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RANGZHIN



Inspiring personal responsibility for environmental conservation since 1987

RSPN Bi-annual Newsletter | Vol. 15 Issue 2 | December 2022

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We have over 2,000 members across the world supporting our conservation efforts. Keeping our mission at the core, the membership platform is another great way to inspire and get people on board to support the cause.

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Greetings from RSPN

Warm Greetings to our donors, partners, members, and supporters in Bhutan and across the globe!

Once again, we are delighted to share with you our bi-annual Rangzhin Newsletter, Volume 15, Issue 2, filled with information and news update. As RSPN continues to build and expand our conservation initiatives, the past one year saw us striving to leverage people's support in the conservation efforts through incentivizing and engaging local communities in the implementation of various community-based conservation programs.

This issue, in particular, highlights RSPN's progress on Species Conservation, Livelihood programs and donor and partnership-supported project updates, besides bringing in some inspiring field stories from the people we live and work together.

With the same spirit of appreciation, we extend our highest regard to our donors, partners, and collaborators for your unwavering support, trust and partnership.

We wish you all happy reading!

RSPN Team

Rangzhin is RSPN's bi-annual newsletter started in 2003. It is one of the communication tools to garner support for the organization. Through this platform, we inform, educate, engage and connect with our friends across the world.

In the News

► Commemorating the 11th Royal Wedding Anniversary of Their Majesties

The staff of the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN) organized a cleaning program along Chubachu stream (Thimphu district) in commemorating the 11th Royal Wedding Anniversary of Their Majesties.

To uphold the strong environmental conservation legacy of Their Majesties, the cleaning program aimed at supporting Their Majesties' consistent guidance and leadership in the conservation and to re-assure RSPN's continued efforts and dedication to carry forward the golden legacy in the preservation of the Kingdom's environment.

The event marked RSPN's 29th cleaning of the Chubachu stream since the adoption in 1971. Apart from the regular monitoring and clean-up programs, numerous awareness and education engaging diverse groups of society were also consistently carried out.



Participating organizations



Event supporter



► High Commission of Canada to India visits RSPN

Mr Colin Wetmore, the First Secretary (Political Affairs) for the High Commission of Canada to India, met with the project team of the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) at the RSPN Head Office, Thimphu on September 27, 2022. RSPN presented the project status and shared the expected benefits of the project.

RSPN has been implementing the project on 'Enhancing climate resilient through gender responsive agro-ecological farming, provision of agriculture tools and developing marketing linkages' in

Langdurbi and Phulabi villages covering around 100 households in Zhemgang District with fund support from CFLI. The overall goal of the project is to strengthen community resilience to climate change and contribute to pandemic recovery by promoting environmentally, socially, and ecologically sound agriculture that has supported climate resilience hybrid

vegetable and horticulture seedlings.

Subsequently, Mr Colin Wetmore and Ms Stéfanie Bergeron, First Secretary (Political) made a monitoring visit (November 21, 2022) during which the CFLI project team presented the progress of the project.



High Commission of Canada to India with RSPN officials



Monitoring visit by CFLI officials

► Expanding partnerships

RSPN received a courtesy call from His Excellency Shri Sudhakar Dalela, Ambassador of India to Bhutan on December 6, 2022. The RSPN team led by the Executive Director presented some of the priority environmental conservation areas in the country and avenues for possible support desired from the Embassy of India in Thimphu.

His Excellency highlighted some of the possible conservation ventures that RSPN may take up in the future and discussed possible collaboration and partnership between the Embassy and

RSPN. The Executive Director thanked His Excellency for extending the goodwill and solidarity to RSPN's conservation efforts

and expressed RSPN's readiness to collaborate and partner with the Embassy.



His Excellency and official, Embassy of India in Bhutan with RSPN team

► Congratulations to our Chairperson

It is an honor for RSPN to rejoice yet another moment as we congratulate our Chairperson, Dasho Phub Dorji on being appointed as the Dzongdag of Thimphu district.

Under the benevolent leadership and guidance of our Hon'ble Chairperson, RSPN has succeeded in leveraging our

conservation programs across the region and has gained incredible recognition both nationally and internationally.

The RSPN Board of Directors and staff would like to offer our good wishes to Hon'ble Dasho for your new position.

We are certain that Dasho's leadership will continue to serve the people of Bhutan and fulfil the aspiration and vision of the Royal Government of Bhutan.



Photo Courtesy: Facebook page of His Majesty the King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck

Project Updates

► Capacity building workshop for LCSGs

- Tshering Tobgay

Communities are important stakeholders for the successful implementation of conservation programs. To enhance their capacity to support the conservation of White-bellied Heron (WBH), a day-long workshop was conducted on November 26, 2022. The workshop was targeted for the communities residing along the two of the important WBH landscapes, Punatsangchhu and Mangdechhu river basins.

For the last many years, local communities enrolled as members of the Local Conservation Support Group (LCSG) initiated by RSPN, has helped in strengthening the conservation programs. The initiation of LCSG is aimed to garner support from the local communities for the conservation programs and engage them in conservation works. Today, we are facing numerous challenges due to our own actions. Increasing anthropogenic threats are grounding nature to the point of non-recoverable situations, and the threats to nature are further compounded

with global environmental issues. Therefore, the modality to build the nature conscious and supportive citizens are found crucial. The LCSG membership initiation was found meaningful as they act as informants in reaching out conservation messages to many local communities and constantly engage in supporting the conservation programs.

The capacity building workshop saw the attendance of interested communities wishing to become a new member of LCSG. The participants included both male and female participants of different age groups. The workshop conducted at Tingtibi in Zhemgang district was also attended by officials of the Department of Forests and Park Services.

The workshop was tailored for the participants to know more about the WBH, their ecological roles, monitoring protocols and identifying the role of communities to engage in conserving the species. The modality of delivering the workshop included both classroom lectures and hands-on activities. The highlight of the workshop was mainly to encourage local communities to become involved in conservation programs or

becoming citizen scientists. Participants were trained to gather WBH data and submit it using a mobile app-Epicollect5, which was launched in 2019 as a real time WBH data gathering project as 'WBH_Monitoring' (<https://five.epicollect.net/project/wbh-monitoring>). The app is user-friendly for any interested citizen scientist in submitting the information regarding the WBH sighting, habitat information, and WBH associated species observed. The information received through this app help RSPN in prioritizing the conservation interventions.

As of now, RSPN has more than 30 individuals identified as LCSG members spread across the project landscape. With this capacity building workshop of the local communities, the number of LCSG members have now doubled.

The activity is part of the ongoing project funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN.



