

OLEP PROJECT REPORT

RUKHA VALLEY, BHUTAN



THE CULTURAL
SANCTUARIES
FOUNDATION



PROJECT SUMMARY

This project was designed to help support and protect the culture and language of the Olep community, the oldest indigenous group in Bhutan.

It comprised three main parts:

- 1. A cultural, linguistic and ethnobotanical survey
- 2. The building of a community cultural center
- 3. Creation of economic opportunities

In this report, we describe each of these three elements in more detail – on pages 9 to 14 – and then conclude with the impacts and success of the project – on page 18.

Suffice to say here that the project has been viewed as so effective and meaningful by both the Royal Family and the Government of Bhutan that it is now being replicated in 21 other indigenous communities across the country.

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OUR FLAGSHIP PROJECT



The sacred Tiger's Nest (or Taktsang Palphug Monastery)

We chose to work in Bhutan because it is a role model for the world in terms of protection and celebration of its unique culture and in terms of conservation of its beautiful landscape. This was to be The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation's flagship project and Bhutan epitomises everything that the Foundation is about. We were also blessed to have the support of Tarayana Foundation and Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk without whom we could not have completed this project.



Festival mask

SPECTACULAR BHUTAN

A visit to Bhutan is nothing short of life-changing: the people, the breathtaking landscape, the philosophy, the architecture and the wildlife. A few things that really stand out to us are these:

Environmental uniqueness: Bhutan's snow-covered peaks provide water for one fifth of the world's population. It is also one of the few carbon negative countries in the world, absorbing more carbon dioxide than it produces. It offsets its modest emissions by exporting renewable energy. Under its constitution, the country must remain in perpetuity under a minimum of 60% forest cover. Currently 72.5% of its land is forested. Of that, 27% is protected as national parkland. The 2016 TED talk

by former Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay (who was instrumental in helping us with our project in Rukha) is worth watching to understand more about Bhutan's enviable environmental policy and philosophy.

Gross National Happiness: Bhutan does not judge its success as a nation by reference to GDP as much the rest of world does. Rather, it judges itself by reference to Gross National Happiness or "GNH". GNH was introduced by the Fourth King or "K4", His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in the 1970s and measures the country's moral and economic progress. It seeks to achieve a balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional, cultural



and environmental needs of individuals and of society. On its introduction, the King said, "if a government cannot create happiness for its people, there is no purpose for a government". Every draft law is judged against this measure and its four pillars - of good governance, sustainable development, preservation and promotion of culture and environmental conservation.

Monarchy to democracy: Bhutan is notable for its transition from an absolute hereditary monarchy to a constitutional monarchy and democracy. The beloved K4 shocked his people in 2005 by announcing that he would abdicate in favour of his son and that he wanted to convince them to form a democratic government. While K4 knew that he was a good king, he feared the risk of a future king not being benign. Philosophically, he felt that the people should self-rule. The first elections were held in 2008. His son, K5, is currently King.

Approach to tourism: K4 introduced the concept of "high value, low impact tourism" when the country opened up in 1974. 'High value' is intended to cover the revenue received by Bhutan and the experience had by the visitor. 'Low impact and low volume' ensures that the number of visitors corresponds to the carrying capacity of Bhutan's natural resources, cultural values and infrastructure. From a practical point of view, it means that every tourist must pay a daily tariff which includes their hotel, travel, guide, driver, meals and entrance fees. There is no backpacker/mass tourism culture as a result. This forward-looking philosophy gets to the heart of what sustainable tourism is all about, taking into account the long term protection of culture, wildlife and land.

Dress: By law, all government officials, office workers and schoolchildren must



wear national dress (the gho for men; the kira for women) and the whole population must wear it for formal occasions. Any visitor to Bhutan will soon see that almost everyone dresses in national dress. It is a way in which Bhutan chooses to celebrate its unique culture.

