

The “Panda Adventure”:

The WWF in China and Chinese Environmentalism Today

Short News >
East Asia

For the Netherlands premiere of the film “China: The Panda Adventure” in December 2001, the Chinese environmentalist Li Ning travelled to the Netherlands to promote the panda habitat protection programme of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in China. In an interview with the *IIAS Newsletter*, she tells us more about the present condition of the panda in Sichuan, the growing environmental problems in China, such as declining biodiversity. Throughout the interview, Ning describes a country where a new realization of its environmental problems is awakening in its citizens, especially young people. “They are taking action and trying to do something about the situation. During the past two to three years, it seems that environmental protection is becoming a priority for everybody, and not only for the government.”

By Marloes Rozing

Among the big challenges for the WWF panda programme were the government and the local communities wanting to expand their economic activities into panda preservation areas. According to Ning, the WWF China is attempting to find a balanced solution. It is not possible to restrain economic activities, she acknowledges, so they “try to look for win-win solutions.” For example, she describes how the WWF works together with big development projects and provides advice on how to make the projects ecologically sound.

According to Ning, the main activities endangering the panda’s habitat are dam construction (for hydrological power production), highway construction, tourism, and mining. “Road construction is harmful if not designed well, as it leads to erosion and landslides and thus further destruction of the habitat. Hydrological power plants will change the whole ecosystem of an area and cause the relocation of people and villages; people moving higher up and into the mountains drive the panda away. Tourism is also a danger to the panda’s habitat. The preservation areas are extremely beautiful and nature areas are popular Chinese tourist destinations. Tourists, however, are not educated about environmental issues and do not know how to behave in the wild. The local governments are very keen on the revenue from this tourism and plan to build hotels in these natural environments, thus leading to the destruction of the panda’s habitat.”

Win-Win Solutions

The panda is one of the national symbols of the Chinese, like the Great Wall and the Forbidden City; however, its preservation is but a small issue within the greater context of Chinese environmental problems: that communities are confronted with pollution, water shortage, and simply securing basic needs all have priority. Nevertheless, new programmes, like The Western China Development Program launched in 2000, give the WWF renewed hope. In this programme, the twelve Western provinces in China will receive favourable support from the government for investment, policy, and environmental protection work.

How, then, does the WWF monitor economic activities in the panda’s habitat and how does the WWF contribute to the sustainable implementation of new projects? “If a new economic project is launched which endangers the panda’s habitat,” responds Ning, “we look into problems and solutions right



away. This is a big part of our project work. We actually meet with government officials once or twice a month to discuss new developments. We mainly provide suggestions for a more environmentally friendly solution. The WWF is a very small NGO in China and can only influence projects by recommendation or providing scientific research and information. The only possibility for the WWF to initiate changes is by convincing the project leaders of the long-term ecological benefits. The WWF China will not try to stop economic activities, because these are important to China’s development. But,” Ning continues, “in many cases the project organizers only look at the short-term gain. If a project is allocated to an area with a very fragile environment, we will try to move them away and nearer to the already existing villages or towns. For instance, in some nature reserves, only fifteen visitors per day are allowed; the remaining people can go and visit the nearby villages and the local community can benefit from tourism revenues.” One such example is the Pingwu project. Pingwu is a very important crossroads of panda migration corridors. The government planned to develop it for tourism, as the nature is spectacularly beautiful there and the ethnic minority called the Baima-people reside there, as well. “Through the reserve managers’ work and negotiations and some financial contribution from our side,” says Ning. “The government is now constructing ecologically friendly guesthouses. In this way, the WWF is trying to be involved in all governmental tourism

plans for the area. However, it appears that eco-tourism can not replace the revenues that logging provided in the past, and the government continues to search for other options.”

The First Step

The NGO sector is still developing in China. The WWF China is, in fact, one of the few NGOs formally registered in China, but it has no members. This is because its legal status does not allow it to have members and, furthermore, to apply for any funding. According to Ning, this is mainly a government decision and she believes it will change because of China’s membership in the World Trade Organization. “We need a change of policy,” says Ning, “but we have to wait for the government to take the first step.”

Images from the film
“China: The Panda
Adventure”



All photos: Deana Newcomb, 2001, Courtesy of IMAX Corp.

When asked to describe her hopes for the future, Ning responds, “People mainly worry about the environmental problems that affect them directly. If they would realize that the extent of environmental problems goes further than local water shortages or pollution, they would also come to realize that biodiversity is an important part of environmental problems as well. Also, I believe that, through tourism, people will come to learn more about China

and the natural diversity of our country and therefore realize the importance of preserving China’s beautiful nature.” <

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