► International Black-necked Crane conservation network meeting

- Jigme Tshering

During the Convention of Migratory Species COP13, held in India, representatives of the range states and international partners organized a side event to discuss conservation issues related to Black-necked Cranes and exploring options for strengthening cooperation. The group presented conservation actions of respective range states as well as conservation strategies which require cross-border cooperation. Subsequently, an international network meeting was conducted in Bhutan by the Royal Society for Protection of Nature in partnership with NABU International, Crane Conservation Germany, and the Department of Forest and Park Services, Royal Government of Bhutan, with the fund support of BMUV (The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection) and International Crane Foundation.

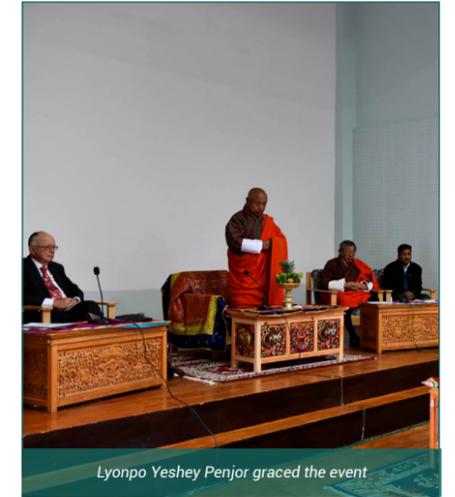
The event was graced by the Agriculture and Forests Minister Lyonpo Yeshey Penjor. The networking meeting was attended by international experts from Australia, China, Germany, India, Nepal, USA and relevant local environmental conservation stakeholders and academicians engaged in the study and management of BNC and their habitats.

With the objective of strengthening conservation actions for the BNC, the two-day workshop brought together regional and international researchers, conservationists, academicians and related partner institutions engaged in study and management of BNC and their habitats. The event provided a platform for the experts to share knowledge and learn from each other about country specific conservation and development.

The first day saw a series of presentations by the participants on various subjects including result sharing of research and

studies carried out on BNC and their ecology. Research on migration, dietary composition, habitat preferences and management were some of the topics covered.

During the second day of the workshop, representatives of the range countries and international partners discussed pathways to strengthen collaborative conservation initiatives. This was followed by identifying and prioritizing conservation gaps and actions in each of the range countries. The participants worked on the global strategic action plan for BNC conservation and drafted the document.



Lyonpo Yeshey Penjor graced the event



Mr Jigme Tshering, National Coordinator, presented the status of BNC conservation in Bhutan



The participants

► Stakeholder consultative meeting for CBET development

- Karma Wangchuk & Khachi Wangmo

RSPN has strengthened the collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders in the tourism fraternity through a stakeholder consultative meeting that was organized by RSPN on August 9, 2022.

The stakeholders were apprised of the findings from the Community-based Ecotourism (CBET) feasibility study. During the meeting, the stakeholders agreed to collaborate and synergize the project interventions to avoid duplication of efforts and resources among three

projects:

1. BMUV-IKI project, "Developing Ecosystem-based Solutions for Managing Biodiversity Landscapes in Bhutan", managed by RSPN.
2. BMUV-IKI project, "Living landscapes: securing High Conservation Value (HCV) in the south-western Bhutan", managed by WWF Bhutan.
3. GEF Ecotourism project, "Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into the tourism sector in Bhutan", managed by Royal Government of Bhutan.

CBET is one of the key livelihood programs under the BMUV-IKI project that will demonstrate the importance of conservation as a basis for the sustainable

social and economic well-being of the communities living in the WBH landscape. The participants comprised relevant government agencies (Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Department of Tourism, Local Governments), international partners (WWF Bhutan, UNDP Bhutan and Helvetas Bhutan), Civil Society organizations (Tarayana Foundation and Guide Association of Bhutan).

The activity is part of the ongoing project funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN.



► Enhancing community livelihoods as co-benefits of biodiversity conservation

- Tsheten Dorji & Karma Wangchuk

RSPN in collaboration with the District Agriculture and Livestock Sectors has kick-started the implementation of the Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) and Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) mitigation interventions.

The team from RSPN completed the consultative meetings with the Local Government leaders and the identified

communities and provided orientation on the HWC Management group By-laws, crop compensation schemes, and CSA interventions to the identified villages within White-bellied Heron (WBH) landscapes of six districts (Dagana, Punakha, Trongsa, Tsirang, Wangdue Phodrang, and Zhemgang).

Additionally, improved winter vegetable seeds were also distributed to 12 identified villages under Dagana, Punakha, Tsirang, and Wangdue Phodrang districts (Tsirang – Toisang, Balwani, and Sunkosh villages, Dagana- Samarchu and Norbuling villages, Wangduephodrang- Zawa, Jarogang,

Jalla, Ulla and Nyshigaykha villages, and Tshachuphu and Zawa villages under Punakha district). Poly houses, improved crop seeds, horticultural saplings, and high-value timber saplings will also be provided.

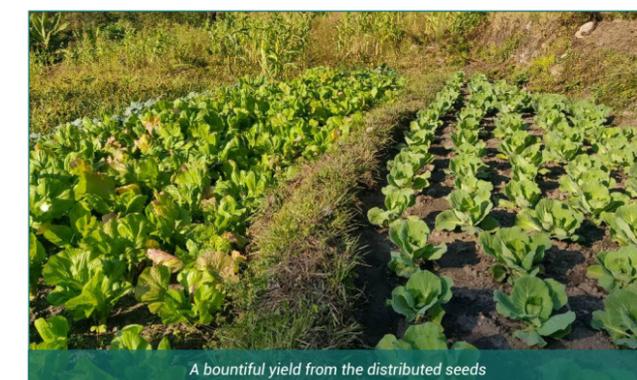
The support for enhancing community livelihood is one of the approaches to balance the co-existences of WBH and local communities, and is expected to empower the communities and increase their ownership towards the conservation initiatives of WBH and its habitat. Besides enhancing biodiversity, climate-smart agriculture will make farmers more

resilient and adaptive to climate change. 10 agro-ecological farms, seven HWC Management groups, and five Community seed banks will be established through the project. By 2025 about 1,000 households are expected to adopt climate-smart agriculture options including organic farming and increase their income by 10%.

The activity is part of the ongoing project funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN.

12
villages of WBH landscape areas distributed with improved vegetable seeds.

1,000+
households expected to adopt climate-smart agriculture options including organic farming by 2025.



Strengthening Species Conservation

► The rescued White-bellied Heron

- Samten Leki

In the history of WBH conservation, we have successfully rescued an injured WBH. A WBH juvenile was found injured in a private fish pond in Nichula under Dagana district. The incident was reported by our WBH conservation counterpart (Nichula Range office) and immediately our WBH Conservation Center (WBHCC) facilitated the rescue operation for the first time. Today, the juvenile is recovering steadily at WBHCC.

