



Case Study:

The Death of Ecotourism in Jisha, China

Country: China



Introduction

From 1949 until 1978, the Communist regime severely restricted both domestic and international tourism to the point that it was almost nonexistent (Sofield and Li, 1998). Hotels in China were known for segregating foreigners from Chinese, and any interaction between local people and tourists was kept to a minimum. With the economic boom and the interest of foreign investment in the 1980s, Deng Xiao Ping recognized the significance that the tourism industry could play in China. Deng and his advisors saw tourism as an economic activity that could bring in foreign exchange. The promotion of tourism also influenced a renewed interest in the preservation of cultural, historical, and religious sites that were once damaged or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. From the 1980s on, the domestic and international tourism industry in China grew enormously. By 1998, 24 out of 31 municipalities, provinces, and autonomous regions had made tourism the leading industry in their localities (Zhang et al., 2000). The World Tourist Organization predicts that by 2020, China will rank first among the top world destinations and fourth among the world top tourist generating countries (Zhang et al., 2000).

The development of tourism in the western regions of China occurred later than in the coastal areas. With the “Great Western Development Strategy” of 1999, the tourism industry has boomed in the western regions. NW Yunnan Province, in particular, has experienced a dramatic growth in tourism over the past decade. The push to promote tourism can be seen at all levels of the province, from government sponsored billboards to the village-level where families have set up their own lodges. There are numerous parks and temples that now charge an entrance fee for tourists; shops, restaurants, and hotels have built up around these tourist sites. Both domestic and international tourism play a significant role in Yunnan, which advertises its diverse ethnic minority populations and exotic environment throughout the country and the world. Between 1991 and 1999, international and domestic tourism experienced an average annual growth rate of 36.5 % in NW Yunnan (Litzinger, 2004). NW Yunnan has gained enormous recognition over the past ten years; for example, the old section of Lijiang was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997, and in 2001 Zhongdian officially changed its name to Shangri-La¹.

With the current boom in tourism in NW Yunnan and worldwide promotion of ecotourism, Li Bo, a conservation practitioner working at the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, saw an enormous opportunity to initiate a project that would encourage economic development, empower the community, and value the environment. They chose to focus on Jisha Village located to the SE of Shangri-La town-center. According to Li Bo, the goal of the Jisha Community Based Ecotourism Project was “to regain and strengthen the community's own footing in recovering forest

¹ Shangri-La comes from James Hilton’s 1933 novel “Lost Horizon” describing a mysterious paradise of beauty, and exotic culture. The Zhongdian township claim that the Shangri-La James Hilton describes is in fact Zhongdian and the surrounding area, however officials in other counties have also claimed the name Shangri-La. The decision was officially made in 2001 to change the name Zhongdian to Shangri-La. Many officials hope that changing the name to Shangri-La will attract more visitors to the area.



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About the landscape: Yunnan, China

Yunnan province lies at the southwest corner of China and covers a diverse climatic area ranging from the subtropics of Xishuangbanna that borders Southeast Asia to mountainous terrain of Northwest Yunnan that borders Tibet. While the entire province is experiencing a surge in tourism, this case study focuses on Northwest Yunnan. Home to a diverse number of ethnic minorities, plants, animals, and ecosystems, Northwest Yunnan is located at the upper reaches of the Yangzte, Mekong, and Salween Rivers. NW Yunnan is part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site "Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan" because of its high biological and cultural diversity. Rich in natural resources, the region has also been classified as a biodiversity hotspot by Conservation International.



Figure 1. Map of Yunnan Province in China

Jisha Village

Jisha village sits at an altitude of 3,300 meters and lies to the SE of Shangri-La. Rgyalthang, a SE Kham Tibetan dialect, is the dominant language and the people in Jisha are considered to be part of the Tibetan minority group. In 2002 the village was made up of 79 households (approximately 400 people). Before 1998, major sources of income included timber production and mushroom/wild plant collection. An interest in logging in the area started in the 1950s when foreigners came to the village to perform forest surveys. The Jisha Logging Company was established in 1975 and logged the



area for over 15 years. With the ban of logging in 1998, 50-70 % of Jisha family incomes have diminished, and villagers have relied on seasonal employment, yak butter production and potato harvesting for income.

