

## Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary: Bhutan's Lost World of Biodiversity

Bhutan's newest operationalized protected area, Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary, is also its least studied. Home to isolated nomadic tribespeople, thick carpets of rhododendrons, snow leopards, red pandas and even the mythical Yeti (or the "abominable snowman"), Sakteng is virtually untouched by development. In this remote and beautiful place, WWF is working with the Royal Government of Bhutan to study and protect the plants and animals while preserving its unique culture.



Kathryn being welcomed at Sakteng

### A trek to Merak & Sakteng

The people of Merak and Sakteng, two most remote villages in Bhutan, had a pleasant surprise in May 2003.

Merak and Sakteng, two of the restricted places do not usually have visitors. But on a special invitation from the then Prime Minister, Lyonpo Kinzang Dorji, a group of 12 people from the United States, led by Kathryn Fuller, President of WWF US, visited Merak and Sakteng as the guests of the government.

Organized by WWF Bhutan, the group was accompanied by high level Bhutanese officials, Dasho Sangay Thinlay, Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Dasho Wangdi Norbu, Secretary, Ministry of Finance and Dr. Sangay Wangchuk NCD, Dasho Sherab Tenzin, Dzongda. Tashigang also joined the group.

With the Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary finally getting functionalized, the guests were

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### Location

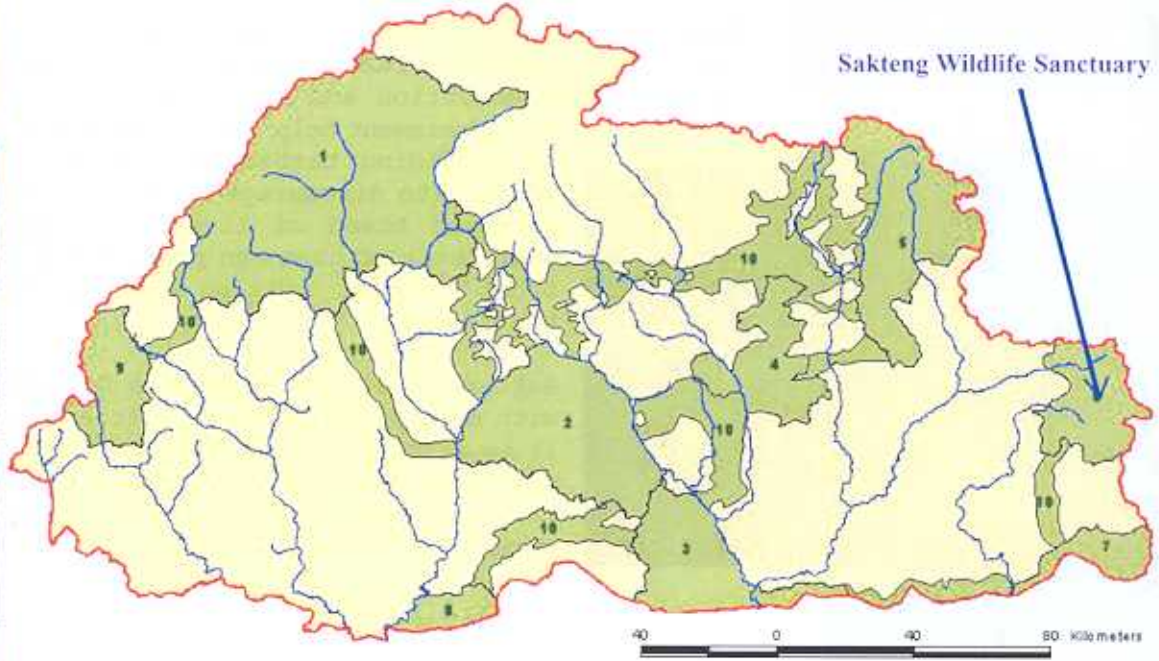
Located in the easternmost part of the Kingdom of Bhutan, Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary spans an area of 650 sq. km. Launched on 17<sup>th</sup> of April, 2003, the park is connected to the Khaling Wildlife Sanctuary by a biological corridor, part of the Bhutan Biological Conservation Complex (B2C2). This network of nine protected areas connected by biological corridors covers 35 percent of Bhutan, forming the centerpiece of one of the world's most ambitious conservation plans.

