet and Bhutan, eventually establishing a Buddhist theocracy in 1642 and pushing Lepcha cultivators into forests due to the Bhutia's trade and livestock herding (Gorer 35). When the British gained political control of the kingdom of Sikkim in 1888, they began encouraging the migration of Nepali agricultural laborers, further pushing migratory Lepcha to the margins. By the time the British returned control of Sikkim back to the Chogyal, Lepchas and Bhutias were the significant minority (McDuie-Ra 84). As a princely state at the time of Indian independence from colonial rule, Sikkim retained limited sovereignty from 1950-1975 (Duff 24). While the details of the process are contentious, Sikkim was incorporated as an Indian state in 1975 (26). During this time, the state government created a dual Bhutia-Lepcha minority category as Scheduled Tribes, with reserved seats in the legislative assembly ("Roots" 4065). In addition, in 2005 the Lepcha gained recognition as a "Most Primitive Tribe" (Arora 215). Even before Lepcha were given these official labels, the view of the Lepcha as economically backward and their gradual assimilation into general Sikkimese society has fed into a deep-seated, internalized narrative of the Lepcha as a "vanishing tribe", pressuring the Sikkimese government to create official spaces for the expression of Lepcha culture (McDuie-Ra 84). Overall, this history demonstrates that the "continuing role of the state is explicit in the structuring of identities" (216).

Lepcha Identity Politics

Development projects in Sikkim have also had a large role in shaping the relationship of the Lepcha ethnic minority and the state. In the past decade, opposition to mega-hydroelectric

projects in Dzongu, and the collective agency employed in that struggle, has been “the catalyst for a more strongly articulated Lepcha identity, articulating both its fragility and its emergent political strength” (McDuie-Ra 88). Led by the Affected Citizens of Teesta (ACT), Lepcha activists, both within and outside of Dzongu, have symbolically employed their vulnerability as a vanishing tribe and their connection to sacred landscapes, in addition to the strong evidence of potentially disastrous effects to the local ecology, as an aid in their fight against big state-sponsored development (Little 243). These dynamics have led to a reconstruction of Lepcha identity as indigenous environmentalists and affirmed Dzongu as the Lepcha holy land (“The Forest” 57).

Within a democratic state like Sikkim, ethno-politics are the mainstream. However, it is the connection of Lepcha identity to the place of Dzongu that distinguishes their struggle as an indigenous one. Dzongu was established as a Lepcha reserve in the 1956 by British overlords “for safeguarding the tribe’s culture, and preventing its economic exploitation and such other disabilities which can result from the coming in of tribes from outside” (“Dams and Development” 27). Encompassing 15,846 hectares, Dzongu is triangular in shape, nestled between the convergence of the Teesta and Tolung rivers and Mt. Kangchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world (Bhasin 42). The current population of Dzongu is around 8,000, about 10 percent of the total Lepcha population in Sikkim, and its status as a reservation means land cannot be sold to outsiders and outsiders cannot migrate into Dzongu, with strict regulations on visitors (McDuie-Ra 85).

The importance of the physical space of Dzongu comes from the Lepcha connection to their sacred landscapes. In traditional Lepcha beliefs, their race was created in Dzongu by Mother Nature, and Mt. Kangchenjunga was placed as a god and guardian for their people (Little

229). Although most Lepcha now practice Buddhism, the tradition of nature worship and shamanism far outdates the colonial arrival of other religions, and the practices are still incorporated into their culture (229). These sacred landscapes are humanized landscapes that embody Lepcha culture and indigenous knowledge systems, as “there cannot be a sacred grove of a forest without the forest-dweller and his beliefs and practices” (249). Gyatso Lepcha, president of the Concerned Lepcha of Sikkim (CLOS), remarked in a 2007 interview, “If we have our land we can flourish as a race, as a community. Our ancient practices, our cultural heritage can be preserved for future generations. With our land gone, we will be finished as well. We will die but we will not give our land” (250).

Interactions with Modernity

In addition to a focus on land, indigenous identity is formed through a process of othering, in opposition to modernity, development, and globalization. Frank Hertz explains:

Modernity needs the contrasting concepts of indigeneity and tradition, whereas traditional societies in pre-modern or precolonial time did not need to establish their “otherness” in opposition to modernity or their own history. In other words, through the very process of being recognized as ‘indigenous,’ these groups enter the realm of modernity. qtd in Aikau and Spencer 2

By connecting themselves rhetorically to sacred landscapes and a primitive, vulnerable status, Lepcha anti-dam activists have established their otherness and indigenous identity, and in doing so have begun entering into the realm of modernity, complete with the Western concepts of environmentalism, nature, conservation, and sustainable development. As an outgrowth of the anti-dam movement, the incorporation of Lepcha sacred landscapes into their official discourse

has created an entering point into the tourism agenda of the state of Sikkim (“The Forest”). Today, the state government is proactively marketing pilgrimage tourism and encouraging a religious perception of the land-scape (“Roots” 4067). In fact, the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan K Chamling, has repeatedly remarked, “Tourism and hydroelectric power are the only two viable sources of revenue for Sikkim” (4066). While the anti-dam struggle rejected hydroelectric power in Dzongu, the space that it opened up has allowed greater interaction with forces of modernity and the possibilities of economic development through tourism.

The tourism sector in Sikkim has seen a 12% increase in the past decade and was chosen as the “Best Region to Visit in the World” in 2014 by the Lonely Planet Global Travel Guide. It currently contributes to 8% of the state’s GDP and is estimated to employ 12,000-15,000 workers (India). The Tourism Department currently promotes many types of tourism in the state, including adventure tourism, village tourism, and pilgrimage tourism, among others (“Explore by Interest”). The other main promoter of ecotourism within the state government is the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project through the Forests, Environment & Wildlife Management Department.

