

THE BHUTAN SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



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What's in a name?



In what could be the discovery of a new species as well as a correction of historical botany facts, the national flower of Bhutan, the blue poppy, has been declared as a different species.

Initially it was misidentified as a sub species of *Meconopsis grandis* which grows in Nepal but not in Bhutan. The national flower has been renamed as *Meconopsis gakyidiana* and upgraded to a species. The *Meconopsis gakyidiana* was named after the country's guiding development philosophy Gross National Happiness. *Gakyid* stands for "Happiness" and *diana* is the nomenclature term for the flower.

Meconopsis gakyidiana was found to be different from the typical *Meconopsis grandis* in several important characters such as plant life form, leaf arrangement, leaf colour, shape of the flower and colour of the petal. Meanwhile two more new species of the *Meconopsis* : *Meconopsis elongate* and *Meconopsis merakensis*, have been discovered growing in Bhutan. However *Meconopsis gakyidiana* is still quite rare as it is found growing only in the Merak and Sakteng areas. Bhutan now has a total of fifteen *Meconopsis* species, three of which, *Meconopsis bhutanica*, *Meconopsis superba* and *Meconopsis elongate*, are endemic to Bhutan.

The 2017 AGM of The Bhutan Society of the UK will be held on Monday 30 October 2017 at 6.00 pm at The Travellers Club in London SW1. Further details are enclosed.

Following the AGM, Chairman Michael Rutland OBE, will speak on "Recent Developments in Bhutan"

SOCIETY NEWS

Annual Dinner

The Annual Dinner celebrating 25 years of the Society in the UK will be held at The Inner Temple in London on Friday 17 November 2017. Invitations and booking forms are expected to be sent out in late July. Members will be encouraged to book early for this special event.

Good progress on projects for the disabled



Late March was an exciting time for the Disabled Persons Association of Bhutan (DPAB) as the shipment of supplies, sent by PhysioNet two weeks earlier from the United Kingdom, had arrived safely in Bhutan. Vans and trucks were quickly loaded and soon on their way to various parts of the country. Supplies included physiotherapy equipment, wheelchairs, mobility and medical supplies and donations were made to Trashigang Hospital and Kanglung Basic Health Unit (BHU).

Timely delivery of supplies was also made to the newly constructed girls' hostel at East Drak-Tsho Vocational Training Institute in Trashigang for children and youth with disabilities. The hostel was completed only in

mid-February and was already accommodating twenty-eight girls. The Bhutan Society Trust Fund has also made a donation of £1150 to Opening your Heart to Bhutan (OYHTB) in January 2017 to support further



work at the Institute. The high levels of monsoon rainwater and steep topography of the site mean that pathways for wheelchair bound children are often waterlogged or washed away throughout the year. OYHTB wanted to provide durable concrete pathways to ensure children in wheelchairs could access all parts of the Institute. They also want to erect safety barriers to prevent children falling down the steep slopes and to improve the drainage generally. Currently the wheel chair railing is

connecting the boys' hostel, academic blocks and the few toilets but, when completed, the new wheelchair ramp and railings will also link the new dining hall and kitchen, playground and girls' hostel.

Top of the world



Photo by courtesy of Andrew Sutton

It's been confirmed. Bhutan has the highest average elevation on the planet. While the Drangme Chhu valley drops to 97m below sea level and the summit of Gangkhar Puensum is 7,570m above it, Bhutan's average elevation is 3,280m. Nepal comes a close second with an average elevation of 3,265m, followed by Tajikistan (3,186m), Kyrgyzstan (2,988m) and Lesotho (2,161m). To put that into perspective, Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in the UK, tops out at 1,345m. Antarctica is the highest continent, at 2,300m and Andorra is Europe's highest country, at 1,996m.

At the other end of the scale is The Maldives, with an average elevation of just 1.8m. Such is the archipelago's lowly geography that there are fears climate change could see it disappear under the sea by the end of the century.

Ban on advertising

Hopefully regular visitors to Bhutan will have noticed some changes recently in the number of advertisements on display. Following a government directive earlier this year, many commercial advertisements, billboards and posters displayed on the streets, buildings and roads have been removed. This is part of the strategic plan of action for regulating such forms of advertising.

The Chief Licensing Officer at Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority (BICMA), Wangay Dorji, said that this would rationalise the various forms of advertisements, prevent cluttering and maintain the value of the pleasant visual environment and would also help ensure and promote the concept of 'Gross National Happiness' and 'Clean and Green Bhutan.' "We are starting with Thimphu and will then move on slowly to other areas," he said.

