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RTC BA Anthropology

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Erfahrungsbericht – Internship at BTFEC

I want to start by saying that my Internship with the *Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental conservation* was an integral and important part of my Bhutan experience. The BTFEC was the world's first environmental trust fund, founded in 1991 and is supporting environment and conservation based innovative projects throughout Bhutan. Due to the trust fund, I was able to see and experience a side of Bhutan which is rarely exposed to foreign people. The reasons for these circumstances are complex, multiple, and political. I am just happy that I was at the right time at the right place.

My Bhutan experience started early for me, in spring 2020 when I lived in Thimphu for the first time, for almost half a year. I left the country with a strong wish to come back and I already made up a plan in mind how I could make it happen. I was very lucky, and two years later I landed in Paro again, everything worked out and I couldn't believe I made it again. After paying way too much for single Bedroom apartment in lower Motithang, I found a small place, a little Attic apartment located above one of Thimphu's most famous higher secondary schools. My landlord, who happened to be the freshly hired Managing Director of the BTFEC, was quite sympathetic right away and we had some interesting conversations. After I got to know from him what his Profession is, I got interested in the Organization he was working for and I expressed my interest to intern with the BTFEC. He was happy to hear that and said he will be supportive as far as possible.

My initial plan was to end my relationship with RTC after the Spring semester 2023 and come directly through the organization. This plan didn't work out and I ended up paying a huge amount of money to RTC again, just to stay back and work for free for BTFEC. A decision which I don't regret at all.

Due to my relationship with the MD I was quite frank about how I see my role within the organization and what I wanted to do there. Me coming from an anthropological background, without any work experience in such an organization, seemed a little bit out of place and I was aware of that. I told him that all I wanted to know is how the funding process works, what

they take in consideration and what not and that I am curious if I can link some of the insights and understanding I will get by being there, to my anthropological concepts and research. Two other important points for me where, that I wanted to build connections for future projects, and I expressed my wish to get to see more of Bhutan through my affiliation with the trust fund. My landlord said that it sounds fine to him, and as soon as I am ready, we should start the application process. This was in early spring 2023 and it took almost half a year till I officially started my internship at BTF. In the meantime, I attended several workshops, organized by the BTF to get a better understanding of what they are doing and how they are operating. I quickly realized that I was about to join the Organization at an interesting point in time, because all the major positions within the Organization were just about to be replaced by new people. The whole dynamic gave me the feeling of re-build of the trust fund. New people, new ideas, new outlooks, and new projects. Not just that the whole Trust Fund and got replaced regarding management and employees, also their head office got restored and got therefore a new 'face'.

The workshops I attended were about finding better ways of communication between the Trust Fund and the organizations which are applying for funding. I found them well organized and quite progressive. The application process seemed to be quite challenging and often not clearly understandable for the applicants which can lead to a refusal due to technical issues. The new management of the trust fund recognized this and took measures to get this hurdle out of the way immediately. I was impressed by the new mindset and was looking forward to getting engaged with them.

I started my work with the Bhutan trust Fund in August, by working with *RSPN (Royal Society for Nature Conservation)*. RSPN is an old and well-known organization in Bhutan today best known for the conservation Projects with rare bird species like the *Black Necked Crane and the White Bellied Heron*. RSPN is conducting projects funded by the BTFEC, so I met a RSPN Officers, which happened to be a friend of mine, at one of the workshops. We planned to work on a project together now that I am working with BTF. Due to my background as a professional tree climber, we came up with the idea to give tree climbing training for the people engaged with the white bellied heron conservation project in Tsirang. After we got all the route permits settled and got BTFEC's as well as RTC's approval, we started our journey to the Conservation center in Tsirang.

We travelled by car and reached the center after 7 hours, including various stops along the way including an extensive lunch break. Our time there was limited so after arriving and unloading the truck, I started to examine their climbing equipment. Just to find out that it was

very insufficient, which I expected. One needs various things to climb a tree safely and almost nothing of this specialized equipment is available in Bhutan. Although insufficient equipment, the trip was successful. I was able to create a basic and fully functioning kit and taught the officers some very basic techniques they could make use of. I also was able to give them a basic understanding of the three-assessment process prior to climbing it. The next day we travelled to Dagana to look for a Heron nest in the jungle, without any success. The last day we spent again with tree climbing training as well as shooting visuals with my camera for funding purposes for RSPN.