Livelihood and Hydropower Development

As Arora tells us, “the links between symbolic identity, livelihood, and ethnicity cannot be ignored in this multi-ethnic context” (“Roots” 4065). In a conversation that normally focuses on the interplay of Lepcha symbolic identity and ethnicity, it is important to problematize the notion of a “united front” of indigeneity, and recognize those who are advocating for the need for livelihood options in Dzongu. For this paper, livelihood “comprises all the capabilities, activities, assets, and the access to these as required for a means of living” (Coria and Calfucura 49). Historically, cardamom cultivation, in addition to hunting, gathering, and subsistence agriculture,

has been the main source of livelihood in Dzongu. Lepcha in Dzongu have faced exploitation by outside groups that control the cardamom market, to which many are susceptible due to their lack of formal education (“Dams and Development” 31). In recent years, crop yields have been severely decreasing, for largely unknown reasons, and youth have been leaving Dzongu in significant numbers to pursue outside education and better livelihood options (McDuie-Ra 94). Therefore, it seems that the Lepcha are now a vanishing tribe not necessarily in population numbers, but in the slow erosion of cultural practices (“Dams and Development” 29).

According to Holt, conservation awareness “does not arise in an ecosystem that is artificially kept outside of the processes that lead to a recognition of the consequences of overexploitation” (qtd. in Davidov 50). One could say that the threat of dams in Dzongu was the moment of recognition for many youth for the need for cultural and environmental conservation. Out of this movement, a few youth started an ecotourism venture in Dzongu, hosting tourists in homestays as a form of self-sustenance, but also so outsiders could learn about Lepcha culture and be exposed to the anti-dam struggle (Roshan 3). It must be noted, however, that there is a significant part of the Lepcha community that is not only in favor of dams and big development, but has advocated for a speeding up of the construction process of the Panan dam in upper Dzongu (“Politics” 90). Mostly led by Mutanchi Lom Aal Shezum (MLAS), the sole NGO in Dzongu, and local political leaders, the pro-dam network sees the construction of dams as a way to open up Dzongu to economic development and increased tourism, thereby providing livelihood opportunities that will allow Lepcha to stay in Dzongu (93). Those who are a part of

this network have also been developing ecotourism in Dzongu since the late 1990s. Ironically, “both sides are battling over the best conditions for Lepcha identity to survive” (94).²

Ecotourism and Indigenous Communities

In this context, where several different actors are pushing ecotourism as the solution to their understanding of the problem, it is important to situate these claims within previous research looking into the promises and difficulties of ecotourism within indigenous communities. Ecotourism is often hailed for its positive impacts on environmental conservation, as it allows communities to be a part of the planning and implementation processes. It also makes their livelihood activities dependent on biodiversity, thereby driving conservation, instead of just being compatible with it (Coria and Calfucura 48). In addition, ecotourism is viewed as more ethical than traditional tourism, as it can facilitate cultural exchange and an understanding of people as part of a living ecosystem (Duffy 98). Ecotourism can also contribute to a process of reassertion of national or indigenous identity, by the positive revaluing of culture in response to threats of assimilation (102). Similarly, land values are positively affected, which is an important point in Dzongu, as the land cannot be sold for any purpose outside of use by the government (Coria and Calfucura 49).

Others, however, are slightly more reserved about the potential benefits of ecotourism to indigenous groups, as the concept, as well as other terms surrounding sustainable development, are western constructs. Davidov says, “Western ideology of sustainability links nature (and its value) with wildness, and ecotourism is instrumental in enforcing this regime of value” (55). For

² It is important to recognize that the conversation around dams is not a strict binary between anti-dam and pro-dam supporters. Individual opinions are far more nuanced and polarizing terms such as these can exacerbate intracommunity conflict. However, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, I have used the terms provided in the literature reviewed.

example, it establishes natural resources as a means of generating revenue. This system of values is often in conflict with indigenous ways of viewing the world. Neoliberal values have created a hegemony of the global power-knowledge nexus that leaves no room for alternative forms of knowing (Cater 48). Even the ideological and institutional incorporation of sustainable development and environmental concern into the mainstream is done such that “the global capitalist economy can grow, if not with clear environmental conscience, then with one effectively assuaged” (Hartwick and Peet qtd. in Cater 48). In this way, because ecotourism fits within the existing political and economic system, globally and in Sikkim, it can be seen to “exacerbate existing economic and social divisions in the host communities and create new ones” (Duffy 100).

Another major concern of ecotourism critics is the commodification of culture for outside consumption. Ecotourism falls within a niche of the tourism industry that caters to those looking for the “coveted alterity”, or a chance to experience the adventure of a lifestyle radically different from their own (Davidov 47). Duffy explains, “The role that tourism can play in transforming collective and individual values is inherent in ideas of commodification, which imply that what were once cultural displays of living traditions or a cultural text of lived authenticity become a cultural product, which meets the needs of commercial tourism” (73). Some could argue that ecotourism is needed in Dzongu specifically because Lepcha culture was slowly dying, and could be reinvigorated by a process of rebranding for tourism. The question remains, however, whether or not ecotourism can really compete with other development interests, as a viable alternative to dams (Duffy xiii).

The goal of this study is to move outside of the dichotomy of “good and bad” or “opportunities and consequences” that often defines conversations around ecotourism by

exploring the specific context of Dzongu, in all its complexity. I aim to understand the motivations for ecotourism development by getting a lay of the land and perspectives of different stakeholders, as well as the values that may be informing them. While it is outside of the scope of this study to empirically evaluate the efficacy and actual outcomes of these claims, I will analyze the possible effects of ecotourism for a broad conception of the collective agency of the Lepcha living in Dzongu.

METHODS

I acquired the data for this project through the means of formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and one focus group. Data collection took place in both Gangtok and Dzongu, and included interactions with ecotourism practitioners at the state level, as well as homestay operators, community leaders, and tourists in Dzongu. I also received primary source documents from government officials, ecotourism practitioners, and homestay operators. The engagement of different stakeholders was crucial for gaining a complete and nuanced understanding of ecotourism development in Dzongu. The period of field study took place in Dzongu over the course of two five-day periods, separated by a week in between. This timing was based on the regulations for tourist permits in the protected area of Dzongu and the availability of my community guide and translator. Before each interview, I informed participants of the aims, objectives, and intended recipients of my study and they gave verbal consent to participate. Participants remain anonymous in this study unless explicit permission to use their names was given.

In Gangtok, I conducted four unstructured interviews. These interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders and pursued on the basis of suggestions by established contacts, the Tourism Department, professors from Sikkim University and Sikkim Government College, and

the interviewees themselves. These interviews helped to give insight into the development of ecotourism at the state level and the current political context of the Lepcha anti-dam movement. Through a more narrative-based structure, I was able to gain a broad background understanding that refined my questions, sparked new ones, and filled in the gaps from my other findings.

