Tourism Development in Bhutan: Tensions between Tradition and Modernity

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Abstract

The demand for 'authentic' cultural and nature-based tourism experiences affects all cultures, including the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. Bhutan's dilemma is represented in its desire to share in global economic development while still retaining its traditional cultural identity. In this paper we examine the relationship between tourism, development, Bhutanese culture and environment. Narratives of cultural identity are considered in an analysis of primary and secondary data – participant observation, interviews, plus electronic and printed texts – to demonstrate that: key stakeholders in Bhutan favour a policy of cautious or 'middle path' modernisation in which the Bhutanese maintain control of the type and amount of tourism and its effect on cultural traditions, religion, and the natural environment. Bhutan's tourism's policy has been effective to date in limiting environmental and cultural impact from Western tourism. But as tourism demand is rapidly growing, an assessment of the country's carrying capacity is necessary if Bhutan's 'middle path' policy of high yield, low impact tourism is to continue to be effective. The special political agreement between India and Bhutan, which amongst other things allows unlimited numbers of Indian tourists to enter Bhutan, will pose a major challenge in achieving an effective cultural and environmental carrying capacity.