Rescue journey

On September 1, 2022, an injured WBH juvenile was reported in a private fish pond at Nichula, Dagana district by our WBH conservation counterpart, staff from

the Nichula Range office, Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary, located about 200 kilometers downstream of the center along the Punatsangchhu river basin.

Immediately a rescue operation was planned by a team from the RSPN head office and WBHCC. Meanwhile, a few staff back at the center prepared the quarantine aviary with all the necessary structures like a dark room, nest and perching logs to receive the injured heron.

Nichula, Dagana

"There were several birds and animals feeding on my fish pond and that's when I started covering the pond with net. Early morning of September 1, 2022, I went to feed fish and saw a large bird entangled in my pond. I immediately informed the forestry officials of PWS based in Nichula",

says Duk Bdr. Katwal, fish pond owner. The forestry officials reached the incident site. "After reaching the site, we found the entangled bird was WBH and that's when we called RSPN to help rescue and rehabilitate WBH. While we were waiting for RSPN team, we untangled the bird and kept it in a temporary enclosure. Also we covered the enclosure with green net and provided water and fishes to the injured juvenile as advised by RSPN team", says Pema Dorji, Sr Forester.



Injured heron in temporary enclosure at Nichula



WBH juvenile entangled in the net at Nichula

The RSPN team reached the rescue site at 08:24 pm and on rapid physical examination found that the juveniles right wing suffered from bruises sustained due to the longer duration of entanglement in the net. However, the team could not provide any immediate medical treatment as it was under extreme stress.

Next the team restrained the heron by covering with a piece of cloth and then transported to the WBHCC using the transportation box and started the journey at 09:33 pm. The heron was monitored timely on the way and we reached the center at 02:00 am.

Rehabilitation

The team carried out a physical examination, collected samples, treated the wound and was quarantined for more than 80 days, for strict surveillance of any communicable diseases and observation of its behavioral patterns especially its feeding habits on daily basis.

Further, its blood and feather samples were sent to National Museum of Nature and Science, Japan, for gender identification and blood analysis. The heron was identified as male.

Medical examination

The fecal examination was carried out on the 3rd, 5th, 9th, and 19th of September. It was found that the heron was infected with coccidia parasite, therefore, we administered Coccidoline Sulpha Driver Premix and completed its medication on September 18, 2022.

No external parasite was seen or found on the feather. On September 9, we collected its tracheal and cloacal swab sample to detect Avian Influenza virus and was sent to District Veterinary Hospital and the result came negative. On the same day, we checked the bruise condition and applied ointment again.



Testing for Avian Influenza



Sample collection

Feeding

Initially, it did not attempt to feed any fish, probably due to environmental shocks and was fed forcefully on its first day. But the next day it was feeding well by itself and exhibited normal behaviour. Today, the heron marks two months in the center and is being strictly monitored daily and keeping records of it.

Further, we have conducted educational awareness programs in the communities and requested them to at least inform us on such incidences in the future to save WBH from the brink of extinction.

RSPN acknowledges Mr Duk Katwal and Nichula Range Office for your thoughtful actions. **By saving this individual heron, you have saved 4.3% of WBH population in Bhutan.**

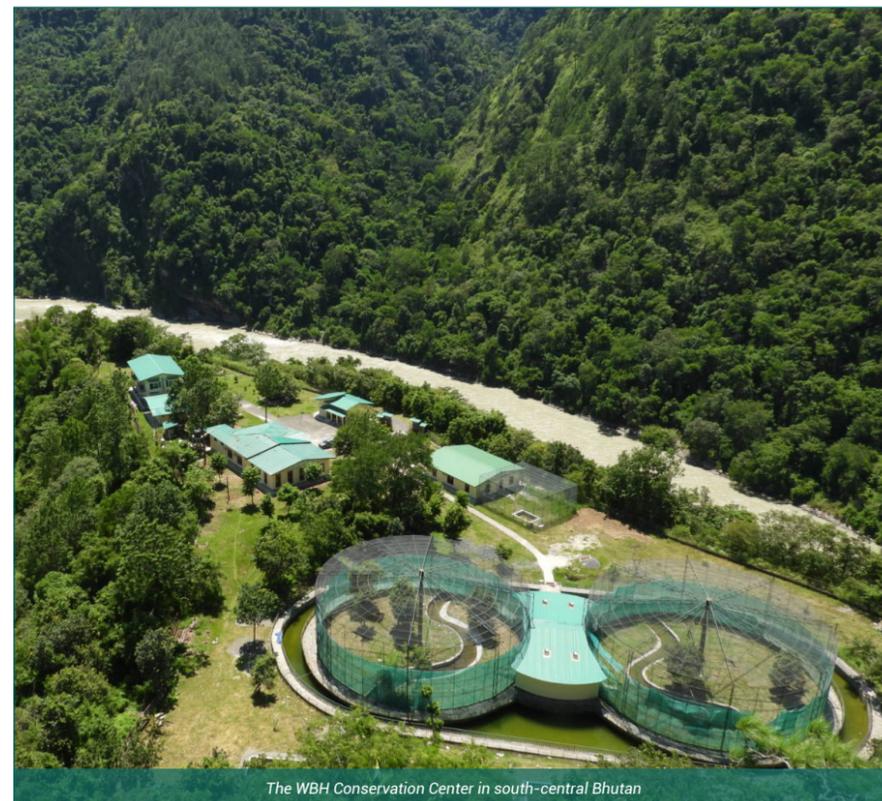


► **Conservation of White-bellied Heron [South Asia]**

(Published in Rewilding Successes)

- Indra Prasad Acharja

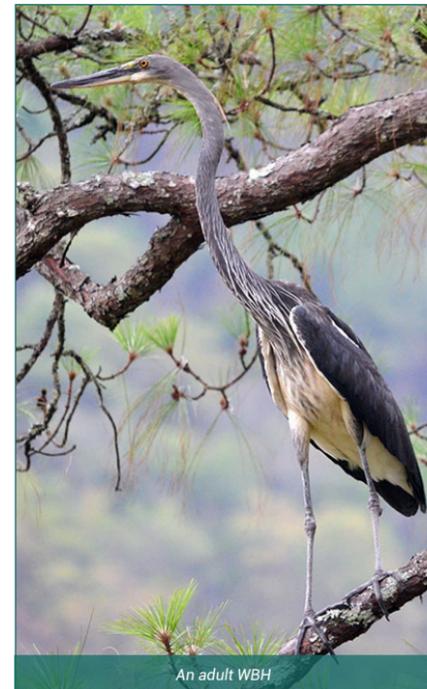
A new phase in the conservation and recovery of White-bellied Heron (WBH), *Ardea insignis*, has begun in Bhutan with the establishment of the first pair of ex-situ breeding birds. In April 2021, researchers of RSPN collected a pair of pre-fledged juveniles from a wild nest and transferred them to the newly constructed Conservation Center in south-central Bhutan, where the birds will be raised and bred. The Center aims: to secure an ex-situ gene pool; to rear, raise, and breed herons; and to supplement the wild population by releasing them into safe habitats, where research indicates that herons should thrive. It will also serve as a center for research, a global information hub, and a place for coordinating conservation work in the region.



