

# POWER OF THE RIVER DISCUSSION STARTERS

Thank you for watching *Power of the River: Expedition to the Heart of Water in Bhutan!* This acclaimed independent documentary is the result of years of research, creative collaboration by an international team, a cast of characters digging deep to bring their real selves to camera, and all the uncertainties that accompany an expedition into the unknown. The film presents numerous intriguing subjects for lively discussions, topics for class assignments, and opportunities for further exploration. Rewatch the film anytime ([poweroftherivermovie.com](http://poweroftherivermovie.com)) and email the film's writer/director/producer Greg I. Hamilton ([greg@poweroftherivermovie.com](mailto:greg@poweroftherivermovie.com)) with feedback or questions. Jump in!

## DISCUSSION STARTERS - WILDLIFE CONSERVATION & ECOTOURISM

1. The film starts with Dasho Benji saying: "When you go in the forest and you see a stag, or a real wild animal, he has a certain pride, a certain feeling, you know? And you see that same animal caged in a zoo: different animal!"
  - a. Many of the stories we're told about human history have been about conquering or taming nature. What are the advantages to preserving wildness?
  - b. How are zoo animals or domestic pets different than animals in the wild?
2. Misty says: "A live fish is worth more than a dead fish." What do you think he means? Do you agree?
3. Dave McCoy asks: "If a species is considered endangered, should you be pursuing it at all? It falls into that category of loving things to death. You have to strike a balance between bringing attention to a fish, or anything for that matter, just enough to get people to really care about it and not completely overwhelm it. It's really hard."
  - a. What are the upsides of bringing attention to an endangered species like the golden mahseer fish in Bhutan?
  - b. What are the risks?
  - c. How can anglers, tour guides, fish and wildlife managers, and filmmakers make sure they aren't "loving things to death"?
4. On a similar theme, Bryant Dunn expresses a fondness for traveling to "places that have never been brochured." He adds that he was compelled to show the world the Drangme River in hopes that: "Maybe there will be more attention given to saving than to damming. And maybe that balance, that middle ground will be reached."
  - a. What balance do you think he's referring to? Do you think it's achievable in Bhutan?
  - b. Are there risks to revealing the world's most pristine, undiscovered places?
  - c. When does tourism harm a place or its people?
  - d. Can you think of examples where tourism has helped to protect or preserve a place?



5. Early in the film Dave expresses sadness about the state of the planet being passed on to his daughter's generation. By the end of the film he shows a spey rod he brought along that will be a gift for his daughter, saying: "It means that she'll remember that I did everything I could to explore this incredible planet we live on—and inspire her to go do the same in her life."
- a. What shifted Dave's perspective as a self-proclaimed "realist" to one with hope for the future?
- b. What is important in your life and how can you pass it on to future generations?
6. At the end of the film, Misty implores the all-Bhutanese river crew to be role models of stewardship for this river. The epilogue notes that the kingdom just launched new legislation allowing conservation-minded angling, led by Bhutanese guides. The first guide training completed in November of 2022.
- a. Why do you think the new legislation requires a Bhutanese guide for all visiting anglers?
- b. What threats might an increase in tourism bring to Bhutan?
- c. Do you think tourism—with all its related industries and forms of revenue—could match the economic potentials of a hydropower dam?
- d. Are there other ways to measure the value of tourism beyond revenue generated?



### DISCUSSION STARTERS - DAMS, HYDROPOWER, & THE ECONOMY

7. Karma "Good Karma" Tshering says that the main source of income in Bhutan is hydropower. Titles in the film declare: "In India, 300 million people are without electricity. India has quadrupled quotas to buy hydropower from Bhutan. These quotas would require damming every last river in Bhutan."
- a. What benefits might dams offer the people of Bhutan?
- b. What are some of the risks of building and operating dams?
- c. Are there other ways to fulfill India's electricity needs?
- d. Does an undammed river provide benefits to people?
8. Bryant mentions that Bhutan is modernizing and that building a dam on every river could fulfill demand for electricity and generate revenue. He asks Dasho Benji if that's a good idea and gets a strong answer: "No."
- a. What are some of Benji's reasons for leaving at least one river undammed?
- b. When countries face these decisions, do you think all voices are heard? Who ultimately makes such decisions?
- c. How do you estimate the value of a river?
9. Bhutan is famous for coining the concept of GNH, gross national happiness. A focus on tenets that contribute to human happiness is built into Bhutan's constitution and has inspired the United Nations to adopt similar policies. In a yak herder's tent by a smoky fire Karma explains that GNH might be viewed differently by these herders than by people from cities who have comforts of electricity, hot showers, and transportation.
- a. How might shifting focus from economic output (GDP, gross domestic product) to the happiness of citizens change a country? What new mindsets emerge?