Since Jisha village is located at the base of an increasingly well-known mountain range called Qianhushan (Thousand Lakes Mountain), the village is a prime target for tourism development. The village's sacred forests, lakes, and mountains are located in the Qianhushan mountain range. At about 4,000 meters, the Qianhishan mountain range is home to diverse alpine vegetation and wetland habitat that are integral to soil health and fresh water availability in the region. The area also provides a significant source of grazing land for the village's yak in the summer.

Tourism is one of the largest growing industries in Shangri-La. According to statistics from Shangri-La's Tourism Bureau, between 1995 and 2009, they experienced a 123 fold increase in the number of tourists visiting the township every year. In 1995, 1.5% of Shangri-La's GDP came from tourism and in 2009, 60% of its GDP was from tourism. In 2001, the government started a massive project to construct a more direct and better paved road from Xiaozhongdian to the outlying villages. The recent rise in tourism has already generated a new source of income in Jisha Village, and the village has organized a rotation system between families to offer some home stays and guided tours/horse trekking up the mountains.

History of Project:

Li Bo first visited Jisha Village in the summer of 2000 to conduct a study on the socio-economic structure of local communities in northwest Yunnan, and to identify the impact that development and modernization were having on the local environment, economy and culture. This work was funded by the Yunnan Provincial Government, the Global Environmental Foundation, and the Asian Development Bank. After getting to know the villagers and spending time learning about the pressures the local community and environment were facing with the rise of tourism development, Li Bo began to think about how he could help them as a trained practitioner of community-based conservation and development. He envisioned that he could help the village collectively form their own tourism business that would respect local traditions and the environment, and allow everyone to benefit from the income generated.

Upon finishing his Master's Degree in natural resource management at Cornell University, Li Bo, a Yunnan native, immediately started applying for funding to allow his community-based ecotourism project to come to fruition. After he started working with the locally based non-profit organization, the Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge, Li Bo succeeded in securing funding from an international development organization based in the Netherlands in 2002.

**Stakeholders:**

Li Bo (the practitioner), [The Center for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge](#) (a non-profit organization based in Kunming, Yunnan, China), Project Funders, Local Government Officials, Ziyuan Real Estate Company, Jisha Villagers, as well as local developers.

Threats to Biodiversity:

Conservationists and some villagers fear that the dramatic rise in tourism will degrade the fragile alpine and wetland habitats located in the mountain range above Jisha Village. Not only will this impact the diverse vegetation and abundance of natural resources, but it will also impact the livelihoods of the villagers by degrading the grassland that they depend on for yak grazing. They are also concerned that a mass-tourism approach with limited participation and consideration of the villagers will negatively impact the traditional, local culture and their connection to the surrounding sacred mountains and lakes.

Purpose of Initiative:

Li Bo and his colleagues initiated this project in Jisha Village to create a community-based ecotourism project that gives the local people ownership and control while valuing both the traditional, local culture and the surrounding biodiversity and natural resources. At the same time, they hoped to engage the local people in learning about energy efficient building techniques and environmentally conscientious development. According to Li Bo, the goal of the Jisha Community Based Ecotourism Project was “to regain and strengthen the community's own footing in recovering forest (once heavily logged by an outside logging company) and livelihoods at the community's own pace ensuring choices for the welfare of the entire village and its mountain ecosystems”.

Strategies:

Li Bo and his colleagues used a participatory approach to engage the community in the initiative. They held elections so villagers could vote on their leaders and course of action. He also initiated a concrete plan to build an eco-lodge to house the tourists. The villagers agreed to equally invest in and provide labor for the lodge using the traditional, local architecture and energy efficiency techniques.

Challenges:

Li Bo and his colleagues faced numerous challenges. Li Bo constantly had to work on gaining the trust of the villagers. Many of them could not fathom why he would come with money and tell them he wanted to help them. They assumed he had some ulterior motive.