### Biodiversity

As Bhutan's least studied protected area, Sakteng is like a "lost world" of biodiversity, waiting to be discovered. The Sanctuary represents a wide diversity of Himalayan terrestrial ecosystems, namely alpine meadow, temperate forest, and warm broadleaf forest. Mammals include the snow leopard, Himalayan black bear, barking deer, red panda and Himalayan red fox and the curiously named hoary-bellied Himalayan squirrel. Local folklore says that the Yeti, or abominable snow man, also lives here. Bird species include the Assamese macaw, blood pheasant, grey backed shrike, grey headed woodpecker, common hoopoe, rufous vented tit and dark breasted rosefinch. Plant life includes Bhutan's



The welcome entourage



Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary



here for a site visit. The four day trek to the two places was highly appreciated by the guests and they felt honored to be among the first foreigners to have ever reached there. Far from the madding crowd, the people of Merak & Sakteng live in perfect harmony with the nature. The absence of motorable road has helped in maintaining the unique culture of these communities. With a day's rest in Sakteng, the guests had the opportunity to visit the Guru Lakhang, the community school and the village. Curious as the visitors were, the people of Merak and Sakteng were equally curious to see the visitors.

The guests were in the country from the 7<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> of May. On reaching Thimphu, they had a discussion and a state dinner with the Prime Minister.

Apart from Kathryn Fuller, the guest list included WWF US board members and donors.



a mask dance



Sakteng valley

national flower, the blue poppy, rhododendrons, primulas and gentiana, all of which transform the park into a garden of colors during spring time. There are also many plants with medicinal properties, such as *cordyceps*.

### People

Bordering the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, the park and its buffer zone encompass the two villages of Merak and Sakteng, each at least a day's walk from the nearest road. The 6000 people who live here are known as Brokpas, tribal people who are untouched by the furor of development and live in close proximity to nature. The Brokpas are mostly nomads who practice subsistence farming and own herds of cattle and yak. The people depend on livestock and other natural resources for their livelihoods.

### Threats

Despite it's location in the far end of the country and the minimal development, Sakteng still faces threats to its pristine biodiversity. Threats to biodiversity from the over grazing of cattle and the over exploitation of forest and non-forest resources are further heightened by the low conservation awareness of the local people.

The people of Sakteng are nomads with large herds of migratory cattle that exert considerable pressure on the natural forests. The people depend extensively on the forest for wood, which they use for cooking, space heating, and construction, and on non-forest products for food and medicine. The low level of conservation awareness among the people threatens wildlife protection for species such as the snow leopard as well medicinal plants.

### WWF in Action in Sakteng Wildlife Sanctuary

Because of Sakteng's isolation and the lack of baseline data on its wildlife and habitats, the task ahead is enormous. But WWF's almost three decades of history in Bhutan and it's close partnership with the Royal Government, local non-governmental organizations and local communities will pay off as plans are developed and programs implemented.

Through grants from the MacArthur Foundation, WWF is providing financial and technical assistance for the development of the park's conservation management plan, which will eventually transform it into a fully functioning national park. Biological surveys, park boundary demarcation, socio-economic surveys, meetings with communities are just a few of the issues to be faced. Three warden posts have already been set up at Sakteng, Merak and Joenkhar.

Many of the projects involve working with the communities to improve their livelihoods and reduce their impact on the environment. Through Integrated Conservation and Development Programs (ICDPs), WWF and the government help villagers reduce their wood consumption by providing barbed wire fencing and corrugated iron roofing (to discourage them from using wooden shingles). Improved breed of livestock are being introduced so that fewer of them can produce the same amount of milk or other product, cutting down on grazing and protecting the forests.

Sakteng is in its infancy as far as park development, but with so much to do and so little known about its wildlife, it is an exciting time for WWF, park staff and conservation partners. Hopefully, 25 years from now, Sakteng will be known as one of the world's most outstanding national parks.