

National Parks in China: A New Model for Nature Conservation



Katherine Fritz
ISP Advisor: Dakpa Kelden
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Though the majority of my interviews were conducted in English, several were conducted in Chinese and so I have translated them here. Where I have translated, I use singular quotes like this ‘. Where I am quoting directly from an English speaker, I use regular double quotes.

I have changed all the names of all my interviewees to protect their identity, even if the information they supplied is not particularly sensitive.

China Has National Park

What may be the first of a park system like ours includes a special area for preserving the "dawn sequoia" trees previously known only from fossils.

CHINA has made the beginning of what may grow into a National Park system like that of the United States, by setting aside a special area for the conservation of the recently discovered "dawn sequoia" trees in the Valley of the Tiger. Announcement of this move was made simultaneously in China and at the University of California, where Prof. Ralph W. Chaney, first occidental botanist to set eyes on the trees, is now growing seedlings for planting on this side of the Pacific.

A Metasequoia Conservation Committee has been set up, with members representing this country as well as China. American members, in addition to Prof. Chaney, are J. Leighton Stuart, U. S. ambassador to

China, and Dean Roscoe Pound of the Harvard Law School, who was a front-rank botanist before he decided to make the law his career. Chinese members are the philosopher Hu Shih, former ambassador to Washington, Wong Wen Hao, advisor to Chiang Kai-Shek, and Han Lih Wu, vice minister of education. The "dawn sequoia," a species previously known only from fossils and supposed extinct for at least 20,000,000 years, was recently found alive in the deep interior of China. A few weeks ago Prof. Chaney made a special journey to see it, starting by flying across the Pacific and winding up by tramping dozens of miles over muddy mountain trails.

Science News Letter, May 22, 1948¹

¹ "China has National Park." *JSTOR*. Society for Science and the Public. NYU Bobst Library, New York. 19 Apr. 2009
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3924874>>.

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When the author of “China has First National Park” published in *The Science News-Letter* in 1948, he could not foresee the next 60 years of China’s struggle to develop an effective nature conservation system. If he had, he would have known that simply recognizing the value of precious land, as China did in 1948, does not automatically lead to a sophisticated, nation-wide national park system.

National parks are the hallmark of advanced civil society and complex government conservation schemes. Since the State Forestry Department declared China’s first officially protected space at Dinghu Shan Nature Reserve in Guangdong province in 1956², China has shown sustained commitment conservation by extending protected status to special natural landscapes every year, but not without serious trials along the way. The path to a Chinese national park system reflects the evolution of Chinese civil society and it’s escalating interest in precious natural landscapes.

In this paper, I wish to show that the nascent Chinese national park system makes a new and special contribution to the Chinese nature conservation scheme, a conclusion that counters the view of many members of the conservation community. My central questions are these: How does the history of modern nature conservation in China inform thinking about the national park system? What do national parks contribute to the complex Chinese nature conservation scheme and to China as a whole?

² Xu, Jianchu, and David R. Melnick. "Rethinking the Effectiveness of Public Protected Areas in Southwest China." *Conservation Biology* 21 (2007): 319.

First, I will briefly outline the history of modern conservation in China and explore some of the problems facing the nature reserve system, the most common framework for Chinese nature conservation, to contextualize the challenges facing national parks. Nature reserves and national parks are apples and oranges. I don't wish to compare the two systems here—they have divergent purposes and goals. But they have both arisen as Chinese nature conservation models and in this way come from the same impulse—the impulse to preserve China's natural heritage. This is what I want to explore secondly: the fact that a new model, the national park system, has recently arisen out of the conservation impulse. The continuing innovation surrounding Chinese conservation marks China's changing conception of national and natural heritage. I will use information gathered from interviews with government officials, park staff, NGO directors, and local people, as well as my own experience as a visitor to give an account of China's national park system.

I focused my research in Northwest Yunnan Province, on and near the Tibetan Plateau. Western China contains nearly 75% of China's protected land area³ so my base location in Xianggelila (Zhongdian), Yunnan Province, provided an ideal location to study the Chinese nature conservation scheme. My visits to Pudacuo National Park, heralded as China's first, and the future site of Tacheng National Park, were essential to my conclusions.

³ Bo, Li, Yang Fangyi, Mu Suo, Zhang Zhongyun, Sun Shan, Shen Xiaoli, and Lu Zhi. Review of CCA Studies in SW China. 2007. IUCN: The World Conservation Union. 19 Apr. 2009 <http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/sw_china_cca_study.pdf>.

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The story of nature conservation in modern China begins with Chairman Mao's brutal environmental policies that wreaked havoc throughout the country. Consideration of finite natural resources and precious natural landscapes had no place in the Marxist scheme; "...under Mao, resources including forests and biodiversity were treated as free goods: they had no economic value as no human labor was involved in their production"⁴. Mao's policy of "conquering nature" wrought extreme consequences for the environment in every region of China, including severe deforestation in western provinces, coastal mismanagement in the east, and general degradation of soil and farmland throughout central and southern regions.⁵

Since the first government sanctioned conservation project in 1956⁶, China has incorporated protected land every year. While historians agree that the state of the environment declined under Mao, statistics for the establishment of protected areas does show a steady, if sluggish, increase in the number and area of protected land throughout Mao's regime. However, nature reserve numbers shoot up dramatically after Mao's death in 1976, and reflect Deng Xiaopeng's 'open door' policies that allowed foreign conservation methods and research to flourish. This table⁷, prepared by the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) in 2005, and accompanying graph illustrate the effect of the Mao years on the

⁴ Harkness, James. "Recent Trends in Forestry and Conservation in of Biodiversity in China." Managing the Chinese Environment (Studies on Contemporary China). Ed. Richard Louis Edmonds. New York: Oxford UP, USA, 2000. 187-210.

⁵ Shapiro, Judith. Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, UK, 2001: 3.