Use of trees: Every individual in Bhutan has the right to use no more than 3 to 5 trees per year. As almost all rural houses are made of wood, a family must save up their entitlement in order to build. We got special permission from the Bhutanese Government in order to build the Olep Community Center in Rukha and each tree used was individually chosen by experts in order to achieve the lowest possible impact on the forest.

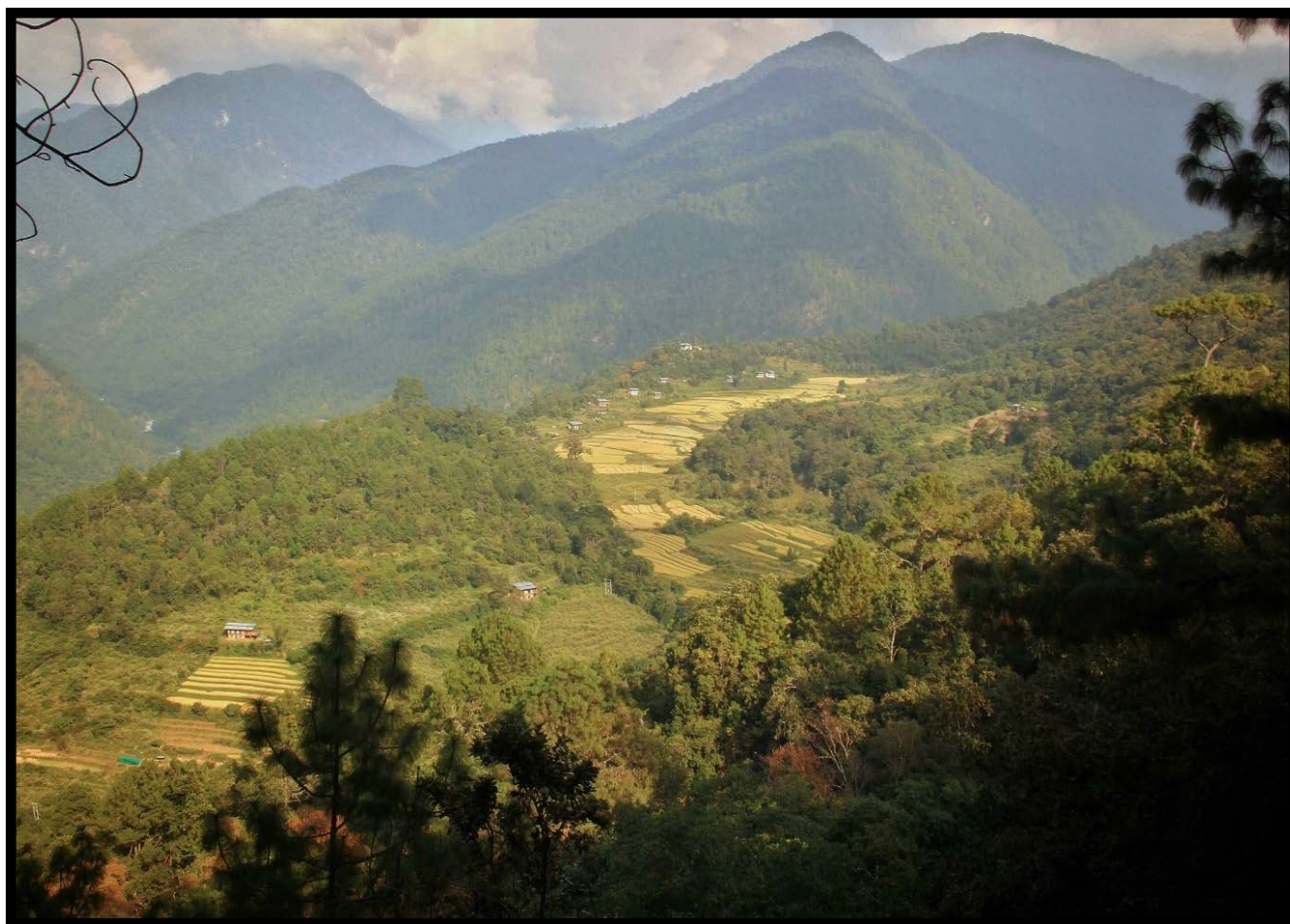
Some firsts and lasts: This tiny country of 792,382 people boasts other unique features too.

