Protected areas and ecotourism: Charting a path toward social-ecological wellbeing

by

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A thesis presented to the University of Waterloo
in fulfilment of the thesis requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Geography

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2017

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTIONS

In the Department of Geography and Environmental Management, doctoral dissertations may be presented in either a standard (traditional) format or a manuscript option. The latter format is centred on three or four publishable journal-type chapters on related issues, accompanied by introductory, methodology and concluding chapters that integrate the research purposes and findings to form a conceptual whole. This thesis adopts the manuscript option and fulfils its requirements, which can be found online at:

https://uwaterloo.ca/waterloo-laurier-graduate-program-in-geography/general-information-current-students/manuscript-options

I am the sole author of Chapter 1, 2, 4 and 6 of this dissertation. Chapters 3 and 5 were co-authored with Sanjay Nepal, and I was the lead author of these manuscripts. Chapter 4 was published in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* (Karst, 2016). Chapters 3 and 5 will be submitted for publication in the near future. This thesis also cites a co-authored book chapter (Karst & Gyeltshen, 2016).
Abstract

Protected areas (PAs) are changing rapidly in size and scope with the influx of development activities intended to benefit people living within and near their borders. In developing countries, integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs), which include ecotourism, are expanding into environmentally fragile areas where remote local and indigenous people live. However, decades of research cite the inability of ICDPs to reach their full potential, suggesting that they do not adequately balance human livelihoods with natural resource conservation. Protected area stakeholder relationships in countries undergoing modernisation and democratisation, and local, indigenous perceptions of project development in relation to social and ecological wellbeing are two largely under-explored areas of research in conservation and ecotourism. Developing a better understanding of approaches to PA conservation and development is critical given the increasing evidence of global ecosystem degradation due to anthropogenic activities and, unless changes are made to policies, institutions and practices, the continued, uneven and detrimental impacts on poor people.

The purpose of this doctoral research is to explore the impacts of ecotourism on the wellbeing of human societies and nature in remote PAs, and the connections between community-level ecotourism and other development initiatives to broader PA policies and practices. The study pursues three research objectives: (1) to critically examine stakeholder relations in PA conservation; (2) to identify and assess indigenous perceptions of ecotourism and wellbeing in relation to ecotourism development; and (3) to refine and apply an integrative framework of wellbeing to empirically investigate the ways in which ecotourism enhances or constrains social-ecological sustainability in developing areas.

This research was conducted through a case study of three local, indigenous PA communities in the Merak-Sakteng region of Bhutan. Data were collected through unstructured interviews (n=20); community (n=68) and non-community (n=50) semi-structured interviews; focus groups (n=6); literature review and document analysis; participant observations; and debriefing sessions (n=4). An empirical analysis of stakeholder relations first examined the progress and outcomes of two recent development projects, revealing that indigenous communities face specific socio-cultural challenges that could benefit from operational adjustments and new approaches. The buen vivir (living well) perspective was then used to analyse indigenous perceptions of ecotourism and wellbeing and the influence of socio-cultural factors, which illustrated the significant links between nature and indigenous cosmologies, socio-cultural values and spiritual beliefs that can impact ecotourism development and local PA governance. Lastly, a social-ecological wellbeing framework was developed to assess subjective, socio-relational, material and ecological dimensions of wellbeing in communities. The framework emphasised the importance of social-