In Dzongu, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 homestay operators, 3 panchayats, and a member of MLAS, and interacted informally with many community members and tourists, as I myself was a guest in a homestay. The interviews with homestay operators followed a similar list of both closed- and open-ended questions, inquiring into the details of their homestay, its operations, and the larger motivations and desired outcomes. A sample list of questions can be found in Appendix A. I identified homestay operators as an important stakeholder in this project, as they offer perspectives of the diversity of on-the-ground experiences with ecotourism within the community. To my knowledge, I interviewed at least one homestay operator in every village in Dzongu that has running homestays, and in some villages interviewed more than one or all of them. Those homestay operators who participated in this study were the ones who were available to speak when we visited the village. The other community leaders interviewed were identified by my guide and provided information about how ecotourism fits in with the larger needs of the community.

My guide and translator in Dzongu was Tenzing Lepcha. During my time in Dzongu, I was a guest at his homestay in Hee-Gyathang, which allowed me to experience the practical operations of a homestay and interact with many community members who helped to orient me to the local culture. I was also able to spend time with other tourists, both at Tenzing's homestay and during trips to other villages. I observed the interactions between guests and hosts, spoke to the guests about their background and experiences in Dzongu, and observed the actions of the

tourists in their daily activities. Tenzing also facilitated the logistics of meeting homestay operators and acted as translator during interviews from Nepali or Lepcha into English. Eight interviews were conducted with his translation assistance, and the rest were conducted solely in English without an intermediary. I discovered the perspective of Tenzing as a homestay owner and anti-dam activist through many informal conversations during our time in the field.

FINDINGS

Ecotourism Development in Sikkim

When Sikkim became incorporated as a state of India in 1975, it was still imbued with a sense of mystery, as the former Buddhist kingdom had been secluded from the rest of the world for so long. The 1990s showed a major influx of tourist activity in Sikkim, as regulations around travel in the state began to loosen. While tourism began growing in its importance as a part of the Sikkim economy, there was a general sense of concern that Sikkim should not succumb to the fate of places like Darjeeling, which were once known for their natural beauty and now face environmental degradation due to large-scale and high-impact tourist activity (R.P. Gurung, Personal Interview). Within this context, in the mid-1990s USAID funded the first ecotourism project in India, led by The Mountain Institute (TMI). While the Mountain Institute brought expertise in conservation and development, partner organizations GB Pant, The Travel Agents' Association of Sikkim (TAAS), and The Green Circle gave the perspectives of scientific monitoring, a business, and an environmental activism NGO respectively. In 1996, this coalition hosted the first workshops to develop codes of conduct for tourists and tour operators. According to Renzino Lepcha, former program manager at TMI, the goal of the workshops was to test if strengthening the enterprise and capacities of those involved in ecotourism will lead to conservation. Primarily motivated by environmental conservation, this project also resulted in

the creation of the Appreciative Participatory Planning and Action (APPA) approach to empowering community participation in ecotourism development. Harnessing the existing assets of the community, this model asks participants to identify resources, envision the future of tourism in their community, design an action plan, and implement it. This tourism planning cycle gained widespread recognition in the region, and many neighboring states began implementing the approach in the development of their national parks (R. Lepcha, Personal Interview).

In 2001, The Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Sikkim (ECOSS) was founded through funding granted by UNESCO, with the primary motivation of environmental conservation. Due to the growing prominence of Sikkim as an example of successful ecotourism development, ECOSS, in collaboration with The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), hosted the Southeast Asia Regional Conference for the International Year of Ecotourism (R. P. Gurung, Personal Interview). During this time, Renzino Lepcha claims, “it was always emphasized that you don’t do much with your natural surroundings. With all your capital and natural assets, don’t do anything, don’t screw it up. Keep it as it is. You build capacity, you put in the software skills, but don’t do anything with the hardware” (Personal Interview). However, both Renzino Lepcha and Rajendra P. Gurung, former and current leaders of ECOSS, point to a drastic change in the trajectory of ecotourism development in the state, marked by the arrival of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (Personal Interviews).

JICA, the facilitating organization of the government of Japan’s Official Development Assistance, began work in Sikkim in 2010, assisting in the creation of the Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP) under the Forests, Environment & Wildlife Management Department, Government of Sikkim. A component of this project focuses on ecotourism, with the motivation of increasing income-generating activities of forest fringe

communities and decreasing their dependence on protected forest resources (Ugen Lepcha, Personal Interview). The desired impacts of the project are that “ecotourism is developed in every district of Sikkim following sound environmental and business principles, restrictions impeding the operation of ecotourism are eased, and the sector is well understood by all stakeholders” (“Ecotourism Component”). In an attempt to centralize tourism development in Sikkim, JICA also created a State Tourism Policy with the involvement of ECOSS and TIES, a draft of which was completed in 2015 (R. P. Gurung, Personal Interview).

With the advent of JICA-sponsored SBFP, and the growth and infrastructure increases from the influx of new funds, Renzino Lepcha lamented that the state government “forgot all about the authentic experience of ecotourism” (Personal Interview). Rajendra Gurung pointed to the lack of a common understanding of the definition of ecotourism as a source of the problem. The Sikkim government focuses on “being green”, but at the same time promotes the arrival of tourists in large numbers, through events like ecotourism festivals, disregarding the carrying capacity of fragile ecosystems. Another specific complaint was the large-scale construction of concrete homestays, which leads to a loss in vernacular architecture (R. P. Gurung, Personal Interview). “People don’t want to look at houses that look so similar, they want to look at cultures,” said Renzino Lepcha (Personal Interview). The Tourism Department of the Sikkim Government is marketing ecotourism as one of its many options in a basket of tourism offerings (adventure tourism, village tourism, pilgrimage tourism, etc.), but is not showing special care to differentiate the principles of ecotourism from other types of tourism (“Explore by Interest”).

Ecotourism Development in Dzongu

Mutanchi Lom Al Shezum (MLAS) was formed in 1990 around the aims of preservation of culture and tradition and is the sole NGO in Dzongu. Over time, because of the needs of the

community for sustainable livelihood development, the organization added a focus on ecotourism (Namgya Lepcha, Personal Interview). In addition to its advocacy and awareness work for health and education, MLAS started working with ecotourism development in Dzongu in the year 2000 through preliminary communications and outreach to the community. In 2002, partnered with ECOSS and supported by the Group for the Environment, Renewable Energy and Solidarity (GERES), MLAS began capacity-building trainings for those interested in various activities involved with ecotourism, such as running homestays and leading tours (Ugen Lepcha, Personal Interview). This development was further carried on by the ECOSS Sikkim Himalayan Homestay Project, in partnership with the Dzongu Ecotourism Committee. The objectives of the project were as follows:

Objective 1: Develop and promote local homestays at the sites as an alternative opportunity for economic upliftment of the disadvantaged tourism stakeholder groups.