- Its first commercial airport opened in 1968. It is one of the hardest airports in the world in which to land and, until recently, only 2 airlines and 10 pilots were qualified to do so.
- It received its first tourists in 1974.
- Bhutan was the last country in the world to introduce TV – in 1999.
- It is the only country in the world to have no traffic lights.
- Mountain climbing is prohibited. The peaks are sacred.

WHO ARE THE OLEP PEOPLE?

We chose to work with the Olep community of Rukha village in consultation with our local project partners at Tarayana Foundation, Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk, the Bhutanese Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture. Key to this decision were:

- the Olep's position as one of the earliest indigenous communities in Bhutan
- the Ole language being the most endangered in Bhutan
- the risk of traditional knowledge, including that relating to the plants of the forest, fading
- the beauty of Rukha valley and its vital biodiversity and wildlife
- the enthusiasm of the Olep community for the project and their passionate conviction that their culture and language should be preserved and celebrated
- the facts that the culture of the Olep in the area had never been documented and that the oral Ole language had never previously been written down and
- the potential for the introduction of limited, sustainable high value, low impact cultural- and eco-tourism.



Rukha Valley

OUR OBSERVATIONS FROM OUR VISITS TO RUKHA IN 2016 AND 2017

“Sitting in a hidden valley in the foothills of the Himalayas in Bhutan, at the centre of five mountains protecting it like the petals of a flower, Rukha village is home to the Olep people.

The Olep were, for many centuries, nomadic hunter gatherers and believers in Animism. They lived within the forest, moving from area to area and practising shifting cultivation. In the mid 1950s, the Olep were encouraged by His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan to settle in Rukha valley in order to reduce their environmental impact on the land and as it was felt that economic and societal development would be achieved only if the community stayed in one area. The King granted to the Olep the land that now comprises the heart of Rukha village. Three households settled in the valley as a result and, now 70 years later, the Olep community at Rukha comprises around 200 people.

Life in Rukha in many ways remains much as it has been for decades: a strong community spirit connected by close family networks thrives; the lush valley, forest and river allow the community to be essentially self-sufficient; and additional income comes from the sale of agricultural produce, fish and basketwork. The relative physical isolation of the village (a seven hour walk from the nearest road) and the fact that Rukha sits within the boundaries of the Jigme Sigme Wangchuck National Park continue to hold the rest of the world at a distance. The villagers come together to support each other when a house needs to be built, the river fished or a field harvested. Each member of the community, young and old, has his or her place in village and family life and pulls their respective weight.

Medical ailments are treated with leaves and resins from the forest, houses are built from the area's timber and bamboo and the land provides almost all that the community needs and uses. The village shamans are consulted for healing and blessings and traditional songs and dance fill the night air on auspicious days, in moments of celebration and for the benefit of occasional visitors and officials.

Change has, though, of course come. The Olep's language, Ole, is oral and highly endangered with only three fluent speakers remaining. Two of those speakers are 89 years old and the youngest 55 years old. The young of the village speak no Ole. The community is now Buddhist and perched above the village and surrounded by prayer flags fluttering in the breeze is a Buddhist temple, albeit currently without any monk or lama to run it. The men still carry long knives on their belts but hunting is now prohibited. Farm animals are rarely killed and meat rarely eaten. The Olep children go to school in the nearby town of Mitana, an hour and a half's walk from the village and, after finishing school, increasingly the youth of the village move to Thimphu and other cities to find jobs and income. As the population of the village grows, each family's land is being divided into smaller and smaller plots and the community knows that further income will need to be found to supplement the income potential from the land. Where once mud huts stood, traditional Bhutanese houses now dot the valley, in large part encouraged and paid for by the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck's Tarayana Foundation. Skilled carpentry has developed, such that some of the Olep men are now in high demand in other areas of Bhutan to build houses in the traditional



