

Spring 2012

Education Structures for Ecotourism: A Case Study on Shangri-La

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**EDUCATION STRUCTURES FOR ECOTOURISM:
A CASE STUDY ON SHANGRI-LA**

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SIT: STUDY ABROAD

CHINA: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND ETHNIC MINORITIES, KUNMING

SPRING 2012

Preface

Ecotourism in Shangri-La is at a critical moment of opportunity and challenge which will shape its future. This study began with three goals: 1) to define the attributes of, and analyze the definition of ecotourism; 2) to gain a sense of the role education and training programs play in the area; 3) to see what needs improvement in the ecotourism industry's future.

During my field work in Shangri-La, I attempted to piece together a snap shot of local challenges and possibilities. In addition to many conversations, I carried out ten formal interviews lasting about one hour each with representatives from various organizations. These interviews were structured but also open-ended conversations as I began to map out emerging themes and issues. Information was also gathered from various site visits and participant observations made while sitting in on different training courses. It must be stated that I am not trying to develop publishable results; such work would require formal approval, more rigorous design and deeper understanding of the local context. This being said, I have tried to concretize my collective findings and to gain a sense of next steps. Along the way I have learned a great deal in what is admittedly a very short time. The following ideas represent a mere start at my understanding of ecotourism in Shangri-La.

Acknowledgments

Throughout the work on this study I was a student of Professor Lu Yuan through The School for International Training. Among the many people I would like to thank, Lu Laoshi is perhaps chief among them. Her role was not only that of a mere professor, but that of a system of support to my fellow classmates and me, as we collectively journeyed through Yunnan Province during the spring of 2012. Most significantly, I would like to thank Lu Yuan for patiently tolerating my constant change of ISP plans, as they ranged from Xishuangbanna to Shaxi and finally to Shangri-La. I can only hope that the field work conducted in my final site decision will make her proud, and is reflective of the methods of study I learned from Lu Yuan's exceptional study abroad program.

Additional thanks is owed to my project advisor, Ms. Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, without whom I would not have been able to establish so many contacts during my time in Shangri-La. Kailah offered me a lens through which I was able to formulate concise conclusions about ecotourism, a feat I would otherwise deem impossible if it were not for her guidance. I would also like to extend my gratitude towards all of my interviewees, for their help in making this project a unique experience. I must also acknowledge the sponsorship of The Global Studies Foundation, for their assistance in making this experience possible. All those at SIT are additionally well-deserved of a portion of my gratitude, especially Xiao Zhou for her constant assistance, my language instructor Charles for giving me the skills to communicate in China, and Mr. John Thorne, for his keen editing eye.

Finally, and perhaps most considerately, I would like to thank my fellow classmates, for their humor during times when nothing else seemed feasible, for their companionship in a place I would otherwise be alone, and for their constant, matchless, and widespread support.

ABBREVIATIONS

ETTI	Eastern Tibet Training Institute
RMB	Renminbi
SACP	Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation
SISC	Shangri-La Institute of Sustainable Communities
TIES	International Ecotourism Society
TPAF	The Poverty Alleviation Fund
UNCED	UN Conference on Environment and Development
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WTO	World Tourism Organization
YEDI	Yunnan Environment Development Institute

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is changing Shangri-La's physical and economic landscape. Though tourism can provide revenues to support the community, it can also have negative impacts. In the midst of the myriad positives and negatives of Shangri-La's tourism industry, the area has tremendous environmental and cultural assets, along with capable eco-tourism leaders, that can all be used to affect positive tourism growth. At the root of this growth lies fundamental education and training programs that are essential in establishing sustainable ecotourism. In an area where tourism is booming, integrating ecotourism within the larger picture will prove essential for the proper development of the industry. By exploring the complexities of ecotourism as a broad concept, this study is intended to examine the interface between ecotourism and its dependability upon sustainable education and training programs. Using Shangri-La as a case study, this examination presents several innovative training models that future policymakers are encouraged to consider in the development of ecotourism initiatives, as the industry will inevitably serve as a sustainable development tool in the future.

INTRODUCTION

On 22 June 2012, the United Nations will launch the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio +20), marking twenty years since the first UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), otherwise known as the Rio Earth Summit. While the first Rio Earth Summit focused mainly on the concept of sustainable development, one of the main themes at Rio+20 will be the “green economy” in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. The green economy is viewed as both a journey and a destination, holding clear promise in building sustainable development communities that are energy efficient, safe and healthy.¹

Among the many proposed ways of achieving sustainability via the green economy, ecotourism development presents a significant opportunity. Ecotourism is viewed by policymakers as a comprehensive initiative that takes into account community interests, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, sustainable development, the benefit of local people and poverty reduction, particularly in poor rural communities. While ecotourism has the potential to create positive environmental and social impacts, putting ecotourism on a truly sustainable path poses a major challenge.

At the root of this challenge is the proper development of training and education programs for ecotourism at the local level. As globalization makes local economic control increasingly more difficult, ecotourism seeks to reverse this trend by stressing that local business owners and local communities must be vitally involved..² To ensure this vital involvement,

¹ United Nations Environment Programme, *Green Economy: A Brief for Policymakers on the Green Economy and Millennium Development Goals* (Geneva, Switzerland: UNEP, 2010).

² Megan Epler Wood, *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability* (Paris, France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2002), 8.

however, successful and sustainable training programs for ecotourism must function in a way effective enough to make these communities self-sufficient. Without successful training and education programs, therefore, the success and sustainability of the ecotourism industry remains at stake.

At its best, ecotourism offers a set of principles and practices that have the potential to transform the communities of developing regions in major ways. This study focuses on the ecotourism industry which is emerging in Shangri-La, a developing region located in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the northwest of Yunnan Province, southwest China. By examining the mere definition of ecotourism, along with its principles and practices, it is evident that genuine ecotourism is hard to find, particularly in China. What exists is a mixture of hype and experimentation, superficiality and creativity, including industry promises before international forums and “green” propaganda presented in local tourism brochures.³ This study is intended to examine ecotourism as an emerging concept and the interface between the success of the industry and training/education programs. Using Shangri-La as a case study, my assessment of ecotourism is drawn from field research conducted over a one month period. Amid the superficiality, hype and marketing of the industry, I have found some excellent examples in the field, many dedicated people and students, much creativity and experimentation, and some early models that may well serve as examples for conference participants at Rio+20.

In my assessment, although genuine ecotourism in China is indeed rare, often ill-defined and usually flawed in some way, it is still in its infancy, and my field research in Shangri-La reflects that. Whether or not ecotourism matures into adulthood, whether it gains permanence

³ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* (Washington, DC, USA: Island Press, 1999), 5.

and becomes the predominant way in which we travel and interact with the physical and cultural environment, all depend on myriad factors⁴, chief among them training and education programs specifically geared towards ecotourism. This study aims to offer a compelling analysis of the ideas and activities shaping ecotourism in Shangri-La today, in order to ultimately attempt to make policy recommendations for negotiators at the forthcoming Rio+20 conference, where ecotourism development will inevitably be a topic of discussion.

FRAMING THE DISCUSSION

Ecotourism is a term incongruent with the word concise. Some describe it as a concept, an idea, a model, a label while others deem it a propaganda term, a theoretical conception that is widely used among marketing companies but scarcely come across in reality. Some experts have pronounced ecotourism dead before it was even born, while others have declared it passé or hopelessly diluted.⁵ According to Wende Gomba from the Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC), when defining ecotourism one must avoid “green-washing”, a problem that has undermined the legitimacy of the term.⁶ Green-washing occurs most typically when one overestimates their comprehension of what ecotourism actually is. Some green-washing, though certainly not all, can also result from a general lack of understanding of the underlying principles of ecotourism.⁷

⁴ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* (Washington, DC, USA: Island Press, 1999), 25.

⁵ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* (Washington, DC, USA: Island Press, 1999), 10.

