

Restore Bhutan: A National Movement for Ecological Rehabilitation, Climate Resilience, and Sustainable Development

BACKGROUND

Bhutan has long been internationally recognized for its environmental stewardship, maintaining over 69 percent forest cover and constitutionally mandating a minimum of 60 percent forest cover at all times. Despite this strong conservation record, the country is increasingly exposed to intensifying climate variability and socio-economic transitions that are reshaping its environmental governance landscape.

Shifting rainfall patterns and seasonal irregularities are affecting hydrological systems, contributing to dry-season water shortages in urban centers such as Thimphu and Paro. More erratic monsoon rainfall has increased flood risks and infrastructure vulnerability. Bhutan's steep mountainous terrain further amplifies exposure to landslides, particularly under extreme precipitation events.

Rapid urbanization has intensified localized heat accumulation and reduced permeable land surfaces, increasing climate stress in growing towns. At the same time, rural-urban migration has led to the abandonment of agricultural land, declining soil productivity, and weakening rural economies.

These interlinked pressures signal the need for a transition from traditional conservation maintenance toward proactive, climate-responsive ecological restoration.

In response, the Royal Government of Bhutan launched the Restore Bhutan initiative, targeting the restoration of 50,000 hectares of degraded forests, scrublands, fallow farmlands, and vulnerable landscapes over the next decade. The initiative represents a strategic shift from passive protection toward active ecological rehabilitation as a pillar of climate resilience and sustainable development.

Key Messages

1. Restore Bhutan strengthens national climate resilience by addressing floods, landslides, water stress, and rising heat through large-scale ecological restoration.
2. The initiative integrates forest restoration, agricultural regeneration, and urban greening into a coordinated landscape framework that supports ecosystem stability and green livelihoods.
3. Through blended finance, environmental trust mechanisms, and performance-based climate outcomes, Restore Bhutan reinforces Bhutan's carbon-neutral commitment and long-term sustainability.



Figure 1: Land restoration in Bhutan
Source: onetreeplanted.org, 2024

COUNTRY TREND HIGHLIGHT

Studies by Conservation International show approximately 800 hectares already restored through tree planting; however, the national need is far greater. The Restore Bhutan initiative responds to this urgency through a coordinated and evidence-based restoration roadmap launched on 28 November 2025 by Her Royal Highness Princess Chimi Yangzom Wangchuck, setting the stage for targeted interventions across diverse landscapes.

Restore Bhutan Initiative Pathway

1. Forest Restoration (28,000 hectares)

This component targets degraded, fire-impacted, and low-tree-cover forests. Restoration efforts focus on watershed stabilization, biodiversity recovery, wildfire risk reduction, and enhanced carbon sequestration. Strengthening ecological integrity contributes directly to Bhutan's constitutional forest mandate and carbon-neutral pledge.

2. Regeneration of Fallow and Abandoned Farmlands (21,000 hectares)

Agricultural land abandonment due to rural-urban migration has reduced food production and weakened local economies. Through agroforestry systems, regenerative agriculture, and soil rehabilitation, Restore Bhutan aims to restore productivity, enhance soil carbon storage, and diversify rural income streams.

3. Urban and Peri-Urban Restoration (1,000 hectares)

Urban greening initiatives including tree planting, ecological landscaping, and nature-based infrastructure address rising heat stress and storm water management challenges. These interventions improve urban livability while reducing disaster risks.

Collectively, these pathways move beyond isolated tree-planting campaigns toward a coordinated, science-based restoration framework that integrates ecological recovery with socio-economic resilience.

Climate Mitigation and Economic Benefits

The Bhutan Restore Initiative is projected to deliver substantial climate benefits, including the removal of 1.96 million tons of CO₂ equivalent, valued at more than USD 100 million. To finance the initiative, Bhutan aims to mobilize USD 50 million in blended finance by integrating government commitments with private, international, and philanthropic investments. A national workshop has already kick-started the design of an innovative financing mechanism to sustain the restoration agenda.