Rukha

style, and new seeds have been introduced to allow for the planting of valuable cash crops such as oranges and cardamon. The Olep chief and his wife carry cell phones inside the folds of their gho and kira while some of the younger villagers carry Samsung smartphones; cell connectivity is pretty strong in the valley on most days; and a few households have a TV and satellite dish, albeit in rooms with no furniture. Every house has electricity and a basic toilet. The sound of a couple of chainsaws join roosters in waking the village each morning, rice cookers speed up the making of morning breakfast and some limited farm machinery increase each day's productivity in the fields and rice paddies. Teenagers listen to music on earphones while ploughing the fields in the day or mustering their cattle home in the evening's fading light.

Further change is coming fast. Construction of a road to Rukha is well advanced and should be completed within a year or two. Requested and welcomed by the community, the road will bring new access to market for the community's produce and will ease community life. The journey

time to schools and cities will shorten dramatically, access to medical attention will increase and what now needs to be carried by hand across a narrow pedestrian suspension bridge and then by power tiller or horse the seven hours to the village will be able to come by car or truck within an hour. The tourists that now can be counted on one hand in a year will come in greater numbers. Satellite internet access can surely not be far off.

The challenge for the people of Rukha, as it is for so many indigenous communities around the world, is to balance tradition with change, to protect their way of life as modernity and all that comes with it sweep towards them. The Olep passionately want their culture, their knowledge and their language to survive and to thrive. The odds are often against them but with support, they can find the right equilibrium – embracing change and all the good that it will bring while cherishing and celebrating their heritage and the forest around them."

The key objective of this project was to help them to do just that.

PART I: THE SURVEY

In October 2017, we convened a group of local Bhutanese and international experts to survey and document Olep life in Rukha. Our multi-disciplinary team spent ten days in Rukha living with Olep families and learning as much as possible about the community and its culture and language, the memories of its past and the hopes and fears for its future. With much of the area's biodiversity and wildlife already well researched, our work focused on three key areas: a) culture and anthropology, b) language and c) botany and ethno-botany. A fourth element running through each of these was a visual, photographic and audio documentation. The Survey Report was produced by our team for, and belongs to, the Olep community of Rukha and the Royal Family and Government of Bhutan. It is now housed within the Olep Community Center. Copies of the Survey Report are also kept by the Bhutanese Government, the Royal Family, the National Library and Tarayana Foundation.

Taking the Survey's three key areas of focus in turn here:

Cultural and anthropological study *by Bhutanese anthropologist Kuenga Wangmo*

Kuenga described her mission as being to capture the traditions and special features that construct the Olep identity, to assess the challenges and vulnerabilities of the community as it faces modernisation and to identify the aspirations of the Olep people as they step into the future. Her study used a semi-structured interview methodology, steered only by large guiding themes. It was supplemented by insights and writings formed during participant observation exercises. A salient feature of the study was the creation of identity and dream maps by the participants. All interviews and communication was carried out in Dzongkha and English (English was spoken with the educated youth group).

Language study

By Bhutanese linguist Ratu Dupka with Sha Phurba Dorji and Phurba Dorji

The Ole language is one of the most endangered in Bhutan and before this project had never before been written down. With just three fluent speakers alive and with none of the children of the Olep community able to speak or understand Ole, it was at great risk of disappearing. Our work was to record the Ole language before it, and the traditional knowledge that it holds, fades. It builds on work already conducted as part of the Bhutan Oral Literature and Language Documentation Project established in 2010 in collaboration with the Dzongkha Development Center. We recorded, in writing and in audio tape, as many Ole words and their meaning as possible and we created a three-language dictionary (in Ole, Dzongkha and English) of over 1,000 words. The language now has a chance to survive.

