

Eco-tourism: snapshots from four villages

By CDB [China Development Brief -- <http://www.chinadevelopmentbrief.com>]
Created 2007-10-10 22:38

*It is a decade since mass tourism arrived in the picturesque northwest Yunnan towns of Dali, Lijiang and Zhongdian. But what of the villages and townships that some more adventurous tourists are beginning to visit? **Julie Perng** visits four communities that hope to embrace tourists without being overwhelmed by them.*

In 2006, total receipts from tourism in Yunnan Province reached CNY 49.97 billion (USD 6.2 billion), almost 90% of which came from Chinese tourists. Receipts were up 16.7% on the previous year, and accounted for 12.5% of the provincial GDP. The tourism industry is clearly flourishing in one of China's most ethnically, geographically, and biologically diverse provinces.

The industry in Yunnan has until now been dominated by a mix of government entities and business investors from outside the most visited areas. However, there is now growing interest in using eco-tourism (*shengtai luyou*, 生态旅游) to stimulate local, rural economies.

Eco-tourism is a grand term, often misused and misunderstood. Although there is no fixed definition, most scholars and practitioners agree on a few broad guidelines. Eco-tourism should be community based, allowing local people to take responsibility for local developments, gaining the benefits of tourism while protecting their culture and environment. Because the community takes the lead in planning and management, it can use its own resources and set its own regulations. It is often argued that in the long-term eco-tourism can help the community's sustainable development.

When considering the development of rural eco-tourism, many Yunnan people feel that maintaining culture is at least as important as maintaining the environment. Tiger Xia (夏山虎), manager of the Shangrila Deqing Holyland Travel Service Adventure Tour Centre, enjoys taking tourists to remote areas that offer cultural interaction. Currently, only ten percent of his customers request eco-tourist sites, and the Centre provides around eight loosely-defined eco-tourist options, all located in Diqing (迪庆) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

In Xia's opinion, too much tourist development in a village, even in the name of eco-tourism, crowds out local culture, making it less accessible even to well-meaning visitors. He also points to a triangular conflict between local development, tourism and cultural preservation: as villagers grow richer they start building non-traditional houses, dressing in less traditional ways, etc, and this tends to push tourists further afield, looking for more "primitive" destinations.

Lu Yuan (路元), co-director of a recently-formed NGO, the Yunnan Centre for Cultural Learning and Development (云南三元文化传承发展中心), is keen to promote greater understanding of Yunnan's diverse cultures. "Eco-tourism should not just protect the environment better, but should also improve the connections between city and rural people," she says.

Yet she warns that rural villages should not follow in the path of major tourists spots in northwest Yunnan, such as the Old Town of Lijiang (丽江), located in the prefecture of the same name. In the past ten years, the number of tourists to this UNESCO World Heritage Site has exploded, and few businesses are run by locals, according to Keith Lyons, a writer and photographer who trains Naxi tour guides. He estimates that forty to sixty percent of original residents have already moved out.

This report briefly investigates four sites in northwest Yunnan, chosen for their diversity in terms of livelihoods, local cultures, numbers of tourists and differing experience of eco-tourism.

There are some clear patterns. For example, during the three national holidays—October 1 (National Day), Chinese New Year and May 1 (Labour Day)—the sites are essentially overwhelmed, sometimes causing too much pressure not only on tourist services, but also on water, electricity, and gas. None of the sites has seen much government investment in eco-tourism, nor do they have much control over their own land or landmarks. Local governments are certainly keen to promote economic development and they do offer support in areas such as tourism project management. But they also place a strong emphasis on profitability and prefer schemes with a high rate of return. As a result of government interventions and the drive to maximise profits, the villages described here may never be able to sustain a true “eco-tourist” label. Nevertheless, individuals and groups in all of these sites are working to realise their own notion of eco-tourism.

Shaxi

Shaxi Township, Jianchuan County, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture
(大理白族自治州剑川县沙溪镇)

Beginning in the Tang Dynasty the Southwest China Silk Road, also known as the Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Trail (茶马古道), wound through Yunnan and Sichuan to Tibet and India. Different ethnic groups, among them Tibetan, Bai, and Hui, traded goods such as tea, horses, and salt. One of the major stop-off points along this route was located within Shaxi Township.