The WBH Conservation Center in south-central Bhutan

The collection of selective birds from the wild will continue until the population's genetic diversity is expressed in several breeding pairs, as it is the only source of founders for the species. In the future, this tiny captive group will function as a breeding reserve and hopefully will be a safeguard from extinction and a source of birds for the introduction of herons into safe areas.

The WBH is critically endangered and one of the rarest heron species in the world. Today, fewer than 60 individuals survive over the extent of 165,000 km² of Himalayan freshwater ecosystems, spanning the countries of Bhutan, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and China. It has been declared regionally extinct in Nepal and is possibly also extinct in Bangladesh. Bhutan is home to 45% of the global population, including between three and five active breeding pairs, which are vital for the survival and recovery of the species.



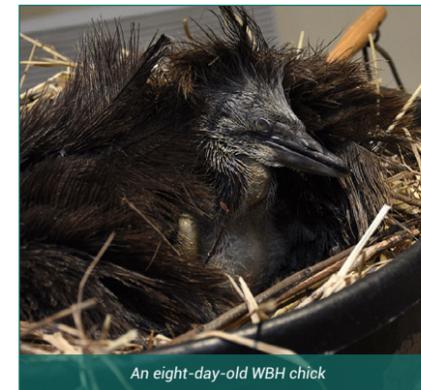
An adult WBH

RSPN, an environmental conservation charity in Bhutan, has been leading in the protection of species in the past two decades. In 2003, recognizing the bird's plight, RSPN began mapping and monitoring the WBH population and habitats. The first nest in Bhutan was discovered in 2003, after more than seven decades since the previous discovery anywhere in the world, in Myanmar in 1929. Owing to its small population, little was known about this heron's ecology and biology.

Over the past two decades, RSPN, in collaboration with the Department of Forests and Park Services, Local Conservation Support Groups and local communities, has monitored population trends, distribution and habitat use, nesting, and active breeding pairs, while also mapping major threats to the birds and their habitats. The annual population and nest surveys for the last nineteen consecutive years have recorded an average of 24 birds and three active breeding pairs, from which two chicks per nest have fledged, barely sustaining the extremely low population.

In 2011, with technical support from the San Diego Zoo, RSPN conducted the first artificial incubation and captive rearing of the WBH with an egg lifted from the wild nest. The chick was reared and released back into the wild after being raised in captivity for 134 days.

This experiment helped gain skills in captive management and build confidence to revive the population through a captive breeding program. It also allowed the understanding of the bird's developmental processes, dietary preferences, and biology.



An eight-day-old WBH chick

In Bhutan, we have also observed that the number of successful nesting pairs has declined from up to six active nests

in 2012 to just three for the last four years. The number of nest failures is also increasing. In 2020, in one of the nests in Mangdechhu, we observed sexual conflict, parental infanticide, and nest failure, suggesting stressed breeding pairs, competition, and potential gender imbalance, or even inbreeding. Although

we are still in the process of understanding the bird's breeding biology and ecology, there is great concern that the population could decline to a state where it might not be possible to revive or to sustain a viable gene pool. Restricted distribution, small and fragmented population size, and poor recruitment are potential indicators of this species' failure and impending extinction.

Three major challenges threaten the birds:

1. Habitats are being lost to infrastructure development, agriculture expansion, hydropower dams, extractive industries, and climate change.
2. Most of the few remaining habitats are increasingly under pressure owing to incautious eco-tourism and recreation, diminishing food resources, pollution, fragmentation, forest fires, and both man-made and natural calamities.



Birds in a breeding enclosure at the WBH Conservation Center

3. The small population itself is a liability, with grave costs of increased mortality and declining breeding success.

The demand for natural resources, infrastructure, energy, transportation, and services has increased with the human population in Bhutan. Moreover, Bhutan has opted for hydropower as the primary energy source and revenue; increasingly, new dams are being built along the fast-flowing rivers. In the process, riverine habitats are being destroyed, fish populations are declining, and threatened wildlife species like the WBH are displaced. The conservation and breeding center has been established to rescue this heron species from extinction risk. Approximately US\$150,000 is needed annually to support the operational cost of the Center. Currently, only half of this cost is provided by the WBH Endowment Fund, supported by the Mava and Hans Wilsdorf Foundations.

We seek donations to fill the funding gap via the Bhutan Foundation, a partner based in the United States that helps us raise funds and manage donations. Over the next five years, we plan to build five additional aviaries and information amenities, to procure breeding and veterinary equipment, and to build the capacity to carry out conservation breeding work, which will cost around US\$500,000.

SUPPORT WBH CONSERVATION

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► **WBH knowledge sharing and coordination meeting**

- *Indra Prasad Acharja*

From the several species at risk in Bhutan, the critically endangered White-bellied Heron (WBH), a bird closely associated with the Himalayan freshwater river system, is on the verge of extinction. Today, WBH is the rarest and the most critically endangered heron globally with less than five known breeding pairs. Bhutan is home to 45% of the global population and 90% of known breeding birds.

For the past two decades, RSPN in collaboration with its partners, have been putting efforts and resources in preserving and recovering the last remaining populations in Bhutan, fearing this tiny population might disappear anytime, before fully understanding them. Therefore, to save WBH and other highly threatened species, there is an urgent need for close cooperation and strategic coordination at the national level.

To this, a two-day WBH knowledge sharing and coordination meeting was organized by RSPN to strategize and enhance stakeholder coordination in WBH conservation on December 28-29, 2022 in Punakha district which is one of the key WBH habitats.

The workshop has successfully been able to bring together experts from various government agencies and organizations to share and discuss insights on diverse conservation practices, technologies, developments, and businesses that would pave a pathway to robust and coordinated efforts among the key stakeholders in saving WBH from the brink of extinction.

White-bellied Heron conservation: Status update by Mr. Indra Acharja, the Chief of Species Conservation Division, RSPN

Globally, WBH population is in a declining state with now only left in few of the range

countries. In Bhutan, many of the earlier places that were known for sighting WBH have no recent record.

