

**Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay's Statement at the Opening Session of the
National Parks Conference held at the Royal Banquet Hall, Thimphu on
August 14, 2014**

Hon'ble Lyonpos,
Hon'ble Members of Parliament,
Dasho Secretaries,
Representatives of international agencies,
Senior civil servants,
Desuups,

May I request your permission to speak directly to the students who have attended this very important conference.

My dear students,

We are a proud people living in a proud country. Think of what it means. When you think of yourself as being a Bhutanese, what comes to your mind? What is a Bhutanese? What makes us a Bhutanese? What defines us as a Bhutanese? Take a moment to think about it. Yes, living in Bhutan, a sovereign nation, a country that is landlocked, small, sandwiched between the two largest countries in the world and is yet independent and sovereign, that makes us Bhutanese.

What else makes us Bhutanese?

Our unique culture, the way we live, the way we dress and the way we speak. Our unique culture, that is intact and that is vibrant.

Just like our culture, our attachment to the environment. Our environment; Bhutanese, all over have a deep, even natural attachment and connection with the environment.

I think that makes us Bhutanese. That differentiates us from many of the other people in many other parts of the world.

Can you think of more traits, more characteristics that define us as Bhutanese, dear students?

Think of our social security system and our kidu system where free education is available throughout the country. We may be a poor country but we have free healthcare.

In times of disaster, in times of need and for those who are extremely poor, we can count on His Majesty the King's kidu. This also defines us and is a very important part of being Bhutanese, knowing that we have social security.

Then there is the rule of law, Democracy and the unique way that it was introduced in our country. That also should make us feel Bhutanese. Not democracy in general, not rule of law in general but the way it has been introduced and the way it is being practiced in Bhutan. It is truly unique.

And there is the development philosophy of Gross National Happiness, something the world looks up to and something that inspires many leaders throughout the world.

Here, it is a part of our character; it is what defines us as Bhutanese. Our sovereignty, our culture, our love for the environment, social security, free education and healthcare, kidu, rule of law, democracy and Gross National Happiness. These and many more defines us as Bhutanese and that makes us Bhutanese.

There's a common thread that runs across these traits, and it is our monarchy. We have been blessed with successive kings who have been extremely wise and have had the courage to exercise that wisdom.

As a result, we are a sovereign nation and it is their gift to us. As a result, we have a unique and a vibrant culture and we are the last surviving Mahayana-Vajrayana country in the world. As a result, we have a pristine environment, one of the world's best.

It is because of our Kings and our Monarchy, we have today a system of government that is unique. We celebrate, today, democracy that was not earned by the people, that was not fought for by the people but that was gifted from the throne.

Our Kings taught us the principles of democracy and how, we as people should participate in democratic governance and in Gross National Happiness. The fountainhead of this world famous development philosophy is our monarchs. So while we define ourselves as Bhutanese in many ways, ultimately, it boils down to one and that is our Monarchs.

We are Bhutanese and we are different from the rest of the world mainly because of the gifts of our Kings and the institution of Monarchy.

It hasn't been easy in all these different areas; our kings have had to work very hard.

Democracy didn't come to us overnight. Our Kings have worked at introducing democracy and perfecting the system for Bhutan over several decades. Having framed laws and the constitution, trained the people at the right time and against the will of the people, democracy was introduced by the Kings for the people.

Similarly, the environment. There was a time when the world, and even today in fact, accepted wisdom to cut down the trees for money. Money that is required to educate the people and give good health services to the people. But our Kings refused to cut down our forests and they worked very hard to earn the money required for free education and free healthcare through other means. They kept the forests intact and today we celebrate the fact that we have some of the healthiest and the most pristine forests in the world.

72% of our country is covered by forests, a staggering 72% and by some account, it is growing. What's left are a few urban centers, a few agricultural farms and waterways that is rivers, lakes, glaciers and snow-capped mountains. Inheriting such a vast amount of forests for us is extremely significant.

Today, we are regarded as a biodiversity hotspot. Not only is the forest cover extensive but it is natural, pristine and untouched. The number of species that we have here; insects, mammals and cats, of them a good 27% is globally endangered. Some of our mammals and birds are the world's most endangered creatures today and we have the responsibility of protecting them.

51% of our country is protected and that's more than half of our country. They are not just new forests that are protected. There's a big difference between the new forests that is now declared protected and in old forests that has been untouched, an area that is pristine as nature intended it to be.

More than half of our country comprise of protected areas; four wildlife sanctuaries and one strict nature reserve all connected by biological corridors. Not in isolated pockets like the rest of the world but connected in a way that one protected area is connected through a biological corridor to the next. The ecosystem can maintain its health that way.