Tucked around the beautiful Hei Hui River (黑惠江), Shaxi valley boasts, among other sites, Tang dynasty grottoes in Stone Treasure Mountain (石宝山).

The township, as of 2004, has a population of 22,411 people, eighty five percent of whom are ethnic Bai. Sixteen natural villages (自然村) make up the township, and seventy percent of residents work in agriculture. Ouyang (欧阳), the locally-famous son of a caravan chief, summed up his fellow villagers in the following way: “What local people are accustomed to is farming...as long as there is food to eat, it is acceptable. So the people here are very honest, simple, and hardworking.”

In 2002, the World Monument Fund included Shaxi’s Sideng Market Area (寺登街) in its list of the world’s 101 Most Endangered Sites. Representatives of the Fund lamented the lack of due

recognition of Shaxi's history as well as physical damage caused during the pre-1949 civil war and later Cultural Revolution, especially to the now-rare local Bai architecture.

In response, the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) and the People's Government of Jianchuan County launched a joint USD 1.3 million Shaxi Valley Rehabilitation Project, which concluded in December 2006. This comprised six steps: marketplace restoration, historic village preservation, sustainable valley development, ecological sanitation, poverty alleviation, and dissemination of project activities and achievements. The ETH website states that one of the main goals of the plan was "encouraging responsible practices in cultural conservation, environmental protection, and eco-tourism."

Yang Fubao (杨富宝), a Jianchuan County government official who worked on the project, says it is difficult to assess how much it accomplished. In terms of eco-tourism, he notes that there are no longer project funds to support longer term work. With slightly over 10,000 tourists a year—a rate that has not increased in the last two years—there is not enough business to justify government-sponsored eco-tourism activities.

Some locals are finding that eco-tourist activities can be profitable, however. Wu Yuxin (吴运鑫), a Jianchuan schoolteacher in Duan Jia Deng (段家登) village, three kilometers from Sideng, is currently building a guesthouse across from a 204-year-old pagoda and stage that was restored by the rehabilitation project. His English website advertises housing and services such as treks, fishing, and chances to teach English in the local elementary school. The great majority of his clients are foreigners.

Tourists who enjoy these quiet activities rarely appreciate an explosion in the number of like-minded travelers. Allen Zhang (张明健), a Chengdu native who has lived in a Shaxi guesthouse since February 2007, came seeking a peaceful place. He described the village's tourists as "more educated and not part of tour groups . . . (They) do not have a big impact; they come quietly, and leave quietly."

Zhang is building a bar in Shaxi but says that the village's atmosphere is more important to him than making money. "If there is a large change [in tourist numbers], I will leave," he says.

Lu Yuan, from the Yunnan Centre for Cultural Learning and Development, is also against rapid tourism development and commercialization: "Shaxi needs to go its own road . . . it can't receive (too many tourists)," she says. Her NGO plans to train Shaxi locals as well receiving students and scholars studying agriculture and minority cultures.

Li Baosheng (李宝生) is a local resident who has been involved with Lu Yuan's work in Shaxi since 2003. He chooses to concentrate on farming and raising livestock, and says that stagnating tourism would not worry him. However, like most Shaxi residents, he acknowledges the benefits that tourism has brought. Not only have there been improvements in the economy, but also in sanitation, trash disposal, roads, and infrastructure.

The county government is currently interested in developing not only tourism, but also Shaxi's walnut, meat and dairy industries. In Yang Fubao's opinion, "This is a coordinated development.

You can't put all your money into one industry...[we] need to develop everything—local people are, first of all, still farmers.”

Nonetheless, tourism is set to grow further. Transportation has been one of the main hindrances to Shaxi's tourist development, Sideng being at least four hours' drive from the prefectural centre, Dali. Now, the construction of the 214 national “should help the tourism of Shaxi and the whole of Jianchuan county,” predicts Yang.

