

## Happiness, Depression, and Carbon Emissions



*"Solar panels are used to charge mobile phones, which weren't available in Laya until late 2009."*

A typical sunny day here, out in the Wide Open. Here lies a solar panel, its face open to the sky. The field is quiet and content, and the yaks that graze here do not bother this technology and are not bothered by it. Instead it keeps to itself, perched on discarded debris and hay as though it is not a necessity, as though it does not provide a necessity. It doesn't. Not here in the Wide Open. It is the thing used to charge phones. It often goes unused, untouched, unbothered by Bhutan's residents.

They might be moving into the twenty-first century, but they are aware of the blessings they have. They do not see this change as a necessity. They do not feel the anxiety so many do when they are not constantly 'connected'. The yaks are happy: they have the sun and the grass and these endless hills. The people are happy: they have just enough technology, just enough of the outside world, and still, these endless hills.

Bhutan is a small, Parliamentary Democracy that sits quietly between China and India, and a little east of Nepal. Although its government has only recently been democratized, and the number of citizens who live below the poverty line is higher than is typically desirable, it has long been considered one of the happiest countries. The photographer, Ciril Jazbec, is inclined to assume a causation between this happiness and the low amount of carbon emissions that Bhutan produces. And I am inclined to believe that it is plausible.

Only in the last couple decades has Bhutan taken cautious steps into twenty-first century technology, and despite these rapid changes, the people continue to be content. The industrialization they allow is highly regulated to help preserve their environment. Solar panels, like the one pictured, are the central source of electricity here. In recent years, hydroelectricity has become popular and is highly available because of its many glacial rivers. In other regions, solar panels were introduced after too much damage had been done, before people could see the value of their own habitat and resources through the filter that is the financial bottomline of these panels.



Upper middle class New Jersey seems like a cruel oxymoron. While I led a rather charmed adolescence and never was in danger of going hungry, I still grew up cloaked in smog and broken glass. My suburban neighborhood was safe enough, but I was very young when my mother explained to me why I couldn't walk alone to school in the mornings. We were sheltered beyond belief in a place where the outdoors was considered more of a threat than the pollution, than the phones glued to our hands. At recess we were not allowed to touch the snow, we had to stay on the asphalt. and I was banned from several play times for convincing other children to climb trees with me.

In the summers, my parents would take me on two week camping trips to the Adirondacks, and I would be miserable as I watched my phone die, knowing I had no way of recharging it, but would then be happier than I was anywhere else. A younger version of myself stands on Chimney Mountain in the Adirondacks and stares out over a sickeningly beautiful cliff,

knowing that in two days I would head south, and two weeks after that I'd be back in school. I can feel the drop[off inches away from me, but the air is cool and clarifying, and everything that seems so urgent and important dissipates.

I got my first cell phone on my twelfth birthday, in October of 2010. I'd been one of the last kids in my school to get one, and for only the practical reason of being able to tell my mother that I already had a ride home. It was out of no one's way to drive me home, and my mom had enough on her plate already. But even then I was mocked by my friends for having a flip phone. They'd complain about not being able to name our group chats and suddenly I'd entered a world of comparisons and criticism that was impossible to extricate myself from.

The year before, the country of Bhutan was starting getting its first cell phones.



*"Fifteen-year-old Karma Tenzin is a 7th-grader in Laya. Unlike his nomadic yak-herding parents, Karma wants to be an engineer and work in Bhutan's capital, Thimphu."*

Recently, Bhutan has been building a 'low-impact' tourism industry. While creating new jobs, it honors the fact that 60% of its forests are protected. Currently, 72% of Bhutan is completely forested, and they plan to keep it that way. Bhutan may not be a force to be reckoned with, or any kind of industrial power, but the motivations of this country are much simpler than those around the globe: to exist, to protect, and to survive. They do not want to grow their



borders, or their military, or their control. They do what they must to improve their economy, to educate and feed their children, but nothing more.

