

# The Monpa: Eco Cultural Conservation The Black Forest, Bhutan



Monpa Community Area

## Executive Report Sept. 2024 by Dawn Murray, PhD

The Tribal Trust Foundation, USA in Collaboration with The Tarayana Foundation,  
Bhutan & Yangphel Adventure Travel, Bhutan

Photos by Dawn Murray



Morning view from Jangbi Village looking down the mountain

**Table of Contents**

Executive Summary.....3  
 Bhutan.....6  
 Our Model.....7  
 Biogeography.....9  
 Monpa Creation Story.....11  
 Monpa Research Team.....13  
 Children’s School.....15  
 Health.....17  
 Shamanism.....20  
 First Monpa Day.....22  
 TTF and Articles about Monpa.....26  
 Conclusions.....27

Tribal Trust Foundation Representatives.....27  
**Executive Summary**

The First People of Bhutan, the Monpa, have subsisted since time immemorial in the Black Mountains in Central Bhutan practicing their cultural traditions and Bonism, speaking their language, and using plant medicine. The Monpas predate the arrival of Buddhism in Bhutan as they are the original people of Bhutan. There are three Monpa villages that are within walking distance of each other Jangbi, Wangling, and Phumzur.

Religious beliefs and practices of the Monpa people uniquely blend shamanism, Bonism and Buddhism. Monpas believe rocks, trees and mountains are domains of local deities and they show their respect by offering incense to the deities. When the government was mapping the forest resources in the Monpa areas, many sacred groves were identified for protection.

The Monpas live in diverse biomes within Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park, including broadleaf and coniferous forests. The Monpa are the original Indigenous people of Bhutan and continue to live in harmony with nature. The community is very connected to nature and each other.

A close-knit people, Monpas live in small bamboo huts or larger traditional mud homes, cooking with fire. The forest is their home and their livelihood depends on the bounty of nature. Until recent history, Monpas were hunter-gatherers. As skilled hunters who value their art, they pass on their expertise in trap setting to future generations.

Their diet has depended on locally available food items that they find in the forest. In addition, they grow maize, rice, and numerous vegetables, including pumpkin and radish. With increased access to local towns, food availability is increasing.

They have a rich culture highlighted by their unique weaving, ceramics, agriculture, food processing, songs, and dance. The Monpa have a wealth of traditional knowledge which is passed from generation to generation through verbal teachings and stories. Their lives are linked to the biodiversity in the forests around them.

There are four Monpa villages that are a community - Jangbi, Wangling, and Phumsur. Jangbi village has 24 households and 90 people. Wangling has 23 households and 90 people. Phumzur has 13 households with 50 people.

The Tribal Trust Foundation (TTF) was invited to visit the Monpa in 2014 and has been supporting their ecology and cultural preservation ever since. TTF works on the premise

of being invited, listening to the people, and supporting what the people want (Cite our chapter). Strong relationships with the Monpa and local governments have flourished. We also supported the first ever Monpa Day Festival in 2019, which was a huge success, bringing students from the USA to witness their cultural traditions and celebrate their heritage.

Much has changed for the Monpa since we started collaborating with them, including the building of a new school, a basic health unit, gaining electricity in the villages, and a new road connecting the largest nearby town to their central village.



Monpa Farmer plowing the fields with oxen



Monpa house with power lines above and water lines along the ground

## **Bhutan**

Bhutan is a remote Vajrayana or Mahayana Buddhist kingdom where age-old traditions hold strong. The Bhutanese practice a mix of the historical teachings of the Buddha and Bon animistic beliefs, based fundamentally on protecting nature and instilling a deep respect for the environment, including mountains, rivers, rocks, lakes, and Earth's creatures. The Monpa are a small Indigenous group in Bhutan, and like other Bhutanese, the Monpa, show great reverence and respect for nature in their celebrations, traditions, and beliefs.

Bhutan's total population hovers around 770,000 people. Arched by the astounding peaks of the Himalaya, Gangkhar Puensum is the highest point in Bhutan (7,600m) and the highest unclimbed mountain in the world. Bhutanese do not believe in climbing their tall peaks – they leave them undisturbed and ecologically pristine so as not to disturb Deities and the ecology. Bhutan is also referred to as Druk Yul, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon.

Bhutan is a small and proud Himalayan nation located between the two most populous countries, India and China, still having a disputed boundary with China in the north. Bhutanese are honored by their rich history and have a strong national identity. Bhutan was closed to outside visitors for most of its history and it was only in 1974 that Bhutan opened for tourism with an airport and air services available ten years later.

