Ecological Restoration and Traditional Knowledge Preservation through Eco-cultural Tourism Development: Case Study from Baimaxueshan Nature Reserve Area

1 Introduction

This paper relates the experience of simultaneously implementing a community-based grassland recovery project and developing eco-cultural tourism nearby a high alpine nature reserve in Southwestern China. It illustrates a development model where ecosystem restoration and preservation of traditional knowledge are merged in a tourism development project intended to address already existing ecological degradation, deterioration and loss of cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, as well as to alleviate poverty.

The idea of fusing the interest in cultural travel activities and the appreciation of nature’s diversity into one travel product builds on already established notion that travel should adhere to the sustainability principles established at the Rio Summit in 1992. While definitions of what exactly constitutes ecotourism vary, for this paper we will assume that ecotourism “revolves around developing an awareness of nature and minimizing the impact on local communities” (Hong 2011). Similarly, cultural tourism focuses on experiencing a culture while striving to reduce the possible impacts on the community that represents it. For the purposes of our analysis, we will assume that eco-cultural tourism entices travelers with both cultural and natural attractions rather than one serving as a mere background of the other. In the case of Baimaxueshan, potential tourists are simultaneously offered a chance to experience a unique landscape and observe displays of the local culture, as well as obtain traditional medicinal products.

Ideally, the visitors that engage in this kind of travel would strive to reduce their impact onto the site they visit and, if at all possible, would enhance its conditions. However, visiting a site, even if done in the most careful manner does not automatically contribute to its protection and in is in fact most likely to detract from it (Isaacs 2000).

Many environmental attractions, such as agricultural landscapes, and resources, clean running water for example, are heavily reliant on particular management practices, which often have developed through a long co-existence of a particular cultural community and its surrounding environment (Hong 2011).

It has been proposed that ecotourism can and should strengthen ecological restoration efforts (Blangy and Mehta 2006), and the same could be said about the relationship between tourism and culture of the community that inhabits the destination. In fact, it has been shown that communities can retain and even regain cultural traits and heritage because of tourist interest (Xie 2001).

Despite the potential for additional stress on deteriorated ecosystems and local culture, well planned tourism holds immense potential for both ecological restoration and cultural preservation. The case study of eco-cultural tourism development at Baimaxueshan suggests that enabling ecological restoration that takes into account traditional management and use practices can deliver ecological and cultural benefits and enhance livelihoods.

2 Quzonggong pasture nearby Baimaxueshan National Nature Reserve

2.1 Site description

Baimaxueshan nature reserve is located in Deqin County, at the northern edge of China’s southwestern Yunnan Province. The 281 640 hectare reserve, which was established in 1983, consists of mostly of the Baimaxueshan (White Horse Snow Mountain) range after which the reserve is named. All the mountain tops in the area are higher than 4000 meters and 20 peaks exceed 5000 meters (Li 2003). Located within China’s most ecologically and culturally diverse province (Yang et al. 2004), the mountain region is recognised as one of the world’s biodiversity hotspots (Conservation International 2007).

Culturally, most inhabitants of the nature reserve and its surroundings belong to the Tibetan ethnic group and speak the Kham language. There is also a small population of another ethnic group - the Lisu - in the region. Tibetan Buddhism is the dominant religion, although strong traces of earlier folk religion remain (Fedor 2006).

The region is abjectly poor. For 2010, the government of Diqing Prefecture, to which Deqin County belongs to, estimates that in the prefecture the average farmer’s per-capita income was 3347 CNY (508.7 USD; [2010-12-31] 1 CNY = 0.152 USD) (http://www.diqing.gov.cn/readinfo.aspx?InfoID=40e2c023c7114b4aa5b93a8da3d5660f). The economic conditions have been further exacerbated by a logging ban after flooding of the region’s rivers in 1998 caused massive damage downstream in Eastern China (Fedor 2006).

The project was implemented at the Quzonggong pasture, which straddles the Baimaxueshan National Nature Reserve’s