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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 22(2) : 113-115

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/0276-4741(2002)022[0113:EIWSC]2.0.CO;2

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Mountain Research and Development Vol 22 No 2 May 2002: 113–115

Ecotourism in Western Sichuan, China

Replacing the Forestry-Based Economy

Yiping Fang

Western Sichuan is not only the key region for soil and water conservation in the upper reaches of the Yangtse River, China, but also the homeland of the Zang (Tibetan), Yi, and Qiang minority nationalities. The forest industry was responsible for 78% of the total revenue in this region before the implementation of a central strategy of natural forest conservation, which prescribed limits on cutting and clearing and the return of cultivated land to forest or pastures. This central strategy resulted in less income for local farmers, increasing the gap in per capita GDP between western Sichuan and the rest of Sichuan. Because ecotourism can improve the natural environment and contribute to economic prosperity, local governments focus on ecotourism when developing their economic policies, and most of the local residents support this focus. Western Sichuan is rich in potential ecotourism resources, especially natural reserves. Ecotourism developments such as Jiuzhaigou Valley–Huanglong offer examples of protection of natural resources and prosperity in minority nationality areas.

Natural and cultural wealth: A strong base for ecotourism

Western Sichuan includes the eastern extension of the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau. High mountains and active glaciers characterize the area, including Gonggashan, the highest mountain in Sichuan Province at 7556 m. The northeastern part of the plateau is one of the largest swamp areas in China. Major rivers flow from this area along geological faults from north to south. The complicated geological structure, high relief, river network, changeable climate, and extremely diverse wildlife in this area provide rich and colorful resources for ecotourism. Since the flood of 1998, the central Chinese government has practiced strict forest and soil conservation on the upper reaches of the Yangtse. Coincidentally, this policy has supplied strong legal support for the protection of potential ecotourism resources.

Western Sichuan includes 3 world cultural and natural heritage sites, 2 "Man and Biosphere" sites, 5 state-class and 12 province-class forest plantations, 20 province-class scenic and historical sites, and 8 state natural reserves (Figure 1).

The Jiuzhaigou–Huanglong area is just 1 example. Jiuzhaigou Valley ("Nine-Village Valley") lies in the northeastern part of western Sichuan. It derives its name from the 9 Tibetan hamlets scattered through the valley. The area boasts emerald-green lakes, waterfalls (Figure 2), colorful forests, and snow-capped peaks, diverse forest ecosystems, spectacular limestone formations, and hot springs.

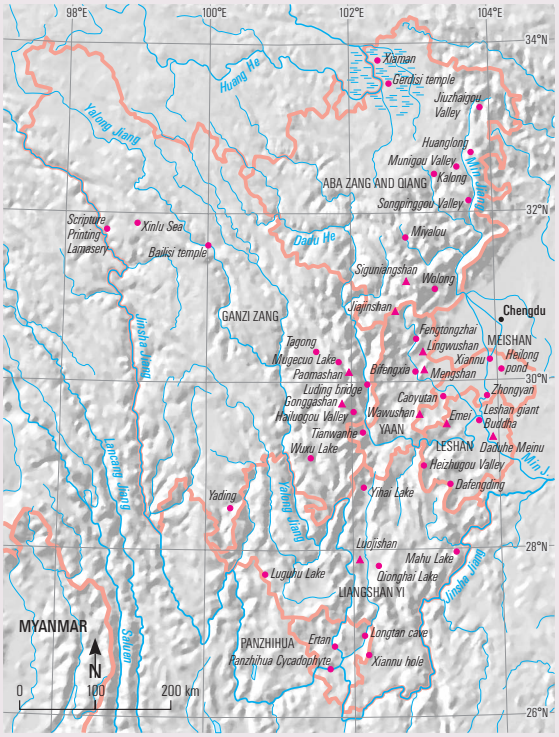


FIGURE 1 Map of western Sichuan, showing autonomous prefecture and city administrative divisions and the distribution of major tourism resources. (Map by Andreas Brodbeck)

Nearby Huanglong ("Yellow Dragon") is home to more than 3500 multihued lakes.

Western Sichuan is also rich in cultural resources. The folkways of the Zang, Yi, and Qiang nationalities include log houses, distinctive national dress, national songs and dances, the "walking marriage" system of the Mosuo people, the torch festival of Yi (Figure 3), and the Zang spring festival, among other things. The Leshan Giant Buddha, built during the Tang dynasty, is the earliest Buddha in China. Emei Mountain is one of the more important Buddhist sites in China.