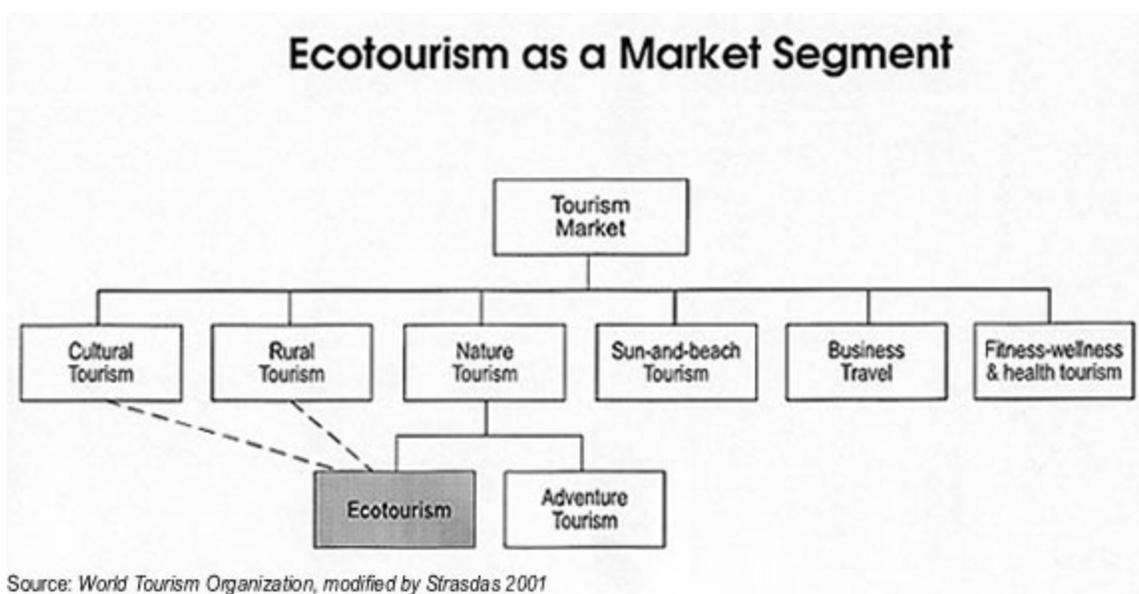
⁶ Wende Gomba, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Team Leader, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

⁷ Megan Epler Wood, *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability* (Paris, France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2002), 12.

Needless to say that in the midst of this frenzy of how to categorize or define ecotourism rests a mass of confusion. Therefore, to avoid misinterpretation throughout this study, it is obligatory to offer a general overview of what ecotourism actually is in order to thereby successfully avoid green-washing.

DEFINITION OF ECOTOURISM

By definition, ecotourism is regarded as a form of nature-based tourism in the marketplace, but it has been formulated and studied as a sustainable development tool by NGOs, development experts and academics since 1990.⁸ The term ecotourism therefore refers on the one hand to a concept under a set of principles, and on the other hand to a specific market segment. It is regarded as a sub-component of the field of sustainable tourism however it is also considered a sustainable version of nature tourism, while at the same time including rural and cultural tourism elements.



⁸ Megan Epler Wood, *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability* (Paris, France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2002), 9.

In tracing the definition over time, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) in 1991 produced one of the earliest definitions:

“Ecotourism is responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.”⁹

The World Conservation Union in 1996 stated that ecotourism:

“...is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features—both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low negative visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”¹⁰

In both of these definitions, the emphasis is on the visitor, the traveler, and his or her impact on the community to which they visit. These early definitions of ecotourism thereby contradict more modern definitions of the term, which emphasize the visitor and the role of the host community equally. It is now understood that ecotourism in its true form addresses poverty alleviation, community participation, environmental conservation, and cultural preservation all in the process of tourism development. In this way, ecotourism is viewed by some as a kind of win-win development strategy in which both the tourists and host communities benefit in an equal and sustainable way.

Properly defined, then, *ecotourism is travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strives to be low impact and (usually) small scale. It helps educate the travelers,*

⁹ The International Ecotourism Society, *Global Ecotourism Conference 2007* (Oslo, Norway: 14-16 May 2007), http://www.ecotourismglobalconference.org/?page_id=5.

¹⁰ Megan Epler Wood, *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability* (Paris, France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2002), 9.

*provides funds for conservations; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities, and fosters respect for different cultures.*¹¹

INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS: FROM QUÉBEC TO OSLO

To further frame the term ecotourism, it is necessary to discuss it in the context of international agreements that have been formed since the term was first coined. Two agreements in particular, the Québec Declaration on Ecotourism of 2002 and the Oslo Statement on Ecotourism of 2007, have shaped international standards that articulate ecotourism in its ideal form. For this study, these documents are meant to demonstrate the balance of economic, social, ecological and cultural benefits for both the tourist and the host community.

QUÉBEC DECLARATION ON ECOTOURISM

In 2002, the UN International Year of Ecotourism, under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO), representatives from 132 countries met at the World Ecotourism Summit hosted in Québec City, Canada. Dialogue at the conference focused on negotiating a set of recommendations for the development of ecotourism activities in the context of sustainable development. Chief among the main conclusions drawn from the conference was the formation of the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism. In it, negotiators affirmed:

“...that different forms of tourism, especially ecotourism, if managed in a sustainable manner can represent a valuable economic opportunity for local and indigenous populations and their

¹¹ Martha Honey, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* (Washington, DC, USA: Island Press, 1999), 25.

cultures and for the conservation and sustainable use of nature for future generations and can be a leading source of revenues for protected areas.”¹²

Negotiators further stressed:

“...that to achieve equitable social, economic and environmental benefits from ecotourism and other forms of tourism in natural areas, and to minimize or avoid potential negative impacts, participative planning mechanisms are needed that allow local and indigenous communities, in a transparent way, to define and regulate the use of their areas at the local level, including the right to opt out of tourism development.”¹³

It is interesting to note that by 2002, ecotourism’s benefit to local communities was becoming chief among ecotourism’s main objectives. Not only was the industry established to cater to tourists, but now the role of local communities was emphasized as a key component to the industry’s development. It must be noted that in order for the goals of the Québec Declaration to be fully carried out, education and training programs are essential in order for locals to have full regulation of ecotourism in their communities. These points were further developed at the Global Ecotourism Conference, held in Oslo, Norway, in May 2007.

OSLO STATEMENT ON ECOTOURISM

Marking the fifth anniversary of the Québec Summit, the Oslo Conference’s main objectives were to assess the achievements and challenges since 2002. Five years down the line, the role of tourism in supporting sustainable development, notably the alleviation of poverty, was

¹² World Ecotourism Summit 2002, *Québec Declaration on Ecotourism* (Québec City, Canada. 22 May 2002).

¹³ Ibid.

recognized as a critical industry responsibility.¹⁴ This responsibility, although discussed in 2007, will undoubtedly be discussed further in the context of the green economy at Rio+20. In addition to that, the challenges facing the popularity of the mere term ecotourism was recognized:

“The term ecotourism is more widely recognized and used, but it is also abused, as it is not sufficiently anchored to the definition. The ecotourism community, therefore, continues to face significant challenges in awareness building and education and actively working against green- washing within the tourism industry.”¹⁵

While conducting field research in Shangri-La, the challenge of awareness building and education specifically among locals was undoubtedly prevalent. Since 2007, although ecotourism as a development strategy has trickled down to local communities like Shangri-La, the challenge of training those involved in the industry is still widespread. Education for ecotourism must therefore be emphasized in discussions at Rio +20.

EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

In order to tangibly reach the goals of these notable international discussions, in order to effectively address ecotourism’s challenges, it is my belief that at the root of the problem is the development of sustainable training programs in local communities. In order to thereby recognize the various components of the modern understanding of what ecotourism actually is, in order to implement it correctly, all actors in the industry must be equally informed. Taking into consideration the emphasis of local communities, not only must policymakers be well-informed, but local participants as well. The sustainability of education therefore is congruent with the sustainability of the ecotourism industry. Too often have ecotourism endeavors gotten off the

¹⁴ The International Ecotourism Society, *Oslo Statement on Ecotourism* (Oslo, Norway. 2007) <http://www.ecotourism.org/oslo-statement-on-ecotourism>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

ground without foundational training programs. In speaking to an ecologist from Guangdong while stationed in Shangri-La, I asked her what the main issue is with ecotourism in China. She told me, “Too often ecotourism in China is fake. Many don’t even know what it really means.”¹⁶ This concept of green-washing was observed throughout my stay in Shangri-La.

ANALYSIS

My criticism of these lofty definitions of the term is that despite the relative ease in defining and discussing ecotourism, policymakers have not been able to successfully put policy into practice on the main scale. Tangible success and concrete thriving ecotourism practice are far too sparse to reflect the overall significance of such international conferences and definition development. According to Wende Gomba from SISC, one cannot help but question the value of these mainstream international conferences. So much funding goes into these events and, even more, to get representatives from various different countries into the same place inevitably, but often unnoticeably, requires a huge amount of energy. Is it worth the carbon footprint?¹⁷ Are the ideas gained from these massive, highly publicized conferences unique and imaginative enough to be worth the effort? Can the ideas gained from these meetings truly initiate action?

What has been gained from these conferences, despite overall lack of tangible action, has been the increase in buzz about ecotourism, all the way down to the local level. While conducting field research in rural Shangri-La, for example, even local people were familiar with the term. According to Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, an American volunteer teacher at the Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI) who works daily with local Tibetan youths, ecotourism is just that, a buzz word. Many industries promote their businesses as being “eco-friendly”, but they

¹⁶ AJ, Guangdong Ecology University Student, Personal Interview, 9 May 2012.

