

# A 21-Day Hike with the GNHC Secretary

Team discovers the problems and challenges facing two remote villages in Lunana



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ON JULY 4, 10 people from the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), including the GNHC Secretary, Karma Tshiteem set off on a 21-day trek to Lunana. The purpose was to survey two villages - Yoesuna and Whangchey - to assess the level of poverty and what can be done to improve the lives of the people.

A health assistant from Punakha hospital joined the team to provide medical assistance and the manager of Jigme Dorji National Park accompanied the team to explain the problems the people of Lunana face.

The villages of Yoesuna and Wachey have five and 11 households respectively. Both villages had been

identified as needing direct support from the government and Yoesuna was in special need for attention. The first decision was to connect a fresh water supply and provide Bukhari (wood stoves) immediately.

As a result of the visit, it was established that for Lunana, the most important development over the course of the next two years will be the construction of a mule track along the banks of Pho-chhu, as this will help the people of Lunana (and Yoesuna) to access Punakha all year round without the difficulty of crossing the Ganjula River.

Mule tracks connecting the other side of the Ganjula will still be important for the yaks and for cordyceps collection, which is increasingly the principal source of cash

income for these communities. It will also be important for tourism.

"But the most immediate priority must be to ensure all the children of these communities go to school and for that we need to explore more ways of achieving this target. We will have to make special arrangements, given their unique situation," said the GNHC Secretary, adding that he had asked the people to build their cow shelters further away from the houses and clean up their surroundings.

Karma Tshiteem added, "The reason for the trip was to help poverty reduction through a programme called the Rural Economic Advancement Programme (REAP). This is a new project to reduce poverty to 15% or less by the end of the 10th Plan."

"The second reason," continued the GNHC secretary, "was to monitor the progress of the Global Environment Fund (GEF) support for the Thorthomi Lake project, as I am also the Operational Focal Point for Bhutan to the GEF. The third reason was simply to fulfill my personal ambition to try and visit every part of the country and see and experience things first hand."

The progress with the Thorthomi Project is going well despite the loss of working days due to Cyclone Aila and other problems. The early warning systems project is on schedule and should be completed by the end of this month, he added.

The GNHC Secretary also expressed his gratitude for the chance to see the incredible beauty

and rich pristine environment that covers most of Gasa Dzongkhag; getting to know a little of the unimaginable hardships faced by the people who live in these extremely remote places, and seeing the dedication of civil servants.

"I am particularly referring to the principal and teachers of Lunana Community Primary School, and those working in the Jigme Dorji National Park, in the Thorthomi Lake Project and the Early Warning System Project. What an inspiration they are!"

Kunzang working in the GNHC said, "It was an opportunity to experience one of the most remote parts of Bhutan, especially Yoesuna, a village even my grandparents had only vaguely heard about."