Objective 2: Build capacity of ecotourism service providers with emphasis on women and educated-unemployed youth, to enable them to adopt environmentally friendly, responsible tourism practices that ensure the sustainability of project in the long term.

Objective 3: Marketing of the existing tourist sites to the outside world through websites and brochures. (“Strengthening Himalayan”)

Tingvong village in Upper Dzongu was selected as the first target for the project. Out of this program, the first homestay in Dzongu was established by Dupden Lepcha, and is still running today. Even after the initial project implementation, MLAS continued to hold training programs on its own, without outside funds (Ugen Lepcha, Personal Interview). However, ecotourism development activities were pushed to the side for many years due to the onset of the threat of hydropower development and the contentious anti-dam movement. During the movement, many activists began developing homestays organically, without an official title, as they hosted friends and other activists and soon realized there was a need for paid accommodations (Homestay Operator, personal interview). After the hunger strikes ended in

2009, the younger activists were left wondering, “What next?” Most were educated but were now ineligible for government jobs due to their activism. They needed to find a way to return to a steady livelihood, while not compromising their independence from the government.

According to Tseten Lepcha, former acting president of ACT, the homestays that were started by people such as Gyatso Lepcha and Tenzing Lepcha, who were heavily involved in the movement, are a reflection of this desire to be independent, as well as to link their livelihoods with the environment and people of Dzongu (Personal Interview).

While these homestays were being started independently, MLAS began its involvement once again in ecotourism development through SBFP. Dzongu Ecotourism Committee is now incorporated as a wing of MLAS, and the president of MLAS, Ugen Lepcha, is also the JICA coordinator for Dzongu. In his role, Ugen Lepcha acts as the business planner for the implementation of the project in specific villages in Dzongu. The motivations of SBFP are to increase income-generating activities and decrease dependence on the forest for communities living in the Kangchendzonga National Park (KNP) buffer zone. In Dzongu, these communities are split up into seven Eco-Development Committees (EDC), with one or more EDCs for each Gram Panchayat Unit (GPU), depending on the population density. Each EDC receives a grant from SBFP, which the EDC then loans out to a self-help group (SHG) at a minimal interest rate. The loan is used to develop income-generating activities such as cardamom plantations, greenhouses, or homestay development. Once the loan is repaid, it is then given out to another SHG for work on a new project (Ugen Lepcha, Personal Interview).

SBFP functions under the Forests, Environment & Wildlife Management Department and aims to develop community participation and self-initiative in the conservation process. It also is bringing income-generating activities to communities that still practice subsistence farming as

their main source of livelihood, in the remoter areas of Upper Dzongu. An initiative funded by the Tourism Department is aiming to do the same in Lingthem village, by constructing 20 homestays that have been given to individuals chosen by the village leadership. The construction of these homestays started in 2012, and is still yet to be completed, although it has a slated end date for June 2016. There are many voices within the community critiquing this initiative of the Tourism Department, for various reasons. One community leader commented that while the government has good intentions in starting the homestay construction, there needs to be more community involvement for the project to be successful, other than the short capacity-building trainings that were offered in 2014. Others voiced serious concerns about the prototyped concrete structures, as they may lead to a further loss of vernacular architecture. The constructed homestays also do not fit the definition of a homestay, because they are independent structures not connected to the owner's home. Some also voiced cynicism that the gifting of the homestays is simply a politically-motivated gift for a community that is an important vote bank for the ruling Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party (Homestay Operators, Personal Interviews).

Current Homestays in Dzongu

This section of findings will cover the data collected from the homestay operators I had the opportunity to interview and provide an overview of the current status of homestays in Dzongu. The order is organized by location, from Upper Dzongu to Lower Dzongu and attempts to present the unique narrative of ecotourism development in each village. The homestays mostly operate on an individual model, with one community-based model and one homestay-resort hybrid. The guests, a varied mix of Indian nationals and foreigners, all participated in similar activities during their stay, based on the interests of the guests and homestay operators. The activities mentioned included trail walking, small guided treks, visiting hot springs and

waterfalls, bird-watching, witnessing cultural programs, interacting with the homestay family, relaxing at home, and participating in the activities of daily life in the village, including farming, cooking, and chores. The major differences in the homestays were the motivations of each individual in starting their homestay, their definitions of ecotourism, their feelings about marketing approaches, and their visions for the future. See Appendix B for a list of selected homestays that wished to provide their contact information and Appendix C for a map of the villages in Dzongu.

TINGVONG, UPPER DZONGU

As mentioned before, Tingvong village was the first village to have a homestay, started by Dupden Lepcha in 2003. The village now has three operating homestays, the other two of which started in 2011 and 2015. I interviewed two homestay operators in Tingvong, who both operate their homestay on an individual basis. Dupden Lepcha started his homestay after participating in the ECOSS-sponsored MLAS workshop, and sees potential in ecotourism development for alternative incomes for educated, unemployed youth. For him, the main benefits of ecotourism are preservation of culture and interacting with foreigners, learning about different livelihoods and languages. He defines ecotourism as tourism without disturbing your surroundings and the environment, although he believes it is the responsibility of the Tourism Department to create a more universal definition. His homestay is his primary source of income, in addition to farming, and allows him to fund his children's education outside of Dzongu (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

The other homestay operator I interviewed was one such educated, unemployed youth when he transitioned back into life in the village after being involved in the anti-dam movement.

