

"Animal Rights in Bhutan"

By Dr. Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison

Conservation of Sentient Beings: The Concept

Increasingly, environmental sustainability and conservation have necessarily begun to embrace the realities and needs of individuals, not just whole populations, species, genera and habitat. Indigenous traditions, spiritual ecology, and - the more relevant than ever - deep-seated, populist concern for all those countless individual "farm animals" as well as so-called "nuisance animals" (whose lives, in dreaded contact with humans, are predictably nullified) has touched an emotional chord in people throughout the world. These same citizens of the planet translate into voters, consumers and collective trading blocs demanding better and better standards of humane agriculture and organically-produced products.

The sense of moral concern and outrage resonates at every level. Aside from all the ethical scruples whose voices have reached a crescendo, our collective imposition upon other species has incurred enormous ecological consequences. Meat production, for example, contributes devastating quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. A single cow produces approximately 145 pounds, on average, of methane - a gas with 23 times the atmospheric warming traits than CO₂.¹ From a strictly ethical position, no person, community or nation has ever manifested an acceptable defense of the inhumane treatment of another. Along with quality of life indicators that are expanding the circle of concern and compassion from the human collective to all other species, additional sweeping regulatory reforms have affected the agricultural sector with stunning implications. For, it is agriculture that, more than any other human activity, inflicts the most extensive "pain points," the "suffering index" equivalency to "hotspots" (areas of vast biological ruination). Pain points refer to all those domains of human economic expediency that affect the largest number of creatures - whether vertebrate or invertebrate, mammal or other - doomed to suffer and be killed, a quantum that exceeds 100 billion individuals per year, if fresh water and marine vertebrates are included.²

The reality of such pain points has never been ignored. Asia's great religious traditions all acknowledged them, including those of Bhutan; and today, such realizations are nothing less than a compelling summons for policy makers and the conservation community, with all of their inherent contradictions, challenges and long-standing promises, to take humane action. Within the CBD (U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity) framework, animal rights offers a remarkable perspective by which to better assess how nations are doing in the realm of environmental ethics; and how their conservation strategies are actually assisting the largest number of sentient beings. In that respect, the long-ignored policy implications for conservation of animal rights (as opposed to mere "welfare" or "protection," both

categories often woefully inadequate to ensure the practice of true compassion) now promise enormous possibilities for every society.

In a practical realm, most attempts to reconcile conservation biology with animal rights considerations have thus been far less than ideal, except in the instances of applied immuno-contraception.³ As a nation galvanized by distinct ethical insights that date back many centuries, Bhutan offers a unique window on what the human conscience is capable of, a veritable proving ground for pragmatic idealism both today and in the future. There are challenges, to be sure.

Non-Violence, Conservation, and Spiritual Traditions: The Practice

The non-violence corollaries of Bhutan's Buddhist legacy at first glance would appear unambiguous. The very founder of Bhutan's dominant Drupka Kagyupa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism was the Venerable Jigten Sumgon (1143 - 1217) a vegetarian like so many of the great teachers from Tibet, including Marpa, Milarepa and Padmasambhava. Buddhism commends complete abstinence from the consumption of flesh, or from being party to any form of harm to other life forms. In the Buddha's *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, the Shakyamuni Buddha conveys to his Bodhisattva disciple, Kasyapa, "Oh Kasyapa! From now on, tell my disciples to refrain from eating any kind of meat."⁴ Tibetan Buddhists largely refrain from any non-vegetarian consumption during the month of Buddha's Birth and of his Enlightenment.⁵ In Bhutan, contemporary monastic tradition has, in some instances, also translated into a highly pro-active, if discrete stance with respect to saving animals from slaughter.

