

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS AND ENVIRONMENTAL STATUS IN BHUTAN*

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ABSTRACT. The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan is in the midst of transformation as it moves from an isolated past to a modern nation-state and participant in the global community. Its development path embraces the concept of “Gross National Happiness,” a philosophy and policy instrument that seeks to promote human development and manage environmental conservation within a sustainable strategy guided by Buddhist ethics. After examining Bhutan’s approach to development and the governance and environmental policies stemming from it, this essay assesses its impacts on environmental conditions in the country. *Keywords:* Bhutan, development, environmental policy, gross national happiness.

There are in the heart of the vast Himalayas some strange marketplaces where one can barter the whirlwind of life for infinite wisdom.

—Buddhist master Milarepa, 11th century

The philosophical underpinning of life in Bhutan is upheld by Buddhist precepts that emphasize the pursuit of emotional and spiritual fulfillment, prosperity to meet essential material requirements, and a respect for the natural order. These concerns are made explicit in the kingdom’s approach to development, which focuses on enriching people’s lives by meeting basic needs, enlarging economic and social choices, preserving cultural traditions, and promoting environmental conservation. The basic tenets of the strategy were first articulated in the late 1980s by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck as the concept of “gross national happiness” (GNH). The practical outline was developed in the *Bhutan National Human Development Report 2000*:

Ultimately, a happy society is a caring society, caring for the past and future, caring for the environment, and caring for those who need protection. Establishing such a society will require a long-term rather than a short-term perspective of development. Much will depend upon how well the country’s environmental resources are harnessed and managed. Happiness in the future also will depend upon mitigating the foreseeable conflict between traditional cultural values and the modern lifestyles that inevitably follow in the wake of development. (RGB 2000, 22)

The pursuit of happiness as a development policy is, of course, fraught with complexity. It suffers from a universal ideal and contends with the rhetoric of paradise. Problems exist in how progress and success might be assessed; happiness, after

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