Yuhu

Yuhu Village, Baisha Township, Yu Long County, Lijiang (丽江市玉龙县白沙乡玉湖村)

Up the 214 highway from Dali lies the busy tourist centre of Lijiang Old City, and a mere sixteen kilometres further is the much quieter administrative village of Yuhu (“Jade Lake”) comprising 357 households spread across nine hamlets (村民小组). Previously known as Xuesong village (雪嵩村), Yuhu was the home of Austrian-born American botanist and linguist Joseph Rock from 1922-1949. Ninety four percent of the population of 1,365 is Naxi. Set at the foot of Yulong Xueshan (玉龙雪山, “Jade Dragon Snow Mountain”), the village is a starting point for hikes or, more commonly, horse rides that take visitors up the mountain slopes.

The village receives more than 33,000 visitors a year. Luo Mingjun (罗明军), Project Assistant for the Centre for Community Development Studies at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, estimates that tourism accounts for sixty percent of Yuhu's income, followed by agriculture and animal husbandry, each accounting for about twenty percent. Unlike other villages considered in this report, where local people are less involved in the industry, most Yuhu residents consciously regard their village as involved in “eco-tourism.”

In May 2004 the Yuhu Tourism Development Cooperative (玉湖旅游开发合作社) was formed to develop tourism that protects natural resources and the local environment. It is largely managed by Village Committee members. The cooperative organizes households to take tourists up the mountain in turn. There are a total of 354 donkeys and horses registered in the scheme.

“We are a new socialist countryside pilot village project (社会主义新农村试点),” says He Jieli (和杰林), who is the head of one of the hamlets as well as a spokesperson for the cooperative. If Yuhu is successful, he says, it could serve as a model for other eco-tourist sites.

Tourists can choose to take a horse to 3,400, 4,400, or 4,800 meters, paying CNY 180 (USD 22), 300, or 350 respectively. The households who take the horses up then receive a cut: CNY 53, 80 or 100 respectively. CNY 2 goes to insurance, CNY 35 to management, a further portion to “market development fees,” and the remainder goes to special funds designated for university scholarships, a Senior Citizen Association (老年协会), public services (公共事业) such as mending roads, and management of the service centre (服务中心). Households make CNY 6-10,000 per horse per year (not counting the expense of maintaining their animals).

He Lushan (和继珍), The Nature Conservancy's Lijiang Visitor Centre Project Coordinator, says that eco-tourism in Yuhu can and should develop further. When the villagers are the "principal parts" of the industry, they can gain an income while personally being responsible for the local environment, culture, and for the village's future generations.

Lu Zhifeng (吕执凤), a farmer and Naxi folk performer and singer, says that tourism transformed Yuhu. "We used to be very poor . . . we couldn't farm enough for subsistence." Locals cite sandy soil, diminishing water resources, poor climate and high elevation as the causes of farming difficulties. Lu estimates that farmers can only produce about 100-150 kilograms of grain per mu (亩, 0.0667 hectares). He Cuigao (和翠高), another local, said that her family has twenty mu (1.34 hectares), but that only four or five mu are productive.

Although Lu Zhifeng cites the income benefits of tourism, there are some complaints about management of the cooperative. In June 2007, residents say, several official positions were added, making a total of twenty one posts in the cooperative. The office holders receive income from the management fees in addition to stipends for their village committee responsibilities. Many villagers feel that there are too many officials earning money that could go to the horse-owners.

He Jinyong (和近勇), a former Communist Party Secretary of the village, now offers six rooms in his village home-stay (农家乐). He suggests that the cooperative management fees should be slashed in half, allowing horse-owners to make more money. Though such issues can be raised in village meetings, he does not feel that his idea would ever be accepted by the cooperative managers.

Yuhu, moreover, does not control all of its tourism resources. It has three main attractions: Yuzhu Qingtian (玉柱擎天 "Jade Pillars that Prop Up the Sky"), Joseph Rock's former residence, and Longnü Lake (龙女湖 "Daughter of the Dragon King") The latter two have been contracted out to tourism companies that manage the sites and charge entrance fees. Luo Mingjun believes that villagers should be allowed to incorporate the spots into their horse treks.

For now, visitors are impressed with what Yuhu has to offer. Tao Yanzhen (陶焰真), a native of Lijiang's Old Town, was surprised by her visit. "I never thought it would be so pretty . . . I hope it doesn't open up too much. We should protect what it has been. The Old Town doesn't have the same peace and quiet, there are too many tourists there."

Dimaluo

Dimaluo Village, Pengdang Township, Gongshan County, Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (迪麻洛村怒江傈僳族自治州贡山县捧当乡迪麻洛村).