Botanical and ethno-botanical study

by Bhutanese botanist Ngawang Gyeltsen and US ethno-botanist Maria Fadiman

This part of the Survey focused on recognizing and documenting the vital value and importance of the Olep's unique knowledge of the uses of plants in and around the forests of Rukha. Prior to our Survey, only 6 species of wild plants had been recorded in the Ole language. Our work sought to record many more of the area's wild plants, giving their names in Ole together with their accepted scientific names and explaining, in relation to each, its purposes and uses by the community. Our goal was to document in detail the kinds of the plants used together with the Olep's knowledge and understanding of them. In total, we recorded 88 plants and are confident that this is only a small percentage of all the plants that the Olep people of Rukha understand how to use.

THE LAST SPEAKERS

The three remaining fluent speakers of Ole at the time of our Survey team visit were Angge Chödrö, Age Tekpa and Küngga. A fourth speaker, Namsay, does not consider herself to be fluent but has an extensive knowledge of the language and, in particular, of the Ole words for the fruits and plants of the surrounding forests. A further handful of the Rukha villagers understand some Ole but are not fluent in speaking it.

Angge Chödrö was 89 years old in 2017. She spent her childhood in Riti, a Mönpa community which is two days walk from Rukha, later returning to Rukha where she was born. Angge Chödrö explained to us that her parents discouraged her from speaking the Ole language fearing that it would make her, and indeed the

whole community, “inferior” and less well respected among the wider population. It was a “peasant language”. Slowly, the community stopped speaking the language and it has been dying away. Angge Chödrö hugely regrets that and is now very keen to teach and pass on the language to the younger generation who want to learn the language. She told us, “Ole is the language of our forefathers and we should preserve it and pass it on to our children. It is the children’s responsibility to learn it and it is mine to teach it.”

Age Tekpa was also 89 years old when we worked with him. He was very frail and blind but was as passionate about preservation of the Ole language as Angge Chödrö. It is central too to his beliefs as a Shaman. Age Tekpa explained to us



that he feels that the younger generation does not pay attention to the lessons of his spirits while he is performing and goes in to trance. He fears that any misfortune in his family and within the Rukha community are created by the unhappy spirits as a result and he urges the Olep to listen and respect the voice of the spirits. Only if they understand the Ole language can they do so. As part of our discussions with Age Tekpa, he regaled us with tales of his time serving in the Bhutanese Army during the third King's time - of how he was possessed by the Iha (spirit) and got lost in forest for three years, how he could carry heavy loads that would normally require three men to carry when the spirits possessed him and how he encountered and yet was unharmed by yeti and tigers and other big cats in the forest. We have recorded his stories for perpetuity.

Küngga is 62 years old. He learnt the Ole language from his grandmother who could not speak any other language. He too fears that the younger generation takes no interest in learning Ole now that they learn Dzongkha and English at school. He is passionate about the importance of having the language written down so that it could be preserved and if possible passed on to their children. He was invaluable in helping us compile our Survey.

We are very grateful to each of these three speakers and all those others who helped us in our work and in recording the first ever dictionary of the Ole language. We are particularly indebted to *Küngga* who committed to us that, with our help, he would teach Ole to all the local children in the new Olep Community Center. Those classes now take place every week and now have additional Bhutanese government support.



Chief of Rukha, Chokila



Phurba Dorji, son of Chokila and instrumental to the language work on the Project



Küngga, one of the three last speakers of Ole

PART 2: THE COMMUNITY CULTURAL CENTER



The Olep Community Center in Rukha

The building of a community cultural center was always going to be at the heart of this project, as it is at the heart of every one of our Foundation's projects.

Our key objectives for the Olep Community Center were that it should be authentic, traditional, effective, useful, popular and multi-purpose. To this end:

- *Materials:* we used only local materials in the construction process, having received special permission from the Bhutanese

Government for an allocation of 12 trees on which to build the Center

- *Style:* the Center is in traditional style. Any visitor to Bhutan will soon notice that almost all houses are built in this style
- *Labor:* the men of Olep are skilled carpenters and wood workers. We commissioned all of the work to be done by members of the Olep community
- *Land:* the Olep community were kind enough to donate community land on which to build the Center.