Progress, economic growth, and economic self-reliance is growing in Bhutan as are their sustainable farming practices. More important in Bhutan than having too much – overconsumption and overproduction – is the practice of working toward Gross National Happiness (GNH). The government and people believe in the importance of Gross National Happiness and environmental stewardship. GNH is based on the notion that material wealth alone does not provide happiness or well-being and that economic growth should not be achieved at the expense of the people or the environment. GNH promotes people and the environment – health, culture, conservation and preservation. Bhutan is the first country in the world with specific constitutional obligations to protect the environment. A requirement is that at least 60% of the nation must remain under forest cover all the time.



Monpa Woman in traditional attire

### **Our Model**

TTF researchers work within a participatory conservation model, collaborating “with not for” Indigenous communities. We bring together nonprofits, for-profits, and government organizations in Bhutan to support ecological and cultural preservation and build capacity and independence for the Monpa community. Capacity building fosters a sense of ownership and

empowerment, so that Indigenous peoples gain greater control over their own future, their growth, and development.

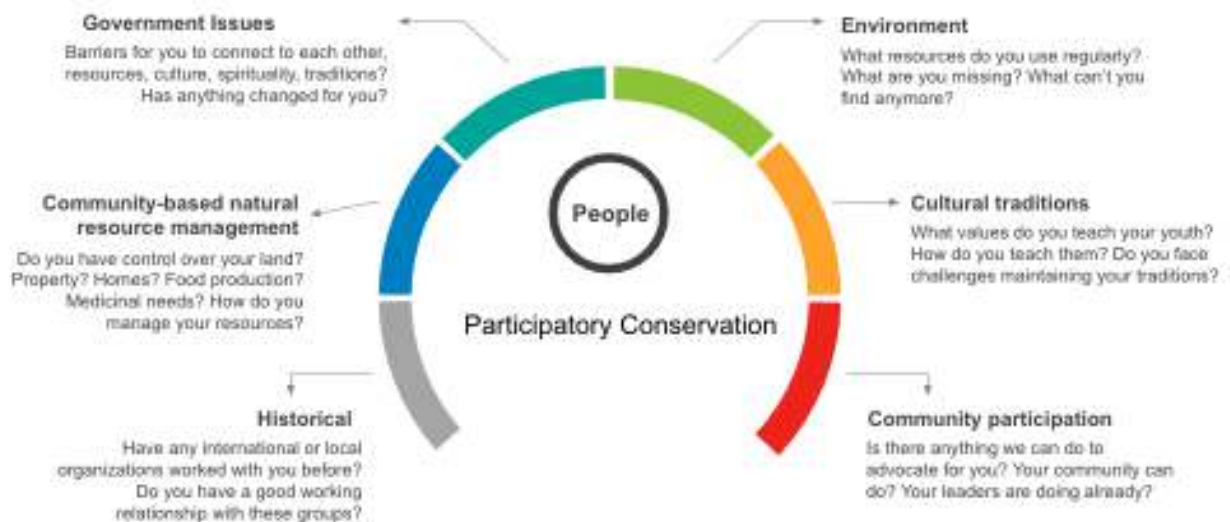
Our model supporting Indigenous cultures involves analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to their way of life with them (Murray et al, 2012).

Representatives from the Tribal Trust Foundation, Tarayana Foundation, National Biodiversity Center, National Herbarium, the Royal Government of Bhutan, Yangphel Adventure Travel, The Bhutan Tourism Board, and numerous guides and translators have come together to honor, appreciate and celebrate Monpa knowledge and cultural traditions, promoting their way of living in harmony with nature and each other.

Our model is shown below, beginning with an invitation from the people, centered on the people and their desires, where conservation is participatory with the individuals within the community and the community as a whole. The graphic also shows some of the questions we think about when preserving and protecting culture and the environment.

## Model for Monpa EcoCultural Conservation

Preserving and protecting culture and the environment





## Biogeography

Monpas have lived for thousands of years in the Black Mountains, a biodiversity hotspot, with some of the richest temperate forests in the Himalayas. They are descendants of survivors of the last ice age, when people in the Himalayas lived in the mountain caves to survive the cold. The Black Mountains are made of huge black boulders exposing an early Paleozoic succession of Tethyan sequence, forming moist, humid forests in rugged and remote terrain; indeed, the Monpas are sometimes referred to as the entrance keepers of a hidden country as the geology of the area is so impenetrable.