⁶ Xu et al

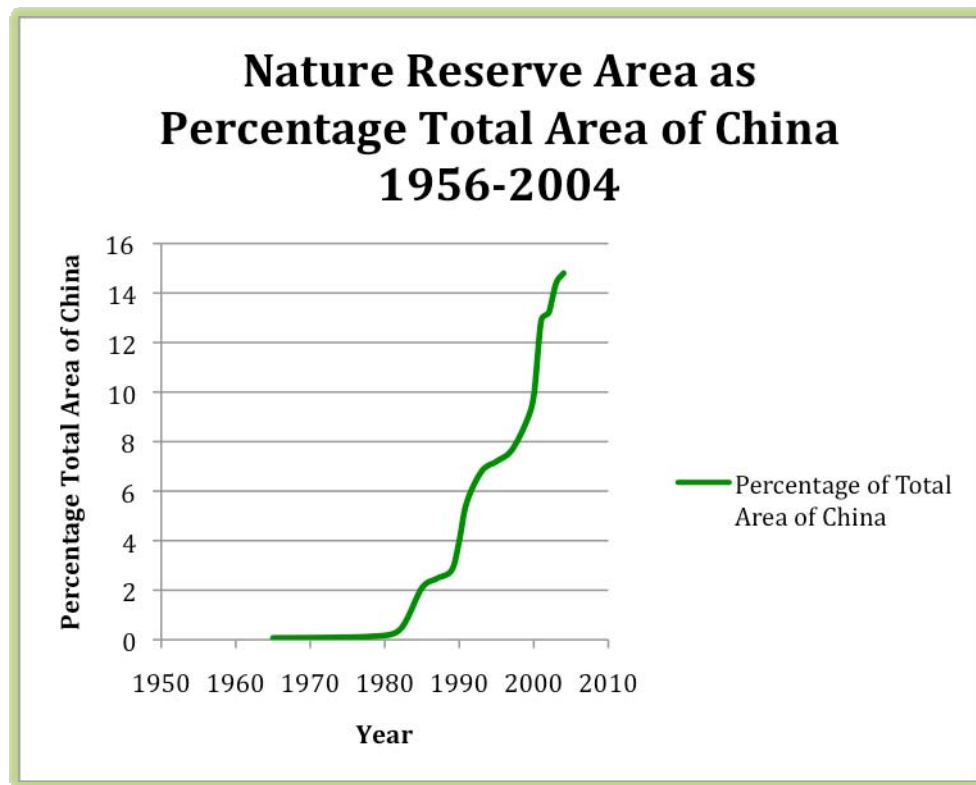
⁷ Ibid.

designation of formally protected areas, and China's renewed commitment to conservation since the 1970's:

Year	No. of Nature Reserves	Protected Area (1000 ha)	Average Size of Nature Reserves (1000 ha)	Percentage of Total Area of China
1956	1	1	1	
1965	19	649	34.2	0.07
1978	34	1,265	37.2	0.13
1982	119	4,082	34.3	0.4
1985	333	19,330	58	2.1
1987	481	23,700	49.3	2.47
1989	573	27,063	47.2	2.82
1990	606	40,000	66	4
1991	708	56,067	79.2	5.54
1993	763	66,184	86.7	6.8
1995	799	71,850	89.9	7.2
1997	926	76,979	83.1	7.64
1999	1146	88,152	76.9	8.8
2000	1227	98,208	80	9.85
2001	1551	129,830	83.7	12.9
2002	1757	132,945	75.7	13.2
2003	1999	143,980	72	14.4
2004	2194	148,226	67.6	14.8

The positive trend in protected area designation illustrates the Chinese government's recognition that China's land is vulnerable and valuable. This may seem obvious, but the concept of government-protected conservation areas evolved quite recently in modern history. This is not a development to take for granted.

China deserves commendation for the enormous expansion of conservation schemes over the past 20 years. Nature reserves are "...mostly well established and well-maintained, and are successful in conservation", according to "Li Yuqing", a



staff member at the Nature Conservancy in Kunming⁸. Overall, the nature reserve system is successful and has preserved huge land area that would otherwise have fallen prey to bad development schemes and other damage.

However, many scholars, both Chinese and foreign, have cited major problems with China's approach to conservation, particularly in nature reserves in western China. Some of these problems include, but are not limited to displacement and economic disenfranchisement of local people⁹, "paper park" syndrome¹⁰, poor

⁸ "Li Yuqing", interview with the author, May 27 2009.

⁹ Xu et al

¹⁰ Harkness: 193

education of reserve managers, governmental oversight problems, lack of park funding, and irresponsible development within protected areas^{11,12,13}.

When I spoke with interviewees about the national park system, much of their analysis of the parks relied on comparisons and references to the pre-existing nature reserve system. Given the dramatic problems that affect nature reserves in Northwest Yunnan, it is useful here to briefly introduce these major issues to give context for the following discussion of national parks, and for my interviewees' notion of conservation in China.

The first major problem is displacement and economic disenfranchisement of local people in the creation of nature reserves. The second is environmental degradation within parks, caused by unsustainable development and tourism projects within parks bounds. Poor education of reserve managers and lack of funding for reserves lead to bad development schemes, while a baffling government administrative structure results in lack of oversight.

1. The policies that govern nature reserve formation displace local people whose subsistence on park land far pre-dated plans for the reserve. Bo et al discuss China's nascent civil society as a factor in disenfranchisement, particularly in poorer areas in the west where most reserves are located. Here, "...the awareness of civil action is at its infancy, the ability to take the advantage of statutory legal system and a series of rural policies favorable to villagers is very minimal in comparison to the

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Bo et al

¹³ Hillman, Ben. "The Poor in Paradise: Tourism Development and Rural Poverty in China's Shangri-la." (2003). [JSTOR](#). Bobst Library, New York.

coastal and eastern regions”¹⁴. This adds to the problem of disenfranchisement, as local people are not aware or able to take advantage of their rights. Only recently have villagers affected by poor reserve planning and management begun to raise awareness of these problems, mainly through the help of grassroots NGOs¹⁵.