¹⁷ Wende Gomba, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Team Leader, Personal Interview, 11 May 2012.

seldom know what that actually means. Various eco-lodges around Shangri-La have failed, she says, because what they promote is not congruent with the reality of their business; a lodge that is promoted as an “eco-lodge” deceives tourists looking for a genuine experience.¹⁸ Therefore, while my research in China was specific to the region of Shangri-La, I believe my findings were collective enough to presume that ecotourism in China more often than not deceives tourists into thinking they will experience ecotourism when in reality tourists’ hosts do not actually fully understand the concept. Ecotourism as a concept in China is thereby green-washed, a concern made in Oslo in 2007. Amid this green-washing, however, is the work of several Shangri-La based NGOs, specifically the Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI), the partnership of The Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) and the Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation (SACP), and the Shangri-La Institute of Sustainable Communities (SISC). The work of these organizations are representative of what I deem best practices—practices worthy enough to be analyzed in detail in order to ultimately serve as ideal models for future ecotourism development.

SHANGRI-LA: THE CASE STUDY

Early on in my research I met with Henry Voigt, the Senior Advisor at Yunnan Environment Development Institute (YEDI). In describing the premise of my study to him, Mr. Voigt responded by saying, “If you want to study ecotourism in China, you’ll need a magnifying glass.”¹⁹ Mr. Voigt’s words stuck with me as I set out to find an ideal location to conduct a case study on ecotourism in China. Shangri-La was the last option I came across while surveying potential sites. Among the many prospective places where I could have resided, I chose to focus on Shangri-La because it offered the most intrigue, perhaps the most relevance, and what I

¹⁸ Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Teacher, Personal Interview, 7 May 2012.

¹⁹ Henry Voigt, Yunnan Environment Development Institute: Senior Advisor, Personal Interview, 5 April 2012.

believe are examples of best practices. Using the magnifying glass Mr. Voigt suggest I use, I discovered that Shangri-La offers some exceptional models of how to properly train and educate local people to therefore properly develop the ecotourism industry.

THE POLITICS OF A NAME

In December 2001, the local government in what has now been deemed Shangri-La, received endorsement from China's Civil Administration Department to change the name of the county from Zhongdian to Shangri-La.²⁰ The name change officially occurred on 5 May 2002 and subsequently attracted huge amounts of media coverage and essentially made the place famous in China. The name Shangri-La, however, is in fact neither Tibetan nor is it Chinese; it is a loan word from English, invented by the British author James Hilton when he wrote his best-selling novel *The Lost Horizon* (1933). The premise of Hilton's story focused on the myth of the "fountain of youth" and was made even more famous by the Hollywood movie of the same name, directed by Frank Capra a few years later.²¹ For many therefore, Shangri-La today is seen as a romantic fantasy of a harmonious, peaceful and secluded society.

As a result of this media attention, new fame and recognition, Shangri-La was put on the map of tourism enterprises worldwide. With a current population of 350,000, the area attracts 3 million tourists annually.²² Naturally instigating an imbalance of locals vs. outsiders, tourism development must expand in a way that properly recognizes this influx. At the same time, according to Dakpa Kelden of the Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation, tourism development must occur in a way that balances tourism with local livelihoods. Shangri-La is

²⁰ Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangri-La*, International Peace Research Institute: Oslo, Norway (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 4.

²¹ Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangri-La*, International Peace Research Institute: Oslo, Norway (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 5.

²² Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 13 May 2012.

therefore an ideal place for ecotourism because it forces the industry to have a balance; sustainability would not be a realistic goal if this balance was not respected. Because the number of annual tourists far outweighs the actual local population, ecotourism is essential.²³

Specifically, state policy in the last decades has been to “develop the tertiary industry” and tourism has been significant as part of this effort.²⁴ However, one of the main issues with the boom in tourism has been that industry growth has often provided those who were already advantaged with further economic opportunity. Little of this seemed to be trickling down to the local villagers, who still lived mainly from subsistence farming and mushroom harvesting.²⁵ Address this concern is the work of a local NGO focused specifically on ecotourism training.

EASTERN TIBET TRAINING INSTITUTE AND YOUTH TRAINING

21 year old Thomas, whose Tibetan name will remain anonymous, hasn't seen much of the world. He has barely been beyond his village, in a remote part of Yunnan Province up near the border with Tibet.²⁶ He's therefore seldom been exposed to what many describe as the thrills of city life. In China, these thrills are characteristic of everything modern, i.e. lights, big buildings, fancy restaurants, bars and department stores.

Thomas' exposure is undergoing a major change, thanks to the impending impacts of China's booming economic development and a Shangri-La training institute that gives opportunities to underserved communities. Since 2004, the Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI) has been training local youths in language and business skills in order for them to enter

²³ Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 13 May 2012.

²⁴ Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangri-La*, International Peace Research Institute: Oslo, Norway (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 12.

²⁵ Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangri-La*, International Peace Research Institute: Oslo, Norway (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 3.

²⁶ Thomas, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Student, Personal Interview, 8 May 2012.

the growing labor force in the service industry. As of recent, the institute has focused a branch of their efforts on educating these youths on the holistic concept of ecotourism and how these concepts relate to the service industry. Ecotourism is therefore seen as an overarching theme, as it relates to hospitality, the service sector, and adventure, nature and cultural tourism alike. Ben Hillman, the founder of ETTI recognized the general lack of opportunity many people in these remote villages and small farms will have in the future:

“It’s about giving young people in these remote parts an opportunity, because the skills that have served them in the past are not going to serve them in the future.”²⁷

Ben Hillman, Eastern Tibet Training Institute, 2011

Ben Hillman makes a valid statement, as he has pointed out the importance of youth engagement in training programs. The importance in working with younger residents rests in the fact that they can be viewed as catalysts for establishing sustainable ecotourism for the future. As 21 year old Thomas has plans to continue vocational training post-ETTI before entering the tourism work force, he exemplifies the opportunities ETTI can lead to.

MISSION AND GOALS

ETTI’s overarching mission is to improve the livelihoods in China’s western regions by providing unemployed youth with free access to specialized vocational educational training.²⁸ However, in its mission statement, ETTI sees providing access to vocational training as a major challenge for the development of China’s western regions. From 2011-2015, ETTI’s goals are stated as follows:

²⁷ Stephen McDonnell, “Beyond the Lost Horizon,” *ABC News*, 27 September 2011. <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2011/s3327036.htm>.

²⁸ Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Improving Livelihoods through Vocational Training, <http://eastertibet.moonfruit.com/#> (accessed 20 May 2012).

- i. Expand the variety of vocational training programs offered
- ii. Provide training to young people from across the wider Eastern Tibetan region
- iii. Use successful training models to demonstrate the importance of vocational training for the sustainable and equitable development of Eastern Tibet
- iv. Become a model not-for-profit organization in China²⁹

To carry out its goals, ETTI offers courses in tourism and hospitality, small business management, green technologies such as solar panel installation, construction skills, and agricultural technologies such as modern beekeeping. While conducting field research during my time in Shangri-La, I focused specifically on ETTI's English for Ecotourism training course.

UNDERSTANDING ETTI THROUGH ENGLISH FOR ECOTOURISM

My understanding of ETTI as an organization was very much the result of my participant observation of the course English for Ecotourism, which met Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings in two sections. With a total of 23 students, the group was divided into two sections: A Class and B class. A Class was lower-level English while B Class was advanced English. The course is currently taught by, Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, my project advisor, who is an American volunteer based in Shangri-La through Volunteers in Asia. On my first day sitting in on Kailah's class, the lesson topic was pollution, both air and water pollution, and corresponding vocabulary. One of the biggest challenges Kailah faces is tackling two tasks at once: teaching environmental concepts and English vocabulary simultaneously. "Teaching at the conceptual level while at the same time teaching the language is asking a lot from both the students and the teacher", Kailah

²⁹Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Improving Livelihoods through Vocational Training, <http://eastertibet.moonfruit.com/#> (accessed 20 May 2012).

explains.³⁰ Nevertheless, during my time spent at my desk in the back of Kailah's classroom, I observed that despite this difficulty, Kailah is doing a fine job at tackling both duties.

TEACHING METHODS

English for Ecotourism teaches ETTI students holistic concepts related to environmental education and how they relate to the service industry. During my time at ETTI, the class covered units on pollution, transportation, directions, landscapes, litter, recycling, and, surprisingly, religion. When Kailah informed me that the class would be doing a unit on religion, I was taken aback. How does religion relate to ecotourism? Kailah's explanation reflected the holistic approach to the course:

“At ETTI, ecotourism is viewed as involving many broad concepts as they relate to the environment and religion is viewed as one of them. For students entering the tourism and hospitality industry, they will inevitably be faced with questions regarding the area's religions, so introducing students to these concepts will benefit them in the future.”³¹

Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, ETTI

At the same time, English language components to the class included sentence formation, vocabulary, present and past tense, commands, and opinion formation with words like agree/disagree. For one homework assignment, students were presented with various statements such as, “The grassland is ugly,” or, “I respect nature”. Students were instructed to either agree or disagree with the statement and explain why. Reviewing some of the students' completed assignments, responses that stuck out to me included, “I agree. The grassland is ugly because we often litter,” and, “I agree. I respect nature because nature is life,” or, “I agree. I respect nature

³⁰ Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Teacher, Personal Interview, 17 May 2012.

