

From the Village to the Palace: Restoring History

Sonam Tenzin is a 25-year-old project engineer working at the Wangduechhoeling Palace restoration site. He was born in Wangduechhoeling village—the home of his mother’s family. Sonam’s grandfather served at the palace during the reign of the Second King of Bhutan, Jigme Wangchuck (1928–1972). Sonam’s family was one of the three families who conducted yearly rituals at the palace for the entire Wangduechhoeling community to honor the local deities of the village.

After completing his degree at the Jigme Namgyal Engineering College in Thimphu, Sonam worked on new construction projects in Thimphu but hoped to return to his village to help his parents. Once the restoration of the palace began, Sonam was able to secure a job as the site engineer and return to Wangduechhoeling. The restoration of the palace was a whole new experience for Sonam because he had not previously worked in restoration and conservation of old heritage sites. This presented a challenge for him, but he was eager to learn. Now, having worked at the site for three years, Sonam has learned new techniques for restoring historic heritage sites and buildings.

He shared, “We do not need to tear down the whole building and build a brand new structure anymore; we can use conservation efforts to restore old buildings and heritage sites.” Sonam is confident that he can carry out similar work for other sites across the country.

The techniques and skills Sonam has learned in the last three years have enabled and inspired him to take a keen interest in conservation. After completing the restoration work, he hopes to continue working at the Wangduechhoeling Palace as a conservator and would like to pursue further education in this field. He is also very excited that he may have the opportunity to serve in the palace like his grandfather did decades ago. Sonam hopes that, in the future, the local Wangduechhoeling community can use the palace as a public space, and he also hopes that the yearly rituals of the three families performed to honor the local deities can be replicated within the walls of the palace to continue its traditions.

“I learned a whole new set of skills because restoration work is not easy. Conservation and restoration of old heritage sites is very important for my generation to learn so that older architectural heritage sites can be preserved.”

— Sonam Tenzin

$500
Buys mineral paints for the palace to bring back the art of using traditional paints

$200
Trains a student from TTI at the palace for a month

$100
Preserves one painting at the palace

$50
Plants one tree on the palace grounds for landscaping
Snow Leopards and Yak Herders in the Highlands

Yak herders and the snow leopards that often prey on yaks might seem like natural enemies, but in the Soe and Lingzhi regions of Jigme Dorji National Park (JDP), herders are benefiting from initiatives that simultaneously address their needs and help conserve snow leopards. Herding villages have not resorted to retaliatory killing of snow leopards for the last 25 to 30 years. In fact, the late Ap Zangpo, an elder in the community would recall, “His Majesty the Fourth King used to say that the snow leopards were the jewels of our mountains. It is our duty to protect them.” These unique values in the Soe and Lingzhi regions are just part of the reason why the Bhutan Foundation is partnering with herding communities to encourage their participation in protecting the endangered predators.

One program that has been instrumental in maintaining tolerance levels between herders and snow leopards is the livestock insurance plan, administered by the Snow Leopard Conservation Committees in the Soe and Lingzhi communities. The plan started in 2016 with initial seed money provided by JDP and currently benefits about 45 households in the two communities.

Premiums collected from participating herders were added to the seed fund. In the event of a yak kill made by a snow leopard, as verified by a peer group of villagers and the committee, a nominal payout was given to the classroom to recoup a portion of the loss. While, admittedly, the sum is far below the market rate of a yak calf, the herders have expressed gratitude for the payout, as this was seen as a quick and efficient response to livestock predation. This fledgling program has been so successful that more herders are signing up for it. The positive attitude toward support for snow leopard conservation in these communities indicates that such programs should be strengthened further. If the seed money for the insurance plan can be increased, we can accordingly increase the payout amount and start another new livestock insurance plan in Lingzhi village next door.

In addition to maintaining herders’ tolerance toward livestock predation, we have also been working on improving their living conditions—especially while moving around with their yak herds during the summer. In an effort to replace their colorful and flimsy plastic tarpaulin tents, we have supplied a more durable and spacious tent for the herding families in Yaksah and Yaksa. These ecologically friendly tents work to reduce plastic garbage while providing more space for herding families, accommodating wood-burning fires with chimneys so that the inside of these tents have very little smoke and considerable ventilation in the air inside. They are windproof and therefore provide better warmth and comfort for the families. Based on the success and popularity of the improved tents, the herders from the Lingzhi community have also requested similar tents.