Villagers that continue to live in or on the outskirts of the nature reserve are often caused to discontinue their traditional way of life in accordance with strict new rules for the benefit of nature conservation. Several scholars have noted that local people are almost never involved in the planning and implementation of reserves^{16, 17}, and after a reserve’s establishment, they are often excluded from the economic benefits of the reserve. Indeed, there have been instances where government agencies have done all of the work to lay out a nature reserve on a map, and have even sought legal establishment, without having visited the site to assess the viability of a reserve in the area¹⁸.

In extreme cases the upheaval caused by reserve formation spurs local people to harvest scarce resources before access to them ends, making a perverse incentive to degrade land slated for protection¹⁹. For example,

“When the collective forest lands of Yuhu village were incorporated into the Yulongxueshan Nature Reserve in north-west Yunnan...farmers responded by cutting down trees that they had previously managed on a sustainable basis. Work teams had to be stationed in the village to prevent further damage and carry out propaganda work”²⁰.

¹⁴ Bo et al

¹⁵ “Andrew”, Interview with the author, May 1, 2009.

¹⁶ Xu et al

¹⁷ Harkness: 193

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Xu et al

²⁰ Harkness: 195

Considering that the people at Yuhu village faced expulsion from their land without compensation, their reaction to the impending nature reserve is hardly surprising. A grassroots NGO director I interviewed in Zhongdian confirmed that no people are allowed to live legally within the bounds of nature reserves, though many do under arrangement with local officials or at their own risk²¹. In many instances, the establishment of a reserve means extreme hardship for local people. Indeed, it is just this kind of uncertainty caused by displacement that makes locals mistrustful of officials and breeds an unproductive relationship between government and people that makes conservation work even more difficult²².

Even those villagers that remain near the park and continue to live in their ancestral homes are often excluded from the economic scheme of the park. Bo et al blame this on the nature reserve “model” that was adopted from Eastern coastal regions of China, where people have benefitted from the open door policies of the last two decades. In western China, people have not experienced such abundant economic growth, and still live in largely poor, agrarian communities that are ill-suited to adapt to the strict nature reserve system that causes them to have to change their livelihood²³.



²¹ Andrew

²² Xu et al

²³ Bo et al

2. The second major problem is environmental degradation within reserve bounds caused by unsustainable development and tourism projects. Both foreign scientists conducting research and international conservation watchdogs have found severe destruction within reserve bounds. The reasons for the destruction vary, but essentially come down to lack of funding and support for reserves from central government.

There are now over 2500 nature reserves in China. Li Yuqing explained that reserves have different classifications according to their “level”. The level entitles them to different resources, mostly funding opportunities. 250 are national level national parks, and these have the most access to government funds, but even they are supported primarily through local funding.²⁴ Today, nearly every nature reserve is fully dependent on local government²⁵, and local governments undertake reserve administration with vastly different amounts of enthusiasm. While some feel that a reserve is a source of pride, the reserve saddles many local governments with an unnecessary and even untenable fiscal burden²⁶. Li Yuqing broke this down for me,

“Local governments lose out with the nature reserve model in two ways: 1) they lose the right to develop because most zones of the nature reserve are off-limits to development. 2) they bear the financial burden of the reserve. They have no incentive to make nature reserves. Additionally, the local communities use the land for cutting trees, and harvesting mushrooms and traditional Chinese medicinal herbs. They can no longer do that when the government establishes a nature reserve”.²⁷

²⁴ Li Yuqing

²⁵ Harkness: 194

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Li Yuqing

Governments that must manage the reserves within their jurisdiction have to supply funding themselves. This often puts reserve managers in a difficult position. In order to keep reserves afloat, reserve managers direct development projects within reserves. This isn't illegal, because reserves are supposed to self-sustain. Indeed, higher officials even encourage projects as a way to finance reserve administration. If this seems vague, then surely the lack of guidance about how much development is acceptable²⁸, and in what industries, leaves managers with a lot of power to interpret as they will.

Many reserves have attempted to develop eco-tourism projects, but at least basic understanding of ecology and environmental sciences is necessary to implement successful eco-tourism projects. A survey of nature reserve managers in China in 1997 revealed that only 16% of managers had received some kind of higher education (not even necessarily environmentally focused)²⁹. Other degrading activities within reserve bounds include mining, logging, and tourism development.

Administration poses another problem. Even as a dedicated student seeking specific information about the reserve system, I found the bureaucracy of conservation administration absolutely overwhelming. There are 10 different Chinese government ministries that oversee protected lands. Not only that, but nature reserves are designated at the county, provincial, and national levels, further complicating the administrative structure³⁰.

²⁸ Harkness: 195

²⁹ Li, Wenjun, and Nianyong Han. "Ecotourism Management in China's Nature Reserves." *Ambio* 30 (2001): 62-63. *JSTOR*. Royal Swedish Academy of Science. Bobst Library, New York. 2 May 2009 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4315102>>.

³⁰ Xu et al

This manifests in lack of development oversight. There is no check on reserve managers or other officials to weed out conflicts of interest in development projects, and the process for applying for licenses within reserves is largely undefined³¹.

Similarly, the sheer complexity of the administrative structure makes communication difficult between different agencies at different levels, particularly as departments are already indisposed to deal with each other. Reserves are ordered by higher administrative agencies that do not understand the complex administrative balance that already exists in rural areas, so the formation of a reserve often exacerbates the contentious relationships between local and provincial level governments³².

In summary, the “conservation community” in northwest Yunnan—conservation experts (both local and foreign) who publish papers in international scientific journals, conservation biologists and scientists on the ground in China, and local grassroots NGO staff and directors I spoke with in and around Zhongdian—feels extremely negative about nature reserves. Each group has their own quarrels, whether human rights issues—displacement of local people, or hard conservation issues—degradation within reserves. I overwhelmingly got the impression that the nature reserve system is broken, with a few exceptional reserves that thrive because of dedicated and educated managers who personally take on stewardship of the land.