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Education and infrastructure needed

Interviews conducted with a range of local government officials and peasants in 7 areas of western Sichuan over a 2-month period revealed that ecotourism is largely misunderstood. Many people, including local government officials, think that ecotourism is just a way of encouraging tourists to enjoy the natural world. They do not understand the equally important responsibility for protection of natural resources. Many tourism developers pursue profit, ignoring the contradictions between short-term and long-term gains and between site-specific and overall perspectives. As a result, resource destruction is of serious concern, especially in Qionghai Lake in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture and in the middle to lower reaches of Minjiang River.

Infrastructure for tourism is limited. Communications, electric power supply, highway and railway connections, and provision of accommodation and meals are all fairly primitive. For example, the Jiuzhaigou Valley has accommodations for 300,000 tourists, although 450,000 arrived in 1998–1999.

The area has a low share of the overall international tourist market in China. In 1998 foreign exchange earnings from tourism in Sichuan were only 2.8%, 3.5%, and 29% of those in Guangdong Province, Beijing, and Yunnan Province, respectively. Less than 1 out of 100 tourists in Sichuan is a foreigner.

An imperfect system of management is universal in this area. Examples include unwieldy and overlapping organizations, vagueness about organizational liability, inconsistent regulations in different government organizations, planning of ecotourism not in accordance with the principles of environmental protection, and lack of effective supervision.

Ecotourism and conservation: A success story

Jiuzhaigou is a successful example of ecotourism in western Sichuan. Ecotourism here plays a positive role in protection of the environment and improvement of the local economy. In 1984 only 30,000



FIGURE 2 Jiuzhaigou Valley is situated in the Min Shan range in northwestern Sichuan and has become a major destination for domestic tourism. It boasts emerald-green lakes, split-level waterfalls, rainbow-hued woods, snow-capped peaks, and Tibetan folklore. More than 100 lakes with a variety of shapes are complemented by springs and waterfalls. (Photo by Yiping Fang, 2000)

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FIGURE 3 The Yi people believe that fire is the symbol of power, luck, and life. On 24 June of the lunar calendar, urban and rural residents celebrate the traditional torch festival by lighting torches in doorways and holding a gala parade in the streets, as pictured here in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. (Photo by Yiping Fang, 2001)

tourists visited the area. In 1998 the number had increased to 408,000, and income was 40 times the 1984 figure.

Meanwhile, the area's administrators paid close attention to environmental protection, taking effective measures, including prohibition of logging in natural forests, use of liquefied natural gas for energy and transportation, establishment of a green tour bus project, general electrification, and a workable system of enforcement. Under this approach, the forested area increased by 6.7 million ha, with the vegetation-covered percentage nearing 90%. The conditions and tour routes for ecotourism have been set, and ecotourism products, such as an ice and snow tour, a flower tour, a red leaves tour, have been developed.

Suggestions for the future

Experience in Jiuzhaigou shows that successful ecotourism depends on the following:

- Effective planning of spatial allocation of tourism activities and infrastructure.
- Administrative, economic, and legal structures to support ecotourism, with trained management to implement these structures.
- Carrying capacity control.
- Resident training in ecotourism and provision of quality customer service.
- Local involvement in planning and decision making.
- Cultivation of "qualified" tourists through ecotourism education directed at visitors.
- Development of a range of packaged ecotourism products.
- Positive marketing that helps potential tourists understand ecotourism and highlights available ecotourism products and experiences.
- Promotion of environmentally responsible services, accommodation, and transportation to supplement the ecotourism experience.
- Protecting and enhancing the natural environment through purification of waste water, air, material, and afforestation.

Conclusions

Experience in Jiuzhaigou shows that ecotourism involving implementation of the measures listed in the previous section can guarantee forest and watershed conservation while offering a substitute for the forest industry that has been cut back. However, government action is insufficient: the key is to empower people and encourage them to act for themselves. People's attitudes (including those of tourists, peasants, residents, and government officials) toward the physical environment are related to their feelings about their social environment. This is the most important point. Governments can pass laws. Businesses can develop clean technology. But first of all, people have to care.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks many administrators from the Governments of Aba, Ganzi, Yaan, Leshan, Liangshan, Panzhihua, and Meishan for their support of this study, which was funded by the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Contract 9906). He also wishes to express sincere thanks to Guest Editor Leslie Taylor.

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