³¹ Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Teacher, Personal Interview, 8 May 2012.

because we must protect the environment”. For many of the units, broad environmental concepts were explained in the context of Shangri-La or students’ hometowns specifically. Words like grassland and yak, for example, were emphasized and understood among students. In this way, I observed that much of ETTI’s success has been met because of their context-specific approach to teaching broader concepts.

PARTNERSHIPS

With the aim to allow students to capitalize upon the skills learned in English for Ecotourism in addition to the other courses offered at ETTI, the last two weeks of the students’ semester is spent at an assigned internship location. The goals of the internship program include ideally securing entry job positions for ETTI graduates. At an environmental education conference I attended with ETTI students towards the end of my field research period, I was able to see the value in this aspect of ETTI’s training methods.

Located at the Songzanlin Resort, the conference I attended was hosted by Shanghai-based NGO called Albatross. Prior to entering the conference room, I observed students engaging with a member of the hotel staff, a young girl that appeared slightly older than the current ETTI students. Upon listening to their conversation, I learned that this staff member was an ETTI graduate herself, and students inquisitively asked her questions about her current job. Kailah later informed me that meeting this staff member ignited glimmers of hope in students’ eyes. “These types of encounters open students’ eyes to the possibilities for what opportunities they have for the future,” Kailah says.³²

³² Kailah Weiss-Weinberg, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Teacher, Personal Interview, 18 May 2012.

Positions on staff at the Songzanlin Resort, in addition to several other hotels and tourism establishments are better gained when applicants have internship experience, says Ellen Bartee, director of ETTI.³³ The institute is therefore partnered with several businesses, restaurants, and hotels through which students gain internship experience. This partnering is therefore representative of the collaborative efforts needed to properly develop training for ecotourism.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND RECRUITMENT

ETTI recruits students from a specific target demographic, although there are occasional exceptions, according to Ellen Bartee, the institute's current director. Generally students range from 16-23 years old who have graduated from middle school but face economic hardship in receiving higher education. As the institute matures, ETTI seeks out these students by word of mouth, site visits, and general inquiry about the institute's services. One of the main challenges that ETTI faces during the recruitment process is convincing rural families that a 3 month long free education program will provide for a secure future for their children. In speaking with Ellen, ETTI's director, she spoke about how in general there is a prejudice against the hospitality industry because employees usually start from the bottom. Many rural families therefore don't see the point in training programs like ETTI because entry jobs are relatively low. They would rather have their children work at home in the village. Skepticism is also rooted in families' concerns for the transition from village to city life for their children. Like Thomas, many ETTI students have never encountered city life prior to their time at ETTI. Families fear their children's exposure to "drugs, sex and rock & roll", Ellen claims.³⁴

³³ Ellen Bartee, Eastern Tibet Training Institute: Director, Personal Interview, 9 May 2012.

³⁴ Ellen Bartee, Easter Tibet Training Institute: Director, Personal Interview, 9 May 2012.

Students are also likely to remain in the city following their graduation from ETTI, which further makes families apprehensive. Many students' internships transition into stable jobs, which inevitably drag students away from their villages and turn them into city dwellers. I asked Ellen what the likelihood is that students will return home to their villages to start projects stemming from what they learned at ETTI. She said that currently, there are only a handful of students that have done so, but in the future she predicts that there will be more. One graduate from the green technology program, for example, is looking to start an eco-lodge project in his native Qinghai Province.

XIAO WU AND THE ECO-LODGE

Xiao Wu was born and raised in a small village in Qinghai Province. He attended primary school in his native village but by high school, he was recruited by a specific training program to study English. He continued studying English at Qinghai Normal University and has since attained a master's degree in linguistics. Xiao Wu is one of the exceptions Ellen was talking about; he has far surpassed the foundational educational criteria of ETTI's target, however upon coming to Shangri-La, Xiao Wu began taking classes at ETTI out of personal interest. In fact, Xiao Wu was part of the graduating class that completed an eco-toilet project through the green technology program. Xiao Wu spoke fondly of this experience in an interview I conducted with him. While Xiao Wu comes from an educated background, his aspirations are indicative of "no big dreams," he says.

"Mainly I just want to make some money in order for my family to have a better life in Qinghai. In order for them to have a better life, however, I need to provide the finances,

but not anything of extravagance. If I can successfully make some money, then maybe I can do something more meaningful.”³⁵

Xiao Wu

At the moment, Xiao Wu finds himself far from Qinghai; he is currently managing an eco-lodge in Dara village outside of Old Town in Shangri-La. Although Xiao Wu is currently overlooking management of the eco-lodge, the project is funded and operated by the partnership of the American NGO The Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) and the local NGO Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation (SACP). The partnership has given up management for one year in order for Xiao Wu and a group of colleagues to run the establishment in order to gain familiarity and knowledge of the project.

Eco-lodges are becoming popular projects for those interested in entering the ecotourism industry, as they are seen as a means of tangibly achieving the goals of international agreements related to ecotourism.³⁶

“In some cases, skilled entrepreneurs have partnered with indigenous landowners to co-manage the wild land resources that tourists visit and local people depend upon, thereby achieving a positive situation for both the lodge and the local people.”³⁷

Megan Epler Wood, United Nations Environment Programme

It is Xiao Wu and his colleagues’ intention to return to Qinghai next year to start their own eco-lodge. In this sense, the eco-lodge is serving as an educational tool for future ecotourism projects while currently, the project’s management is indicative of a success story of

³⁵ Xiao Wu, TPAF/SACP Eco-lodge: Manager, Personal Interview, 5 May 2012.

³⁶ Megan Epler Wood, *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability* (Paris, France: United Nations Environment Programme, 2002), 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

past ecotourism training programs. While the eco-lodge serves as an example of what ETTI graduates can go on to pursue, it is also representative of another context-specific best practice of ecotourism in Shangri-La.

ECO-LODGE PARTNERSHIP: A COLLABORATION OF THE POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND (TPAF) AND THE SHANGRI-LA ASSOCIATION OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION (SACP)

While the eco-lodge at which Xiao Wu finds himself working is representative of his own personal success, it is also illustrative of another method of successful ecotourism: partnerships. Partnerships, in a broader sense, can be a tricky concept; often times the beginning of a partnership is marked with much enthusiasm and grandeur plans, however as time goes on, partnerships can be hard to maintain in any sense, but especially in the business sense. What partnerships must be wary of, however, is maintaining their goals and purpose for the long run. In other words, partnerships that initially state they want the host-village to profit completely from an eco-lodge, for example, can get caught up in the money of the agreement, ultimately leading to the failure of the eco-lodge and the exploitation of the host village. As long as these partnerships are wary of the fate so many attempted successful projects have met, ecotourism projects, specifically partnerships between NGOs and social enterprises, present a significant opportunity. The eco-lodge at which Xiao Wu is employed is the result of just that: a partnership between an American NGO that funds the project and a local NGO that operates it. In evaluating the current status of the project and by examining its foundation, I aim to predict whether or not this project will meet the goal of sustainability for the long run.

THE FUNDER: THE POVERTY ALLEVIATION FUND

Founded in 1998 by an American named Arthur Holcombe, The Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF) strives to:

“Improve the capabilities, livelihoods and well-being of disadvantaged poor communities, in particular ethnic minority communities in China. Support is intended to increase poor household income and food security on an environmentally sustainable basis, and demonstrate innovative strategies to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals.”³⁸

At the moment, TPAF strives to achieve UN Millennium Development Goals by promoting innovative models of sustainable ecotourism development in three villages of Shangri-La. Each project differs slightly from the other, but in general activities in each village include community-led ecotourism development planning, environment protection training, ecotourism service skills training, and construction and visitor eco-lodges that simultaneously function as community centers. Outcomes and lessons from each of the three projects are aimed to be:

“...disseminated to tourism bureau officials and travel agents in order to encourage government and private sector support of a more sustainable model of tourism development that can be scaled up and replicated more widely.”³⁹

In this way, TPAF is using eco-lodge projects to educate both locals and government officials alike. To do so, TPAF is using three models. The eco-lodge at which I spent most of my time is one of them. The lodge was built with the intention of becoming a guesthouse for visitors managed directly by the host village. The second lodge, built in the next village over, was constructed with a community center on the first floor and a guesthouse on the second. The third model was constructed similarly to the first, however management will be operated by an outside

³⁸ The Poverty Alleviation Fund, *About TPAF*, <http://www.tpaf.org/> (accessed 21 May 2012).

³⁹ The Poverty Alleviation Fund, *Community Ecotourism*, http://www.tpaf.org/community_eco-tourism.html (accessed 21 May 2012).

source for the long-run. The intention of running three similar projects at the same time under a different format is to see what works and what doesn't, what are the flaws of one model as opposed to another?