³¹ Ibid

³² Harkness: 198

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These are the complicated circumstances into which the national park model has taken root in China. Given the extreme problems with reserves, it is of little wonder that conservation experts feel discouraged about prospects for conservation. Indeed, like their discussion of nature reserves, almost every government official and NGO staff I spoke with gave me a disparaging view of some element of the national park system.

The national park system can't "fix" the problems with current conservation practices, even though the policies governing national parks have done much to rectify some of the problems. If every nature reserve were suddenly to adopt the national park model, some problems would be abated while others would continue, perhaps exacerbated. Many of the criticisms expressed by my interviewees are well founded. But after visiting Pudacuo myself, I'm convinced that the success of Chinese national parks should not be judged by this criterion alone. I found that the primary value of national parks lies not in their conservation function. The parks serve a much greater and, I feel, more important purpose, which I will discuss later.

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Throughout my research period, I was curious about why governments and officials were so eager to found national parks. What is the purpose of the national park model and what are the benefits of the designation?

According to Li Yuqing at TNC, "the national park model is designed for places where local government and communities have no incentive for nature reserves. It's a compromise...Pudacuo is a first experiment. It is meant to compliment nature

reserves, not replace them. We never had the intention of replacing nature reserves.”³³ In his telling, the national park model is an answer to problematic nature reserves, but not a threat to the nature reserve model in itself.

Founded in 2005, Pudacuo is China’s first national park. It lies about 30km outside Xianggelila in northwest Yunnan. Pudacuo served as my concentration site because it is the only fully functioning national park in Yunnan at this time. As Pudacuo proved, national parks are expensive and complicated to establish, so expansion of the national park model has been slow. There are several other “official” national park projects in the design phase right now, including Laojun Shan National Park and Meili Xue Shan National Park, with many auxiliary—some might say “rogue”—projects in the works all over Yunnan.

In Lijiang, Hu Ma works at the Lijiang Tourism Company as the planning overseer of Laojun Shan National Park. The land is currently designated as a nature reserve, but the national government has marked the area for a national park. He spoke to me about the benefits of using the national park model for the Laojun Shan site,

“At first there was a question about whether to use the ‘National Park’ designation. Should we use the national park name? It was decided that we should because in a typical nature reserve, absolutely no development is allowed—the only purpose is environmental conservation. National parks allow for development within their boundaries. In addition, the idea of national parks is very popular internationally. TNC experts advised that the land should be called a National Park for this reason.”³⁴

In his estimation, the Laojun Shan National Park will be more successful than the Laojun Shan nature reserve, because the national park model will draw tourism that

³³ Li Yuqing

³⁴ “Hu Ma”, interview with the author, May 6, 2009

will help sustain the park. Throughout this conversation I got the impression that national parks are a “sexier” conservation model that attract international attention and, most importantly, investment. Indeed, internet searches of Pudacuo yield thousands of articles praising China’s conservation progress and the new national park system, demonstrating the international communities’ wide approval of the new model.

I also visited Baima nature reserve, slated to become a national park this October, though not with the explicit permission of the government or the blessing of TNC. This project could be considered one of the “rogue” national park projects I mentioned earlier.

The park is still in the development phase—round the clock construction crews are working to erect the visitor’s center, the education center, a hotel, and a restaurant at the entrance gate. These developments are new according to the national park model, but would have been prohibited within a nature reserve. Zhang Zhi, who has worked in both the NGO and public sectors and who is now a research director at Baima nature reserve, answered questions for me about the difference between reserves and the national park model. In response to my question: “In Baima nature reserve, why do you feel that the national park is the best model? Why don’t you want to remain a nature reserve?” he replied with similar reasons as Hu Ma at Laojun Shan,

‘We don’t have very many [golden snub-nosed] monkeys, only about 90, so we don’t have much money or attention from the government. If we become a national park, more people will come to visit and our revenues will increase. Also, the national government will give us support and money.’³⁵

³⁵ “Zhang Zhi”, interview with the author, May 17, 2009

For local governments, the national park label brings prestige, tourism, money, and recognition from the central government. Between them, Hu Ma and Zhang Zhi also unwittingly corroborated the major problems local governments have with nature reserves: funding and allowances for development. Both officials feel confident that the national park model can answer these problems with the nature reserve system.

But the prestige associated with parks has a negative side. Hu Ma in Lijiang quite openly shared his vexation at the bureaucratic jumble caused by officials and agencies that vie for power over park administration. This excerpt from my interview with him illustrates this:

Fritz: "What are some of the administrative differences between US and Chinese parks and how has the US model been adapted to the Chinese context?"

Hu: "In the US, National Parks are given budgets and basically operate themselves. In China, there are so many bureaus involved and consensus does not exist. There is a proposed National Park Administration Committee that would be allowed to make policy relating to parks, but current Chinese law doesn't allow such an institution because it would override some other bureaus that want a say in the park system. Everyone wants some power of authority over the parks.

For example, in the master planning process for Laojun, we had originally thought that the Lijiang provincial government could take charge of the process and authorization. But then we were told that the Ministry of Construction needed to approve the process, and then the Ministry of Forestry wanted to approve it. Everyone wanted final say and the power of authority to veto or authorize the plans. And this is not just a provincial level problem. This is a national level problem. The Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Environmental Protection Ministry all have a part in the national park designation process.

In fact, this is funny, the Ministry of Tourism and the Environmental Protection Ministry founded illegal national parks in Heilong Province. They were illegal because those ministries don't have the authority to designate national parks. It was a little scandal."

Fritz: "So who has ultimate authority over park designation?"

Hu: “The national government is the only body that has the designation power. But within the scheme we have national level national parks, provincial level national parks, and municipal level national parks. Pudacuo is a municipal level national park, while Laojun is a provincial level national park.”