During the conservation journey of WBH, RSPN carried out habitat inventory, ecological studies, annual population count, and established a network of members as Local Conservation Support Group (LCSGs) to enhance the conservation of WBH.

The decline in number of the species was observed mainly from the upstream of the Punatsangchhu. Currently, the main habitat in Bhutan includes two river basins, Punatshangchhu and Mangdechhu that fall under Tsirang, Dagana, Phibsoo, and Zhemgang districts.

In Bhutan, the first nest was discovered from a place called Zawa under Wangdue Phodrang district in 2003. The discovery of the nest in Bhutan was made after the

gap of several years with the only last known WBH nest found in Myanmar in 1929. For now, there are only three active nests known in Bhutan or in the world. The maximum nest distribution (about 90%) was recorded in Punatsangchhu. However, it is not always a success story to have WBH chicks getting fledged from these nests. Each nest has their own story with observation of infanticides, adultery and predators.

Meanwhile, the extinction probability model shows that there is a 15 % likelihood of WBH to go extinct by 2050-2060 if no conservation measures are taken. Therefore, there is a need to reduce juvenile mortality, and supplement the wild population through captive breeding to enhance the conservation of WBH. The meeting was followed by a series of presentations from different guest speakers.

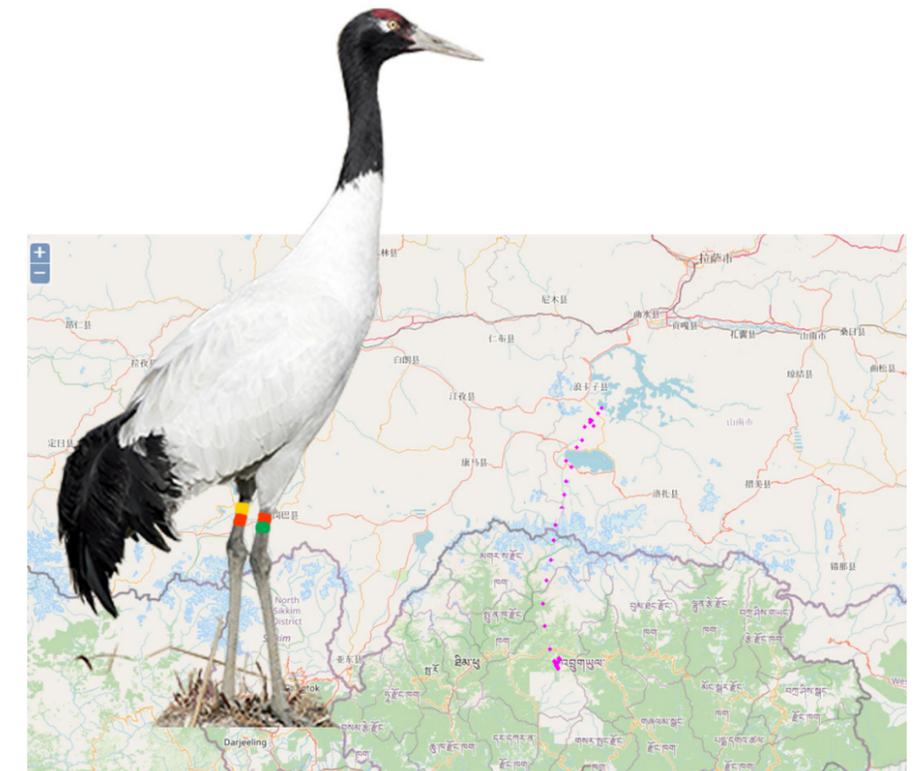


► **Crane Tsheyphyell is back**

- *Jigme Tshering*

With Yellow-Red and Red-Green colour rings on his left and right legs, respectively, Crane Tsheyphyell flew over the mighty Himalayan mountain peaks from his summer home in Tibet to get to his winter home in Phobjikha. Tsheyphyell was tagged with eobs GSM GPRS transmitters by RSPN in collaboration with the Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environmental Research (UWICER), Crane Conservation Germany and NABU International in January 2020. It took Tsheyphyell, approximately, 3 hours 30 minutes to get here, covering about 175 kms.

This project is funded by Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany.



► **White-bellied Heron Conservation Action Plan launched**

The White-bellied Heron Conservation Action Plan was launched on July 29, 2022, in the presence of our conservation friends from the Department of Forests and Park Services (DoFPS), Bhutan for Life and WWF Bhutan.

RSPN started the conservation of WBH in 2003 and over the years, together with our partners, we have put in our efforts to the conservation of this species to a greater height.

Over the last two decades, we have mapped the distribution range, identified key feeding and nesting habitats, and closely monitored the population, nests, and juveniles. We have educated, inspired, and engaged local communities, students, researchers, institutions, and policymakers in its conservation. We now have a better understanding of WBH's



genetic diversity, ecology, biology, threats, and challenges.

The Conservation Action Plan is an outcome of multi-institutional collaboration and the support of many individuals. This is a national document developed jointly by DoFPS and RSPN. The overall conservation strategies and actions outlined here reflect the holistic approach to achieving the milestone in the conservation of WBH within the period of the next 10 years, 2022-2031. As it

became effective in 2022, the plan was expected to bring various conservation partners together in putting our foremost efforts to achieve our common goal of saving the last remains of WBH from its brink of extinction.

The action plan was developed through funding support from the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation (BTFFEC).

[Download Action Plan](#)

► **Adha, the beautiful hamlet was once the home for WBH**

- Tshering Tobgay

WBH is known for occupying the large freshwater rivers of Himalaya. This species in Bhutan is even known to forage in the lake with frequent observation at Adha Tsho, the perennial lake located in Adha under Wangduephodrang district.

Adha, a beautiful hamlet, famously known for the existence of many of the legendary people, and now the Adha Tsho in the village has become the center of attraction for many of the visitors. In terms of socio-economic situation, they consider themselves as a self-sufficient people. The crops grown are enough to sustain them comfortably. At Adha Tsho, the heron used to forage and not very far from the lake the heron built a nest on the large pine tree grown over the steep cliff.

"I used to observe nest building and could hear the large call of croaking sound. But that was only a history now!", says Adha Tshogpa.

It has been almost a decade with no recent sighting of heron from the area. Earlier, three places under Adha gewog were very prominent for WBH sightings:



WBH awareness and advocacy program for community

Adha Tsho, Zawa and Nangzhina. Even the first nesting recording of WBH in Bhutan was discovered at Zawa in 2003. However, two of the places Zawa and Adha Tsho have now no recent record of WBH. Many of the people think that due to the occurrence of flood in the area and the road construction, the heron might have probably left the area.