We work with snow leopard conservation committees in Soe, Yaksa, & Lingzhi.

438
Yak Calves
Insured

38
Tents Supplied

$400 (each)
Buy 75 improved tents

$200
Supports one anti-poaching patrol

$100
Sponsors two community meetings

$25
Provides vaccination & deworming for one camp

New and improved tents in use by herders in Yaksa (2019).

“These new tents will help us use less fuelwood. They can be easily assembled and dismantled, and are quite convenient to carry when we move between mountain pastures. They have a bigger space and smoke ventilation, so now we have adequate room for our family and belongings. It is less smoky inside and healthier for us overall.”
— Sherab Zam, Yaksa Herder

96
Snow Leopards in Bhutan

4
Horses Insured
**EMS Project**

**BEAR Team: Emergency Services in the Air**

In the early morning hours of October 23, 2018, Sangay Rinzin, an expectant mother at 34 weeks, was airlifted by helicopter from Paro in Southern Bhutan. Given Sangay’s history of two preterm deliveries and an unfortunate experience of losing her first son on the way to the Regional Referral Hospital, the Bhutan Emergency Aeromedical Retrieval (BEAR) team was called to evacuate her by helicopter, equipped with both neonatal resuscitation and a delivery set. While in mid-flight to the hospital, Sangay went into labor. There, at an altitude of 12,000 feet, two BEAR team members safely delivered a healthy baby boy, whom his grandfather would come to appropriately name Namku Druk, “the helicopter baby.”

Since its establishment in May 2017, the BEAR team has been rescuing lives and providing emergency medical services to the far-flung, hard-to-reach communities of Bhutan. Within the first year of operations, 117 people were treated and evacuated by the BEAR team. In 2018, another 126 lives were saved.

To further improve their medical evacuation services, the team was trained in November 2018 on basic aeromedical retrieval. Then, in January 2019, the team was provided with the refresher course, Helicopter Safety and Emergency Protocols. This program will now come standardized as the annual refresher training program for all BEAR team members. As in the case of the miraculous helicopter baby, the effectiveness of the BEAR team’s services has dramatically reduced mortality through efficient in-flight interventions, and these teachings are critical to their success.

As the BEAR team continues to work relentlessly to serve the emergency medical needs of rural Bhutan, we hope their remarkable work inspires you to support critical emergency medical equipment and training for the Bhutan Emergency Aeromedical Retrieval program.

“Our family would like to, wholeheartedly, thank the BEAR team, the helicopter service, and the pilot of the day. His incredible delivery was blessed under the wings of the Dragon and our baby is healthy. We are really fortunate to receive such kindness from our country and our people.”

— Parents of “Helicopter Baby”

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**Impacts & Needs**

- **17,218** Flight hours
- **117** People treated in the first year of operations
- **126** Lives saved in 2018
- **2** Refresher courses conducted

**Budget:**

- **$30,000** buys one defibrillator
- **$10,000** buys one transport incubator
- **$255** buys one venoscope
PHENSEM: Bhutan's Parental Advocates

It has been six years since Karma Sonam resigned from work to focus her attention and commitment to her nine-year-old son, who is on the autism spectrum. She recalls feeling frustrated and helpless. But now, she is empowered. In May 2017, the Bhutan Foundation supported Karma and another Bhutanese mother, Ugyen Choden, in traveling to the Philippines to participate in the 5th Parent Advocate for Visually Impaired Children (PAVIC) Congress. The three-day meeting highlighted the importance of forming a parent support group and advocating at all levels for ensuring equitable and accessible services for their children with special needs.

Inspired by the need for parental advocates, Karma Sonam returned from the Philippines and immediately got to work on developing our new partner, PHENSEM, a Bhutanese support group for parents of children with special needs. PHENSEM, which translates to “Positive Attitude,” launched in July 2017 and has now registered more than 26 parents and families of children with disabilities, out of whom 40 are children between the ages of 4 to 12 years. Other members of the group include teachers, special educators, therapists, and doctors.

