

Finding Shangri-La

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Specialthang at Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan

It was already two months into my fieldwork season. Specialthang was to be my next research site (“*thang*” in Bhutanese refers to a flat land). If you know anything about Bhutan, “*thangs*” are hard to come by, and this one is considered the most special of them all! Until then, I had only heard or read about this place. Tucked away in the heart of the Royal Manas National Park in subtropical Bhutan, our site is said to be a place where tigers and elephants roam.

Excited as I was to visit the place, this one had to wait for now. We got a call from a local partner advising me to defer my visit. A downpour upstream had rendered the stream practically impassable. It was too risky! Reassured by my supervisor, I headed back to the capital where I could spend some time sorting through and processing my samples - a welcome respite after what had been many weeks of intense work in the field.

Three weeks later, news came that the river level has dropped. With my two colleagues, I moved to Manas, involving a 12+ hours’ drive (including an overnight at *Tingtibi*) and crossing a river on a boat. We were greeted by park officials who had been expecting us. Next up in the agenda was to make plan for our fieldwork. They said we would be more efficient if we camped at the site which we were more than happy to oblige. I soon discover that distance here is measured in terms of “drink breaks” one takes along the way, and the duration of your stay based on number of meals one is supposed to carry. I learn that two handfuls of rice is an adult-sized meal portion. I trust their judgement and we agree on the number of sites we were going to cover and how long it might take to complete our work.

Walking amidst the thick subtropical jungle, and exactly three “drink breaks” later (each roughly an hour apart), we reach out site a vast grassland appearing seemingly in the middle of nowhere. We push through the tall grasses and soon find the watchtower, which was to be our camp. We took the top floor; it is open and cooler up there. From this vantage point, I could finally appreciate the grandeur of this place. This is probably one of the biggest subtropical grasslands in Bhutan, with lush green grasses taller than humans. More than half a century ago, the area of Manas was gazetted as a game sanctuary, the first protected area in Bhutan. It was upgraded to a National Park more than thirty years ago, considered by many as the conservation heartland of Bhutan. And Specialthang was its crown jewel.

But it has not been immune to the wave of change sweeping across the world: that of encroachment of woody plants in open grasslands. Similar stories echo across the mountains of Bhutan. Each year, the park officials at Manas set aside huge resources and time to manage and conserve this area. They told me that such measures seldom provided permanent solution. Then a new year dawns and the cycle repeats. Much like the pygmy hogs and the rhinos that once roamed in these places, we risk losing places like Specialthang from our southern frontiers. My project seeks to understand why this is happening and what we can do to help.

Combining satellite imagery with local knowledge, we could locate sites that would fit our study. Work usually started early in the morning and would often stretch till late in the evening. Reaching to the sites here involved navigating through the thick grasses. Then we start the gruesome process of trying to lay our plots in the thick vegetation, painfully lamenting the easy times of doing the same in the alpines a month ago. The otherwise quiet place suddenly buzzed with activities: scientific names shouted from one side, someone measuring height on the other, and occasionally someone frantically looking for a sharpie that was clipped behind their ear all along. Samples of leaves, wood and soil were collected and carefully stored to be carried to the UK for further analysis. The occasional wind and drizzle brought temporary relief from the heat.

At night, we slept underneath the open sky, the moon shining on the grasses below. I think of the journey I have made to get here (literally and metaphorically). For a place that I always wanted to visit, I had to travel half the world away across to the UK and back to get here. I thought of all the people that I have met along the way, and how their kindness continues to guide me. It reminded me how interconnected we all are and reinforced the importance of collaboration. Eight meals later, we finished our work and made our way back to the park. Our journey back was harder than I remembered, probably due to the extra weight from the samples we had collected.

Dehydrated and exhausted, my sights were already set on the next site in Phibsoo, the last one for the year. They say it is the best-kept secret in Bhutan. Here, elephants not only roam the forest but sometimes help tow your vehicle. But that's a story for another time.