As a part of the International Climate Initiative project activity, funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN, the WBH educational program conducted

recently for the communities along WBH landscape also included Adha community. The advocacy program is expected to enhance the collaborative approach and bring the communities on board of conservation. During the program, communities residing along the WBH landscape were visited and advocated on the importance of conserving the WBH. Sharing the ecological roles of WBH and their significance, the discussion to enhance the partnership between RSPN and communities in safeguarding the heron were also made. The educational program saw total participants of 1,674 individuals including farmers, students, hoteliers, nuns and local government officials.

REACHED TO

1,674

participants including farmers, students, hoteliers, nuns and local government officials.



Adha lake

► **Meet Ap Penjor, a decade old WBH conservationist**

- Tshering Tobgay

In 2010, Ap Penjor was introduced to the Local Conservation Support Group(LCSG) membership initiated by RSPN. Since then, he has been actively helping RSPN in conservation of the WBH. He would regularly mark his footprint along the river banks of Harachhu keeping close watch for the WBH or check for any signs that may give indication of WBH in the area.

Today, he is a living legend who shares the historical records of WBH in the area, and how distribution and population patterns have changed in Harachhu. More than keeping records of heron in the area, his charismatic means of communication helped him advocating community on the importance of conserving WBH in his village.

"I used to remain busy watching herons in the year 2013 to 2015 with frequent sightings of these birds in the Harachhu area. There used to be a nest too in the area. However, this moment was short-lived with compounding threats to the WBH occurring in the area", says Ap Penjor.

The frequent occurrence of forest fires, major flood, and sharp increase in unsustainable community fishing practices in the area led to decline of the herons. As Ap Penjor narrates, his sudden change of voice modulation and emotional expression give clear evidence that losing the herons from the area brought **no happiness to him and his community**.

With the hope to see the herons back in the area, still today the instinct in him to open the window and keenly watch over the Harachhu once every morning after waking up has become routine for him.



Ap Penjor

► **The return of Wild Celebrity**

- Tshering Tobgay

"Finally, our prayers were answered. It is the blessing of Machey from Punakha Dzong", Ap Daw made this remark to his friend while they were discussing the return of WBH to their village. They felt the emptiness of Phochhu river only when the herons did not show up to their village for long period of years. The return of WBH is now talk of the village starting from school kids to the head of village. Communities were also alerted by local government officials and forestry officials through

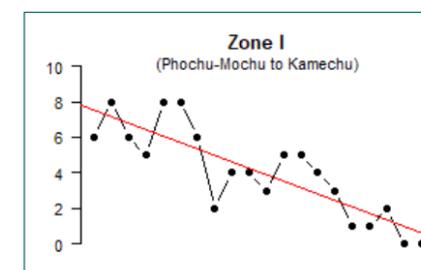
social media forums to be sensitive, cautious and minimize the threats to herons. The heron is wild celebrity for now in the village.

WBH, the critically endangered bird was once not so rare to sight in Phochhu. From the good family numbers to finally a pair and then to single individual, the history of herons' disappearance from Phochhu is not very far history as not a single WBH sightings was reported in the area for

past three years. The increase threats in the area can be the attributing factors for this drive.

Today, it is joyous moment to see the herons back, but if the threats are not cautiously consider to mitigate, the history will just repeat.

Kindly respect the presence of species maintaining safe distance from the area.



Securing Sustainable Livelihoods

► Eco-restoration to enhance the conservation of WBH and improve community livelihood

- Tshering Tobgay

As a responsible citizen for the development of the community, Ap Daw Gyeltshen is leading as the chairperson of the Community Forest at Tsekha village in Punakha district. Through the funding support of RSPN, Tsekha Community Forest has carried out the plantation on the degraded areas within the Tsekha community forest.

The snowfall in the area last winter and a forest fire that occurred a few years ago damaged some areas of the community. However, the plantation carried out last year has helped to replace many of the damaged trees. Ap Daw is very proud and confident that after a few years time, the plantation carried out will bring so many benefits, both in terms of conservation and improving the livelihood of the community.

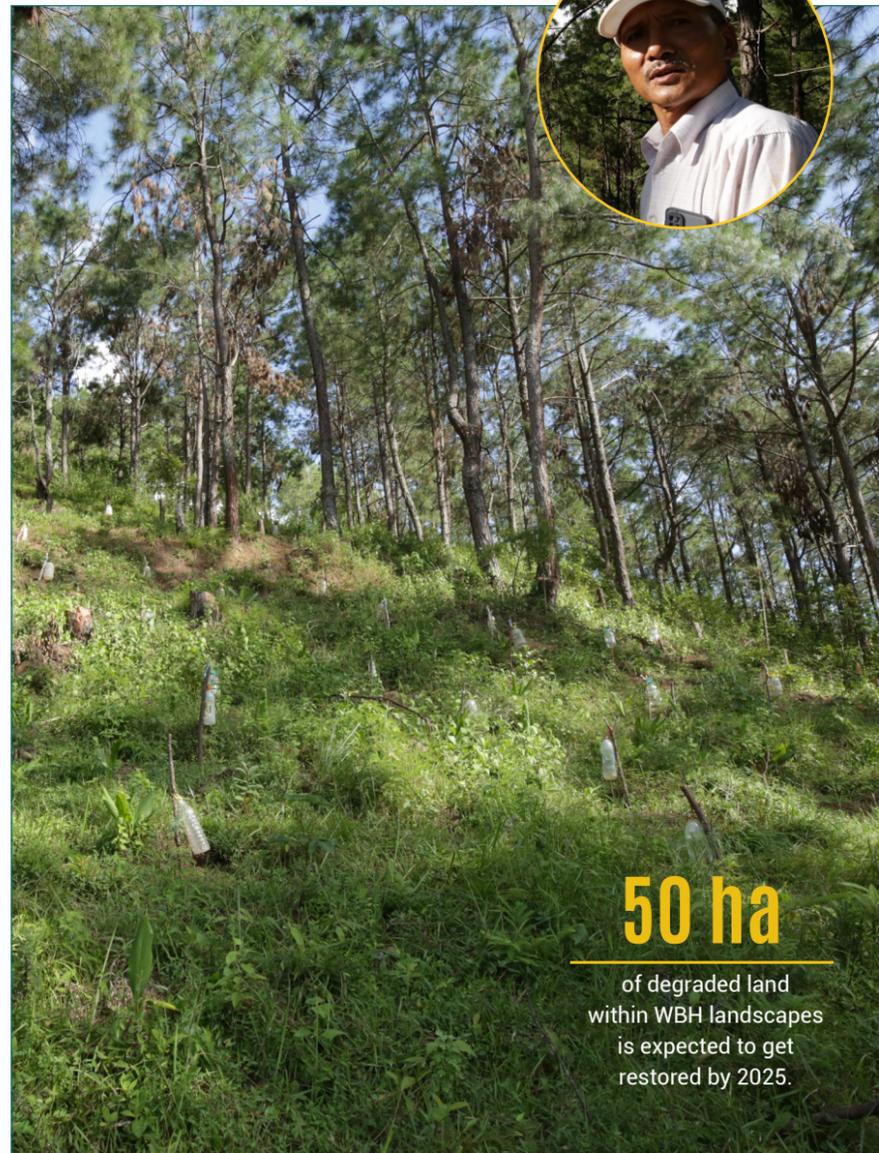
He and his members decided to choose the plantation area close to the Phochhu river that was once used by the critically endangered WBH for nesting and roosting. According to him, this will help in creating suitable habitats for WBH but also strengthen community development. The plantation area also holds cultural significance where community people gather annually in the area to perform rituals for preventing untoward weather conditions in their village that might impact their crops and health.

