

Citadels of Conservation: Mapping Ethnographic Complexities of Protected Species & Protective Deities in Bhutan

By David Hecht

In the Eastern Himalayas, spiritual practices and cultural worldviews influence how conservation is practiced, as much as international foreign aid, domestic politics, and endangered species agendas. Lived religious beliefs are cognitive and experiential, but can also be spatial and geographical, and have profound implications for the way in which conservation is practiced. Protected areas and sites of conservation in the Kingdom of Bhutan are deeply interwoven with such religious and spiritual histories, where a suite of protective local deities and spirits are known to preside over forests, lakes, trees, rocks, rivers, and mountains, and mediate relationships between communities and their environments. These places are locally referred to as “citadels of the deity”, protected areas imbued with social prohibitions and ritual practices that govern community choices and behavior. In partnership with the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), my research explores how these cultural realities influence community-based conservation practices and ideologies that influence the protection of two priority bird species, the sacred Black-necked Cranes and the critically-endangered White-bellied Heron.

Research Approach

The goal of my research is to bring local and traditional knowledge directly into narratives of environmental conservation, by recognizing that spiritual and cultural cosmologies have as much influence on the legacy and impact of conservation as does attention to development policies and species-focused biodiversity concerns. While pulling attention to lived religion and the complexities of sacred and cultural landscapes in Bhutan, I employ an integrative approach to scholarship by drawing on research methodologies from multiple disciplines to facilitate knowledge integration from local partners, in ways that are both culturally salient and valuable to conservation institutions and NGOs. Because our work focuses on how lived religion is spatially negotiated, we use community ethnography, sketch mapping, and participatory mapping to better understand these complex geographies of protection.

Significance

- **Institutional & Community Collaboration:** This research is facilitated by Bhutan’s oldest NGO, the Royal Society for Protection of Nature (RSPN), and is thus rooted in community-based approaches to conservation, directly partnering with local people in support of their voices and choices.
- **Integrating Multiple Knowledges:** While there are calls for bolder integration of traditional and indigenous knowledge into conservation practice, decisions are still frequently made independent of the ways of knowing of local people. This research foregrounds under-represented local knowledge in applied community-based conservation projects.
- **Strategic & Creative Communication:** Through an emerging collaboration with a traditional-contemporary artist in Bhutan, we are documenting lived religion and intangible cultural heritage through the creative visual arts, as well as an integrative approach to conservation scholarship.

Preliminary Findings

It is hard to travel through any area in Bhutan without encountering stories and local experiences connecting powerful deities with histories of biocultural change, the emerging politics of development & modernization, and environmental management efforts. It appears much of this knowledge is infrequently passed down between generations, and there is the real likelihood that some knowledge diversity may be lost if not recognized or woven into conservation and development priorities. One manifest challenge in conservation initiatives for cranes and herons, is that their home-ranges and territories occupy different geographical areas in Bhutan that are marked by distinct social, cultural, and religious histories. This translates into different values, beliefs, and conceptualizations of what “conservation” means, and how spiritual landscapes should or could be protected into the future. Our research demonstrates that understanding and mapping local perceptions is key to pursuing protected area management in Bhutan, for visible or invisible beings, and can help guide community-based conservation and development agendas in ways that are both inclusive and effective.

Through our community ethnographic work, collaborative mapping, and interview series, we have found that some recorded experiences are not easily “mappable”, that is, they aren’t easily visualized with introduced techniques of mapping or technologies like GIS. For instance, while deity citadels are understood to be bounded, their territories are fluid and indeterminately discrete, and do not neatly fit into western understandings of space and classification.



Annual ritual for local deity in Burnthang, Bhutan.



Interviewing and sketch-mapping with White-bellied Heron conservation community partners in Berti, Bhutan.

We are presently exploring alternative techniques for mapping and thus protecting these tangible and intangible aspects of living culture embedded in conservation protected areas, drawing insights from Tibetan Buddhist cosmologies and traditional Bhutanese artistic expression, such as *thangkha* and *debri*.

Conclusion

Given the importance and centrality of deity citadels to religious experience in the Eastern Himalayas, and their role in cultural landscapes and environmental conservation, the results of this research could help scientists and conservation organizations better understand, respect, and utilize traditional, spiritual knowledge in decision making processes. Broadly, our research aims to increase awareness of the richness of place-based religious experience in this context. If successful, mapping protective divinities alongside protected species and areas, in culturally salient ways, will influence the perceptive capacity of the scientific community and conservation practitioners who work to protect and preserve both cultural and biological complexity and diversity.



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