Ahimsa, the Jain principle of non-violence that was embraced by Mahatma Gandhi himself, derived from Buddha's elder contemporary, Lord Mahavira, the 24th Jain Tirthankara. Gandhi recognized that while non-violence was one of the most important ideals worthy of human aspiration, he also believed that absolute non-violence was not easily achieved. Nonetheless, one of Gandhi's most powerful thoughts is encapsulated in his decree, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."⁶ In a similar vein, Albert Einstein wrote, "Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet." Leonardo da Vinci had weighed in with the thought, "I have from an early age abjured the use of meat, and the time will come when men such as I will look upon the murder of animals as they now look upon the murder of men."

These beliefs are ingrained within Bhutanese life and culture, although the many existing variations, outlooks, and outright contradictions are symptomatic of all peoples, all nations, in all times. As the country endeavors to secure the conservation of its natural resources, sustainable economic production and enhancement of income all under the umbrella of the Fourth King's Gross National Happiness banner, there are bound to be significant challenges. This is particularly

so in a nation for which the rural sectors and farming account for over 80% of the population and well over a third of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP.)⁷

Just as Tibetan Buddhists try to refrain from any involvement in the destruction of animals during Holy periods, so too, do the Bhutanese. Discussions as to whether the consumption of meat is "un-Buddhist" constitute a very serious, ongoing debate within the country, but there is no escaping the reality that Bhutan, by conservative estimates, is no more than 15% vegetarian.

Consumption Variables in Bhutan: The Contradictions

From 2005 to 2006, the residents of Thimphu alone "consumed about 1,200 metric tonnes of imported beef" according to Bhutan's Agriculture Food Regulatory Authority. Phuentsholing, home to the country's largest slaughterhouse, "skinned 15,500 cows," while that same year Bhutan imported approximately "1,000 metric tonnes of pork - 12,000 pigs killed."⁸ During the country's fourth month, Saga Daw, the sale of all meat is banned, as of a decision taken by the 79th National Assembly in 2000.⁹ Yet, this has also prompted a hoarding of meat products on the eve of every Saga Daw, when consumption, and stockpiling of animal-derived foods soars.¹⁰

Consumer patterns are by no means uniform across Bhutan. According to Dr. Ugyen Tshewang, founding Director of the National Biodiversity Centre, which coordinates the Biodiversity Action Plans, "there is a trend that Bhutanese are avoiding meat year after year and I have heard it is more common among the younger generations and older generations, while the middle age groups are more meat-eating oriented."¹¹

Bhutan's animal rights legacy, in effect, confronts a thousand years of Buddhist ethical considerations and culture with the onrush of multiple five-year plans devoted to improving nutrition, economic stability and natural resource sustainability, among other things. These developmental tiers of the national agenda have butted up against ingrained ethical strictures that can only result in contradictory nuances of any modernity, providing, for example, such measures as the Livestock Act of the Kingdom of Bhutan 1981, regulating aspects of food quality, consumer and animal health, hygiene, Codex Alimentarius considerations, ante and post mortem inspections.¹²

Prior to the earliest livestock regulations, data suggests that per capita animal protein consumption in Bhutan was "0.8 kg of pork meat, 0.2 kg of poultry meat and 2.7 kg egg consumption."¹³ By 1987, the country was consuming an estimated 14 million pounds of meat (including veal, pork, mutton and lamb) and 62 million pounds of various milk products. By that same year, Bhutan was catching/producing approximately 2 million pounds of fish annually.¹⁴ Such data is not easily verified, however. For example, as of the year 1990, one source suggests that Bhutan was producing all of 4 million pounds of meat. Even accounting for far heavier imports,