Since its inception, PHENSEM has initiated numerous project activities, including creating awareness and advocating about disability, counseling and mentoring parents and families, and promoting inclusive education and transition. The group’s most recent activity has been working with a mainstream school in promoting inclusion, starting with six children with disabilities. Overall, more than 25 teachers and 15 parents have been trained and sensitized.

Karma has not only become a strong parent advocate, but has also become a stronger parent to her son. Karma says, “A big test as a parent was to accept my son for who he is. I know and feel that he is a special child for me and my husband and a strong reason for broadening our horizon to the world that is challenging but at the same time different, beautiful, and genuine.” Being associated with the group and working with other parents has taught Karma that life is special: “My life is so much richer because of being a parent to Samten. I am different from what I used to be—more patient and sensitive.”

PHENSEM’s long-term goal is to have children and persons with disabilities in Bhutan mainstreamed in society with equal access to opportunities. Karma and her friends are determined to build PHENSEM as a strong parent support network with the hope that they will one day become self-advocates and carry on the PHENSEM legacy. Karma strongly believes “No one understands the challenges and situations better than the parents/families of children and persons with disabilities to make crucial recommendations for need-based interventions. Therefore, if parents and families come together as a group to address these concerns, it is possible for us to bring about positive changes that can make a difference in the lives of children and persons with disabilities and of parents and families themselves.”
Our Wide-Ranging Role in Conserving Bhutan's Tigers

The Bhutan Foundation’s partner, the Global Tiger Centre (GTC) of Bhutan, now joins the ranks of about only three teams in the world that can successfully capture tigers for radio-collaring. So far, the all-Bhutanese team of biologists and vets have collared three tigers and several leopards as part of a long-term tiger movement ecology study, providing us data on the movement behavior of these cats to better inform their conservation. Following their movements for over a year, biologists can see how transboundary conservation efforts are critical for tiger survival in Royal Manas National Park. Preliminary data also reveal that the undulating landscapes of Bhutan’s tiger habitat offer excellent cover for these cats. Next, the team is moving to collars tigers in Bhutan’s middle hills and high Himalayas to gain valuable insight into the ecology of Bhutan’s mountain tigers.

Elsewhere on the ground, active threat mitigation efforts are underway in Norbugang, a village that was identified as a poaching hotspot by the GTC. With help from Buddhist monks, school teachers, and medical doctors, the poachers are slowly coming out in front of the community to give up poaching and reform their ways. Some 30 individuals have already given up poaching and have received cleansing blessings from the monks.

Initial needs assessment with the community members has shown that water security was a challenge for local farmers. So we will address this issue as a priority in order to improve farming conditions in the village. We will expand three surface ponds to facilitate permaculture and water recharge to help water supply. Other requests from the community include supporting environmental education, improving school sanitation, expanding a community gathering space, supporting transportation for the school to provide rides to children from far-fung villages, and providing a utility vehicle for the village hospital.

We are also working on developing educational and outreach materials to share information on tiger ecology, conservation needs, threats, and community participation in conservation. This is modeled on similar work on snow leopards that we carried out in the Jomolhari region. Village elders will be consulted for developing the materials, and the final products will be rolled out in schools in prime tiger habitat. At a later stage, we anticipate distributing the materials all over Bhutan so that all children have access to them to learn more about Bhutan’s mountain tigers.

Norbugang is particularly important to Bhutan’s tigers, as it shares a border and poaching route with India.

392 Households in Norbugang

3 Tigers radio-collared

2 Leopards radio-collared

30+ Ex-Poachers gave up poaching

$6,000 Buys utility vehicle for hospital

$5,000 Develops tiger education kits

$1,500 Expands three water recharge pods
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A view of the Ringkung Dzong and Ta Dzong in Thimphu.
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21 Dupont Circle, NW
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Please remember the Bhutan Foundation with a gift in your will. There are several ways to make a bequest to the Bhutan Foundation through your will or other estate plan: a residual bequest, a percentage bequest, a specific bequest, or a contingent bequest.

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