He saw potential in running a homestay to provide a self-sustaining income, in addition to farming. He is currently building a larger homestay facility on his property. For him, ecotourism means just keeping it natural, using what is available in the region, not like the government schemes. If done properly, ecotourism can be done in harmony with nature, without destruction. Tourism and hydropower development are in conflict with one another. He argues it is better to keep the running of homestays independent, not under the control of politicians, as there can be favoritism in contracts (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview). Both interviewees mentioned the hypocrisy of the government constructing concrete structures on a large scale and calling them “homestays”. Dupden Lepcha also mentioned the difficulties in the management sector of homestays, as the individual homestays do not have a systematic approach. Finally, he reinforced the importance of slow growth in ecotourism and keeping restrictions around permits to Dzongu. “If tourism grows in Dzongu too much, the protections might go away, and we might not be able to control tourism. The influx of tourists would spoil our environment and culture” (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

KUSONG, UPPER DZONGU

Kusong is one of five villages in the Tingvong GPU, which also includes the villages of Lingkoo, Tingvong, Namprick, and Nung. Kusong is unique in Dzongu; since 2015, the village has been operating ecotourism through a community-based model. Two homestays have operated individually in Kusong since 2011, but have now been incorporated along with two new homestays into the community model. The community partners with the Youth Hostels Association of India (YHAI), Maharashtra Branch, to sponsor and facilitate group tours to Tingvong. According to the tourists I interacted with from this group, the goal is to promote cultural exchange and understanding across the vast diversity of India. YHAI has started the

same partnership with Kitam in West Sikkim, because both this village and Tingvong were chosen under the Prime Minister's Island Village program. The group seemed in consensus that you should not bring in tourists by advertisements, but by word of mouth; that way you will find people who are truly interested in the type of cultural exchange and learning that happens in homestays. Another tourist remarked, "It is so important to learn from people who still retain traditional knowledge, because most of us have forgotten all of these things" (Participant Observation).

The brain behind this initiative is 24-year-old Naysam Lepcha, who proclaims that tourism is good, but it cannot be just for the financial benefit. In this community model, it means that income and revenue benefits are distributed equally among all members, including homestay operators, guides, cooks, drivers, and those who provide organically-grown food. The homestays in this model run only during the peak tourist seasons of April and May, and October-December, allowing the community to focus on agricultural production the rest of the year. This model ensures that traditional lifestyles are conserved (Personal Interview).

Another homestay operator within this community model is a respected elder who served as panchayat for five years and was part of the anti-dam movement. She began her homestay informally around 2011 when she hosted the royal family of Sikkim, with whom her family has close ties. Although her homestay does provide income generation, for her the most important benefit is the relationship-building that happens with guests. While it is too soon to see what the bigger-picture effects for the community will be, she hopes to witness the fruits of building meaningful connections. "The city is digitized and artificial. When outsiders come to Dzongu, they see our way of survival, and they realize our survival is important for them as well." Because she says Dzongu is a "blessed land", she believes that those tourists who come are good

people with “pure hearts”. She also hopes that when the government is alerted to an increase in tourist activity in the village, they will take note and more readily support an upgrade in infrastructure (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

LINGTHEM, UPPER DZONGU

As previously mentioned, Lingthem is the recipient village of 20 concrete-constructed homestays from the Tourism Department. It is too soon yet to know what the effects and sustainability of these homestays will be for a community that still largely depends on subsistence agriculture. There are currently four conventional homestays operating in Lingthem, and I was able to interview two owners. One interviewee was the owner of the homestay, but mainly focuses on farming, while his son takes care of the logistical operations of the homestay. They began the homestay in 2011, but are also recipients of a government-constructed homestay (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

The other owner I interviewed is in the midst of constructing his homestay. An educated young man, he believes homestays are important to bring up the development of his village, by providing livelihood and cultural exchange with outsiders. He got the idea to start his homestay from others who were involved in the movement, and he hopes he can set an example for the generation coming up behind him, just as others have done for him. He currently runs a tours and travels business in Gangtok. When asked if there are tour packages for Dzongu, he replied that they had tried some in the past, but “regular” tourists were not interested “because of the bad roads and food.” For him, ecotourism means having an exchange of culture and knowledge, which means that guests also have something to offer. He also added that through ecotourism,

outsiders can gain knowledge about the effects of hydro-projects (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

LINGDEM, UPPER DZONGU

Lingdem is a small village in Upper Dzongu, and is not shown on the map included in Appendix C. There are currently two homestays in the village, each run individually, which started up in 2013 and 2015. One more is currently being started. In 2013, allegedly because of exploratory drilling done by a dam construction company, a hot spring suddenly sprang up in the village. Both of the currently-running homestays formed to take advantage of the income opportunity provided by the accommodation needs of tourists visiting the hot springs. The income is used to supplement other livelihood activities and to be able to afford outside education for their children. One of the homestays has a website (Homestay Operators, Personal Interviews).

PASSINGDONG, UPPER DZONGU

There is one homestay in Passingdong. Mayal Lyang Homestay is run by Gyatso Lepcha and was pointed to many times in various interviews as an example of a “successful homestay”. Gyatso Lepcha was one of the first activists to start a homestay after his involvement in the anti-dam movement as the president of CLOS. Unfortunately, I was unable to interview him due to scheduling conflicts. He does, however, have a fully-functioning website, and his is the only homestay in Dzongu capable of online booking. An excerpt from the website explains his motivations in starting his homestay:

We have always felt that development can be achieved without destroying our fragile ecology, culture and tradition. This was how we came up with the idea of Mayal Lyang,

an ecotourism venture. We want everyone to see how beautiful this place is and how intricately our way of life is linked to the nature. We strongly feel that such a venture can bring sustainable economic development to Dzongu and can empower our community, without affecting the pristine nature around us in any way. This in our opinion is the best way to move forward and ensure that we pass on this beautiful gift of god to our future generations. We believe that conservation of Nature is equally important to all of us because we all live under the same sky and the walk the one Earth. “About Us”

SANKALANG, UPPER DZONGU

There is one homestay in Sankalang, Sankalang Sampo Lee, which was started in 2015 by a retired schoolteacher. She was the only interviewee that did not mention income as a motivation in starting her homestay. Because she began the homestay as a pastime in her retirement, she values the venture for providing opportunities for relationship-building, as well as sharing culture and experiences with her guests. Other benefits to the wider community include income generation by creating demand for drivers, guides, and cultural performers. She got the idea to start a homestay from friends who also own homestays. Her son lives in the nearby town of Mangan and helps out with the business by providing logistical support and communication with guests during the booking stage (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