- b. Bhutan's average income (GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity) is less than 16% of that in the U.S. (approximately \$10,000 per year in Bhutan versus almost \$60,000 in the U.S., according to [worldometer](http://worldometer.com)). How might income levels affect happiness?

### DISCUSSION STARTERS - CULTURE, COSMOLOGY, & LOVED ONES

10. The belief systems in Bhutan infuse nature with a lively array of spiritual presences. Authors have written that facts of Bhutan's history are hard to pin down since they are intertwined with fantastical mythology. Lead safety kayaker Chencho Drukpa says: "Being a Bhutanese people, we always respect the river, since it's one of the goddesses, as we believe." Karma mentions a number of deities to which the crew will make offerings for the safety of their expedition.



- a. Within travel and exploration, how are elements of mystery and faith part of the experience?  
b. Can beliefs be more powerful and compelling than scientific or historical facts?

11. Misty Dhillon's wife Aikta shares one of her favorite quotes: "If you're coming here to save me, you're wasting your time. If you're coming here because your liberation is tied to mine, then let us work together." In a discussion after a screening, Aikta shared that the quote is from an Aboriginal elder in Australia talking to the missionaries who came there to convert them.



- a. How might other countries' "liberation" (their ability to survive and thrive) be tied to that of the small, remote kingdom of Bhutan?  
b. How does the film address the idea of outsiders working with locals (versus trying to "save" them)? Did you see evidence of people working together toward a common goal?

12. When asked about the risks of the expedition (and the possibility that they might not all make it home alive), Misty and Dave bicker. Misty, who has said he believes in the power of manifesting one's dreams, says: "The universe needs us. And we're going to be around for a while." Dave disagrees, saying: "I don't know that we're necessarily always in control of our destinies."



- a. How much control do you feel you have over circumstances in your life?  
b. Despite their different beliefs and given the risks, both Dave and Misty continue with the trip. Do your beliefs affect how much risk you're willing to take?

13. We meet the significant others and families of several characters: Karma's wife Dema and their two boys; Misty's wife Aikta; Dave's wife Natalie and their daughter. We also hear from Bryant who talks about returning to this river with his sons and daughters and from Pem Tsering, the chef, who won't tell his wife and kids how scary the raft flip was for him.



- a. How do the family members of each character feel about them going on this trip?  
b. When you travel away from family, in what ways do you bring them with you?

## DISCUSSION STARTERS - THE CRAFT OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING

14. Some of the film's most intimate moments, with Karma and his family, were filmed by Paco Tshering, a Bhutanese cameraman, with no other outsiders involved. Otherwise the crew was just one to four people total, filming "run-and-gun" style with minimal gear.
- How does the presence of a film crew, whether large or small, locals or outsiders, affect the characters they are filming?
  - Is it easy for you to feel natural—like your true self—when being filmed or interviewed?
  - What techniques can keep subjects at ease and give viewers a glimpse into authentic real-life moments?
15. *Power of the River* invited its composer Stefan Smulovitz to join the expedition. The original score features Buddhist monks and nuns chanting, Bhutanese instruments, and wild sounds from the environment.
- What did you notice about the music and sounds?
  - How does music contribute to the experience of a place?
16. In film, television, and performance there's a convention of the "fourth wall," an imaginary one-way barrier through which audiences view the story. "Breaking the fourth wall" (when characters acknowledge the presence of the audience) happens several times in *Power of the River*, starting with the first scene where Karma's son refuses more tea and Karma looks to the camera, saying: "You must do this when you're in a movie."
- What are the advantages of maintaining the fourth wall?
  - How does breaking the fourth wall change an audience's interaction with—or comprehension of—a story?
- ~~17. Karma shares that a year prior to filming he did not know how to swim. He says: "Bhutanese kids, we are not advised to go to the river because our parents say you'll get carried away by the river current."~~
- ~~If you grew up familiar with river recreation, how might your views of rafting and kayaking differ from those of someone like Karma who was cautioned to stay away from the river?~~
- ~~18. Bhutan is a Buddhist country. A tenet of Buddhism is to do no harm (or as little harm as possible) to animals. At the time of the expedition, the country's religious leaders were weighing the ethics of allowing the practice of fishing (special permission from the government was required for the film's expedition). Today fishing tourism is allowed, but with strict rules on employing a Bhutanese guide and practicing catch and release techniques, as demonstrated in the film.~~
- ~~How might such policymaking be different in a country like Bhutan—with its official religion of Buddhism—than in a country where church and state are meant to be separate?~~