Whereas Lijiang's Old Town is a cultural site, Yunnan's Three Parallel Rivers area is a designated World Natural Heritage Site. UNESCO calls this area the "last remaining stronghold for an extensive suite of rare and endangered plants and animals." One of the parallel waterways is the Nu ("Angry") River (怒江), the upper reaches of what becomes the Salween as it flows

into Burma. The river runs through Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture (怒江傈僳族自治州), which borders Tibet (西藏自治区) to the north and Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (迪庆藏族自治州) to the east.

With Gaoligong Mountain (高黎贡山) to its west and Biluoxue Mountain (碧罗雪山) to its east, the Nu valley appeals to tourists looking for off the beaten track experiences. This is offered by Dimaluo village, which is partly spread along a tributary of the Nu, Dimaluo River (迪麻洛河), and which now receives about 400 tourists a year.

Dimaluo consists of twelve natural villages and has a population just over 2,300. Though originally mainly a Nu ethnic area, there are also Tibetan, Lisu, and Dulong groups, and Tibetan language and culture is clearly evident throughout the village. French Catholic missionaries came to the valley in the 1850s, using written Tibetan in their teachings, and today eighty percent of Dimaluo's population is Catholic. For the past three generations, animal husbandry has been the village's main source of income.

Aluo (阿洛) is a local resident who has led treks to Tibet and Deqin County (德钦县) since 1998. He now owns the only guesthouse in the village and organizes a larger-scale trekking service. Currently, tourists can choose from two three-day routes. Aluo works with around twenty guides and two hundred guide assistants who carry bags. He collects a CNY 50 management fee from each trip but puts 20 RMB of it into a special Environmental Fund for projects such as litter collection and disposal.

Aluo is determined that if tourism grows in the area "the environment should still come first." He has been trying to register an Association for Ecosystem and Environmental Protection in Nu Mountain" with the county Civil Affairs Bureau. The application was rejected for unspecified reasons in 2006, but he has since re-applied while also informally involving some thirty villagers in his own Environmental Fund.

Tourists certainly increase the need for the Fund. Liang Rong (梁荣), who has been a guide since 2002, says that he sometimes has to pick up litter after visitors. Some trekkers, he points out, leave behind plastic and other trash in their pasture camps, presenting a potentially serious danger to sheep and other livestock who may consume what has been left behind.

Under the auspices of a project by the Kunming-based Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge (CBIK), Aluo has received training in eco-tourism networking and marketing and met counterparts from other eco-tourist sites. He hopes that, as Dimaluo's tourism continues to take shape, the area will see no more than 500 visitors per year, and feels that they should not be concentrated in the three main holiday periods.

Some visitors also seem to favour low volume tourism. Zhang Ke (张科), from Shenzhen, has visited Dimaluo three times since 2005. He enjoys his new friendships in the area and being able to relax in the countryside, away from the pressures of work and city life. "I hope they can develop [tourism] but I don't want them to lose their simple way of life. I don't want them commercialised," he comments.

However, another local resident, Hexi (荷西), is hoping for some expansion of the trade. He is building Dimaluo's second guesthouse, and thinks that more services and housing will allow the village to handle greater numbers during the holidays. In his eyes, tourism would not only help locals economically, but would also give them a different perspective on their home and environment. "We need outsiders who love this place" to show villagers how to love and appreciate it, he says.

Meanwhile, traditional livelihoods in the area are under pressure from resource shortages. In 1999, the provincial government divided the Anka pastures, where the Dimaluo River rises, putting some sections within the jurisdiction of Deqin County. Neither Gongshan nor Deqin has enough rangeland, so this land has frequently been the subject of conflicts that remain unresolved. "If there is no land, how can farmers develop?" asks Guo Jiexin (郭杰新), the leader of Congni hamlet (从尼小组) in Dimaluo. Eco-tourism, he warns, cannot be the village's only industry.

Pressure of a different kind comes from planned infrastructure development. The local authorities are reportedly considering building a road from Nujiang to Deqin. This would impact upon current trekking routes as well as affecting the surrounding rangeland.

A hydropower dam currently under construction in lower Dimaluo has already displaced eighteen households and taken land from several others.