Building a Strong Partnerships and Governance through the Bhutan Restore Initiative

The partnership draws strength from the complementary roles of the four collaborating institutions. The Royal Government of Bhutan provides national leadership, policy alignment, and institutional coordination. Conservation International (CI) contributes scientific expertise, global best practices, and technical advisory support. The Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation one of the world's earliest and most successful environmental trust funds will play a central role in financing and sustainability planning. The Bhutan Ecological Society (BES) will lead community engagement, research, and capacity-building efforts to ensure restoration actions are grounded in local realities. Together, these institutions form a robust governance mechanism capable of delivering nationwide restoration.

Figure 2: Tree plantation on Social Forestry Day, 2025
Source: WWF-Bhutan



Community-Centered and Inclusive Implementation

Community participation lies at the heart of Restore Bhutan. Local consultations have shaped restoration priorities, ensuring interventions respond to regional needs and cultural contexts. The program will create green jobs in nursery management, agroforestry, site restoration, and community forestry, offering new opportunities for youth, women's groups, and rural households. It will also secure critical ecosystem services such as water supply, pollination, soil stability, and disaster risk reduction.

Part of a Regional Environmental Movement

Restore Bhutan is embedded within the Mountains to Mangroves (M2M) initiative, a regional effort across Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh to plant one billion trees and restore one million hectares in the Eastern Himalayas. Bhutan's leadership in this collaboration elevates its global profile, strengthens science-policy networks, and expands access to innovative financing.

A Pathway toward National Resilience and Global Leadership

Ultimately, Restore Bhutan reinforces the nation's constitutional mandate to maintain forest cover, its carbon-neutral pledge, and its development philosophy grounded in Gross National Happiness. By combining science, community action, and innovative financing, Bhutan is positioning itself as a global model for sustainability and climate resilience.

Over the next decade, Restore Bhutan will help heal degraded ecosystems, enhance water and food security, create green economic opportunities, and strengthen the ecological foundation upon which Bhutan's long-term prosperity depends. It marks a transition from planning to impactful, on-the-ground restoration demonstrating how a small nation with strong environmental values can lead globally in restoration, climate action, and nature-based solutions.



Figure 3: illustration on how the current condition in Bhutan and how Restore Bhutan Initiative will be implemented
Source: Generating AI

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

As Restore Bhutan transitions from program design to long-term implementation, the next phase requires deeper institutional consolidation, stronger community anchoring, and durable financing mechanisms. Moving from coordinated intervention to sustained national resilience will depend on reinforcing governance coherence, inclusive participation, and performance-based accountability.

The table below outlines the key challenges that may affect this transition, alongside strategic opportunities to strengthen partnerships, institutionalize long-term financing, and position Restore Bhutan as both a national resilience platform and a model for global environmental leadership.

Challenges	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of institutional fragmentation as restoration scales nationwide.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consolidate a multi-layered governance framework integrating national leadership, scientific advisory support, environmental trust fund financing, and community-based implementation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community engagement may weaken without structured inclusion and long-term incentives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Institutionalize community-centered approaches, generating green jobs and embedding restoration in local socio-economic systems.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long-term restoration outcomes depend on sustained and predictable financing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen carbon accounting, monitoring systems, and performance-linked financing to ensure transparency and financial continuity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintaining climate credibility requires measurable and accountable outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Link restoration performance to Bhutan's carbon-neutral pledge, constitutional forest mandate, and Gross National Happiness framework.

CONCLUSION

Restore Bhutan demonstrates how ecological rehabilitation can serve as a foundation for climate resilience, water security, and sustainable livelihoods.

More than a restoration program, Restore Bhutan represents a national movement linking governance, community participation, and long-term financing into a coherent resilience strategy. Its success will depend on sustained coordination, accountability, and inclusive implementation, ensuring that ecological restoration continues to strengthen both environmental stability and national development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

AFoCO would like to extend its sincere appreciation to Keizang Choden, AFoCO Fellowship Official from Bhutan (2025), and Teis Nuraini, AFoCO Fellowship Official from Indonesia (2026) for their dedication and hard work in developing the Bhutan Country Forestry Trend publication. AFoCO recognizes their significant contributions in advancing evidence-based knowledge sharing and reinforcing regional cooperation across member countries



Asian Forest Cooperation Organization

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