Our protected areas are a gift to us from the throne and we need to protect it and celebrate it. It is also a gift to the world because the health of our environment plays a significant role in the health of the world's environment.

For us, a healthy environment means healthy waterways and sustainable water. What that means is our farmers and we citizens have access to safer and cleaner drinking water.

In the future, drinking water will be a problem, it is already a problem. The sheer health of our environment and taking care of the environment would make sure we have enough water to drink and significantly, enough water for hydropower.

Hydropower to generate energy that is clean, green, cheap, will fuel development and will allow us Bhutanese to continue to enjoy free education, free health care and free social security. That comes from the environment and for that the environment must be protected.

How do we know whether the environment is healthy or not? How do we know whether the protected areas are serving their functions or not? There are many indicators. One of the most powerful indicators is the 'Tiger'.

The world had only 3200 tigers left and a good many of them must be in the zoos or in protected areas where they roam free but within the limited area.

In Bhutan, we have as many as 150 tigers roaming from the borders in the south through the valleys in central Bhutan to the high mountaintops in northern Bhutan. Our tigers are free to roam and by all counts, they seem to be thriving.

As the land of the tigers shrink throughout the world, in Bhutan, they seem to be getting a second lease of life.

I wouldn't be surprised that given the health of our environment, our protected areas which are connected by healthy biological corridors and given that our tigers can roam from the southern foothills to the mighty Himalayas, the tigers may be developing into a new wonderful sub-species; the mountain tiger.

The tiger is an indicator of the health of our environment. It is a magnificent animal that plays a vital role in our history, in our heritage, in our religion and in our society. In and by itself, the tiger is important. As an indicator of the health of

our environment and our protected areas, the tiger comes as vital. If numbers expand, we can feel excited that the gift of our kings is protected and that our forests are vibrant. If numbers dwindle, we will have to do some soul-searching of what we have become and how much of what makes us Bhutanese we are willing to sacrifice.

This is the reason. Our environment, our waterways, our tigers, that all of us Bhutanese must exercise leadership in.

Like culture, the environment also makes us who we are. Our love for the environment and our connection to the environment makes us who we are. The Bhutanese, that differentiates us from the rest of the world. As a result, we must exercise leadership.

Students, you must exercise leadership and you must acknowledge what we have. Our forest cover, our pristine ecosystem and our animals; you must acknowledge that, you must celebrate it, you must feel good about it and you must imbibe them as our legacy, as a gift from the Monarch to each one of us.

We must protect it. We must learn about the environment and everything about it. We must undertake as much research as is needed. We must become the best in the world. We must not only understand and celebrate but also become role models for the world. Role models, in terms of the environment and also in terms of the expertise that we have.

The environment that we have today, we must cherish it, we must celebrate it but we must be able to hand it, just like our Kings have handed it to us, to our future generations. It is not just for us, it is for the world. And it is not just for the world, it is for the future generations of the world.

It's a tall order but one that we can achieve because we have again, in our Monarchs, the role models we can draw inspiration from their example and their sacrifices.

What we do in the area of environment cannot be done in isolation. We cannot think of tigers in isolation, rivers or forests in isolation. They are all interconnected. This is what makes Bhutan's protected areas special. They are also interconnected through biological corridors. Our parks are interconnected with our forests and our forests are interconnected with the people of Bhutan. Unless, there is relevance to the people, we will not be able to feel a sense of oneness with our environment and we will not have the motivation to celebrate and we will not work to protect the environment. This is why people must be at the centre of our environmental protection efforts.

The waterways are important to us because they generate money for us through agriculture and through hydropower. The environment is important to us because it improves strength of the economy through tourism and other measures. The environment is also important for agriculture.

We must, at the same time, understand that human-wildlife conflict is big issue today. As environmentalists and as Bhutanese, all of us must be able to

empathize with the farmer and see how to reduce his/her burden while at the same time not compromising the health of the environment.

The National Parks Conference is being conducted after three long years. During the three years, our foresters have done a wonderful job and I want to congratulate you while urging you to do more. We cannot rest on our morals. I wish to thank the Desuups for being available every time when our forests have needed you; to cultivate our forests and to save them from disaster.

Three years is a long time and it is important to have this conference every year for the simple reason that we are talking about 51% of our country. We are talking about more than half of our country. We are talking about our waters resources and ways of keeping it sustainable. We are talking about our economy, we are talking about the tiger and the carbon sink. We are talking about our promise to the world that we will remain carbon neutral for all times to come. It is important for Bhutan, it is important for the world and it is important for our brand, our identity, and our economy and ultimately, it is important for our own character.

I wish all those who are participating in this conference success.

Tashi Delek