In recent years, the number of children completing their education has increased. Fifteen year old Karma sits on a rock just on the outskirts of Laya, nursing his coffee. He only needs a jacket to keep out the chill that comes with these hills. He stares off at a herd of Argali wandering through the mountain side. The mountain sheep are unbothered by him, as he wonders if he'll miss them when he finally heads off to school. He considers his future, and where he might go as he overlooks his home from his perch. He considers his parents, who approve of his education, are impressed and sad as he learns things they never did in school, and know he will one day leave the village for the capital.

He may not have access to the best teachers, and his family may not be wealthy, even for an economy like Bhutan's, but he has support and he has his home. He is happy here, and wants to make it an even better place for the future, for his three little sisters who are still too young to dream. Children like Karma are the ones who will find the way to save our planet while continuing to innovate. He dreams of the future, of changing the world, like most do.

But even if he doesn't, even if he stays, he would still be happy here. Without his dreams, he would still have his home where there are no carbon emissions at all. The air is so clean that it is challenging to imagine what it must feel like to breathe it in. Right now I can close my eyes and try to imagine something cleaner than a cool, morning breeze, but I can't.

At Karma's age, I was struggling significantly. I had difficulty picturing my future, my goals, and my direction. From social media, it seemed as though no one else was feeling this



way. Unfortunately, I had been duped by the fragment of life that my peers chose to share online. Everyone was grappling with their own private issues, and many of them were feeling just as isolated as I was. I didn't realize I could dream about living anywhere else, or doing anything else.

But I could not give up summers spent camping and backpacking. My phone would die, my friends would never understand, but everything became unnecessary in the face of the mountains. In a place like Bhutan, cellphones are a welcome luxury, saving these old women from a two day trip to the next village. This woman calls her friend she has not talked to in months to see how her daughter is doing, instead of hiking to see her for only a brief conversation. They discuss the next holiday, and when they *will* have time to get their families together. They joke about their husbands and brag about how well their grandchildren are doing in school. And while they do all this they can continue their work in the fields. Cellphones are used at the bare minimum.

Today, we panic when we can't feel our phones in our back pockets. Can we not enjoy ourselves in order to stay connected? Even my mother gets worried if I don't pick up my phone, while complaining that I use it too much. Since spending some time living in Vermont, I've found myself turning my phone off when I go out, freeing myself of the responsibility of staying



in touch, constantly.

Bhutan sits in the center of an increasingly hostile world. As the present slowly infiltrates the country, the people are careful to maintain traditions of the past. School children continue to

play, parents will work, and the forests will stay upright and silent. The children will go to the same shop, the only shop, each day after class to play games brought from far away places. The boys will continue to play the games they were taught and they will learn what will preserve the lives and the environment they love. They are not really cut off- their calendar is marked with the next football game. They are surrounded by movie posters and ads, just like any general store. They are safe, protected by the smallness of the town. The shopkeeper who sees them each day is one of their fathers, or uncle, or next door neighbor. They will be back the next day, and the next. They are consistent because they are happy.

Unlike these children, I was not allowed to grow up unwatched, without some kind of following. I grew up forty minutes from Newark, where the best park was off a highway and the air smelled of fumes, a scent I didn't even recognize until I left for the Adirondacks and returned wondering why everything smelled like fire.

It may be impossible to prove causation between the lack of carbon emissions in Bhutan and the level of happiness, but I know that there is a certain freedom that is unique to wild areas. The forests in Bhutan are sinkholes for carbon emissions, so while the country's new industry may produce some, they are immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of preserved forests.

Although some might argue that they are missing opportunities, Bhutan has no need to 'fix' their country in terms of technical advancement. They intend to improve what needs to be improved while safeguarding the wilderness that is so important to them but not as respected by the rest of the world. They will not fight to become a dominating world power, nor will they deny their children education. With the climate emergencies many corporations and governments are causing, future generations will have to find solutions as these critical changes continue to intensify. Bhutan's priorities may seem disarranged to those who glorify paychecks, but quiet happiness is enough for some, especially when it is not at the expense of future generations' happiness.

Photo Series:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2018/march/bhutan-gross-domestic-happiness-sustainability-environment-mountains/#/14-bhutan-happiness-sustainability.jpg>

Bhutan Official:

<http://www.tourism.gov.bt/about-bhutan/environment>

Stats:

<https://www.globalpartnership.org/country/bhutan>