Collectively, TPAF's goals and missions are indicative of another educational method when it comes to ecotourism: eco-lodges. Not only are villagers educated on how to run and manage the establishment, but if done correctly, eco-lodges have the potential to educate officials on how to sustainably promote ecotourism development.

THE OPERATOR: SHANGRI-LA ASSOCIATION OF CULTURAL PRESERVATION

The Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation (SACP) was founded by a group of volunteers "...dedicated to protecting the local ethnic culture and passing it on to future generations".⁴⁰ While the mission of the association is not focused primarily on environmental sustainability or ecotourism, Dakpa Kelden, the association's founder and director, claims,

"In China, there is a lot of talk and no action in terms of environmental issues; in general this is the same with ecotourism, there is an effort but not a whole ton of initiative."⁴¹

Dakpa Kelden, SACP

Because of this lack of initiative, Dakpa explains how SACP is striving to incorporate "responsible tourism" within their goals as a method of further promoting cultural preservation. By framing ecotourism in this way, the industry is seen as relevant to the goals of SACP. The challenge, however, was finding a means of funding such an endeavor. By partnering with

⁴⁰ Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation, *Introduction*, <http://www.shangrilaassociation.org/en/index.htm> (accessed 23 May 2012).

⁴¹ Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 7 May 2012.

TPAF, Dakpa's association is striving to create a sustainable establishment in order to promote cultural preservation through tourism.

“One eco-lodge cannot make a big income, but at least it can help make a path. Later the village can work on the arts, souvenirs, dance, etc. Students can also begin to learn English which will serve them well in the future.”⁴²

Dakpa Kelden, SACP

One of the main goals of the SACP/TPAF eco-lodge project, Dakpa says, is to establish a scholarship fund for the host village in order to send students on to higher education.⁴³ At the moment, Dakpa claims they have all the resources, they just need to use them collectively in a beneficial way. In this way, too, the eco-lodge is being used as an ecotourism educational tool for Dakpa, for the village, for the NGOs involved. By operating the lodge, Dakpa claims the project is more likely to be met with success because the association is local. The collaboration between TPAF and SACP therefore uses the strengths of each organization to collectively benefit and address the goals of each party involved. SACP is therefore doing what TPAF cannot and vice versa.

THE COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

With the strengths of each organization being used to aid the development of the eco-lodge, the project exemplifies a unique gateway into establishing sustainable ecotourism in the area. The eco-lodge project is intended to eventually be completely managed and operated by the host village. At the moment, however, because the lodge is still fairly new (it was opened in

⁴² Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 7 May 2012.

⁴³ Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 7 May 2012.

September 2011), SACP is managing the lodge while at the same time training and educating local villagers on how in fact to run the lodge. SACP will serve this position for a total of five years while TPAF looks on. Xiao Wu, the current house manager, is serving his position for one of these five years, in order to learn how to run his own eco-lodge.

Curious as to why Dara village in particular was chosen as a site location for the project, I spoke to Kelsang Phuntsuk, the only TPAF staff member stationed in Shangri-La, more about the decision making process. This inquiry led to several responses. Firstly, Dara village was seen as an ideal location because of the community members' relative open-mindedness.

“Many villagers study outside of the village . Therefore, villagers are a bit more open-minded about outsiders coming in because many of the village youth leave to study. Also, this village is particularly poor, so starting something like an eco-lodge would be beneficial to the community financially.”

Kelsang Phuntsuk, TPAF

Dakpa's goals of establishing a scholarship fund through the eco-lodge are therefore more feasible because Dara village's youth are already studying at outside institutions. Perhaps one day these educated youth will be able to take over full control of the lodge, Dakpa hopes.⁴⁴ At the moment, however, while SACP is currently leading the management of the village, the host village still plays a vital and active role. The village is divided into different committees, for example, each of which selects a committee leader. These committee leaders rotate each month and have monthly meetings with representatives from TPAF and SACP. The various committees include groups focused on cooking, performance, home-stay, health and safety, etc.

⁴⁴ Dakpa Kelden, Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation: Founder and Director, Personal Interview, 7 May 2012.

Who actually benefits from the project? From what Kelsang explained to me, the host village seems to be gaining the most from the project. Each year the TPAF/SACP partnership must pay the village an annual lease of 8000RMB. They also have to pay the eco-lodge's employers, managers, etc. Therefore, the partnership makes little profit, but according to both organizations, that is the point of the project.⁴⁵ This presents a conflict however, which goes back to the first warning sign I mentioned about partnerships. Kelsang spoke to me in confidence about how many providers hesitate to fund projects like these because they make no money out of it. Greed often overtakes some of these lofty organizations that claim to work towards no-profit but actually end up demanding some profit.⁴⁶ This is something the partnership needs to be weary of as the eco-lodge matures. In addition to the work of TPAF/SACP is but another local NGO who is demonstrating how to educate people about ecotourism in different ways that those previously discussed.

SHANGRI-LA INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES (SISC)

When I arrived in Shangri-La, I knew little about the non-profit world in the area, save for diminutive knowledge regarding the goals and mission of ETTI and SACP. My knowledge of the SACP/TPAF partnership was cultivated only after a few preliminary weeks of research at the eco-lodge. Therefore, when I came across the Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC), a registered independent Chinese non-governmental organization based in Shangri-La, I was immediately intrigued by their work, by their aims, by their overall existence. How does the work of SISC compare to that of ETTI and the SACP/TPAF partnership? Was there anything unique and different about their work? For this study, my discovery of SISC is presented in order

⁴⁵ Kelsang Phuntsuk, The Poverty Alleviation Fund: Shangri-La Representative, Personal Interview, 5 May 2012.

⁴⁶ Kelsang Phuntsuk, The Poverty Alleviation Fund: Shangri-La Representative, Personal Interview, 5 May 2012.

to showcase a third areal project in Shangri-La that demonstrates another context-specific approach involving education and training for ecotourism.

ABOUT THE SHANGRI-LA INSTITUTE

Originally established as WWF China's education programme, SISC has since accumulated nearly fifteen years experience working to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in China.⁴⁷ The work of SISC is aimed towards supporting projects that empower schools and local communities to engage in sustainable development.⁴⁸ Because SISC was one of the first environmental education organizations in the area, my interest in the institute's work rests in how such an establishment is working to incorporate ecotourism education within their initiatives. "Ecotourism is viewed as a cross-cutting issue, as it relates equally to sustainable development, community engagement, and environmental education," according to Wende Gomba, a local staff member at SISC.⁴⁹ In order for ecotourism to function successfully, Gomba explains, three things are essential: natural reserves, community learning centers, and willing communities. While these self-declared fundamentals to ecotourism are reflective of Gomba's personal beliefs, they also reflect some of the key components SISC currently sees as vital in educating people about ecotourism.

CANADA FUND: BUILDING A COMMUNITY-BASED ECOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL TOURISM PROGRAM IN SHANGRI-LA

SISC addresses each of these three fundamentals to successful ecotourism through a project that stretches across three areas of Shangri-La: the Napahai area (Kesong), Bazhu village

⁴⁷ Wende Gomba, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Team Leader, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

⁴⁸ Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities, *About Shangri-La Institute*, <http://waterschool.cn/about-us/> (accessed 24 May 2012).

⁴⁹ Wende Gomba, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Team Leader, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

and Baima Xueshan Nature Reserve. Additionally, an “ecotourism resource center” has been established in Shangri-La’s Dukezong Old Town, constructed to help connect all of the existing sites.⁵⁰ Mainly this ecotourism project, known as the Canada Fund Project, focuses on building up home-stay capacity and providing extended hospitality training for villagers, students and teachers from each of these areas. For each area, SISC has established a community center at a designated nature reserve amongst communities they have deemed as willing, thereby fulfilling each of the three “fundamentals” stressed by Gomba. To gain more insight, I accompanied Wende Gomba on a site visit out to Kesong Nature Reserve, about half an hour bike ride outside of Old Town.

The community center is a fairly-sized building situated in a small village amongst adjacent grasslands. There is a large meeting room in the bottom floor of the construction and several office rooms on the second floor. The third floor is allocated as a classroom, being used now for Thangka painting classes for students at a nearby college. The center is managed by a local man who teaches embroidery classes to students and tends to the gardens of the center. Adjacent to the main building is what is purposed to be a guesthouse for the ecotourism endeavor. The guesthouse has three guest rooms, a common dining room, and kitchen. Guests at the center are encouraged to cook for themselves using vegetables from the greenhouse, also located on the center’s property. Another unique component to the center is an organic farm, planted on a large field behind the center. Gomba informed me that students and locals use the field to plant their crops. The center also has several green technology sources including a vat for rain water collection, eco-toilets, solar heaters and a compost system. Because the center functions as both a guesthouse and a community center for the village, the project seems more

⁵⁰ Lha Tso, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Staff, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

integrated than the TPAF/SACP eco-lodge. Comparisons of the two projects will be made in the conclusion of the study.

