

Project brings progress for Baima

Environment protection in balance with the development of local people

China Daily feature writers **LI XING** and **YU NAN** recently accompanied field researchers to nature reserves in southern China. The following report focuses on efforts to harmonize the relationship between nature conservation and ethnic community development.

Yang Qi, 22, hardly recognized his home village nestled in the Minshan Mountains in Pingwu County of Southwest China's Sichuan Province after three-years' military service in the country's Henan Province.

When he left in 1997, the sputtering sound of electric saws and roar of trucks carrying timber out of the mountain village could be heard day and night.

"The noise and piles of timber along the road are no longer there," recalled Yang, whose relatives still live in the Yazhe Zaozu village.

With the timber industry gone, the village — home to nearly 400 Baima people — began to experience yet another change, which has brought it into an international programme called the Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) and is making it popular with tourists.

Continuous changes

An ancient ethnic group officially linked to Tibetans, the Baimas worshipped many gods and lived for centuries by farming, herding yaks and sheep and nurturing honey bees, as well as hunting.

They exchanged salt and other necessities with the outside world via trade caravans along mountain trails.

Some also engaged in the opium trade, according to Yin Zhu, 41, one of the village heads.

The thick foliage in the Minshan Mountains provided the Baimas with ample wood. Their traditional two-storey houses are constructed out of the fine material. The upper floor is used as the living quarters, while the ground floor is for storage.

Dramatic changes in the lives of the Baimas began when the first group of people from outside the mountains arrived in the early 1950s and built dirt roads.

They settled at what the Baimas called "Wanglang," meaning sheep-herding pasture in their own ethnic tongue, about 10 kilometres and remove lumber.

About 10 years later, lumbering at Wanglang stopped and the workers left. In their stead came another small group of people who built fences around Wanglang, transforming it into one of the first nature reserves in the country.

It is home to several endangered animal species, including giant pandas, golden snub-nosed monkeys, takins and leopards and 97 species of trees, shrubs, grass, ferns and other plants.

The Baimas were no longer able to cut trees or graze their herds inside the reserve.

However, they seemed not to mind as the hills outside the reserve offered enough wood and pastures for their livelihood.

Gemi, 50, still remembers her late teen years in the early 1970s when she took charge of looking after all of the honey bee hives owned by the village, then a brigade of the local *Renmin Gongshe*, or people's commune.

"They were the best years of my life," she said.

In 1979, another lumber company settled in the valley just outside the nature reserve.

In less than a decade, many of the Baimas said goodbye to poverty by engaging in logging and lumber transportation.

Until 1997, more than 60 per cent of Pingwu County's revenue came from commercial logging. The population of the Baima people in Pingwu County is about 3,000. Yazhe Zaozu is one of the several Baima populated villages in the county.

Now, no more dense forests surrounds the village. The Baimas turned their attention to the Wanglang Nature Reserve again, so that they would not fall back into poverty.



Centuries-old homes: The Baima people's Yazhe Zaozu village nestles in the Minshan Mountains in Southwest China's Sichuan Province.

LI XING/China Daily

Apart from the virgin forests in the deep valley, the foliage of trees in the reserve had not been disturbed for more than three decades and would provide better lumber than the relatively young trees nearer the village.

For Nature (WWF). "Pandas often move outside the reserves, so protecting the surrounding environment of reserves is also very important."

To reduce conflicts and improve the man-

Following the national ban on the logging of the natural forests in the country, the villagers also saw the need to explore new ways to improve their lives.

Today, the reserve's computer data base has

files of the socio-economic data the researchers have collected over the years.

The villagers hope, among other things, to build a new primary school for their young children, improve their electricity supply and expand their bee hives.

But starting tourism services was the most popular choice, particularly as their distant neighbours have prospered as millions of tourists have poured into the Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve, which borders Wanglang, since the early 1990s.

Ecotourism

The reserve cannot be properly protected by just closing it to local people and tourists, a fact not lost on reserve staff

and scientists who completed initial work in the Baima village, according to Li Shengzhi, the Pingwu ICDP field manager of WWF and socio-economic researcher at the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences, whose specialty is in developmental economics.

When the needs were identified, ICDP was launched, with reserve staff, researchers and villagers working together to push for community development.