Fritz: “How does this impact the administration of national parks?”>

Hu: “All of this really does impact the administration of the parks. The smallest operational details need approval from everyone, from every single ministry. It’s extremely frustrating and the process is extremely slow. We’ve already spent 3 ½ years working on the Laojun project, and all we have is the master plan! There are so many interest groups and authorities vying for power. I would like to tell you more about this park, but unfortunately there isn’t much to tell right now, we only have a master plan. Many people, NGOs, schools, businesses, all come in interested in learning more about the park. But what can I tell them? I only have a master plan.”³⁶

From Hu Ma’s comments, it seem that national parks reverse the problems of administrative structure that plague nature reserves. While governments try to absolve themselves of responsibility for troublesome nature reserves because they pose a financial and administrative burden, government agencies and officials fall over each other trying to gain some of the prestige from authority over national parks.

Zhang Zhi said in our interview that the government power-grab really has taken a toll on the administrative efficiency of the park and the quality of conservation within³⁷. Several people I spoke with shared their feeling that Pudacuo has been completely ruined by greedy officials who only seek financial success and notoriety. Zhang Zhi told me that Pudacuo has nasty internal administrative problems. Corruption is a serious problem, and because the park

³⁶ Hu Ma

³⁷ Zhang Zhi

administration doesn't cap the number of tourists that can visit each day, the park is overrun and the quality of conservation has suffered severely. I asked if there was a problem with the policies governing park administration,

'No, policies are generally very good for all national parks. Pudacuo has very good policies, but the officials there are bad. Maybe they don't have an environmental education, or maybe they are greedy, I don't know, but they don't allocate their money well. If a good official has 10 dollars, he allocates 3 to education, 3 to research, 3 to maintain the park, and 1 to himself. Pudacuo is not doing very good conservation at all. It's a mess. A bad official allocates 1 to education, 1 to research, 3 to maintain the park, and the rest for himself.'³⁸

Zhang Zhi seemed particularly concerned with education opportunities within parks, and several people I spoke to expressed concern about the lack of focus on education at Pudacuo. A fellow visitor I met at the soon-to-be Tacheng National Park site summed up this problem perfectly. She is staff at a well-respected Zhongdian grassroots environmental organization and a former 3rd grade teacher. Speaking of the two small girls who were with us on the tour, she said, "the little girls just want to see the monkeys, they don't understand the politics"³⁹.

This is a serious concern for many people who see national parks as perhaps the only opportunity to educate the vast public on nature conservation. Zhang Zhi thinks Pudacuo has utterly missed this precious opportunity, and asserted adamantly that the mistake wouldn't be repeated at Tacheng National Park when it opens. "When the main buildings are finished with construction, all visitors will first have an educational session to learn about the landscape and the snub-nosed monkeys before entering the park. Education is more important here than at

³⁸ Zhang Zhi

³⁹ "Li Laoshi", conversation with the author, May 21, 2009

Pudacuo. Education is the most important method for nature conservation at the national park.⁴⁰ In a subsequent interview, he stressed the importance of education again when I asked him what he thought was the best method for nature conservation, ‘restrict access to tourism, do research about how to establish the park, and continue allowing research within the park. When tourists do visit, the focus should be on education about the animals in the park and the culture of the local people.’⁴¹ The fear is that people will come to visit Pudacuo and other national parks and “see the monkeys” without understanding the urgency and importance of nature conservation.

* * *

Before I visited Pudacuo, I had been armed with an extremely negative vision of it. While most of my interviewees agreed that the model and policies were generally good, almost all felt that the conservation and administrative practices are abysmal. A local grassroots NGO director who grew up as a Tibetan nomad in a similar familial structure to those of the people living in Pudacuo told me, “People live in the park. Tibetan nomads live in there, but I feel it is bad because it’s like a zoo. The tourists come to look. We want to build an education center in the park to stop this perception”⁴². I braced myself to have a depressing day at the park, observing local nomads exploited as if “in a zoo” and obnoxious tourists snapping away happily and ignorantly on cameras. I had nearly written off the entire nature conservation system in China as corrupt and ineffective.

⁴⁰ Zhang Zhi

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² “Andrew”

Then I arrived at Pudacuo. The majestic visitor's building heralding the park entrance was as dignified as any in the US. I was immediately reminded of Yellowstone National Park, and the comparison arose all day, not just because the altitude causes startlingly similar flora to grow—large pines and short, stubby brush—and yaks forcefully reminded me of buffalo. But Pudacuo is worthy of comparison because of the dignity inspired by the spare development, the formality of the architecture, and the sincerity of the staff. What I saw at Pudacuo was the inspiration of national pride, like the kind Americans have in our great American west.

The Chinese national park model was originally borrowed from the US, which goes some length to explain the similarities in infrastructure. Hu Ma told me of the model, "We learned the administration model from the US. But the realities in China are different. In the US, there are wide expanses of land where no one is living, and these are national parks. In China, there are so many people, people are living inside these protected spaces."⁴³ In addition, the national park model has strict development codes; only 5% of total land area is allotted for tourism infrastructure projects. Beyond that, the landscape is to remain untouched.⁴⁴ Even though the US model inspired its eastern sister, the Chinese scheme is distinctly Chinese.

While the 190RMB entrance fee is prohibitively expensive for many Chinese people, it makes Pudacuo feel like a place that's *worth* conserving. After paying a slightly reduced student entrance rate (135RMB), my friends started a spirited debate:

⁴³ Hu Ma

⁴⁴ Ibid.

‘Shouldn’t the admission be free, or at least prorated according to the amount people are able to pay?’

‘If the park were free, people would use it as a free good—there would be no incentive to keep it beautiful.’

‘But as such, it’s a good that only benefits the wealthy.’

There is no easy answer to this challenge. But clearly, the thousands of visitors to the park every year are willing to pay the admission fee because they cherish this natural relic—a distinctly Chinese landscape that is absolutely worthy of pride.

