

Cultural Heritage Management
Assignment 7
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Taksang Palphug Monastery, commonly known as "Tiger's Nest," is arguably Bhutan's most iconic cultural and spiritual site. Perched on a cliff 900 meters above the Paro Valley, this sacred site represents the pinnacle of Bhutanese tangible and intangible heritage, associated with Guru Padmasambhava, the father of Bhutanese Buddhism (Pommaret, 2017). However, increasing tourism pressure and the physical difficulty of the four-hour uphill trek have led to a proposed measure: the construction of an aerial tramway. This paper assesses the potential impacts of this proposed measure within the framework of a Cultural Heritage Impact Assessment (CHIA), focusing on cultural landscape integrity and the site's sacred value.

Identification of Heritage Values

Under the *Cultural Heritage Act of Bhutan* (Kingdom of Bhutan, 2016), Bhutan adopts a "cultural landscape" approach, recognizing that heritage exists in the relationship between nature, society, and spirit. The physical integrity of the site relies on the dramatic "cliff-top" isolation, which symbolizes the spiritual ascension and meditation of Guru Padmasambhava (Phuntsho, 2014). Intangible values include the ritual practices, the silence of the surrounding forest, and the pilgrim's journey. As UNESCO et al. (2022) note, impact assessments must evaluate threats to both tangible attributes (like the visual vista) and intangible ones (like the spiritual journey).

Assessment of Impacts

The proposed tramway would introduce a high-impact, irreversible alteration to the site's cultural landscape. The introduction of mechanized steel cables, pylons, and moving cabins into a protected forest and cliff face would severely damage the visual authenticity of the site. A mechanical structure would violate the "authenticity of setting," transforming a sacred pilgrimage site into a theme park attraction (UNESCO et al., 2022). Furthermore, the physical trek to Taktsang is a form of devotion; removing this requirement through a tramway severs the tangible action from the intangible meaning (Pommaret, 2017). To balance accessibility with conservation, a discreet, ground-level alternative on the opposite side of the valley could be considered, ensuring the sacred cliff face remains untouched by vertical infrastructure (Phuntsho, 2014).

While the tramway aims to democratize access, it ultimately commodifies a sacred space. A cultural heritage impact assessment strongly advises rejecting the tramway, as the measure destroys the very "spirit of place" that defines Paro Taktsang (Kingdom of Bhutan, 2016).

References

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