- *Position:* the Center is positioned perfectly within Rukha valley and is easily accessible by all of the community

Construction of the Center was completed in 2019. The upper floor houses four small rooms for homestays and the lower floor is made up of one large room to act as a meeting place for the community, a classroom and a “living museum” for visitors. Photographs of key community members hang on the walls and an array of baskets, crafts, artefacts and other items which tell the history and story of the Olep are displayed.

Today, the Center:

- is an important gathering place for the community
- is a classroom; it is the venue for Ole language lessons to all the local children
- is a home for the dictionary of Ole that we created and the Survey described on page 9
- is a living museum, showcasing local crafts and artefacts that are available for sale to visitors
- doubles as a homestay; the upstairs rooms are available for visitors and tourists to stay in (at a modest fee for the community)
- underpins local conservation efforts
- helps to protect the local traditions around endemic plants and medicines
- brings much needed revenue opportunities and
- last but not least, heightens pride and cultural identity – it stands in Rukha valley to say to one and all: the Olep culture and the Ole language are to be cherished and are here to stay.



Museum and teaching room on the ground floor of the Center

PART 3: CREATION OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



The Olep people live off the land and need little from outside their lush valley. The forest is their supermarket, their warehouse and their pharmacy. But as families grow, the land is being increasingly subdivided and the ability to prosper or even to survive is diminishing. Young Olep men and women want to stay in the valley but feel that there are few opportunities for them. The pull of the city is strong.

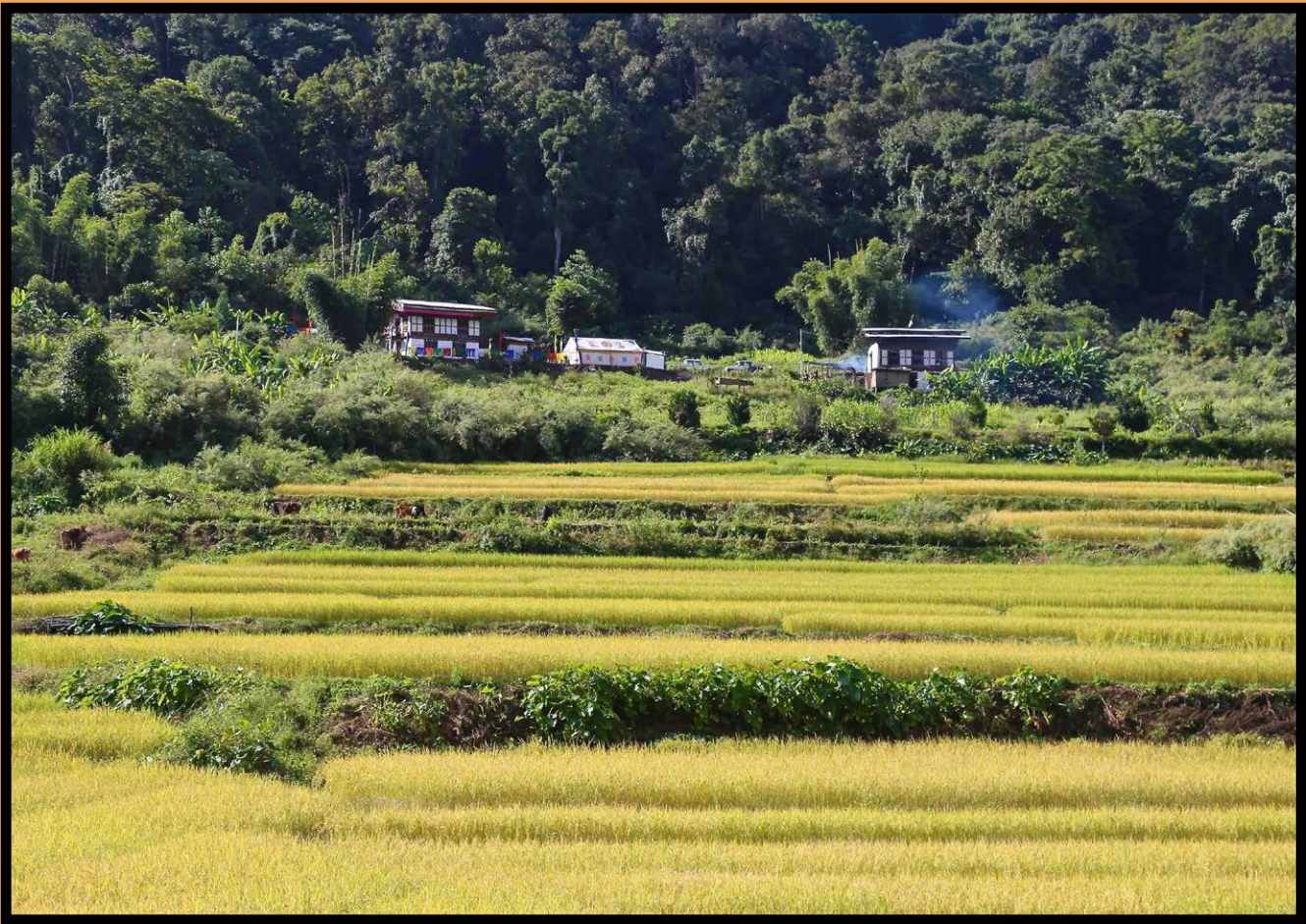
Every single member of the community that we spoke to hoped for something to change. They welcomed the new road which would reduce the journey to the road head from a seven hour walk to a one hour drive – in the dry season at least. They welcomed the greater access to market for the sale of produce that it would bring, as well as

