

Field Notes from Bhutan's Tiger Biologist at UWICE, Mr. Tshering Tempa

Warm greetings from Bhutan!

It's been two months since I returned to Bhutan from pursuing my PhD in "Ecology of Mountain Tigers" at the University of Montana. And boy, it is good to be back home! I am happy to work alongside my colleagues once again, venturing into the lush forests and hoping to cross paths with my favorite cat species, Bhutan's mountain tigers!

I am excited to write to you as my team and I prepare to collar a tiger in Bhutan for the first time. It's quite ambitious but not impossible. Just two weeks ago, Bhutan received one of the heaviest snowfalls in years, which we Bhutanese believe is an auspicious sign. I hear the Northeastern United States also received quite a lot of snow. I hope all this snow bodes well for tigers in Bhutan! On this hopeful note, I am happy to present an account of our initiative to conserve Bhutan's tigers.



Wildlife through hidden eyes--In recent years, remote camera traps have become an essential tool for wildlife biologists around the world and especially in Bhutan. A single camera trap gives us the chance to discover some of the most mysterious animals concealed in the vastness of our forests, which we otherwise would have missed. I had heard about these game-changing remote camera traps as early as 1999 while pursuing my undergraduate degree in India. It was only in 2006 that I got the opportunity to handle and learn about them at the University of Montana while I was working toward my master's degree. Since then, I have been using camera traps in Bhutan's dense forests. For the first time in Bhutan, we are now able to discover the diversity of wildlife in our forests.

Bringing endangered wildlife to the forefront through camera traps--The [Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment \(UWICE\)](#) is an organization dedicated to promoting stewardship, education, and research on sustainability and conservation of forests and the environment. With support from the Bhutan Foundation, UWICE started an extensive remote-camera-trapping exercise in the lower foothills of the [Royal Manas National Park](#), Bhutan's oldest national park in the southern foothills of the Himalayas. I saw that Manas was filled with majestic tigers, magnificent elephants, and critically endangered pangolins and pygmy hogs. While the rest of the world is reeling under the threat of species extinction due to poaching and habitat loss, here in Manas, the landscape brims with many iconic wildlife species.

By 2013, with continued support from the Bhutan Foundation, we extended our camera-trapping network to [Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park \(JSWNP\)](#) in northern Bhutan, the third largest protected area in Bhutan. We now have camera traps from elevations as low as 500 feet in the south to above 13,000 feet in the northern mountains. These hidden eyes revealed the movement of tigers all the way from the foothills of Manas to the mountains in JSWNP. This enabled us to learn that Bhutan still has vast connected landscapes where tigers and other large predators roam

unhindered in their natural habitat. In 2015, we set up additional camera traps in the rugged mountains of northeastern Bhutan. To our surprise, we captured the tigers at the staggering altitude of 14,400 feet. Roaming at such high altitude is considered unprecedented for the Royal Bengal Tiger, supposedly a warm and low-land top predator. Further supporting our claims that Bhutan is an important tiger conservation landscape in the region, camera traps captured a female tiger with cubs at multiple locations across Bhutan.



Tiger prowling in our backyard-

-Just recently, a tiger was captured on camera prowling in the UWICE research preserve, near Lamai Goempa Dzong in Bumthang in north-central Bhutan. A tiger inside the UWICE campus! A little unexpected, but all of Bhutan is potential tiger habitat, so this finding is not very surprising to me. The UWICE research preserve was established in 2014 for conducting forestry and wildlife research especially for our students.

Our joint effort with the Bhutan Foundation towards understanding these majestic wild cats have come a long way in terms of establishing baseline

information on key species, and we look forward to achieving more. This year, we head toward the Royal Manas Park again, where we will be putting a radio collar on a tiger for the first time in Bhutan. Here's a [short video](#) put together by the Bhutan Foundation that will give you interesting facts and figures about Bhutan's mountain tigers.

More programs at UWICE supported by the Bhutan Foundation--The Bhutan Foundation also supports a major climate change initiative at UWICE using citizen scientists to collect climate and weather data. The [Himalayan Environmental Rhythms Observation and Evaluation System \(HEROES\)](#) project is being implemented by UWICE in partnership with schools and nature clubs throughout Bhutan. The HEROES project employs a combination of weather data collection (through a network of weather stations) and citizen science to help understand climate change. The project has a network of 23 weather stations (20 in schools and 3 in remote mountain locations), 17 schools, 34 teachers, and over 1,000 students collecting this data. By its second year, the project has already succeeded in mainstreaming plant phenology observation and climate change as topics in the high-school environmental science curriculum.

Bhutan will be one of the few places in the Himalayas to have a comprehensive set of climate data that will be vital for helping understand climate change. This will be supplemented by an understanding of how key plants and animals respond to a changing climatic pattern over time. In the process, hundreds of students will gain first-hand knowledge of how climate change affects us through our surrounding environment. Thousands more will learn about climate change through local lessons in school. This project has been made possible from partnership with the [Karuna Foundation](#). Here's a [short video](#) that gives you a brief overview of the HEROES project.

Global support makes a world of difference--The Bhutan Foundation has also supported UWICE in the past by helping develop their research library, the Daphne Hall for Conservation, and much more. In addition, UWICE has partnered with the Bhutan Foundation, [Jigme Dorji National Park](#), the [Ministry of Agriculture and Forests](#), [National Geographic Society](#), the [Snow Leopard Conservancy](#), and the [University of Montana](#) in work to protect and conserve the wild cats and snow leopards of Bhutan.

Thank you to all our friends who continue to support the Bhutan Foundation so that they can fund important projects under UWICE and other environmental conservation programs. We hope that you will continue to support all the exciting work happening in Bhutan!

Sincerely,



Tempa Tshering
Chair of the Department of Conservation Biology
Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment

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Bhutan Foundation (Washington, DC)
3121 South Street, NW
Washington, DC 20007
+1 (202) 609 7363
info@bhutanfound.org

Bhutan Foundation (Thimphu)
Nazhoen Pelri, Post Box 1918
Thimphu, Bhutan
+975 (2) 322751
info@bhutanfound.org