In addition to Gomba, I spoke to a woman on staff at SISC named Lha-Tso. A local Tibetan from Shangri-La, Lha-Tso elaborated on these training programs one afternoon during an interview I had with her:

“The main goal of training locals is to change their outlook. The institute wants to keep their traditions alive but we also want to make them open to new ideas. One of the main challenges facing the Canada Fund project is the fact that local people don’t have education in the first place so it is difficult to translate the ideas and concepts of SISC on to villagers.⁵¹

Lha-Tso, SISC

Lha-Tso makes a valid point: it is one thing to develop ideas related to ecotourism development, but it is another thing to translate these ideas into context-specific approaches when it comes to teaching these concepts to locals. Home-stay training, for example, is fundamental, claims Lha-Tso, because villagers need to understand why visitors are coming, what they are expecting, and how this will benefit the community altogether. In addition to home-stay training, SISC is implementing an ecotourism training program via the Canada Fund Project with six components.

1. Ecotourism workshop: The goal of this workshop is to teach locals what ecotourism actually is. In other words, teachers aim to take broader concepts and ideas and bring them down to a level at which locals can comprehend. In many ways, this workshop

⁵¹ Lha-Tso, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Staff, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

is similar to the aims of ETTI's English for Ecotourism class, save for the fact that English is not included in SISC's project as of yet.

2. Home-stay Training: To reiterate, this training is meant to essentially teach locals what the point of a home-stay experience is, both for the visitor and community.
3. Bird Watching Training: Representative of a context-specific approach, bird watching training is meant to teach locals about the bird wildlife in the area in order for them to guide visitors on bird watching treks.
4. Tibetan Culture Training: At first, when Lha-Tso mentioned to me that locals had to be trained on their own culture, I was taken aback. Why would locals need to learn more about their innate culture? However, with explanation, I understood the relevance. Many locals perform their duties so habitually that they do not even realize that it is particular to their culture. For example, Lha-Tso explained, many Tibetans arise in the morning, wash their hands and burn incense. For them it is so habitual that they do not realize outsiders would find this interesting or intriguing. Therefore, locals are essentially trained to understand what makes their culture unique.
5. Local Guide Knowledge Training: This training is geared specifically towards those who will serve as guides to visitors.
6. Health and Safety Training: This training component is meant to provide the basics to locals about what to do when guests stay with them.

Another added component to this list, Lha-Tso explained, is something called "Research Trips for Communities". The goal of this component is to provide communities with real-life working examples of successful ecotourism practices. "Mainly this program brings people to Dali in order for locals to see certain ecotourism projects that are working so they can adapt

these ideas to their communities,” Lha-Tso says.⁵² Last year the institute brought about fifteen people from various villages in Shangri-La to Dali. The benefit is for locals to see what is working in a similar area. During my time in Shangri-La, I heard from more than one source that the area has the potential to develop to the same development status as Lijiang or Dali. However, it must be noted that while this development status may be viewed as a goal of sorts, seeing what is working in both areas—and what is not working for that matter—is important for locals to see for themselves. In this way, the “Research Trips for Communities” in addition to the training programs and community projects of SISC are all addressing education for ecotourism in a context-specific way that differs from the methods of other areal NGOs previously explored.

SISC PARTNERSHIPS

Prior to my discovery of SISC, my only conception of ecotourism partnerships stemmed from my knowledge of TPAF/SACP and ETTI. My impression of partnerships did not extend beyond this because I was altogether unfamiliar with the range of possibilities of partnerships for ecotourism education. However, SISC offers some innovative affiliations that I would otherwise not even consider in the realm of possibility had I not discovered SISC.

With Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) among SISC’s top priorities, the institute is partnered with several colleges and vocational schools in the surrounding area at which they have programs to educate students about sustainable development practices. SISC is partnered with Tibetan Middle School, Bama Xueshan Tibetan Community School, Bazhu Primary School, and Diqing Vocational School for Ethnic Minorities. By chance, I was invited to judge an English competition at Diqing Vocational School by Ellen Bartee, the director of ETTI, and was thereby able to speak to some staff members at the school about the role SISC plays in

⁵² Lha-Tso, Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities: Staff, Personal Interview, 10 May 2012.

the curriculum. According to George, an English professor at the school, ESD is not an official major at the school, but students that partake in the programs usually study subjects like hospitality or tourism.⁵³ In this way, ecotourism is addressed in a similar way as it is as ETTI: broader concepts related the environment are taught to students in order for them to thus be able to incorporate them in their work in the tourism industry.

In addition to areal schools, SISC is also partnered with several grassroots organizations related to Tibetan cultural preservation, youth organizations, higher learning institutions and several monasteries/nunneries. Although interesting, it is unnecessary to go into too much detail about each of these partnerships. It is necessary to note, however, that the range of partnerships SISC has established reflects the multidimensionality of ecotourism. In order to properly educate people about the industry, it requires a lot of thought, initiative, and creativity. However, SISC exemplifies these attributes and is thereby deemed a third best practice.

ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURES IN SHANGRI-LA: INNOVATION AND TRADITION

Collectively, the work of ETTI, TPAF/SACP, and SISC are each indicative of context-specific approaches to ecotourism training. Initially, my only conception of training programs consisted of models similar to that of ETTI's English for Ecotourism course in which there are students and an instructor, in a classroom, learning things. I was not expecting to come across so much versatility in the field when it comes to different models of training.

What I gathered from the field is that among these many models of training is much innovation. Common among the work of ETTI, TPAF/SACP, and SISC is the operation of what

⁵³ George, Diqing Vocational School for Ethnic Minorities: English Professor, Personal Interview, 11 May 2012.

I deem “traditional” training programs in which there is an instructor, there are students, and there is a curriculum. What this method lacks in innovation is made up for in job retention, for the majority of the people I spoke to who had taught, managed, or taken these courses expressed gratitude for their existence when it came to finding a job later on. Most of the training programs geared specifically toward ecotourism involved the teaching of broader more holistic concepts, as discussed in the context of each organization presented in this study.

More innovative and less traditional methods of educating for ecotourism include the physical construction of establishments. These establishments include community centers and/or eco-lodges in rural communities in which locals play a vital role. The projects of TPAF/SACP and SISC are exemplary of this. Through this form of ecotourism development, locals, organization staff, community leaders, and students all learn from the establishment’s operation. Traditional training programs can and often are organized through these centers, as they provide incentive for communities to enroll in these courses if they are to sustain them themselves. Scholarship funds, as is one of the goals of the TPAF/SACP eco-lodge project, can be formed through these projects as well.

Amid both this innovation and tradition when it comes to ecotourism development structures, partnership formation presents further opportunity. In the traditional sense, partnerships formed for educational purposes are nothing exceptionally innovative or novel. However, in the case of ecotourism partnerships, I found that the versatility of collaborations amongst organizations and businesses to be quite notable. For example, ETTI is partnered with hotels, restaurants, and businesses in order to provide internships to students, thereby leading to more probably job security. TPAF and SACP are partnered with each other, with the intention of the using the strengths of both organization for the betterment of ecotourism development. SISC

is partnered with several vocational schools, higher education institutes, monasteries/nunneries, grassroots organizations and beyond in order to use this network for the variety of their projects. In all cases, it is clear that the complexity of ecotourism as a mere concept necessitates a complex network of partners in order to properly develop the industry through training programs.

SOME MISSING PILLARS

By making education a priority via these innovative models of ecotourism training, the development of the industry is more likely to be met with success under the premise that education is the root of sustainability. However, amid this praise for what does exist among ecotourism development initiatives in Shangri-La, there are some pitfalls that need to be noted. Chiefly, I found that although there is much effort to educate people about what ecotourism actually is, I encountered much confusion in the field in terms of what the term actually means. For example, among three different interviewees, each of them provided a different answer when asked what ecotourism is. The interviewees lacked overall decisiveness when answering my question. When speaking to a representative about why the TPAF/SACP eco-lodge is in fact “eco” the representative stumbled over his words, telling me that many people ask this question and there is no real answer. What makes the eco-lodge different from just a mere guesthouse? With more research I was able to answer this question, however the representative I spoke to, who is very involved with the lodge’s management, was confused by the inquiry.

This brings us back to one of the first points made at the beginning of the study: if ecotourism as a concept is not understood, how can it be properly development? I can neither provide answers to this conundrum nor can I state solutions to fix it. However, I think it is

interesting to note that despite the efforts to push ecotourism training in the right direction, confusion among actors still exists, therefore representative of the efforts' shortcomings.

An additional missing pillar of the industry's development not previously discussed is stable funding. Many projects' plans are not able to fully hit the ground running because of lack of financial support. As is the case of any NGO project though, this is nothing new. However, if the complexity of ecotourism was more fully understood, if its potential and ability to cover issues such as poverty alleviation, job retention, cultural preservation and environmental sustainability were realized by the public more fully, then perhaps funding for such projects would not be so scarce. This leads us back to the main thesis of this study, that stable and well-developed education and training programs lie at the root of the future success of the ecotourism industry as a whole.