The species planted were selected mostly from native species and fruit-bearing trees that will benefit the wildlife and also be useful for the community. The idea is as well to mitigate human-wildlife conflict and also bring economic benefit. At the end of the five-year period

of the project, it is expected to restore 50 hectares of the degraded area within the WBH landscape that will mitigate climate change, and improve wildlife habitat and community livelihood.

The plantation activity is successfully carried out in collaboration with the Department of Forests and Park Services, Local Government and communities.

The activity is part of the ongoing project funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN.



50 ha

of degraded land within WBH landscapes is expected to get restored by 2025.

► Human-Wildlife Conflict Crop Compensation Scheme

- Karma Wangchuk

Fourteen years into the Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) strategy document, the wild boar problem appears to be getting worse. Our environmentalists seem wary of the issue. However, the economic loss caused by the reduction in production will undoubtedly make our farmers unwilling to continue farming, let alone let our young people return to the village to work in agriculture (Kuensel, August 20, 2022).

"...the Government cares more about wild animals than us..." if you ever spend some quality time trying to understand the feelings of some of our farmers, you will certainly hear similar sentiments. Imagine a cow or farming as a sole household income source. For such a household, losing a cow or crops to wild animals will devastate the family financially and emotionally", Kuensel, August 20, 2022.

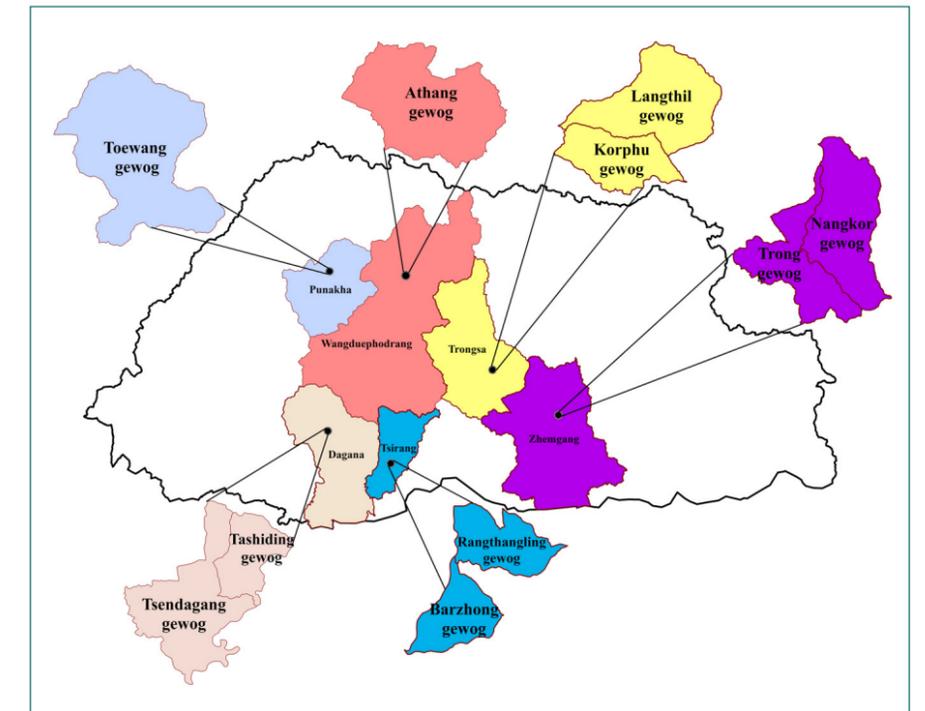
To address the rising issue of the HWC, Human-Wildlife Conflict Insurance Scheme (HWCIS) is one of the alternative approaches adopted by RSPN.

In RSPN, one of our thematic areas is to support rural communities to secure a better future through sustained livelihood options and currently we are implementing HWCIS as a pilot program in the WBH landscape.

This crop compensation scheme will benefit the community that suffers crop damage, especially by wild animals. For the successful implementation of the scheme, a chairman, treasurer and accountant are appointed by the community group and joint-saving accounts are created in their nearest financial institutions. And for the sustainability of the scheme, every community member contributes membership fees as a co-finance mechanism and seed money is being provided by the on-going BMUV-IKI project.

"We are farmers, living in the rural pocket and dependent solely on our farm. All our hard work often goes to waste overnight when we encounter crop damage caused by wildlife. So, HWC is another big issue and concern that makes us lose our interest in doing agricultural work", said Aup Zati, Kewana village, Toedwang Gewog.

Further, RSPN will facilitate training and capacity-building programs for the group members to assess the crop damages by the wild animals. Such programs are expected to provide timely services like reporting of crop damages and compensations to the affected farmers in the communities.



Nomination and appointing of Chairman, Treasurer and Accountant

Stories from the field: Improving the lives of the communities

► A youth-led conservation livelihood program in Samarchhu

-Deki Dema

A youth-led winter chilli farming group working in Dagapela under Dagana district, is turning into a model for many aspiring youth farmers.

With RSPN's support through the mass distribution of chilli seedlings to the farmers of Samarchhu Chiwog under Tsenda-gang Gewog in Dagana district, the farmers have started venturing into growing mass winter chillies. One such inspiring and promising initiative is the youth-led mass chilli production on a commercial scale.

Mr Bimal Subba, a youth in his early twenties decided to stay in the village after completing class ten and has initially worked on his father's fallow lands, clearing off 1.5 acres of land to start the mass chilli cultivation. A youth group established early this year has three youth members keenly taking up the chilli business.

The group has already begun cultivating chillies and earned over Nu. 55,000 from their first harvest. Currently, the youth cultivates chilli on a five acres of land under lease. The youth group has also planned to upscale their chilli production and venture into growing other varieties of vegetables on the additional five acres of the leased land.