But Pudacuo is somewhat justified in charging the hefty admissions fee. The infrastructure was entirely build using bank loans, and the major revenue source at Pudacuo is ticket sales. There isn’t the variety of funding sources that benefit US national parks. In addition, the park administration allots 30% of revenues to community development projects within and around the park.⁴⁵

Zhang Zhi’s fear that educational information available at Pudacuo was extremely limited is well founded. What literature did exist was only provided in Chinese. During my visit, I saw only one educational signpost, the English translation of which read:

“Fish Drunk with Rhododendron spp: Despite their beauty, some species of Rhododendron spp have tiny amounts of poison. After the fish consume the falling flowers containing the poison, it will be intoxicated and float to the surface, thus create the famous scene “Fish Drunk with Rhododendron spp”.

No information was obviously available about the species within the park or the most popular natural attractions, Shudu Lake and Bita Lake.

Zhang Zhi’s other criticism, that the huge number of visitors seriously degrades the conservation practices within the park, is also a good one. There is

⁴⁵ Li Yuqing

definitely a trade-off between tourism development and conservation. But in the several hours I spent in Pudacuo and of the several hundred visitors I observed there, I never saw a single person litter or step out of bounds of the neatly developed tourist boardwalks. This alone indicates people's reverence for the stunning natural landscape. Li Yuqing sees the national park model as a sensible compromise between nature conservation and China's new, ferocious appetite for domestic tourism,

“The trend that is not going to stop. We have certain realities that we have to deal with. People want to come and see this land. Instead of stopping tourism, which would be impossible, we're adopting concrete measures to ensure good conservation. These include eco-buses, trails, elevated walkways—all to minimize the negative impacts of tourism. Also, like it or not, the expensive ticket price has the added benefit of curbing the number of people in the park.”⁴⁶

The infrastructure that Mr. Li describes was sparse and tasteful. Electric lines, fences, and trash receptacles dotted the paved road through the park. Green “eco-buses” are the only form of transportation for the general public allowed within park bounds. Tourists ride the buses to and from designated bus stops to sites of interest, including Shuda Lake and Bitu Lake, where they can explore at their leisure and then re-board an eco-bus.

One way to look at national park model is to see as a great money grab that commodifies the landscape and removes tourists from the real experience of nature. Another way to see it, and the way I think many Chinese people see it when they visit the park, is that this natural landscape is a place that deserves respect. It is a place to be proud of, and the formality of the national park infrastructure adds to

⁴⁶ Li Yuqing

the feeling of significance to the space. Tourism degrades and tourism infrastructure interrupts the pristine natural landscape, yes, but these developments are a sign that people are taking an active interest in the natural heritage of their country.

National parks in the United States have done much to instill in our national character a fervent respect for liberty, open space, and the Great West. Shouldn't Chinese people have an analogous conservation system that encourages people to enjoy the most beautiful parts of their country? The hope is that national parks can lead to a general increase in nature appreciation. At no time in the history of China is this more important than right now.

Further, the fact that China is experimenting with conservation schemes such as national parks shows that people aren't satisfied with the problematic old models. Initially TNC planned to establish more nature reserves in the area, but they quickly realized that nature reserves were not the best model for the area, and so looked to the international community for ideas.⁴⁷

In the grand hall of the visitor's building at Pudacuo, a wide screen scrolls through stunning scenery, punctuated with a message from TNC about the innovative new national park model:

⁴⁷ Ibid

“Northwest Yunnan: Piloting National Parks in China

China—unrivaled geology and ecology

Northwest Yunnan—a pearl of biodiversity

A cradle of culture

Soaring mountains and rushing rivers

One of China’s last great places

But it is also a region gripped by poverty

As traditional subsistence methods become increasingly unsustainable

And threaten the region’s ecological support system

A new model is therefore needed

To balance community development with conservation

National parks deliver this method of development

Founded in 1872

Yellowstone was the world’s first national park

The model has now spread throughout the world

National parks preserve functioning ecosystems

And allow people to get closer to nature

The national park concept was introduced to northwest Yunnan in 2000

With support from the Yunnan government

TNC [The Nature Conservancy] planted the seed for a national park here

By hosting a “National Parks workshop”

Local governments had the foresight to promote the national park model

With the guidance and support of TNC

In June 2007

Pudacuo opened in Shangri-la

With science based planning

And upgraded facilities

Improved management

And community participation

Conservation can achieve effective results

And sustainable tourism can be realized

People are drawn into nature

TNC and local governments are working to establish more national parks

At Laojun Mountain

And Meili Snow Mountain

With this base, the national park model will spread elsewhere

Conservation yields no easy answers

In searching for suitable methods for China

With pragmatism and dedication

We need support and participation from all corners of society

To succeed in this mission

Please join us on this journey

—The Nature Conservancy”

Just as the visitor's screen claims, it seemed to me that TNC and the local and municipal level government really has developed a model that incorporates environmental and cultural conservation with community development.

Perhaps the most striking policy difference between traditional nature reserves and national parks, and the one heavily touted by the TNC message board at the entrance to Pudacuo, is that local people are thoroughly incorporated into the scheme. According to Li Yuqing,

“The ultimate purpose of TNC's involvement in the national park model is conservation of biodiversity, but there are other stakeholders who want different things, mostly money. We have to manage these relationships and desires, and we often compromise. TNC's agenda is no totally in compliance with local governments, so we have to be realistic and engage the local community for leverage.”

One of the ways to use the community as leverage is to improve relations with locals and ensure the rising standard of their quality of life. Unlike US national parks, locals can live inside the park and continue their traditional subsistence practices within park grounds, with guidance on sustainable practices from NGOs and government officials. Hu Ma from Laojun Shan National Park project explained park resident policy to me,

“11,000 residents live within the boundaries for the park. The plan is to incorporate them into the national park scheme, but to arrange this with each individual would be too much, so we plan to discuss with the township level and local leaders. This is very different from Pudacuo because that land has very few residents. In the case of Laojun, there are so many people it would be impossible to move them all out.”⁴⁸

I was lucky to visit a village within Pudacuo, and observed firsthand that locals continue raising animals, building traditional style living complexes, and planting

⁴⁸ Hu Ma

small fields of crops. Indeed, the only difference between this village and others in the area that were not incorporated into the park were road and electrical infrastructure and huge cured logs for revamping traditional houses. Many were under construction—the old plaster sided structures were in the process of being torn down and replaced by superior quality wooden complexes. A local man told me that the park subsidizes the building projects and erected the infrastructure free of charge to the community⁴⁹.