The Monpa live within Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park. The park covers an area of over 1,700 km<sup>2</sup> ranging from broadleaf forests at 250 meters to coniferous forests, alpine pasture and lakes, to permanent ice on the peak of Jou Dorshingla at 4,925 m.



Mountains, trees, and rice paddy fields in Monpa Village

There are many sacred and significant trees, rocks, and areas in these mountains. It is considered taboo to cut sacred trees because it is believed that if you disturb them, the people will suffer illness and misfortune. Certain trees are culturally valued and linked with legends that encourage protection of the trees, even in cultivated land, to increase soil fertility. In addition, in Bhutan, people do not climb the tallest peaks – they leave the deities in peace and do not disturb them by conquering mountain peaks.

According to the Royal Society for the Protection of Nature in Bhutan “the park constitutes the largest, richest and most intact temperate forest reserve in the entire Himalaya. More than 270 species of birds are recorded in the park, including the vulnerable black-necked crane (*Grus nigricollis*)”, the rufous-necked hornbill, the Himalayan Monal (blue pheasant) and 50% of the population of the critically endangered white-bellied heron. The mammals within the park include the Royal Bengal tiger, golden langur, musk deer, clouded leopard, golden cat, marbled cat, red panda, and gaur. When one visits the Monpa villages, the endangered golden langur can be seen in the trees above the village and the barking deer can be heard in the evening and at night calling out.



Endangered Golden Langurs in Monpa Village

## **Monpa Creation Story**

For the origin of the word Monpa, in the Tibetan scriptures, Mon was the land in the south - the land of medicinal plants. Tibetans used Mon to refer to people who knew medicinal plant medicine (Giri, pers. comm., 2019), as well as any un-Buddhist people. In addition, Monpa, 'mon' references darkness and 'pa' means people, and there have been indications of them referring to themselves as the people of darkness (Giri, pers. comm., 2019; The Tribal Trust Foundation video interview, 2014). The forest areas of their lands are very dense and the rocks include dark metamorphic formations.

Furthermore, in their origin story, as shared by Karma Ura and Seeta Giri, and interviews with the Monpa, mythically there were three lineages of the Mon race and from them came nine brothers of sun with incredible heat to burn everything. Only a few survived a huge rainstorm that came in the hollow of a tree, one flew away and then there was one survivor. He planted land and saw a plot that was being burned for use. It was a mystery who was burning the land and sowing the seeds so he hid and watched many fairies come down and work the soil. He caught one whose wings were trapped on a tree, removed her wings, hid them and married her.

They had two children and years later, when the woman found her wings, she flew away to heaven. The father went looking for her but did not survive. The children were left with a hunting dog and met with three relatives and the Monpa are the descendants of God's family.

There are varied and complex versions from books and interviews with the Monpa, but that is a brief summary of their commonly told origin story.



Creation story and origin graphic at Monpa Day



Monpa woman carrying hay to her livestock

### **Monpa Research Team**

TTF supports the Monpa in carrying out their priority projects and in 2023 provided funding, through a grant from Serving our Spirits, to establish the Research Project of Indigenous Monpa Culture and Tradition. The Monpa decided on their own research team members, their jobs, logo, and priorities. Below is their logo with the description in their words.



Some members of the Research Team

#### Logo Description

1. The mountain symbolizes a combination of protection, spirituality, and continuity of belief. It represents the *Monpas'* deep connection to their ancestral practices and their reverence for local deities, (*Lhachen Durshing*) prior to the spread of Buddhism by Buddha.
2. The human pictorial elements under and around the local deity (*Lhachen Durshing*) represent the existence of the historical and cultural roots of the *Monpas* community.
3. The golden rosary held by an individual human symbolizes the active presence of the indigenous cultures and traditions and its original *Monpas* from an early era of the universe.
4. With the advancement of globalization and modernization, many indigenous cultures around the world are indeed facing the risk of extinction or assimilation into more dominant cultures. For that, the project "*Golden Mirror of Monpa Culture and Tradition*" will lead an initiative to promote and preserve the cultural heritage and traditions of the *Monpa* community which is symbolized by the mirror.

Monpa Elders are prioritizing indigenous language preservation. UNESCO International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 recognizes, “Languages are one of the most significant emblems of human diversity, revealing how we can perceive, relate to, and understand the world differently. Languages are vehicles of our cultures, collective memory, and values. They are an essential component of our identities.”