And the story is no different for other farmers in the community. In the past, the farmers grow chilli for self-consumption only but the situation is different this year as growing chilli has become a lucrative business now. Locals in Samarchhu say earlier they had to buy chillies from neighboring Indian towns.

The Samarchhu village is identified as one of the most potential areas for chilli cultivation and RSPN shall render continued support and encourage the communities especially youth group to take forward such initiatives. Besides, the communities have also shown their interest to take up other alternative livelihood programs such as fishery, poultry, piggery, and ecotourism.

RSPN will continue to support these initiatives to help in building community and landscape resilience to climate change impacts.

Nu.55,000+

earned from their first harvest of chillies

The activity is part of the ongoing project funded by the Federal Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection (BMUV), Germany through the International Climate Initiative (IKI) and co-funded by MAVA Foundation, Switzerland, and RSPN.



Bimal Subba (Left)



Chili cultivation

In the Conversation

► My journey with RSPN

- Hishey Tshering, Bhutan Birding & Heritage Travels

Q1. When did you first hear about RSPN?

I heard of RSPN around 1988 or 89 when one of my friends was working there as its first Secretary General. Further as the office was located in the town our circle of friends often visited the office.

Q2. What was your journey with RSPN like?

There are many memories and some of them may not be related to conservation or the environment such as the famous RSPN archery team. Even though our players were average players we were the team to beat and we demonstrated to the rest the value of teamwork. It was also through the team's participation in the tournaments that people came to know about RSPN and that it wasn't a division of the Forest Department as most people used to think so.

Looking back and seeing all the wonderful work that RSPN is doing, I feel extremely proud of the role I played in ensuring that RSPN survived. Many of you may not even know that the organization itself became almost "extinct". We had a management crisis in the mid-90s and the society was on the brink of closing with no funds even to pay the staff salaries, etc. Along with my colleague Mincha Wangdi, we organized a high-level meeting with key government officials and sought their help to ensure that RSPN survived. In that meeting we were advised to look for someone who could lead the society and if need be even to approach the government for a suitable person on secondment. Following that meeting, I approached the late Mr. Migma Norbu Sherpa, who was the Country Director of WWF for both Nepal and Bhutan for financial assistance that would give us the tools to negotiate a financial

package to entice someone capable to join us. That was how we managed to get Dr Kinlay Dorjee, who at the time was the Head of the Policy and Planning Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, to join and lead us through the rough times. It was he who laid the foundation for RSPN to move forward. At that time there was no civil society act and Dr Kinlay managed to get RSPN registered as a not-for-profit organization under the Companies Act of Bhutan 1989.

Under Dr Kinlay's leadership one of my most memorable achievements was starting the Black-necked Crane Festival. At that time most people's idea of a festival was always around the Tsechu concept with a religious connotation. I feel that it was the Crane Festival that was the forerunner to so many other festivals besides the Tsechus. Today as

a tour operator I feel proud that the Crane Festival has become a very important part of the tourism calendar.

Q3. Is there an achievement that you are most proud of?

Besides what I mentioned above, some of the contributions that I am extremely proud of actually happened after I left RSPN in 1999 to start my travel business. First of all, when I led the Crane Festival in 1998 it was on an agreement with the local community of Phobjikha that RSPN would fund and organize the festival for the first two years after which the community was supposed to take it up. Unfortunately, due to lack of funds the community was not keen to continue with the festival and hence there was no festival in the year 2000. I was depressed that something that I thought would bring about great benefit to the community of Phobjikha didn't even



survive a couple of years. I learned that the community wasn't keen on continuing with the festival with any assurance of its success and were unwilling to fund it. I was told that they needed an amount of Nu. 120,000 (which at that time was about US \$ 3000) and that His Holiness the Gangtey Trulku provided 50% of the fund. I raised the entire amount from my clients and handed over to the community and that was how we were able to revive the Crane Festival again in 2001 and like I mentioned earlier, I feel extremely proud that outside of our Tsechus, the annual Crane Festival is perhaps the biggest and most popular festival in the country.

Besides this, two other contributions that I have made have had a significant impact on RSPN for which I am extremely proud. One was embarking on a fundraising lecture tour of the US that was sponsored and coordinated by my former clients. On that tour we raised hundreds of thousands

of dollars for the RSPN endowment fund and also made many connections. It was a huge honor for me to go around several cities in the US with Dr George Archibald and Dr Lam Dorji talking of Bhutan's conservation efforts in general and RSPN's role in particular. The other contribution that I am particularly proud of is how one of my tours in November 2002 was responsible for starting the white-bellied heron project which today has become a multimillion-dollar program.

Q4. Through your journey with RSPN, what have you learned about and what kept inspiring you? How has this changed you?

It Although I am now a businessman, my motivation to do any activity has always been about how I could benefit the society and never be influenced by profits. This value of "always wanting to do things for others" was instilled in me by my mother, who is now 92 years and still going strong.

This value was further nurtured by my association with RSPN; after all the work that RSPN is doing is always centered around future generations and serving the society.

Q5. What do you think other people should know about RSPN?

Obviously, people ought to know about all the wonderful work that RSPN is doing and how they can be a part of RSPN's journey.

Q6. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

In my life I have learned that you don't need to be highly qualified or rich to make a difference to society. Every one of us can make a difference and have a positive impact on our society; either by doing things by yourself and by helping those with capabilities to fulfill their potential.

- Compiled by: Sangay Dema



Black-necked Crane festival in 1999



ABOUT US

RSPN was established in 1987 under the Royal Command of His Majesty The Fourth King of Bhutan as a citizen based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) devoted to the conservation of the Kingdom's environment.

His Majesty The King was the Royal Patron of RSPN from 1999 to 2012. Her Majesty The Queen of Bhutan is the Royal Patron. RSPN is managed by a seven-Board Directors, the Executive Director is the head of the organization.

VISION

To be the Leader in conservation ensuring future generations of Bhutan live in an Environmentally Sustainable Society.

MISSION

To inspire personal responsibility and active involvement of people of Bhutan in the conservation of the Kingdom's environment through, Education, Community Engagement and Sustainable Livelihood Opportunities.

WHAT WE DO?



RSPN's Conservation Mandala

The mandala represents our systemic approach and efforts, geared to implement sustainable solutions to emerging environmental challenges through, innovation, citizen engagement, education, and empowerment. The six thematic areas are initiated based on national and international priorities that are aligned to address Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Using this approach, it affirms our belief and commitment to addressing the global issues which are interdependent in nature to support our goal of an 'Environmentally Sustainable Society'.

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We would love your support!
The Royal Society for Protection of Nature is working across the country to protect our environment, providing HOPE to its people and the threatened species that they live and depend on.



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