this number falls short of other agricultural data for the country.¹⁵ Much of Bhutan's meat statistics involve dried meat ("Sha-kam"), given the vagaries of a country where human consumption of yaks at altitude often necessitates said process. As of 1993, per capita Bhutanese fish consumption was estimated at 0.2 kg per year, most of it in the form of fingerlings imported from Assam.¹⁶ Domestic fish production in 1993 hit an all-time high, for Bhutan, of approximately 7 million pounds, a figure also calculated by FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Department.¹⁷ Such countrywide data between national production and consumption remains unreconciled and is further complicated by the context of Bhutan's economic growth throughout the 1980s, which stood at 6.8% per year, with the national diet comprising an inordinate proportion of cereals, but relatively low vegetable and fruit consumption. With a 2.555 kilocalorie intake per day per Bhutanese, on average, nutritional surveys suggest a higher consumption rate for meat and fish products than has ever been accurately accounted for, particularly in light of major efforts by the government to improve dietary (animal protein-based) preconditions for the elimination of hookworm, Iron Deficiency Anaemia, and various iodine and vitamin A deficiencies.¹⁸

To further complicate fast-evolving trends, by 1998, World Bank data showed Bhutan's economy growing by 7.1% per year.¹⁹

As of 2004, it was estimated that Bhutan was importing 30.6 thousand metric tonnes of meat each year, a figure also out of sync with other available domestic production data.²⁰

With such remaining gaps in any consistent picture of national production, consumption, and importation data, the animal rights considerations must remain unclear.

Additionally, the National Centre for Animal Health in Serbithang, under the Ministry of Agriculture, uses some sheep and rabbits for vaccine production, and a committee exists for consideration of animal welfare issues, although, by some estimates, the committee has to date done very little. And if one were to summarize the current consumption trends - however unclear the picture still is - alongside ethical viewpoints in the country, it is fair to say that Bhutan is divided. "Many Bhutanese welcome the ban on sale of meat in the auspicious months but many more are hoarding meat."²¹

Bhutan's Animal Rights Future: The Challenges

Bhutan's commitment to non-violence coincides with a unique set of characteristics which stand out in marked contrast to most other nations. According to FAO projections, meat consumption by the year 2020 worldwide will top 300 million metric tons.²² Bhutan's neighbor, Nepal, saw per capita meat consumption at 10.3 kg/annually in 2003.²³ Yet, in Bhutan, where meat consumption amounted to 3 kilograms per capita annually as of 2002²⁴ and fish consumption was among the very lowest of any nation in the world (also at 3 kg per capita), the future holds

fascinating possibilities with respect to the increasing awareness of and insistence upon non-violence. Given the country's overall conservation ethic and explicit concern about the status of domestic animals, a high level of national concern, even reverence, for life may offer a cultural blueprint of extraordinary hope and optimism to other nations struggling with the same issues.

Bhutan, as with some other nations, including Suriname, Germany, New Zealand and Canada, has engendered large amounts of protected area proportionate to their land base. Bhutan has also inspired other nations to institute their own versions of Gross National Happiness. For example, Mongolia, Costa Rica, Iceland and the Netherlands have each established "well-being indicators." But, no country other than Bhutan has enshrined such an all-encompassing primary forest canopy policy in terms of constitutionally protecting a sizeable portion of its in situ forest biodiversity. That, in and of itself, places Bhutan in an animal rights league of its own considering the suite of taxa, compounded by the global average of 3 million individuals per species, dwelling within such a canopy. That, most assuredly, represents animal protection at a spectacular level. Suriname and Canada each have more hectares of "avoided deforestation" to date. And, the nearly 100 million vegetarians in India (or roughly 9% of the entire nation, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain) obviously constitute the world's largest non-violent footprint. But Bhutan's Buddhist values and conservation moral compass are suggestive, at the policy and judicial levels, of a powerful combination of sophisticated understatement, restraint, and pragmatic, heartfelt strategy.

In 1999, under the Royal patronage of Her Majesty the Queen of Bhutan Ashi Tshering Yangdön Wangchuck, the Royal Society for Protection and Compassion for Animals (RSPCA) was established as an NGO in Thimphu.²⁵ There are now 52 registered members of the society, whose goal is consistent with SPCA's around the world (though the substitution of the word "compassion" for "care" is illustrative of the heightened awareness within Bhutan): "protection and care (compassion) for animals in Bhutanese society from cruelty and negligence." One of the largest dog shelters has been created on National Biodiversity Centre land in Serbithang, another in Trashiyangtse where Dr. Ugyen Tsehwang is now the Governor. And, other dog sanctuaries are being planned by the Ministry of Agriculture all over the country.