greater access to education and healthcare. More help, though, would be needed.

We concluded, through much discussion with the community, that there were three main areas for potential income growth that we could support with this project. These were 1) the introduction of tourism for the first time into Rukha valley, 2) the creation of a homestay as part of the Community Center that we would build and 3) promotion of the local handicrafts and other wares. The second and third objectives would in part be achieved by the first and we would also lobby the Bhutanese government for support and workshops to help the Olep find routes to market for their crafts and produce. (Covid showed us only too well the risks inherent in relying on only tourism as a sustainable economic model.)

Crucially, a fourth objective would be to elevate the Olep culture to protected status within Bhutanese law. As part of that and the Bhutanese government's commitment to support and promote the Olep, micro-finance and small business loans would be made available.

All four of these economic objectives have been met, the Olep culture is now afforded protected status and welcome income has started to flow to the community. As a direct result, some of the local youth have decided to stay in – and some to return to – Rukha. This includes Phurba Dorji who helped lead the linguistic work in our Survey and who has since taken a small business loan to start an orchid farm in the valley. He is pictured on page 11. Staying and living in Rukha is now seen as a viable option.



A view across the paddy fields

VISITING RUKHA

Tourists visiting Rukha now are some of the first ever to visit the valley. They are able to:

- meet the community and feel the incredible warmth of their welcome
- learn about the Olep culture and the Ole language
- see the Olep's authentic way of life
- learn about their sustainable way of looking after and living off the land
- see traditional weaving and basketware
- enjoy local songs, music and dances
- cook and eat traditional local food
- buy local arts and crafts

- learn about the forest and its traditional medicines and secrets and
- learn about the amazing and abundant local wildlife and
- enjoy guided forest walks and amazing hikes.

Any visit to Bhutan is life changing – and we can not recommend more highly a visit to stay with the Olep of Rukha. By staying at the homestay within our Community Center and by spending time with the Olep, you will directly support their culture, their language and their forest.

PROJECT OPENING CEREMONY

The official opening ceremony of the Olep Community Center took place in October 2019 in two stages.

The first part was in the capital of Thimphu where the Center was inaugurated by Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk at her palace. Her Majesty's small grandson, who is a reincarnated rimpoche, then blessed the Center. The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation's founders Chris and Olivia had an hour's discussion with Her Majesty to discuss the importance of protecting and celebrating the Olep culture, among other issues in a wide ranging discussion. As at our previous meetings with Her Majesty, we were struck by her warmth, generosity, energy, curiosity and fierce intelligence.

