

Green Dreams in Shangri-La

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Shangri-La County, China

I came to Shangri-La and I met the Buddha.

Well, not the Buddha, but one of the "living Buddhas" designated by the Buddhist hierarchy as spiritual leaders throughout this Tibetan region of China, and not the mythic Shangri-La of "Lost Horizon," but this lush western China countryside near the border with Burma that has renamed itself Shangri-La to attract more tourists.

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But don't underestimate this Shangri-La. Its spectacular wetlands, pine forests and mountains (this is where your rhododendrons originally came from) make up one of the 34 biodiversity hot spots designated worldwide by Conservation International as places

with large numbers of unique plant and animal species threatened by human development - which, once lost, may never come back.

And that's why I came here. Because Shangri-La County is a microcosm of the biggest challenge facing China. Put simply: if development doesn't come to Shangri-La and other rural areas, the divide between haves and have-nots will widen and destabilize China. But if the wrong development comes here, it will add to global warming and ravage the rural environment where many of China's indigenous cultures and species are nested.

Yes, China must get its smoke-belching factories out of the coastal cities because they are making the cities unlivable, but if it just pushes them into the countryside, they will destroy way too much of China's farmland, and the natural areas that are the home of things like Tibetan culture.

The living Buddha, Ang Weng, is right in the middle of this drama, trying to promote a higher living standard for his people - without destroying the "sacred forests" essential to Tibetan spirituality. The living Buddha wears a sunny smile and a cowboy hat. His wife, who makes a mean butter tea, a traditional Tibetan drink, translated from his Tibetan dialect into Chinese for my translator.

He got right to the point: "The human brain is moving much faster into the modern world than the environment, and this fast move is having an impact on the environment. Build this and build that, and you lose the environment."

The good, and surprising, news I found in Shangri-La was how much the poor villagers here were coming up with their own green growth solutions. For instance, the 39 families in the village of Hamugu have bundled their savings to build a lodge for ecotourists drawn by the wetlands. "We just need a Web site," the manager told me. A local botanist has built Shangri-La Alpine Botanic Garden, which employs two dozen people and shares profits with the local village.

It also has the finest public toilet I've ever used, a solar-powered composting toilet with an automated plastic green seat cover - in the middle of nowhere! It was labeled "The Lavatory of Environmental Protection of the Travel."

A U.S. multinational, 3M, is financing the restoration of the local forests to reduce climate change and protect the watersheds. And the old log-and-mud town of Zhongdian here is a Disneyland-like traditional Tibetan village, with hot-pot restaurants that attract droves of Chinese tourists.

"All the basic elements of a network solution to safeguard environment and culture are here," said Lu Zhi, Conservation International's director in China and my traveling companion. (My wife's a C.I. board member.) "But the challenge is how do you organize this business-N.G.O.-government network more effectively so you can provide ecofriendly alternatives to industrial development that could be replicated in the rest of rural China."

Not only would this be enormously important for China's environment, but it could also be a model for other developing countries. What we don't want is for China to protect its own environment and then strip everyone else's in the developing world by importing their forests and minerals.

"For 30 years, the business of development has been Americans and Europeans lecturing poor countries about how they need to do things differently," said Glenn Prickett, a senior vice president with Conservation International. "What we hope to see here is a new paradigm, where China, itself a developing country, offers a new model of sustainable development to other developing countries."

I sure hope so. We all need China to start assuming an environmental leadership role commensurate with its impact on the world. Imagine a day when China is sharing its own approaches to environmentally and culturally sustainable development with other developing countries - not just pursuing them for its resources.

Now that would be a great leap forward.