TALKS AT RIO+20: THE GREEN ECONOMY AND ECOTOURISM

To prelude the main topic on the platform for discussion at Rio+20, the concepts behind the green economy aim to foster sustainability through improved human well-being and social equity, while at the same time reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities.⁵⁴ The green economy can therefore be thought of as one which is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive.

Structurally, the green economy is defined as having a triple bottom line, which includes and incorporates the three pillars of sustainability. A truly "green" economy would be one that is environmentally sustainable, based on the belief that our biosphere is a closed system with finite

⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *Green Economy Report*. <http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/GreenEconomyReport/tabid/29846/Default.aspx> (accessed 25 May 2012).

resources, socially just, based on the belief that all people should have access to abundant opportunities for social and personal development, and local, in that a “green” and sustainable economy would be locally rooted. While the green economy can be seen as a global model, it is based on a more local approach, in which change is fostered from the bottom-up.

Likewise, while the principles of ecotourism can be seen as a global model, this study has aimed to defend that its concept is more so based on a local approach in which the sustainability of the industry is fostered from education and training of local communities. This understanding of ecotourism is fundamental for negotiators at Rio+20.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AMID ECOTOURISM’S PROMISES AND PITFALLS

As the first section of this paper demonstrated, ecotourism is a complex and multidimensional term. International treaties and definitions of ecotourism have been on the books since the early 1990s, yet proper development of the industry is hardly widespread. How can this trend be overcome?

Amid the various promises and pitfalls of ecotourism, negotiators at Rio+20 are advised to consider the following policy recommendations when discussing ecotourism as a method of achieving a truly “green” economy:

- Progress in green economy initiatives that consider ecotourism development as a viable method of achieving sustainability will only be reflective of success if education and training are seen as vital components of ecotourism development. Sustainability is therefore dependent upon education and negotiators need to understand the importance of this. Sustainability can therefore not be fully achieved without a strong educational foundation.

Therefore, training programs for ecotourism are the key to making communities involved in ecotourism self-sustainable.

- Development funders should be equally educated on the promise and potential that ecotourism holds for the future. Educating funders could perhaps ignite more support, resulting in stable funding for ecotourism development projects. Promotion of ecotourism's promise, therefore, is essential.
- Ecotourism development holds great possibilities for providing educated candidates for tertiary sector jobs. Vocational training and preparatory coursework in ecotourism will better prepare tertiary sector employees for a future in which sustainable development is vital. Furthermore, the promotion of vocational training is more financially viable for families of impoverished rural areas in developing countries. Therefore ecotourism can be viewed both as a sustainable development and poverty alleviation tool.
- Youth engagement should be seen as vital in making the ecotourism industry self sustainable. As the industry develops, there needs to be a solid target population that specializes in the field. Therefore, educating youth that already have plans of entering the tertiary job sector are an ideal target group for ecotourism development initiatives.
- Actors must utilize the strengths of participating parties by developing partnerships or networks that work collectively towards the common goals of ecotourism. NGOs partnering with local vocational schools, training institutions, local businesses, hotels, or restaurants are just a few examples of the myriad of possibilities of ecotourism networks.
- The models presented in this study are intended to serve as examples from which other developing countries' ecotourism projects can be based. By following the example of the organizations studied in Shangri-La, the success of the industry is believed to be more viable.

The innovation of each organization was presented to demonstrate that in any case, a context-specific approach is vital.

CONCLUSION

Among the many topics on the platform for discussion at the forthcoming Rio+20, ecotourism development presents a significant opportunity when it comes to addressing poverty alleviation in the context of sustainable development. The green economy is but a complex and multifaceted concept; equally multifaceted is the concept of ecotourism itself. This study has aimed to examine the complexities of the ecotourism industry, as it is expected to become both more prevalent and more popular in the future. Overall, this study was meant to assess the various components of ecotourism, taken initially from a broad policy standpoint before more narrowly examining the case study presented from my field work in Shangri-La. Amid all of this complexity lies some concrete models of how to properly develop ecotourism in small areas of the developing world.

From my work in Shangri-La, I have concluded that oftentimes organizations have declared ecotourism's maturity prematurely. In other words, some businesses declare themselves as ecotourism businesses before fully comprehending the complexities of ecotourism itself. This premature declaration results in failure—failure of the business, failure of the goals of ecotourism, failure of the aims of so many policymakers' work and effort. From my research I have concluded that this failure is the result of under-developed training programs—programs for policymakers, for locals, for business people and NGO workers alike.

Ecotourism thereby is still in its infancy. It is essential for those involved in ecotourism development to recognize this infant state and avoid forcing the industry to develop prematurely.

Development in any case takes time, it cannot be rushed or hastened or hurried. Rather, development must occur naturally, with the necessary guidance in order for maturity to be achieved properly. Using this analogy, the development of ecotourism must occur in a way in which the industry is guided properly, by NGOs, by training programs, etc. Businesses or ecotourism initiatives that have not been met with success may claim a myriad of reasons for why they in fact failed. My supposition for why these projects have failed is because these actors have been too anxious to see the results they wanted to see. They hastily develop what they believe is true or proper ecotourism before fully understanding that the industry is still in its infancy, before fully understanding the complexity of the industry itself.

True ecotourism therefore is indeed rare. However, amid this rarity, amid this uncommonness, I encourage those who truly believe that ecotourism can be a tool to achieve sustainable development to follow the example of the best practices presented in this study. I especially encourage negotiators at Rio+20 to take what I deem best practices into consideration when discussing the potential of ecotourism. The various methods for developing ecotourism, presented in the work of ETTI, TPAF/SACP, and SISC have all rightly emphasized the need of proper training and education for participant communities. It is no coincidence that these enterprises all have this in common. Rather, this correlation accurately reflects the main argument of this study: in order for ecotourism to properly address poverty alleviation in the context of sustainable development, in order for ecotourism to be properly understood and not overlooked or green-washed, in order for the mere sustainability of the industry to be achieved, the recognition of training and education as a fundamental basis of the industry itself must be recognized in order for ecotourism to develop into maturity properly. Only then can ecotourism develop into adulthood.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY:

Although my time in Shangri-La provided me with enough information to write what I believe is a somewhat thorough analysis of what ecotourism projects exist in the area, the time period only allowed me to merely scratch the surface. If more time were allotted, I think I would have been able to work with each organization more in depth, perhaps tracking the progress of each project as it develops, measuring the promises and pitfalls of each along the way. Therefore, for future study, I would recommend taking what introductory information has been provided in this study and work with the projects and project staff more directly over a longer period of time.

Specifically, I would recommend working with one teacher at ETTI, in order to get a clear glimpse at a classroom setting. Volunteers at ETTI are usually stationed there for one to two years, so the contact information I provide may be out of date. Nevertheless, getting in contact with one volunteer is advised as they will be able to lead you to more projects and people in the area. From my work in Shangri-La, I can say that one contact led to another, so meeting and talking to as many people as possible is strongly advised. In terms of TPAF/SACP, I would recommend getting in contact with Dakpa Kelden, the director and founder of SACP, who was extremely helpful to me, as I imagine he will be to others. Finally, in terms of SISC, I would advise contacting Wende Gomba, an extremely friendly and helpful man whose English far surpassed my expectations. Each of these people were extremely beneficial to my research, as they each in their own way contributed to the depth of study I was able to reach. Below is a list

of contacts I established while based in Shangri-La during the spring of 2012. Interviews were conducted with each of them, however all of the information gathered from each interview was not presented in this study. Although I would have liked to include all of the information, the time period and length of study just did not allow it.