Most importantly, the biggest challenge was the competing outside real estate company (Ziyuan Real Estate Company) that wanted to develop the Qianhushan mountain range area and promote mass tourism with plans for a cable-car going up the side of the mountain. They first visited the village around the same time that Li Bo was



introduced to Jisha, and since that time they put continuous pressure on the villagers to sign a 40-year contract to allow them to develop the area. With the promise of money, the real estate company was successful at winning over many, but not all of the villagers in Jisha. With the outside real estate company impeding on Li Bo's initiative, he also struggled with helping the villagers understand their legal rights. Without trying to involve the Community-Based Ecotourism Project, Li Bo decided to advise the villagers to invite a legal consultant for support in dealing with the Kunming Ziyuan Real Estate Company.

From the legal consultant's research, it was obvious that there were numerous state and provincial laws in place that should ensure the welfare of local communities and the environment; however, the legal system appeared to break down at the local level because the laws were not enforced. The majority of the people in rural areas such as Jisha Village are not aware of the laws or their rights, and many of them do not have access to documents or people to help them stand up against larger companies and officials. There is opportunity, therefore, to strengthen China's legal system and develop tools and training to allow more citizens at the ground level to participate in environmental protection projects. Since 2001, the American Bar Association has been working in China under the Asia Law Initiative to implement an environmental governance-training program as a step towards strengthening the legal system and providing a more solid framework for local participation in environmental governance.

Conflict Management:

Conservation and natural resource management issues inevitably bring about conflicts and disputes between families, communities, businesses, and even governments. Conflict management has become a significant part of development programs all over the world, and many researchers have realized the impact that conflict management can have on the sustainability of natural resources. Using conflict management, decision-making in complex resource management situations where there are a number of stakeholders involves the full participation of each interest group, and disputes are ideally resolved in an unbiased way ensuring the sustainability and security of the natural resource. "Conflict management considerations cannot be divorced from considerations of participation, power and policy. . . . Indeed, the likelihood that a conflict can be 'resolved' or 'managed' will be highly influenced by the complex interplay of participation, power and policy." (Castro and Nielsen , 6).

Participation of all the stakeholders in the decision-making process is therefore a significant part of conflict management, yet it is also extremely challenging when stakeholders come from different parts of society with different backgrounds and outlooks. The case with Jisha Village illustrates that including the community in the decision-making process with government officials and an outside company presents a real challenge given the cultural and societal barriers that exist between the different interest groups.

This case study presents a typical situation that can be found in many natural resource management projects involving local communities. Not only are there disputes between the community and outside interest groups (the company and local



government officials), but there are also divisions and conflicting interests within the community. The divisions within the community are complex, and they were present even before the idea of a tourism enterprise was introduced. As discovered by both Li Bo, the preexisting divisions within the community became more pronounced when new business interests emerged, and the growing divisions made it easier for outside interest groups to take advantage of the village.

Using conflict management, Li Bo and a legal consultant hoped to get the community to voice their views, talk through their differences, and become involved in the decision-making process that will affect their village for the next fifty or more years. Through their efforts, they were able to help the villagers realize their rights and negotiate a higher annual fee that each family receives from the outside company. Despite the assistance and knowledge that Li Bo and his legal consultant offered, the ecotourism lodge that the villagers built still goes unused. The divisions within the community have hindered the village's ability to successfully get their community based tourism business off the ground, and Li Bo and his team have since left the village and moved on to work in other organizations.

Questions:

- How and when should a practitioner decide to take a participatory approach to community-based conservation and development?
- Using a participatory approach to community development, how important is it to have the community come to a consensus before taking action?
- What can practitioners do to earn the trust of local communities? How much of a priority should this be in community based conservation projects?
- How do you measure the success of a participatory community development project? What are the criteria for success?
- How did this project succeed? How did it fail? Are there further steps that you think the stakeholders can take now that can still enable them to run a community based ecotourism business? Describe what steps you think they should take.

About Practitioner:

In 2001, Li Bo completed his master's degree in natural resource management at Cornell University. He grew up in Dali in Yunnan Province and he is part of the Bai ethnic minority group. Over the last decade, Li Bo has worked with various non-profit organizations with different missions: rural livelihoods, indigenous knowledge, natural resource management and world heritage management in Yunnan, community-based tourism, biodiversity conservation, and NGO-led advocacy for transparent dam site decision making in southwest China. Li Bo currently resides in Beijing and works for Friends of Nature, the oldest environmental NGO in China.



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