"A maximum period of two weeks will be provided for the removal of all billboards and banners. Any defaulters would be issued initially with a cautionary notice but if a defaulter repeats the offence, a penalty charge would be made equivalent to a maximum of three months of their daily wage".

Although various measures to control advertising had been in place, the absence of a strategic policy had allowed the proliferation of advertisements in all forms, shapes and sizes, including those manufactured outside the country. Such proliferation of unregulated advertisements, banners and billboards was considered to be a distortion of the aesthetic environment which would ultimately culminate in providing an ugly picture of Bhutan.

More pilgrims from Ladakh

Bhutan is becoming a popular pilgrim site for the people of Ladakh in India and quite a number of Buddhist pilgrims have been visiting in the recent years.

They usually visit the country in winter and in the past year numbers rose to over a thousand. Most of them come to visit the holy sites in Paro, Thimphu and Punakha. Rinchen Wacher, a visiting pilgrim, said he was excited to be in the country. "We have heard a lot about the many religious sites in Bhutan. Everyone back home is curious about the country and wants to visit."

He added "The moment we set our foot in Phuentsholing, we couldn't help noticing how clean the town is. The roads are better and I think there are many things we can learn from Bhutan."

There are a number of tour agents who bring in visitors from Ladakh. Some organize their trips through Young Drukpa Association which aims to bring in more visitors from Ladakh next year.

Scientific education for monks

Acquiring scientific education has become crucial for monks and nuns in this day and age according to American scientists and Buddhist scholars. They say a combined scientific knowledge and Buddhist philosophy can help the monks better understand the reality of the universe.

A workshop called 'Astronomy to Cosmology' held in May gave monks all the reasons to learn



more about science. From lessons on the universe to hands-on experience of seeing through a telescope, the classes have been a new experience for the monks.

"In Buddhist philosophy, there are manuscripts about the life span of the earth, moon and the stars.

Through this workshop, all such theories are brought to life with pictures and calculations. We are now very much convinced that whatever the Buddha and

other Indian saints said are true. It's incredible to learn how Buddhist philosophy and science are so similar," said a teacher of Kharchu Shedra, Tenzin Jamtsho. "When we experience the Buddha's teaching in reality through scientific equipment, it makes us more devoted and committed to Buddhism. In the last nine days of the workshop, I have understood about the Solar System," The scientists and the Buddhist scholars, in this second workshop held in Bhutan, believe that a good knowledge of science coupled with Buddhist philosophy can help the monks propagate their knowledge more efficiently.

One of the tutors, Dr. Bryce Johnson, a scientist from the USA said, "We all live in this modern century where science is a really important part of our experience and understanding of the world. When monks and nuns study science, it gives them an opportunity to have new conversations about how to incorporate what they have learnt into Buddhism. They will also wish to share their new knowledge of science with a wider audience in their own community."

The workshop organised by the Ati Foundation in collaboration with Science for Monks Foundation, a non-profit organization based in the United States is the second of its kind in the country. The General Secretary of Ati Foundation, Ngodup Dorji said, "We are in a time where our culture is being diluted, so it is important to be able to reach out and use science as a tool to help convey the profound philosophy of Buddhism."

Meanwhile, this coming together of science and Buddhism seems to have ignited a new-found enthusiasm among the monks to learn and better relate the subjects to one another.

KINGDOM OF BHUTAN

Protecting the white-bellied heron

In what is an important milestone in the conservation of the white-bellied heron, a ground-breaking ceremony for a Captive Breeding Facility Centre for the species was held recently at Changchay Dovan in Tsirang.



The white-bellied heron (WBH), one of the 50 rarest birds of the world and most threatened avian species in Asia, was first spotted in Bhutan by His Majesty the Fourth King in 1976 and, under his Majesty's

command, the conservation and protection was carried forward by the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature (RSPN).

According to Rebecca Pradhan, an Ecologist with RSPN, Bhutan is currently home to 28 white-bellied herons, which is the highest count amongst the WBH habitat range countries in the world. However she said the numbers are still worryingly low, so the need to establish a safe and reliable ex-situ gene pool through captive breeding for the bird had become necessary. "One of the biggest challenges was providing fresh fish, the only food of the WBH, so it was essential that the upcoming breeding facility in Dovan had a well-stocked fish pound." One of main tasks during the captive breeding period will be to study the breeding age of the bird as until now the age at which the bird reaches its reproductive phase is not known.