The question relating to dogs is one of Bhutan's more apparent domestic animal challenges. With an estimated 18,000 stray dogs in the country²⁶ and at least 5,000 stray dogs in the nation's capital²⁷ the issue of how to mitigate potential conflict with humans (whose love of the canine is much noted by all travelers to Bhutan) has been prominent in the nation's recent news. Between 2003 and 2006, two known individuals in Bhutan died from rabies complications, while on average 10 people per day throughout the country endure dog bites.²⁸ Animal Birth Control ("ABC") has rightly been advocated by the head of the RSPCA, Ms. Tashi Payden; and Bhutanese appear firm now in their rejection of the sorts of violence meted out to suspected rabies-carrying canines in past decades.

Bio-prospecting is another animal rights issue in Bhutan that has, to date, seen preliminary discussion and consideration. On ethical grounds, the National Biodiversity Centre has thus far restricted invasive sampling by non-Bhutanese. While a gene bank and national herbarium are in place, virtually no invertebrate sampling has been done, with the one exception being at the natural history museum at the entrance to Bumdeling National Park, where a representative selection of indigenous Lepidoptera, and others species, are on display.

Large ruminants will continue to play a huge role in the overall farming systems throughout Bhutan, given her rural demographics - including "draft power, manure and livestock products for sale or home consumption"²⁹ but vibrant new trends, some harkening back to ancient spiritual tradition, suggest important paradigm shifts that are wonderfully peculiar to Bhutan.

In one remarkable instance, the so-called "ox business" or "toka tsong" was completely renounced by the Chalingpa community in the northern Trashigang (far eastern) portion of the country. This is a village that for years earned its entire livelihood through the slaughter of cattle (as many as 50 bovines per day). As of November 1, 2007, they gave it all up. The entire hamlet of 95 households, formally and forever more, renounced all killing; this coinciding with "the Descending Day of Lord Buddha." According to one local Chalingpa, "Our grandparents made a living without having to kill animals." Others in the community pointed to the fact that "money earned at a cost of somebody's life...would never bring him happiness or long-term prosperity." While "many others agree(d) that money earned out of slaughter could never really sustain them."³⁰ Such voluntary reversal of an entire community's diet and livelihood on ethical grounds is rare. The other known instances are of the Todas in the Nilgiris, the Bishnoi of Rajasthan and the Inner Badui of Western Java.³¹

Also in Bhutan, "the slaughter of animals was stopped on religious grounds" as of October 2004 in the Trashigang dzongkhag.³² Numerous interviews with Brokpa yakherders who depended on the Chalingpas for their butchered meat throughout Sakten Wildlife Sanctuary (one of ten Sanctuaries, Scientific Reserves and/or National Parks throughout the country) also reveal a deep regret at any animal ever having to be killed, despite their traditional transhumance agriculture which, in part, relies upon the by-products, including meat, of their various cattle and yak breeds.³³

These trends collectively suggest a profoundly important role for animal rights and animal welfare in Bhutan, and the nation's ability to integrate these deep-seated convictions regarding the sacredness of life on earth within the country's broader environmental and conservation ethics.