The Monpas are translating their oral language into Dzongkha and English and creating a dictionary. Their language will be taught in the classroom of the local school.

TTF is supporting a grassroots sustainable cultural preservation initiative to document and revive the Monpa culture by teaching their youth about the Monpa lineage, religious activities, traditional foods, crafts and dress using nettle cloth, songs, ceremonies, and medicine. Forty years ago, the Monpa wore paggay, nettle plant fiber cloth they would weave. Now Monpa wear the national dress of the gho and kira, worn by all communities in Bhutan but have instigated the revival of the paggay with funding from TTF and now have many beautiful woven outfits they wear when they perform in festivals.

Monpa Elders, Shamans, and the Monpa Lama contributed their indigenous perspective on how to transform education in their community.

### **Children’s School**

The school in Jangbi is kindergarten to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Early Care Center Development has 7 students, pre primary has 8 students, class one has 5 students, class two, three and four have no students, class five has 11 students, class six has 7 students. There are usually 5-6 teachers. The school year runs from Feb. 15 to Dec. 18. If a student lives too far away to walk each day, there are beds available for them to sleep at school during the week. School days are Monday to Friday and a ½ day on Saturday. Students learn English, Math, Dzongkha (the National Language of Bhutan), Social Studies, and other topics the teachers have interest or expertise in. TTF is working on a program to bring students from the USA to the Monpa village to help the teachers in the classroom.



TTF Representatives meeting with the school principal at the school



## Health

As Monpas dwell in remote areas within the high Himalayan forests, they developed a unique and expansive knowledge of medicinal plants over thousands of years.



Ap Tawla, Medicinal healer

Ap Tawla, their respected elder healer, is about 80 years old and is the Monpa healer. Ap Tawla is a man to be admired not just for his tremendous healing ability and medicinal plant knowledge, but also for his generosity of spirit. He passionately shares his wisdom and walks from village to village healing people and animals. On almost every visit, he is helping a cow who has hurt their leg, ankle or foot. People line up for his assistance. Ap Tawla's knowledge is a zenith of information shared over thousands of years by Monpa traditional hunter and gatherers, who found roots and shoots in the forest. This knowledge kept them alive and kept their culture alive.

Ap Tawla has risked his life for others and is committed to passing on his skills to the next generation. At Ap Tawla's request, we interviewed and filmed him both in Monpaland and in the capital of Bhutan, Thimphu, at the Royal Biodiversity Center, where students of plant medicines could learn from him.

The attention he received from collaborating with TTF inspired several young people to become his apprentices and follow in his footsteps. He now has apprentices learning from him and the Research Team organizes lessons with him open to the community. Providing local solutions to health issues builds community resilience. Once, he pointed to his knees and proclaimed 'I am dead up to here. I want people to know what I know and learn from me about the plants the Monpa use to heal.'

Ap Tawla started to treat broken limbs of animals and worked on mastering that before he started healing people in his village. A shaman, Bhura, was a father figure to him, and taught Ap Tawla how to cure snake bites. It was believed that shaman Bhura would cast a spell on the snake using black magic. Ap Tawla, being a pure Buddhist and a religious man, refused to learn about black magic and spells. He focused on how to safely sucking toxins from the wound using a small round chili (dorlokhorsani) without any associated rituals. He would also similarly treat blood impurities. In addition, Ap Tawla treats patients using medicinal plants and massage therapy. He also heals mushroom poisoning and animal/livestock injuries.

Ap Tawla learned from the previous local healer, Ap Upla. He studies the structure of nerves and bones in the legs, arms and eventually the entire bodies of humans and animals. His specialty became treating broken limbs. Ap Tawla learned about healing broken hands, fingers and the more complex neck vertebra from a traditional medical doctor, Kunzang Sangay. Dr. Sangay taught him about the medicinal plant taping which is used to reduce pain when treating broken limbs and severe injuries. Ap Tawla was also taught by the traditional medical doctors Phuntsho Wangdi and Singye Dorji, students of Dr. Singye Phuntsho of Kharshong Village. And later in Ghaga Village, a

doctor named Tshewang taught him about approximately 100 species of medicinal plants and their individual uses.