The Centre is being established through multiple donors and will be completed by 2018 with a captive breeding programme expected to begin by 2019. The Government had allocated 18.224 acres of land for the development, with financial support for the construction coming from one of the Hydropower Project Authorities. The MAVA Foundation, which is based in Switzerland, is also supporting the WBH Endowment Fund with US\$ 1.5 million to meet the operational costs of the Centre.



Flower Show

The 3rd Royal Bhutan Flower Show was inaugurated by Her Imperial Highness Princess Mako of Japan on Sunday, 4th June. This year the Show was held in Thimphu, in the surroundings of the National Memorial Chorten. The wonderful displays, with masses of colour and variety, complement the majesty of the Memorial Chorten, which was surrounded by banks of flowers for the occasion.

The photo shows Her Imperial Highness with Her Majesty The Queen seated in a floral bower at the Show, which was open to the public for a week.

NEWS AND UPDATES

Preserving biodiversity

Since June 2015 the communities around Trongsa have been reaping the benefits of being the first participants in a new programme. The aim is to help them in their long-standing tradition of harvesting low altitude medicinal plants and developing products for sale in both domestic and international markets. The communities have an old tradition of collecting as many as 47 different medicinal plants which can be



used as active ingredients in the production of traditional medicines. For the past 50 years they have been capitalizing on this knowledge through a partnership with the National Health Care System. These farmers' groups, which comprise mostly women, know the importance of the conservation of biodiversity and the need to strictly follow a sustainable method of harvesting these medicinal plants annually.

Menjong Sorig Pharmaceuticals (MSP) and the National Biodiversity Centre (NBC), who are collaborating with this project, have also helped to train the communities how to minimize risks of unsustainable harvests. In recent years, having recognized the potential health benefits of Bhutan's unique endemic plants, MSP with technical collaboration of the Thai based Institute of Cosmetics, has been developing in its laboratories in Thimphu, prototype products such as anti-wrinkle cream, anti-fungal cream, herbal soaps and therapeutic products from the Himalayan gooseberry plant. In 2016, 500 Kg of Himalayan gooseberries was supplied to MSP at the rate of Nu 170/Kg. Project Manager, Jigme Dorji said, "Deki, a mother of three, earned about Nu 15,000 in 2016, which she used to buy school uniforms for her children." Sherab Tenzin, Head of MSP said, "This will mark the beginning of research and development of new products as well as enhance the vast traditional knowledge on genetic resources."

Bhutan through the Lens of Compassion

On April 27th, Emma Slade (Anim Pema Deki) gave a talk at a Society meeting on the importance of compassion and wisdom within the tradition of Himalayan Buddhism. Emma spoke on the use of Chenrezig as a representation of a mind filled with compassion and how inspirational these teachings have been to her in setting up her charity- *Opening Your Heart to Bhutan*.

Describing the representation of Chenrezig in the form of having a thousand arms with a thousand eyes to help and see all the suffering of beings, Emma described how this gives her the determination to do her best for those in need in Bhutan.

She briefly touched on the importance of combining compassion with the development of wisdom, pointing out the agreement between modern day science and Buddhist philosophy on the nature of reality. Understanding the true nature of reality was defined as the growth of this wisdom. This combination of compassion and wisdom is often expressed in the ceremonial objects of the dorji and bell, so often seen in sculptures and paintings in Bhutan.

In her continuing efforts to put compassion into action and help the charity, Emma signed copies of her book 'Set Free' which describes the true story of her transformation from high flying banker to Buddhist nun in Bhutan. All royalties from the book go to the charity.

NEWS AND UPDATES

Tales of two bright young Entrepreneurs

An e-ticket to ride

From May this year, travellers in Bhutan can go to www.drukride.com and book ticketless bus tickets. Once location, destination and other details are filled, the available buses and the seat layout for the passengers are shown on the screen. Confirmed users will be transferred to the payment gateway where they can pay through M-BOB, which is provided by the Bank of Bhutan.

The concept of paperless booking of bus tickets struck Jigme Rinzin, newly graduated in Business Commerce, as a good idea when his friend faced difficulty in physically booking bus tickets. "There are many inconveniences when people have to come to the counter to buy bus tickets," he said. "But going online would save people time, fuel and the environment in the long run."