Also planned is a much larger, and highly controversial, flight of dams along the Nu River. This has drawn sharp criticism from Chinese NGOs, and the State Environment Protection Agency at one point ruled that Environmental Impact Assessment procedures had been ignored. In June 2007 UNESCO also expressed its concern and called for the plans to be at least modified. Nevertheless, at present, the authorities appear committed to proceeding with the project.

This seems a clear enough illustration that the future of eco-tourism, in Dimaluo at least, in fact largely depends on decisions taken well beyond the village.

Jisha

Jisha Village, Xiao Zhongdian Township, Shangri-la County, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (迪庆藏族自治州香格里拉县小中甸镇吉沙村).

Jisha Village also lies within the Three Parallel Rivers area. It is a natural village of 400 Tibetans who have had a complicated interaction with outsiders. For twenty years a government-controlled logging industry had flourished in the area, causing extensive forest loss, but when a national ban on logging was suddenly introduced in 1998 many villagers had to find new income sources.

One possibility was suggested by the fact that, since 1997, tourists had begun trickling in to the area to visit a 3,900-meter high mountain, recently dubbed Qianhushan (千湖山 "Thousand Lakes Mountain") in a bid to attract tourism. The mountain and its lakes are sacred to local

people, and used for various religious ceremonies. Nevertheless, the village committee mobilised villagers to act as guides and, from 2000, to take tourists up on horses.

In 2002, the Centre for Biodiversity and Indigenous Knowledge started a “Jisha Eco-Cultural Tourism Project” in the area. Villagers visited other tourism project sites, built a Tibetan eco-lodge (that was to be owned and operated by villagers), and participated in capacity-building trainings and meetings. The project was also to cover tourism development and marketing, ecological research, agricultural support, cultural projects, and livestock processing.

Partly due to their past experience with commercial logging companies, some villagers mistrusted the project and CBIK’s intentions. Nevertheless, they were interested when a Kunming-based real estate company, Zi Yuan (子元), which had established a Shangri-la County Qianhushan Eco-development Ltd. (香格里拉千湖山生态开发有限公司), offered to purchase the rights to Qianhu. The corporation planned to construct a cable car leading to the peak of the mountain, where they would also build hotels. Their goal was to attract more than 80,000 visitors a year.

The Xiao Zhongdian Township (小中甸镇) government approved the project, and work began on laying power cables and building an access road.

However, according to staff who worked on the CBIK project, not all of the villagers signed a contract agreeing to release the land and some of those who did sign could not read Chinese. *[Land is held collectively in China’s villages and can in theory only be contracted to outsiders if the entire community agrees—but enforcement of villagers’ rights is often extremely weak, making it relatively easy for village heads, local authorities and businesses to strike deals that disregard community opinion –Ed.]* Moreover, according to CBIK, the development should have been approved by a higher level of government than the township authorities.

In 2005 CBIK wrote to the State Environment Protection Agency, Ministry of Construction and China World Heritage Committee complaining that the developers did not have all the necessary permissions, and that the contract with the village was ambiguous. CBIK also drew media attention to the case, which was reported by the *China Youth Daily* among others.

In April, 2005, The Yunnan Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau began an Environmental Impact Assessment of the cable car project. However, according to CBIK, towards the end of 2005 the Bureau quietly suggested that the real estate company drop its application for an assessment. Construction work halted in 2006.

Meanwhile, the eco-lodge built under the auspices of the CBIK project has not yet opened, although it was completed in 2004.

The final shape of tourist development in Jisha thus remains unclear.

“Community-based eco-tourism is ideal in these mountain communities, but resource conflicts, inadequate access to information, and lack of transparency put those communities in a bad situation,” says Li Bo (李波), who led the CBIK project.

It is clear, however, that this episode has deeply divided the local community. Some distrust CBIK and are willing to deal with the corporation, not wanting to pass up what, in such a poor area, is a rare opportunity for financial gain.

Others, however, fear that commercial operators will neglect responsibilities to the local culture and environment. Jisha villager, Tibu Zhuoma (提布卓玛), issues a bleak prediction that should prick the conscience of tourism companies and eco-conscious tourists alike: “They will come to our village, destroy our environment, and when they are done the tourists will be gone and we will be left with nothing.”

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