The second part comprised a series of elaborate celebrations in Rukha. The new Center was bedecked with decorations and colourful flags fluttered all around it. Thonkas were hung on its outside walls and a temporary altar was erected. Two

marquees had been brought in by the Park service, the commemorative plaque that her Majesty had blessed the day before in Thimphu sat proudly on a large plinth and a large area (akin to a new village square) had been cleared for the celebrations.

The ceremony itself involved the official announcement of the new legal protection for the Olep culture, a tour of the new Community Center and a formal appreciation of the Olep carpenters that built it, blessings by the lama now based at the Rukha temple, the official presentation of the project's Survey Report and a number of speeches - by representatives of Tarayana Foundation, by Chief Guest Secretary Karma Tshering, by representatives of the Rukha community and by Chris on behalf of The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation. This was all followed by a cultural show by the Rukha community, dancing and a big celebratory meal.

It was a very special, meaningful and emotional day for all.



Some of the community showing off the new Center and official plaque at the ceremony



The inauguration by Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk



Celebratory dance at the opening ceremony

PROJECT IMPACT

The Olep project has been a resounding success.

For The Cultural Sanctuaries Foundation, it was our first project and it will always be dear to our hearts, in particular because Bhutan, perhaps of all countries in the world stands for what we stand for too – a passion for the protection of culture and language and for conservation.

For the Bhutanese Government, as mentioned on page 2, it has been deemed so successful that they are replicating the project with all of the other 21 indigenous communities of Bhutan.

For the Olep people, their culture is now protected in law, their language is now recorded and its future made possible, the Community Center stands in Rukha as a testament to the Olep identity and heritage and new economic opportunities mean that life in the valley is once again seen as viable.

In all, the project's significant impacts have included:

- the protection in law of Olep culture
- a commitment by the Bhutanese Government to support and promote the Olep people and culture
- the building of the Community Center, complete with living museum, teaching room and homestay
- completion of the Survey describing the Olep's culture, language and local botany
- the creation of the first ever written dictionary of Ole language
- the teaching of Ole language classes to all Olep children in and around Rukha
- the introduction of sustainable economic models
- the introduction of sustainable eco- and cultural- tourism to Rukha
- young people seeing a future for them in, and returning to, Rukha, and
- a heightened sense of Olep cultural identity and pride.

THANK YOUS

We could not have completed this Project without:

- Her Majesty the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk
- Our project partners at Tarayana Foundation, in particular Chime Paden Wangdi, Sonam Pem, Dhendup Tshering, Jigme Wangchuk, Karma Wangchuk and Pema Lhendrup
- The former Prime Minister of Bhutan, Tshering Tobgay
- The Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs
- The Minister of Agriculture and Forests
- Director General of the Department of Traditional Medicine at the Ministry of Health, Kuenga Tshering
- Dasho Karma Tshering, Honored Guest at the Center's Opening Ceremony
- The Tourism Council of Bhutan
- Sha Phurba Dorji for being our guide, our translator, sometimes our ears and eyes and for helping us every step of the way
- Karma Lotey and Sonam Peldon at

Yangphel Adventure Travel for their advice on Bhutan tourism and

- Our wonderful Survey team of Kuenga Wangmo, Ratu Drukpa, Ngawang Gyeltshen, Phurba Dorji and Maria Fadiman and
- The generous donors without whom we could not have funded the project.

Most of all, we are grateful to the Olep of Rukha and, in particular, to Chokila, Namsay, Phurba Dorji, Angge Chödrö, Age Tekpa and Küngga. We thank them and the whole community for their donation of the land on which the Center sits and the time and expertise that they gave in building it. We thank them for their warmth and their welcome. We thank them for their passion for their culture, their language, their traditional knowledge and their stewardship of the beautiful valley of Rukha and their new Center. We thank them for their friendship.

We feel very proud of this project and we wish the Olep people every success. We look forward to visiting Rukha again soon.



THE CULTURAL
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FOUNDATION

Protecting the Protectors

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