The village I visited was off the road used by park tour buses, and the local people were extremely surprised to see me there, asking repeatedly if I was lost. This illustrated to me that their life within the park is quiet and private—almost completely uninterrupted by the comings and goings of thousands of tourists just beyond the village boundary.

Every local I spoke to said that they liked living within the park and derived major benefits from its presence. A man whose hometown is just outside the Pudacuo boundary told me that even his village has benefitted from proximity to the park. The park provided him with a job sweeping walkways and picking up litter. Other men in his village also found work within Pudacuo⁵⁰. This man's work experience is due to park policies that are sensitive to local people,

“Before Pudacuo was established, tourism in the area was very ill managed. Local people would offer horse-riding tours to visitors, but the horses trampled over very fragile ecosystems. Now horse-riding in the park is prohibited, which means that people have lost their livelihood. But the park managers compensate the local people with \$5000RMB per year for lost income. The local people are also preferentially employed within the park. They do jobs like cleaning, bus driving, and interpreting. In addition, a

⁴⁹ “Cheng Changming”, conversation with the author, May 22, 2009

⁵⁰ “Zhao Lu”, conversation with the author, May 22, 2009

portion of the ticket price is set aside and given directly to local people. We're still experimenting with profit distribution."⁵¹

Zhang Zhi corroborated that locals living in or near national parks experience increased living quality. In response to my question: Do local people like or dislike the park? He answered, 'local people really like the park because the park pays for development projects in the villages. Also, out of every family, one person is offered a job at the park. People feel that the park brings them money and work. It improves their lives.'⁵² With respect to economic enfranchisement, the national park model is unquestioningly superior to nature reserves.

* * *

The future of national parks is still uncertain. Pudacuo is the first officially designated national park, even though there's currently no national level avenue for designating parks. Pudacuo was founded with local level legislation because it sits in Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Autonomous prefectures can pass their own legislation without approval from the central government.⁵³

There is good news for Pudacuo and the national park model. The recently released 2008 financial numbers showed that the park is financially sustainable, and even makes a small profit.

But this could ultimately cause problems. Other prefectures also want national parks because the conservation model is lucrative. This is a problem for TNC, who have provided training, scientific expertise, and interpretation services to

⁵¹ Li Yuqing

⁵² Zhang Zhi

⁵³ Li Yuqing

help launch all the current park projects in Yunnan. Because so many prefectures are rushing to make national parks or transform nature reserves into parks, like Baima Snow Mountain nature reserve, TNC simply does not have funding or personnel resources to help “plan very carefully before making parks and approach things systematically.”⁵⁴ The zeal over the park model could produce sub-standard parks with poor conservation practices, thereby undermining the model completely.

Ultimately, Pudacuo is an experiment and a demonstration. Of the future of national parks, Li Yuqing told me,

“If it is successful, then we will approach the higher level government with this demonstration model so we can scale it and spread it to other provinces...Pudacuo is a success in TNC’s mind because conditions in the local community have improved and the ecosystem is being preserved. This shows success to us. But it’s been a long learning process.”⁵⁵

And there are still issues that Pudacuo will face before the declaration of victory, like how to cap village development inside the park, or how to continue financial success through the economic crisis. There are still many unknowns.

* * *

In Deqin, I spoke to a grassroots NGO staff member who is a devout Buddhist. For him, conservation is about the feeling in one’s heart that causes one to act respectfully and responsibly toward nature. He said,

‘Law (falu) physically controls the body, for example if you kill or steal they can imprison you. But law cannot control the spirit. Even with laws, people still destroy, officials don’t inspect everything, and even if they do inspect, they can’t see everything that people do, all of the destruction that people do, so destruction will happen anyway. Law only captures the surface, it cannot

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Li Yuqing

regulate the spirit, and environmental destruction is caused by this sickness of the spirit.’⁵⁶

Ultimately, my research concerned whether law can actually produce a system of conservation that respects the balance of people and nature. When I heard him say this, my Buddhist friend’s words shattered my assuredness that law has the power to mediate human/nature relationships successfully.

But on second look, my experience of Pudacuo helped me understand that conservation runs deeper than the law, because I saw that Pudacuo means more than nature conservation, and more than responsible tourism development.

Good policy has the potential to draw out deep beliefs about good stewardship of the land and of each other that run in the teachings of all the world’s major religions. We have queues from thousands of years of human wisdom about how to live on earth. In this period of huge change we can look seriously at that guiding knowledge and put it to practical use.

The national park model in and of itself cannot ensure good conservation practices. But the institution of national parks can engender a sense of pride in China’s natural landscape that can affect the country’s national character as a whole, and inspire a new generation of Chinese people who believe in the value of their natural heritage and act in concert with those beliefs. In this way, Pudacuo has a much deeper meaning than the innovation that inspired it, or the policies that govern it.

⁵⁶ “Tsering Mu”, conversation with the author, May 13 2009.

Human Resources

“Andrew”, interview with the author, Zhongdian. 1 May 2009.

“Cheng Changming”, conversation with the author, Pudacuo National Park. 22 May 2009. (Interview conducted in Chinese)

“Hu Ma”, interview with the author, Lijiang. 6 May 2009. (Interview conducted in Chinese with interpreter)

“Li Laoshi”, conversation with the author, Tacheng. 21 May 2009

“Li Yuqing”, interview with the author, Kunming. 27 May 2009.