SITE CONTACTS:

Organization	Key Contact	Staff Position	Email	Phone
Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI)	Kailah Weiss-Weinberg	Teacher		
Eastern Tibet Training Institute (ETTI)	Ellen Bartee	Director	director@etti.org.cn	18288835075
The Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF)	Kelsang Phuntsuk	Shangri-La Representative		18608873330
Shangri-La Association of Cultural Preservation (SACP)	Dakpa Kelden	Director/Founder	dakpa@shangrilaassociation.org	13988778781
Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC)	Wende Gomba	Team Leader	wendegomba@shangrilainstitute.org	13988785370
Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC)	Lha-Tso	Staff Member	gesangla@hotmail.com	13988732857
TPAF/SACP Eco-Lodge	Xiao Wu	Lodge Manager	janxiajay@gmail.com	18297007337
Local Trek Guide	Gonpo	Trek Guide		18308876664
Guangdong University	AJ	Ecology Student		13428881410
Independent Tour Guide	Tony	Tour Guide	nicefor2007@yahoo.co.in	15284577299
Yunnan Environment Development Institute	Henry Voigt	Senior Advisor	henryvoigt@web.de vedi@vip.km169.net	86-13888039722

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APPENDIX II

SUBJECTIVE ANALYSIS:

The vast majority of my research during the ISP period went relatively smoothly, save for a few expected bumps in the road. I found that having a clear idea of your topic prior to beginning your research is helpful, however you must be open to change. Flexibility, therefore, is essential and if you don't have this prior to beginning your research, you are likely to acquire it. One of the main things I focused on while conducting research is seeing every experience as an opportunity. Whether or not a particular experience is "relevant" to your research, you are bound to encounter locals that know something or someone that has to do with your project. In many instances, I met people and key contacts through others or simply by chance. The community in which I was engaged in was very small, so by the time I neared the end of the ISP period, I realized that many of the projects I was working with in addition to the people were intertwined with each other. Becoming part of this community proved to be extremely rewarding, as I was able to walk around and have people to wave to or say hi to. Throughout my time in Shangri-La, I kept a work journal in which I would write what I did that day, related to my topic or not, in order to be able to look back and see what was relevant from that day or week. Below are a few excerpts from that work journal. When writing the paper, I found that having a journal like this was extremely helpful.

WORK JOURNAL EXCERPTS:

26 April 2012 (Day 1 of ISP period)

I have successfully settled down in Shangri-La after being struck by pangs of indecision on where to study for the ISP period. Originally, I had planned to study eco-tourism in Xishuangbanna, after having had an insightful experience there for the Yunnan Exploration Project. As plans for my stay in Xishuangbanna became more concrete, our stay in Shaxi during our field excursion altered my plans for research as I was really intrigued by the Shaxi Rehabilitation Project and its relationship to eco-tourism. I thought I had decisively settled on studying Shaxi for the ISP period, and had left one of my bags there with the intent of returning to Shaxi at the end of the field excursion. However, coming to Shangri-La and listening to an introduction on the Eastern Tibetan Training Institute (ETTI) changed my plans yet again, and I found myself having new ideas and new goals for my ISP. So, albeit a complicated and convoluted process, I have decided to reside in Shangri-La for the duration of the ISP period to focus my research on training and education for eco-tourism. I returned to Shaxi yesterday to retrieve my other bag, and although the experience was inconvenient, the short trip allowed me to center myself before beginning this project. I also realized after returning to Shaxi that the location would not have been the best for my research, as there is not as much development going on there as there is in Shangri-La.

Specifically, during the ISP period I will be volunteering with ETTI, specifically with a training course they offer called English for Eco-tourism. I will also aim to do some research on eco-lodges in the area, to see what's working and what's not; what has failed and why? I have

also found an advisor at ETTI, an English teacher named Kailah who has been really, really resourceful as of late. She has given me a lot of information on my topic, and I just met a student named Maggie at the Handicraft Center who gave me a book to read called *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangri-La*. I feel overwhelmed with how much information is before me, but excited about the prospects in front of me for the next month. This afternoon I am having lunch with Kailah and after lunch I am going to settle down somewhere to begin all of the preliminary reading I have before me.

30 April 2011

This morning was my first day at ETTI. The walk from the Thangka Center to ETTI was about 45 minutes, which wasn't too bad. Kailah gave me really straightforward directions. Upon arriving at the classroom, I introduced myself to her class. My introduction was followed by typical questions regarding where I'm from, do I like Tibet, what do I like to eat, what I like to drink, etc. After the introduction, each student gave me their names. There are a total of 13 students in this class, which is the higher level English class. Their names are Jay, Julia, Mary, Jenny, Andrew, Mike, Thomas, Naomi, John-Simon, Naomi, Mary Joe, Lee, and one other student whose name I can't recall. I sat in the back of the room for the duration of the class as they learned new words related to the concept of pollution, mainly water pollution and air pollution. Kailah's lesson was very interactive as she showed a short video with photos related to the various new vocabulary words. Kailah also gave me the students' graded homework to look over. The assignment had about thirteen or so statements such as "I respect nature" or "The grassland is important" and the students had to either agree or disagree and write a statement why. It was interesting to read their responses, and I found looking at the homework very helpful in terms of gaining a perspective on how these students view the environment. Their English language levels vary, so some responses were more detailed than others. I want to talk to Kailah about how these lessons correspond to their future ecotourism occupations. Tomorrow I am planning on helping out during Kailah's study hall period. Hopefully I can speak more to the students.

I also tried to contact Gongpo today to see if he was available tomorrow. Unfortunately he is currently really busy so I'm not sure when I will be able to speak with him. I was doing a lot of reading this afternoon and I came across an organization called The Poverty Alleviation Fund, which is based in Cambridge, MA and has an office here in Shangri-La. I emailed the contact email from the website, so hopefully I will get a response soon. The NGO has some training for ecotourism projects going on in three villages in Shangri-La, so my hope is that I can coordinate something with them.

5 May 2012

This morning at 9:30AM Dakpa's nephew Kelsang came to pick me up from the Thangka Center. While in the car on the way to the eco-lodge, I talked to him about the time he spent in Lijiang last week; we had planned to meet on Thursday evening but when I phoned him he apologized for forgetting; his was in Lijiang for work. I inquired about the work he does, assuming he was a tour guide or something like that. He told me, on the contrary, that he works for an American NGO, The Poverty Alleviation Fund. I was taken aback by the irony of this! In doing research last week, I came across this NGO but had trouble finding someone to contact from the organization. I had emailed the office in Cambridge, MA, but have yet to receive and

email back. How ironic that Kelsang works for them! He said that due to the political situation, especially because The Poverty Alleviation Fund gets funding from USAID, their office was relocated to Kunming. Kelsang is actually the only representative of The Poverty Alleviation Fund in Shangri-La. I am so, so grateful for this contact to basically have been put into my hands. In the midst of my search, tracking down a contact was not as difficult as I had originally thought.

9 May 2012

This morning I sat in on Kailah's class. The topic of discussion was a continuation of their unit on religion which they began on Monday. They started talking about Christianity, Islam and Judaism, giving a brief introduction of each. The students also learned several vocabulary words related to each religion like church, mosque, rosary, Jesus, etc. It was interesting to listen to the way Kailah was explaining these terms. For example, she explained priest as "Christian lama". The students understood more clearly when terms were explained in this way. After class I returned to the Thangka Center for lunch and then went to the Handicraft Center to prepare questions for my interview with Ellen.

10 May 2012

This evening I met Wende Gomba for an interview. This morning I learned that he does not in fact work for the Nature Conservancy, which is what Kailah told me, but for the Shangri-La Institute for Sustainable Development; he is coworkers with Lha-tso. Even though I already spoke to someone from this NGO, I thought it would be beneficial to gain a different perspective, even if it is from the same organization. I'm really glad I did meet with him because at the end of the interview he offered to take me to the community center tomorrow afternoon.

11 May 2012

This morning I proctored the exam at ETTI. I was a bit nervous because Kailah warned me that the students have sneaky ways of cheating. With my lack of both Tibetan and Chinese, I was nervous that all hell would break loose when the teachers left the room. It went surprisingly smoothly though, with relatively minimal interruptions. I did catch a few students cheating, but I was able to properly communicate that I knew what was going on. The test itself covered some concepts from their hospitality class, directions, environmental issues, agreement statements, and some terms from their unit on religion. Some students had trouble with the directions so I tried my best to help them along. The test included a written portion, multiple choice, listening, oral/dictation, and fill in the blanks. I'm curious to see how the student's performed.

14 May 2012

This morning was spent writing from my room at the eco-lodge. However, because of the rain, the lodge lost power until about 8PM at night so I was not as productive as I had hoped to be today. Nevertheless, I opted to do some writing via pen and paper, which I think resulted in some good ideas formed for the conclusion of my paper. Tomorrow I will head back to Old Town to meet Kailah in the afternoon to discuss the structure of my paper. I can't believe this is the last week of ISP! I need to start thinking about gifts to get for Kailah, Dakpa, etc.

16 May 2012

Today I met with Kailah at Somewhere Else café to talk about the structure of my paper. I told her about my doubts of my paper being less about my personal and original ideas and more so presented in a report format. She said that that may be true, but at the same time my report is the result of original field research—it could not have been written without having that experience and research. Ultimately this will be reflected in the report, as my ideas and opinions will be consistent throughout. This made me feel a bit better because other than these mere feelings of self-doubt, I feel really confident in the work I have done. I just hope I can present it that way.

19 May 2012

Today I am returning to Kunming via sleeper bus. It feels bittersweet leaving this place, as it has offered me a lot in terms of research and experiential learning. I am looking forward to getting back to Kunming, though, for I will be able to really sit down and write my paper.

25 May 2012

Since being back in Kunming, I have realized how fruitful my time in Shangri-La proved to be. Keeping a journal like this has allowed me to write my paper more smoothly. Presentations begin on Sunday so tomorrow I think I will formulate my PowerPoint.