LINGDONG, LOWER DZONGU

There is one homestay in Lingdong, which started in 2013. The family’s home is farther up in another village, but in 1990 the current operator’s father built a house in Lingdong. He rented it out, but the tenants did not take care of it, so he gave the house as a training space for the handloom industry. Later, his daughter got a diploma in tourism, worked in Gangtok, and then got the idea to start a homestay. The benefits for the family include income generation and interactions with guests around exchanges of ideas and culture, especially food. Their homestay

also provides benefits for the larger community by creating a market for local handicrafts and traditional bags. The homestay has a website (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

HEE-GYATHANG, LOWER DZONGU

The only homestay in Hee-Gyathang is run by Tenzing Lepcha and was started in 2011. Well-known as one of the two hunger strikers who staged a 96-day hunger strike during the anti-dam movement, Tenzing Lepcha views his homestay as a strategy in the continuation of the struggle. In the fight against mega-development, he recognizes that he himself must live the kind of lifestyle to which he is calling others. He wants to be a role model for the younger generation, to encourage them to return to Dzongu after receiving their education. When outsiders come in as tourists, there can be a positive revaluing of tradition that brings dignity and appreciation for the way of life in which the youth were raised. In addition, he recognizes the importance of pursuing a livelihood connected to the land. “If you have the land, you need to use it to its fullest purpose”. To this end, ecotourism cannot be an alternative to a traditional agricultural livelihood. Instead, agriculture is an integral part of making ecotourism possible. Tenzing Lepcha remarked, “We want modernization, but in a way that respects the environment and the carrying capacity.” He believes that the kind of tourists that want to do homestay tourism are the kind of people who will respect the environment. He does not have a website, as he claims “those who would find me online will find me anyways” (Homestay Operator, Personal Interviews).

The other ecotourism initiative in Hee-Gyathang is a model that combines aspects of both a homestay and an activities-based resort. It was established in 2015 by two business partners who were both involved in the anti-dam movement. While the venture is only eight months old and cannot currently host more than 10 guests at a time, it contains three cottages and small

kitchen gardens on the grounds. The structures were all made using local materials and traditional designs, and the food served is seasonal, organic, and from the village. In order to benefit the community, they delegate certain aspects of the business to different community members. For example, in feeding the guests they make use of neighbors' cows, vegetables, and homemade wines, and at times send overflow guests to other homestays in the area. The partner I interviewed feels that normal tourism has reached its saturation point, and tourists are looking for alternatives. Life in Dzongu to outsiders is often interesting because it appears as a place relatively untouched by modernity and development. The owners use this desire as an opportunity to teach visitors not only what it means to live a truly environmentally sustainable life, but also about the most pressing issues for the community in Dzongu. As I interviewed him during a riverside picnic he had set up for a tourist group, one partner remarked:

This is the only chance they have to enjoy a running river like this. All the other rivers in their area are dammed or polluted. When guests come at first and see the dams, they don't really understand the fuss about it. "You're getting development, aren't you?" But by the end of the stay they are against the dams and want to speak out about it. That is how we spread our message. I can help these five people to understand, and they can tell five more. It's not much, but it's what I can do. (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview)

DISCUSSION

While speaking with ecotourism experts in Gangtok about the development of the industry across the state, I was pointed towards examples of successful communities in other parts of the state, but was told that in Dzongu, "it hasn't really worked out", or there is "not much happening" (Personal Interviews). However, my experience in the field as reflected in the findings of this paper showed a varied and vibrant array of ecotourism ventures in differing stages of development, all across Dzongu. Therefore, in this section I will discuss my findings in light of the frameworks of motivation and agency put forth in the introduction, to analyze how

definitions of ecotourism and ecotourism activities reflect the motivations and goals of different stakeholders. I will also comment on my perceptions of the agency of different stakeholders to bring about the desired results of ecotourism development in the specific context of Dzongu.

Definitions of Ecotourism

Seemingly trivial arguments over the definitions of ecotourism are actually incredibly important, as definitions and rhetoric have the power to shape models and motivations that produce real outcomes. Duffy claims that “ecotourism is a business that has to compete alongside of other businesses, and it focuses on profit rather than conservation” (x). The Tourism Department, one of the foremost promoters of ecotourism in the state, certainly falls under this claim. This case of the state government trying to “green” tourism is indicative of a capitalist agent attempting to assuage its environment conscience (Hartwick and Peet qtd. in Cater 48). Although the department does not have a formalized definition of ecotourism, their actions reveal their motivations of profit, as ecotourism is simply listed as one option in a basket of tourism offerings. Even ECOSS’s agenda, with its emphasis on conservation, fits neatly within “dominant development theories based on neoliberal economics and notions of comparative advantage” (Duffy x). While profit is not inherently wrong, it must be recognized that many within the community in Dzongu expressed their view that ecotourism differs from tourism in that it is about something larger than profit. As one homestay owner remarked, “After all, you can’t eat money” (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview).

In fact, it was much easier for people to define what ecotourism is *not*, rather than what it *is*, and most of those negative statements were directed towards government-sponsored projects in Dzongu, specifically the building of concrete homestays. “They may be using the name of a

homestay, but that is not a homestay,” remarked several homestay operators and ecotourism experts. For them, a homestay must be connected to the actual home of the family. This opinion shows the importance that is placed for many homestay operators on authentic interactions and cultural exchange, by allowing guests to be a part of their daily life in the village. By participating in this way, homestay operators have the agency to create for themselves the type of experience they want their guests to have and what learning they want the guests to take away from the experience.

Others, when asked about their definition of ecotourism, took the conversation in the direction of development. “We want development here in Dzongu; we are not against that. We need better education, roads, and telecommunications. But we want it in a way that does not harm the environment and our culture.” In the eyes of these homestay operators, ecotourism that includes cultural exchange, low-impact activities, and uses the resources available within the community can bring the income and governmental targeting that is needed for this type of development. “Unfortunately,” remarked one homestay owner, “if you keep some of tradition, you have to give up some of modernity. And if you take some of modernity you have to give up some of tradition. It’s a balance” (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview). The case of ecotourism is a microcosm of the struggle to find this balance. The unique forms of each homestay, community model, and government scheme show the many outcomes this towards which this discernment can lead. Therefore, it is critical that communities themselves are given the space, time, and autonomy they need to figure out this difficult balance for themselves.

Motivations and Agency

Within my discussion of motivations and agency I have categorized the types of motivations found in Dzongu into income and livelihood generation, environmental and cultural conservation, and the sustainability of the anti-dam movement.