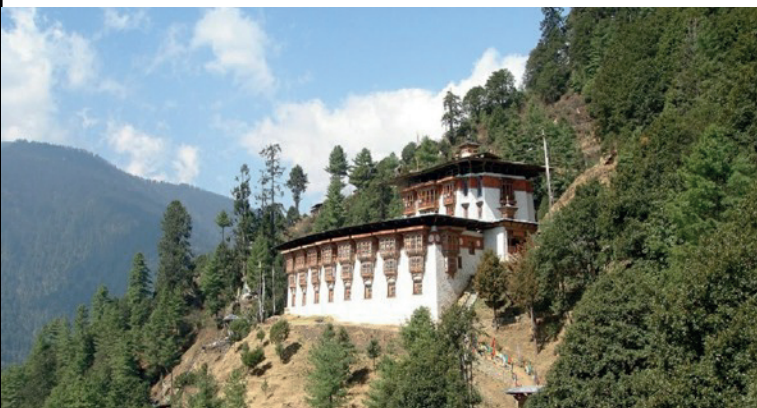
It took Jigme a year and a half to work on ***Druk Ride***. As yet, Meto transport is the only public transport provider that has taken advantage of the new online service, but Jigme is hoping that all the others will soon join in and support the service. Through this enterprise Jigme also wants to encourage other young people to come up with such ideas and become valuable and smart citizens. "I would like to tell the youth to look around, notice problems and to not walk away from them," he said. "We all have problems. So why not make it a business which benefits others."

A messy business

For Ugyen Phuntsho and his team, the service they provide is more than a business. He was just five years old when he first noticed overflowing sewerage tanks around Thimphu. Today aged 22, Ugyen along with his driver and a helper, runs a service called ***Ugyen Phuntsho Sewage Services***. Together, the three drain and clean sewerage blockages. He describes his work as social entrepreneurship as he is running a business while also helping the society. "My father's driver friends used to drive us to school and home and during the ride I saw many poor sewerage systems," he said. "Now, we are doing something about it. Many consider this a menial job, but we don't mind cleaning sewerage tanks with our hands."

Although his service opened in July 2015, Ugyen like any other new entrepreneurs struggled to get his business started. He had completed his studies but had no money to realise his business plan. Although recognising his plan as a good idea, both Government and private institutions turned him down and it was only with a loan from a friend of his father that he was able to raise the Nu 2.2 million, the cost of the vacuum tanker, needed to pump faecal sludge. However the Department of Revenue and Custom now support him by waiving the vehicle tax and both Thimphu Thromde and Bhutan Toilet Organisation refer to him when their tankers are busy. Today his team travels as far as Paro, Haa and Phobjikha and receives at least two calls a day from a building or house owners.

Information on Tango & Cheri Monastery



Visitors to Bhutan should be aware that the dismantling of the Drasha and other related structures at Cheri Meditation Centre are currently in progress, so it is not considered a safe place for people to visit as construction materials, debris and dismantled materials are scattered within the confined area. Restoration work on Tango Utse, resumed in April, will soon be in a similar state as the Cheri site.

The Tourism Council of Bhutan has therefore advised that people should not visit either of these two sites till further notification.

Road to Merak leads to declining tourist arrivals

Annual tourist arrivals in Merak and Sakteng in Trashigang have dropped drastically since Merak was fully connected by road in 2014. The 2015 Annual Tourism Report states that 123 tourists trekked the Merak-Sakteng trail in 2014 and this fell to only 88 in 2015. Porters also complained about a significant drop in tourist arrivals. One said that the number of guests had dropped by a huge margin since the road reached Merak from Jigmeling. "The road really affected tourist arrivals," he said. "Income from tourists has decreased from around Nu 200,000 a year to about Nu 60,000, once the road reached Merak. Once I looked after ten to fifteen groups a year, now I cater for only about two to three groups, with most preferring to travel by car."

Previously the road to both Merak and Sakteng was left halfway to enable the herders, including the people of Chaling, to earn some income from eco-tourism through porter and pony services.



It was also expected that tourists would halt in the villages enabling locals to earn income through home-stays, campsites and guesthouses.

However some others have argued that taking the road to the village has helped the community more than eco-tourism had as the road was benefiting the entire community and income from tourism benefited only one or two individuals.

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NOTE

If you have not already done so, we would appreciate you sending your latest e-mail address to the Membership Secretary at:

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who will then add it to the database. There is no plan for the Society to go 'paperless' but there are times when it could be very convenient to communicate information electronically at short notice.

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