Ap Tawla began collecting plants and making medicines, perfecting the solutions. Years and years of trial and error determined which parts of the plant could be used to treat an ailment, when to harvest the plant, how to prepare the medicine and treat the patient, the dose, and so much more – this information represents years of scientific discovery, memory, and verbal sharing. The Monpas still depend on traditional medicinal plants to treat illnesses and injuries.

When we visit the Monpa, everyone, including the Bhutanese guides, lines up for a healing with Ap Tawla.



Kezang, a guide, seeking help from Ap Tawla for his wrist pain

When sick, most Monpa consult a shaman and seek Ap Tawla's expertise. The two types of traditional healing systems in the villages – healing with rituals and healings without rituals – are most often combined. Ritual practices include readings from religious books, praying for good health, food or drink. The practices are often supported by shamans or lamas communicating prayers. Healing practices without rituals include the use of medicinal plants.

Three of the most often used plants in healings are taap sing, tsatoimen and lhasa methoseng. All medicinal plants are foraged from the wild. Changes in the plant's distributions and abundances are apparent, presumably due to climate change and development.

In 2002, a Basic Health Unit was established in Jangbi that extends services to the Monpa villages. The Basic Health Unit offers medical assistance but is a few hours walk from Monpa households of Wangling and Phumzur and many people start with seeking help first from shamans and then from Ap'Tawla and his students who work with the local plant medicine.

## **Shamanism**

The Monpa communities are concerned that their shamanic healing tradition is at risk due to the integration into the dominant Bhutanese Buddhist culture. The Monpa have consistently requested support for documenting shamanic ceremonies and for the transfer of indigenous knowledge and tradition in preparing for them. We have supported the documentation of their shamanic culture through photography and film. The next documentation in January 2025 will help revive a fading Shilaidung ceremony. This threatened ceremony unites the three Monpa villages, of Jangbi, Phumzar, and Wangling, by bringing them together for three days of prayer and ritual. In the past, Shilaidung was celebrated in a grand fashion in the villages. Nowadays, Shilaidung has lost its former splendor, with each village organizing its own ceremony, leading to diminished unity among the communities. During Shilaidung, there is a temporary halt for foraging from the forest for three days, commencing from the bridge that marks the boundary between the outside world and the Monpa community.



Female Monpa Shaman in ceremony



Male Shaman in the Monpa Village in a ceremony

## First Monpa Day Celebration

The First Monpa Day Festival was Dec. 10, 2019 and TTF had 9 representatives in attendance. In the main tent sat the head of the cup (neighborhood), the superintendent of the Trongsa Police, the head monk of Trongsa, the Deputy Governor Karma Bhandup, Gyem Dorji (member of Parliament), and the joint managing director of the nearby hydropower plant. There were many other dignitaries there as well including the head of the Trongsa Museum.

The festivities lasted for several hours. Fourteen Monpa men and women danced and sang in the nettle cloth full kiras and ghos. A group of the young children from the local school danced as well. A teacher from the school spoke about a writing competition to have the children write about their aspirations and the teacher announced the winners from 4th, 5th and 6th grade, who came up to the podium for a wrapped gift and a photo together. The Monpa then did another dance and song about planting crops and sowing seeds.

We then all walked to a grouping of houses for several demonstrations. The first was a woman sitting cross legged in front of two large rocks that fit perfectly together creating a flat surface where grains could be put in a hole at the top and spun with a small piece of wood in her hand. The husks would come out the sides and in between the rocks the fine flour would gather. The next woman had a metal stick with etched lines on it and a weight, showing how she weighed her butter or cheese, which was wrapped beautifully in banana leaves. The back-strap loom was set up with nettle cloth. There was a woman making ara and a woman making an earthen clay pot.



Successful activities at Monpa Day

Back at the tents, the Governor received a healing with Ap Tawla. In the afternoon there were more activities – plowing with ox demonstration, a woman sitting on a woven matt, two people with long poles taking turns to crush grain in a tall wooden stump, then a hunting demonstrating with two men setting up a bow and arrow hidden in bushes to ambush prey was triggered and shot at a tree. Then we visited the Monpa Museum they are starting to get artifacts for.

It was incredibly important for us to be there to witness their culture and way of living. By showing up we honored them and their ways. It was a beautiful day and they were so thankful we were there. The governor invited the Monpa to come to the Trongsa National Day celebration and said he would send a car to pick them up so they could dance and sing there in their nettle cloth attire. They had never received an invitation to participate in that celebration before.