INCOME AND LIVELIHOOD GENERATION

For the majority of stakeholders involved, ecotourism is an income-generating activity that is an additional form of livelihood, but it is not an alternative. For all of the homestay operators interviewed, all but three of them have their homestay as an addition to producing for the agricultural market or working in government jobs; it is not their primary form of income. There are those within the community, however, for whom the homestay is their primary form of income. These individuals have different income needs, as they are either retired or depend on subsistence agriculture. The significance of creating new income opportunities, is that in regions like Sikkim “marked by national and global political economies, state intervention, and rigorous environmental limits, self-determination means designing world-worthy, heterogeneous economies” (Smith 420). These diversified economic livelihoods also create resilience for the individual households involved. For example, if there is an off year for either crop production or tourist activity, there are other forms of income that can sustain the household until the next year. While the strategy of economic diversification is “one of the central premises of neoliberal economic strategies for development”, many of these households started their homestays on an individual basis, without the guidance or financial support of outside institutions, which means their motivations were internally driven and therefore more sustainable (Duffy 103).

Another important evaluation is whether government programs promoting ecotourism development in Dzongu have the potential to foster community autonomy and ownership over

the projects. For those community members in Lingthem receiving concrete homestays, their participation in the program is mostly driven by the external motivation of the Tourism Department scheme. While there have been marginally significant capacity-building trainings offered as part of this scheme, these have been on the topic of how to run a homestay, but did not include sessions on financial management. The Tourism Department, with its agenda driven by neoliberal values, sees all recipients of the scheme as agents equally capable of acting as a business within the tourism market. This view ignores the contextual nuances and underlying power dynamics within the village (Gershon 546). In De Gurung's study of the financial remuneration to individuals for use of their land for dam construction, the author found that the received benefits were squandered and mishandled, and also exacerbated the existing socioeconomic inequalities within the community (261, 262). The handouts given by the Tourism Department to a community where many individuals have not yet entered a formal cash economy could reproduce similar results and does not promote the collective agency of the community.

The SBFP-sponsored self-help groups have a more mixed result. The program is working within existing village leadership and organizational structures, promotes a decentralized control of funds, and the agenda for each SHG is self-determined. While the model and funds are currently adopted from an outside agent, SBFP, the program has the potential to foster the agency of the communities involved if through the program the communities begin creating their own goals for further development.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL CONSERVATION

In speaking to the goal of environmental and cultural conservation expressed by most stakeholders, the current activities involved in ecotourism in Dzongu seem to be fairly low-impact. The activities the tourists engage with while in Dzongu include soft trekking and other passive activities, like birdwatching, which have not been shown in other case studies to have a negative environmental impact (Coria and Calfucura 49). Another concern expressed by academics about ecotourism in indigenous communities is the commodification of culture (Duffy 73, Davidov 2). This phenomenon also does not seem to be a large threat in Dzongu, as the number of tourists to the area is on such a small scale. For example, there are not enough numbers of tourists to sustain an autonomous traditional handicrafts industry. While tourists can request to see a cultural program put on by local schoolchildren, they may only participate in religious festivals if they are already scheduled to occur. A few homestay operators recognized that a large draw for tourists coming to Dzongu is the “coveted alterity”, the experience of a lifestyle radically different from their own. However, these same homestay operators believe that the individuals who desire this type of experience will also be willing to have a sincere, authentic learning exchange. In addition, it is interesting to note the differing feelings about marketing strategies and how these opinions reveal underlying motivations. Some wished to use existing technologies of online marketing, comfortable with using this modern technique to attract guests and expand their income-generating abilities. These methods are also promoted by ECOSS and SBFP (“Strengthening Himalayan”, “Ecotourism Component”). Others saw this as a compromise of values and wanted to bring tourists through more traditional methods of person-to-person connections, showing they prioritize quality of relationships over convenience and income.

In this vein, the continued success of environmental and cultural conservation through ecotourism in Dzongu seems to hinge on the area’s protected status. The permit system required

for outsiders to enter Dzongu limits the flow of tourists to the area and therefore allows the community to have a higher level of control over the way ecotourism develops there. It remains to be seen, however, whether the development of ecotourism itself could be a reason for the government to relax the restrictions. In its evaluation of the Sikkim Himalayan Homestays project, ECOSS expressed the desire that the area would be targeted for permit relaxation, which in their eyes would increase the economic incentives for the community to participate in ecotourism activities (“Sikkim Himalayan” 3). Similarly, SBFP names as one of its goals, to “ease the restrictions impeding the operation of ecotourism,” which would include permit restrictions (“Ecotourism Component”). On the other hand, when speaking to community members and homestay operators, many expressed concerns about permit relaxation, as it could lead to an uncontrollable influx of tourist activity, which would be detrimental to the environment and culture (Personal Interviews). The community currently has autonomy over the process of ecotourism, because they are not fully part of a free trade market, as there are restrictions to the free flow of tourism goods and services. If the permit restrictions to Dzongu were taken away, the stronger forces of a globalized, neoliberal economy would interfere with the agency of communities in Dzongu to create ecotourism on their own terms.

A crucial aspect of cultural conservation named by many community members and academics is that educated youth should return to live in Dzongu, not only to continue cultural practices, but to create a more viable, relevant future for Dzongu. While education may bring new ideas and values to a community that may seem, at first glance, to be in conflict with tradition, it can also lead to cultural conservation, by giving youth the skills needed to interact with modernity in a way that is beneficial to the community’s livelihood (Bentley 76). The poignant example of this concept is the resurgence of Lepcha cultural identity that was in part

inspired by the young, educated leaders in the anti-dam struggle. Those homestay owners who were a part of the movement named that a motivation of their involvement in ecotourism was to provide an example for other educated youth about the possibilities for livelihood within Dzongu. All parties interviewed named the unquestionable importance of the role of education for individual and community development. However, an interesting note is many of the homestay operators are using their extra income to send their children away for outside education. Because there is no higher education available in Dzongu, many youth leave the area for their schooling, and settle into lives and careers in a new location. Therefore, education can be seen as both an encourager and a deterrent of cultural conservation.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE ANTI-DAM MOVEMENT

Coria and Calfucura argue that in order for ecotourism to be successful in promoting the autonomy of indigenous communities, “[it] must promote deeper social and political justice goals to local communities, as well as the capability to make land use decisions for that area” (48). The final motivation I will analyze is the sustainability of the anti-dam movement. Those homestay owners who expressed this motivation took the earlier-named motivations of income generation and environmental and cultural conservation one step further, by articulating these goals as possible only through the prevention of mega-dam construction in Dzongu. They spoke to the importance of diversified economic activities that connect livelihoods to the land, as well as the desire to set an example for educated youth about the possibilities of making a meaningful livelihood in Dzongu. In addition, some spoke to the ability of ecotourism, and specifically outsiders taking interest in the area, to promote a positive revaluing of culture, by allowing those who take life in Dzongu for granted to see it in a new light (Duffy 102, Personal Interviews). In some ways, the effects of these motivations can begin to be seen in the homestay operators who

named Tenzing Lepcha and Gyatso Lepcha as their inspirations for becoming involved in the work themselves.