“Tsering Mu”, conversation with the author, Deqin. 13 May 2009. (Interview conducted in Chinese)

“Zhao Lu”, conversation with the author, Pudacuo National Park. 22 May 2009. (Interview conducted in Chinese)

“Zhang Zhi”, interview with the author, Zhongdian. 17 May 2009. (Interview conducted in Chinese)

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Personal Reflections on ISP Project

The ISP period presented me with an incredible opportunity to connect the theory I study in school in the United States with a real-world forum for exploring and testing what I think I know. Though I had an inkling of this feeling before I left, my ISP period confirmed that I don't know anything. I love that feeling!

At NYU my interdisciplinary major focuses on the intersection between environmental policy, politics, and philosophy. I'm so pleased that my ISP incorporated each of these disciplines, because I feel that I'm contributing to my studies back at home. This didn't feel like a "slice out of life", but a thoroughly relevant project that will deepen my major at school.

And of course the ISP has deepened more than my academic life. Through this project and the colorful characters that passed in and out of it, I've fallen in love with China. Conducting my own research, managing my own time, being in charge of my own relationships, making phone calls in Chinese—all of these things have given me a taste of what it might be like to live a real life in China. And, for a very short period of time, I guess I was.

At one point, which I wrote about in the conclusion of my paper, I had a crisis where a Buddhist friend basically told me that policy is useless, and the only real way to make positive environmental and spiritual change is through education and self-examination. After that day, I felt defeated—why had I spent so many years of my life studying this subject (environmental policy) that turned out not to be *the most important thing*?

I sat down in the afternoon and wrote in my notebook about policy vs. education. I wrote that good policy has the potential to draw out deep beliefs about good stewardship of the land and of each other that run in the teachings of all the world's major religions. We have queues from thousands of years of human wisdom about how to live on earth. In this period of huge change we can look seriously at that guiding knowledge and put it to use on a global scale—my friend put it perfectly: "the mystical change of the world requires the law to give it structure".

This anecdote epitomizes the ISP experience for me. So many times, my worldview was challenged and momentarily toppled, only to be reconstructed stronger and more resilient.

I'm so proud of my ISP, not of the subject matter, and not particularly of the writing, but of how much I've learned about myself and about how to put what I love to think about into use in the real world.

List of related ISP topics

What is the relationship between tourism and environmental/cultural conservation in Zhongdian?

Why are environmental conservation and culture conservation always paired together in NGO work in NW Yunnan?

How do grassroots NGOs promote environmental conservation and sustainability in NW Yunnan?

How do International NGOs interact with local people in rural projects?

Itinerary

May 1st—arrive in Zhongdian
Interview with grassroots NGO director
JSTOR and online research
Set up interviews with Zhongdian contacts

May 5th—bus to Lijiang
Interview with Lijiang Foreign Affairs official
Interview with Local Tourism Investment Company official

May 7th—bus to Zhongdian
Meet Zhongdian Foreign Affairs official
Interview with Deqin NGO staff
Visit China Exploration and Research Society site

May 11th—bus to Deqin
Meet Kawageba Institute staff
Go to Meili Xue Shan
Interview with Buddhist friend

May 14th—bus to Zhongdian
Interview with Tacheng official
Interview with Vice-director of Pudacuo

May 19th
Visit Pudacuo

May 20th—bus to Tacheng
Meet with Tacheng official
Visit Baima Xue Shan nature reserve

May 21st—return to Zhongdian
2nd visit to Pudacuo
Interview local residents

May 22nd—return to Kunming
Interview with TNC regional program director

List of contacts

Bill Bleisch—The Bridge Fund, regional director (Chengdu)

Cell: 13501023659

Email: wvbleisch@netvigator.com

Chen Li—Foreign Affairs Bureau, staff (Zhongdian)

Cell: 13988722921

Notes: No English. Native of Shangri-la and knowledgeable about tourism in the area.

Dakpa Kelden—Shangri-la Association, director (Zhongdian)

Cell: 13988778781

E-mail: dakpa@shangrilaassociation.org

Gongbu (Carter)—The Bridge Fund, regional environmental director (Chengdu)

Cell: 1368404921

Email: yakherder870@gmail.com

He Jiguang—Local Tourism Investment Company, section chief (Lijiang)

Business Phone: (0) 888 5179 876

Cell: 13908883500

Notes: No English. Knowledgeable about government relations with national park system.

Li Guowu—Foreign & Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of Lijiang, director (Lijiang)

Cell: 13908880171

E-mail: liguowufao@yahoo.com.cn

Notes: Excellent English. Kind and helpful within Lijiang municipal government.

Mu Suo—Kawagebo Culture Association, member (Zhongdian)

Cell: 13988788135

Notes: No English. Extremely generous with his time and knowledgeable about Buddhism and conservation on the Tibetan plateau. Former staff at Deqin TNC.

Paul Buzzard—China Exploration and Research Society, biologist (near Zhongdian)

Cell: 15894371073

Se Long Nong Bu—Kawagebo Cultural Association, member (Zhongdian)

Cell: 13988788032

Shifu—Shangri-la Association (Zhongdian)

Cell: 13988733355

Tse Ring Drolma—The Kawagebo Culture Association, staff (Deqin)

Cell: 13519709170 (Qinghai number), 13578476250 (local number)
Email: drolmabeverly@gmail.com

Wen de Guanba—Shangrila Institute, director (Zhongdian)
Cell: 13988785370
Notes: Excellent English. Helpful and knowledgeable about grass-roots Tibetan environmentalism. Former staff at Zhongdian WWF.

Wang de Zhe (bo shi)—TNC Deqin office, director (Deqin)
Cell: 13688705233

You Lin—Tacheng Nature Reserve (Golden Monkey Project), staff (Weishi County)
Cell: 13988714076

Zhang Yan—Foreign & Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, interpreter (Lijiang)
Business Phone: +86 (0)888 5109 865
Cell: 13769038046
E-mail: ariel22zhang@yahoo.com.cn
Notes: Perfect English, extremely helpful. May be going to grad school in UK in 2009.

Zha Shi Ni Ma—Tourism Management Bureau (Zhongdian)
Cell: 13988784149