Sign in the village for the Monpa Festival Celebration



Community celebrating Monpa Day, December 2019



Some of the International Guests and local Government Officials at the first Monpa Day Festival, Dec. 2019





Dancing and singing in Monpa village

## TTF and Published Articles

TTF has been partnering with and supporting the Monpa Cultural preservation initiatives and education scholarships for 10 years. We support projects that the Monpa would like to see and request. The Monpa are leading their preservation projects and have a Research Team in place made up of community members.

It's critical to include the positive impact TTF and collaborators have had by offering annual trips. Trips are reported as projects because each one gathers more information we use to support and collaborate with the Monpa. We have raised money and awareness, advocacy, and appreciation for the Monpa communities for preserving their culture. By bringing donors, students and key community engagement partners to meet the Indigenous people, such as government officials (annual VIP meetings, including high officials and the Government of Trongsa (the local area), attending the opening of Parliament 2023, and the royal family-private meeting with the Queen Mother (Tarayana Foundation) at her palace 2022, all have helped raise the profile of the indigenous people. Moreover, the Monpa are now invited to dance and participate in festivals around the country, including at Bhutan's National Day in December 2023. This was the first time the Monpa had been invited to participate and for most, their first trip to the capital city. In addition, we lead documentary and Donor trips 2014-2019, (COVID break) 2023 and 2024 to video and interview the Monpa and specifically to raise funds for their projects. TTF shows commitment to the mission in these projects - supporting preservation of arts and culture, including language documentation, collaborating with Indigenous communities. We are not preserving culture, we are providing support to Indigenous groups who requested it and they decide on their own projects. We support education in two ways: we strive to educate the public about Indigenous culture and knowledge and provide Indigenous individuals with educational opportunities. The trips are educational with a syllabus and assignments where students tap into the wisdom of Indigenous ways of life and learn from it—recognizing we are apart of everything and there is a Sacred Obligation to protect people, culture, and all ways of being.

Please reference content in the two articles about the partnership and collaboration with the Monpa.

<https://tribaltrustfoundation.org/monpas-grapple-with-modernisation-while-safeguarding-cultural-legacy/>

Kuensel Article Journey to Jangbi: Into Monpa village May 7th, 2024 [Link](#)

Kuensel Article Monpas grapple with modernisation while safeguarding cultural legacy

May 15th, 2024 [Link](#)

Kuensel Article Monpa healer seeks replacement May 18th, 2024 [Link](#)

Kuensel Article on Monpa Day Preserving the Monpa tradition  
December 14th, 2019 [Link](#)



View from Phumzur down the mountain

## Conclusions

The world has much to learn from this Indigenous culture – their ancient traditions, wisdom, and connections to nature and each other.

The Monpas hold tremendous knowledge about their ecosystem and natural resources. They are an incredibly resilient and sustainable group, having vast generational knowledge on how to live, heal themselves, and coexist in mountainous terrain.

TTF and the Monpa community are creating more collaborations and working on building a heritage museum on their land, recording their language, starting a pilot project to domesticate herbs, and reviving the cultural tradition of weaving nettle cloth.

Support for their way of life is imperative now, before it is too late. The Monpa communities work together with strength and respect and they are planning for their future and sustainability.

### **Tribal Trust Representatives**

Dawn Murray, Barbara Savage, Holly Sherwin, Anabel Ford, Kelly Burke, Barry Shaffer and many others have visited and supported Monpa villages.

Field surveys have been conducted in the forests around Jangbi, Wangling, and Phumzur inhabited by the Monpa by staff of the Tarayana Foundation and the National Biodiversity Center in 2006 and 2007. They collected specimens for the national herbarium and visited locations in different months (April, July, September, and December) to capture seasonal variations in plant phenology. The National Biodiversity Center was actively involved in the field surveys and documented the plant species, the Indigenous knowledge and collected sample species for the National Herbarium.

Increasing efforts to reduce poverty and contribute to socio-economic development in these remote communities' results in quickly changing their way of life. With development comes diminished cultural traditions and threats to living in harmony with nature, making documenting traditions and culture even more imperative.



TTF group being welcomed to Phumzur for a visit

## References

Murray, Dawn, Savage, Barbara & Kvistad, Gail (2012) Tulum Mexico: A case study modeling collaboration for access to clean water for indigenous peoples. In Freeland, Gregory & Gordon, Fredrick (Eds.) International Environmental Justice: Competing Claims and Perspectives. (1st ed. pp. 54-69) ILM Publications.