The unique perspective of anti-dam homestay owners was the way they looked outwards beyond the socioeconomic benefits to their own community to seek to broaden the awareness and impact of the movement against hydropower development in Sikkim. For these owners, each guest offers an opportunity to cultivate a seed of understanding, a personal investment in a contentious issue that for many living outside Dzongu can seem distant and inconsequential. “When they come here, they can start to realize that our survival is important for theirs as well” (Homestay Operator, Personal Interview). While it remains to be seen how these seeds will come to fruition within the lives of individual tourists, this motivation is one that demonstrates the practice of agency to its fullest extent, as is not only an internal motivation, but one that lives over and above the powerful drives of globally-dominant neoliberal value systems.

CONCLUSION

In the voice of Davidov again:

Anyone writing about tourism is responding to the cultural dimension of the entire enterprise, with its hidden and illuminated historical legacies and socioeconomic realities. Thus, theorizing tourism becomes a project that has to be concerned with peripheries and ironies, with people who have been exploited and left in situations where further cultural and economic exploitation seem to be at odds with one another, with marginalized people who are suddenly in a position to profit from their cultural location, with subjects whose very poverty and exclusion from global economic flows has become a valuable commodity, because it signifies the coveted alterity, and with locals for whom ecotourism is inherently a political enterprise, even as their visitors fail to grasp that dimension of it.

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In this study I have attempted to illuminate the realities that became uncovered during my time in Dzongu exploring the motivations and agency outcomes of ecotourism development. I

have tried not to shy away from complexity, presenting the stories of ecotourism ventures as they appear in all forms, while still offering a coherent commentary on the relevance of agency frameworks in promoting indigenous self-determination. Through this journey, I have come to know the stories of individuals and communities tirelessly committed to not only the preservation, but the renewal of their way of life. While ecotourism clearly means different things to different individuals and stakeholders, the main motivations found in this study are income generation, cultural and environmental conservation, and the sustainability of the anti-dam movement. Ecotourism is certainly not a venture with straightforward causes and effects, which necessitates even more a careful exploration of the context in which it operates.

Within the landscape of ecotourism development in Dzongu, many different actors are involved in income-generating schemes of different models and scales. It is those, however, which promote the self-determination of the community that better promote agency, even if the initial drivers are based in neoliberal values, as the community has the opportunity to reclaim the external drivers as intrinsic motivations. My initial findings also suggest that ecotourism in Dzongu contributes a minimal impact to environmental degradation and cultural dilution. This success for the community's agency hinges on the existence of its protected status. Education can also be seen as both an encourager and a deterrent of cultural conservation. Finally, the best case of ecotourism birthing a more autonomous community is when it embodies larger social justice goals by connecting livelihood to the land, providing authentic cultural exchange, and reinforcing the Lepcha claim to place in Dzongu. While only time and further research can tell the long-term agency outcomes of ecotourism for the Lepcha living in Dzongu, the carrying capacity of the environment, and whether tourists fully grasp the transformative lessons being

offered, the complex case of ecotourism development provides a clear picture of the ever-evolving institution of culture as tradition and modernity inter-relate.

The state of Sikkim, like many places in the world, is currently poised to follow a path of either large-scale development or sustainability, but it cannot have both, no matter how tempting that option may seem. In a moment like this, it is a place and a people like the Lepcha of Dzongu that have the potential to offer a different way forward, one that promotes respect of ecology, culture, and a different way of living and knowing, that recognizes our inherent position as part of a living ecosystem. Indeed, our survival is inextricably linked to theirs.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As this study was exploratory in nature, there is much further research that could be done based on these initial findings. I have spoken on the different ecotourism models that are being practiced in Dzongu, but I have only analyzed the differences in those that were started from outside drivers and those begun from internal motivation. It is important moving forward to evaluate the benefits within the context of Dzongu of individual versus community-based ecotourism models. Which model of sharing community benefits from ecotourism, informal or formal, provides the most agency for those involved?

In addition, this study has taken place at a very early stage of the development of homestays and tourism on a larger scale than before in Dzongu. Moving forward, it is crucial to understand in a more empirical way the long-term environmental and cultural impacts for the community. Finally, it could be an interesting experiment to more deeply enquire into the personal effects for tourists of travelling to Dzongu. Are there changes in opinion, worldview, and behavior that can be measured?

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Sample Interview Questions for Homestay Operators

When did you start your homestay?

Why did you start your homestay?

Did you start your homestay on your own?

Do you have other sources of income?

What activities do the guests do while staying with you?

What are your interactions with the guests?

How do guests find out about your homestay?

Do you think homestays have an impact on the broader community?

How would you define ecotourism?

How would you describe your relationship to the land? How is ecotourism a part of that?

Appendix B – Contact Information for Selected Homestays

Homestay Owner	Homestay Name	Location	Contact Information
Topgay Lepcha	--	Kusong, Upper Dzongu	+91 9547184676
Naysam Lepcha	--	Tingvong GPU, Upper Dzongu	+91 8372890975
Rigzen Lepcha	--	Lindong, Lower Dzongu	dzongulee.com
Tashi Chouden Lepcha	Sankalang Sampo Lee	Sankalang, Upper Dzongu	sankalang.in Facebook page: Sankalang Sampoo HomeStay
Gyatso Lepcha	Mayal Lyang	Passingdong, Upper Dzongu	myallyang.com
Tenzing Lepcha	--	Hee-Gyathang, Lower Dzongu	+91 9679183063
--	Munlom Nature Resort	Hee-Gyathang, Lower Dzongu	munlomresort.com