Notes:

1. See "Food's effect on the atmosphere," by Kenneth R. Weiss, "Los Angeles Times", April 22, 2008, p. A1. (Documentation from FAO)
2. See "The Ecology of Conscience: Sustainability Issues for New Zealand," by Michael Tobias, Keynote Address for The New Zealand Planning Institute, Conference held in Invercargill, Southland, New Zealand in 2004.
3. See "Improving Interactions between Animal Rights Groups and Conservation Biologists," by Dan Perry and Gad Perry, *Conservation Biology*, Volume 22, No. 1, pp. 27-35, 2008.
4. See "Nirvana Sutra", Chapter 7, in Lord Buddha's *On the Four Aspects*.
5. See "A History of Tibet and Vegetarianism," by Tenzin, Tibetans for a Vegetarian Society; See: www.animalsavingtrust.org whose founder, Lama Kungzang Dorgee has saved more than 1,500 farm animals from slaughter.
6. See Mahatma Gandhi's speech, "The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism", The London Vegetarian Society, November 20, 1931.
7. See "General status of the system of food and agriculture statistics in Bhutan," Improvement of Agricultural Statistics in Asia and Pacific Countries, GCP/RAS/171/JPN, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Bangkok, 2001, p. 1.
8. See "Is eating meat un-Buddhist?" by Sonam Pelden, "Kuensel Online", August 16, 2007.
9. The Livestock Act of 2001.
10. See "The rush for meat," by Ugyen Penjore, "Kuensel Online", May 7, 2005.
11. Personal communication with Michael Tobias, May 2008.
12. See LEX-FACOC012533. Bhutan: Slaughter and meat inspection 1981, By-law No. 5, The Livestock Act and By-laws, Ministry of Development, Animal Husbandry Department, November 1980, pp. 20-31.
13. See "Bhutan Aquaculture Development," 1981; www.afo.org/docrep/field/003/P8793E/P879303.htm.
14. "Bhutan Animal Husbandry," *The Library of Congress Country Studies; CIA World Factbook*, September, 1991; www.photius.com/countries/bhutan/economy/bhutan_economy_animal_husbandry.html.
15. See Kachondham Yongyout, "Report of a Consultancy on Existing Nutritional Problems in Bhutan and Suggested Plan of Actions," WHO-Bhutan, and SEARO, Project SE ICP NUT 604 RB, 1995.
16. E. Laureti, "Fish and fishery products: world apparent consumption statistics based on food balance sheets (1961-1993)", *FAO Fisheries Circular* No. 821, Rev. 3 Rome, FAO, 1996.
17. See http://www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/FI-CP_BT/3.
18. See "Nutrition Country Profile -Bhutan, December 20, 1999, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, pp. 23-29 and pp. 37-38.
19. *ibid.*, p.30.
20. See "Bhutan," by Kinzang Wangdi, www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/Bhutan/Bhutan.htm.
21. Approved by the Council of Ministers, No: PPD/3/GEN/745, October 27, 1999.

22. Figure proposed by Dr. Karma Rinzin, National Care for Animal Health at Serbithang.
23. This figure according to Hemraj Chhetri, Head of Solid Waste and Sanitation, Thimphu City Corporation.
24. According to Dr. Sona Pradhan of the JDW National Referral Hospital, the vast majority of bites are quite minor.
25. op.cit., Ugyen Penjore.
26. See "Global Production and Consumption of Animal Source Foods," by Andrew W. Speedy, Animal Production and Health Division, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, Italy, in *The Journal of Nutrition*, 4048S, American Society for Nutritional Sciences, 2003.
27. ibid., Table 1, "Global Trends In Animal Source Foods"; See also, FAOSTAT, Rome, 2004; <http://apps.fao.org>.
28. ibid., Tbal 1.
29. op.cit., Kinzang Wangdi, www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/Counprof/Bhutan/Bhutan.htm.
30. See "Chalingpas hang up the butcher's knives," by Kesang Dema, "Kuensel Online", November 9, 2007.
31. See "The Anthropology of Conscience," by Michael Tobias, *Journal of Society and Animals*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1996, p. 69.
32. See "No substitute for beef and pork," by Samten Wangchuk, "Kuensel Online", May 5, 2008.
33. See Dr. Michael Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison, *Sanctuary: Global Oases of Innocence*, Foreword by Her Majesty Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, Queen of the Fourth King of Bhutan, A Dancing Star Foundation Book, San Francisco and Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 2008.

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