The trip was an overall great experience. I was able to see the districts Tsirang and Dagana, I made new friends, explored possibilities for future projects and got an insight into human-nature relations which I could apply to the conceptual and theoretical knowledge I learned during my studies. In this case I am referring to the perception of locals in Tsirang regarding the White bellied Heron and its role in their life and livelihood. Once seen as a fish thief, a perception that changed over time according to the process of conservation, which brought development, work and helpful initiatives to the community, the bird is now seen, at least by some, as something favorable.

Shortly after this trip I started my official internship with the BTF. The new office was still under construction, and it took another 6 weeks to finish everything. There wasn't any specific task for me right away, so I started to attend meetings where grant and fund decisions were made, which gave me an interesting insight in the decisions making process. Besides attending the meetings and taking notes, I was busy reading through proposals from earlier projects to get an understanding of the projects BTF is funding. I also got the chance to attend a daylong meeting with the *Green Climate Fund*, coming all the way from Korea and being on the BTFEC major Donors. It was interesting to see the committee in the position of the one asking for funding, rather than granting it.

It took quite a while for the first trip with BTF to happen. This one took us, in the last week of October, all the way to Samtse, to one of the most south-west located areas in Bhutan. We are funding a project conducted by the forestry department, dealing with a human - elephant issue in Samtse. The key word here is human-wildlife conflict. Elephants coming up north from the bordering Indian plains are destroying the livelihood of the locals, by eating crops, destroying them and accidentally damaging infrastructure. The forestry department started their project some time ago and now it was on the BTF to evaluate and scrutinize the measures and actions they took with the funding money. We spent 3 nights in Samtse, with one day going to the field observing and evaluating as well as meeting with the local

government and people for discussion. I was able to see first person how the trust fund officers were operating in the field and how they deal with organizations which they fund. I was also able to see how the funding organizations are treating the trust fund officials, which gave me a better understanding of the perception of the BTF by local people. After the third night we left at early noon towards Phuentsholing where we spent another night. The next day we came back to Thimphu. We were quite a large group traveling, two cars filled with 9 people including me. This gave me the opportunity to bond with the other employees from BTF, what made the upcoming weeks at the office as well as on the upcoming trip to the east, way more enjoyable.

The trip to the east happened in the third week of November, from the 13th till the 19th. We started our journey early morning, with everyone waiting for me because I overheard the alarm clock. We needed to start early because our goal was to reach Lingmethang, Mongar, by this evening. The agenda for the trip was to visit and evaluate two project sites, one in Gyelpozhing and one in Trashigang, at Sherubtse College. Another important task, which included Cate and myself, was to gather visuals for an BTFEC promotion Video for the upcoming COP28 in Dubai. The project in Gyelpozhing deals with the invasion of the giant African snail and is also conducted by the forestry department. We visited the site on our second day and after the evaluation we continued our travel to Trashigang, where we arrived late evening at the College. The college is planning to build a little research center and is therefore applying for funding. We left the next morning to Samdrupcholing where we spent a night and the next day, after talking to the chief forestry officer of the area and taking shots for the video, we continued our travels to Pema Gatsel. From there on we travelled to Manas, to Zhemgang and then from Trongsa back to Thimphu. We got a great tour and travelled multiple Dzongkhags in less than one week. We sat every day in the car for multiple hours, stopping every now and then to grab some drinks, having lunch or taking some shots. I realized that there was actually no need to take us that tour, BTF was just giving us an enormous treat. They took all the responsibility showing us half of the country and even paid for our expenses. I am very grateful for this and I won't forget it.

Reflecting on my time with BTF I can say that everything worked out perfectly well. I got a basic understanding on what the trust fund is all about. How they operate, what they are targeting and how they operate. I got an insight in Bhutanese work culture, and I couldn't do nothing but smile as I saw the *Green Climate Funds* Specialists face when we broke for another round of tea and biscuits. I was able to bond with people and create possibilities for future projects. I saw the country, went to more rural areas of Bhutan and got the chance to

witness what some people refer to as 'the real Bhutan'. I was able to imply skills and transfer knowledge to people at very different place then where I myself acquired this skillset. I was able to link theoretical knowledge I acquired in an academic context to everyday situations, and I understood how valuable anthropological concepts can be and that there are endless ways to make use of them.

I can imagine that I will profit in many ways from this expirience and most of them I am either not able to understand or imagine yet. I worked with the first environmental trust fund, while I had a beautiful time in an unbelievable interesting and welcoming country. I am very thankful to the trust fund and its employees.

Like I said, it was an important part of my time here, not just because it happened and everything went well, but because I am sure it will open doors for me in the future to either come back to Bhutan or work with similar organizations....or do both.