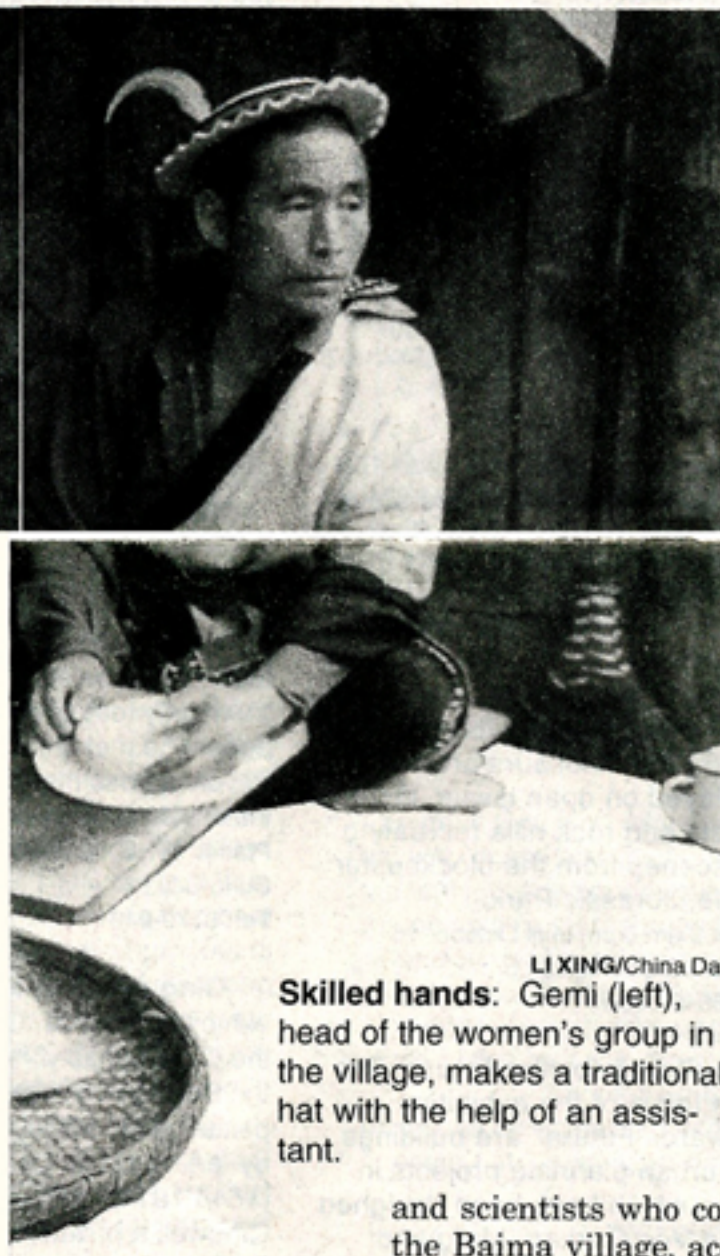
A new primary school was built for children under 10 years of age.

A small hydro-electrical generator was installed, increasing the electricity supply, and satellite dishes were fixed, connecting the mountainous village with the outside world through the medium of television.

Micro-credit schemes were introduced. A women's group was set up and they started to weave traditional ethnic costumes for potential tourists.



LI XING/China Daily
Skilled hands: Gemi (left), head of the women's group in the village, makes a traditional hat with the help of an assistant.



And the grassy pasture inside the reserve was much thicker than grassland outside the fences.

Reducing confrontation

Conflicts were mounting as villagers wanted to make use of their traditional "sheep herding ground," while the reserve rangers tried to stop them.

"For sometime, we would hate to drive across the village on the way to the county seat for fear of hassles we'd get from the Baimas," said Fu Xiaobo, a reserve ranger.

At the same time, scientists found that the logging activities over nearly two decades had reduced the habitat of giant pandas and other precious species, said Dr Yu Changqing, director of Species Programme at World Wide Fund

and management of the reserve zoologist known for his research on the lives of wild panda in 1997.

Over the years about 10 million yuan (US\$1.2 million) in ICDP conducted in China.

"The project aims at making it a harmonious relationship between nature conservation and development," said Lu, who was WWF in China.

Under her supervision, ICDP was launched. Lu, with researchers, conducted a series of discussions with the villagers, learning about their aspirat

Lu Zhi, a leading Chinese researcher on her research on the area started ICDP in the area

The WWF has invested (US\$1.2 million) in several nature reserves in China.

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XING GUANGMING
Welcome: Two little girls from the Baima village giggle at tourists from outside their mountain home.



XING GUANGMING
Left: Some Baima girls fool around by tossing a foreign tourist in the air. Above: When the Baima girls finish a song and a cup of highland-barley wine, the guests must down three cups.

Developing tourism was high on the community development agenda.

Lu insisted that ecotourism was the best way to protect nature while improving the local economy.

Work bears fruit

After five years of effort, ICDP has brought further changes to the lives of the Baimas.

Travelling down the road, crossing the Baima village on the way to Wanglang, no one could ignore the homestay lodging signs put up by the villagers — "White Feather," "Joy at the Tibetan Home," "Snow Cottage" and "Baima Flavour Home" — all declaring their special ethnicity.

Among the services offered on the signs are honey liquor, lumps of yak and beef or roasted whole sheep.

"We have a good chef and his roasted whole sheep should be the best in the village," said Niyinzao, who helped her sister Zhang Xiong and brother-in-law Zhang Jun entertain tourists during the summer at "Joy at the Tibetan Home," which has 34 beds.

Most of the homestays have their buildings decorated with colourful tiles, in contrast to the lanky wooden beams of traditional houses.

Bus-loads of tourists have come into the village, especially during the weekends from late spring through to early autumn, spending the night in the homestays, now numbering 15.

Baimas offer ethnic songs and dance to entertain the visitors.

During peak days, Niyinzao said the homestay could serve about 100 guests for parties. The whole village can accommodate up to about 500 travellers.

The family makes about 100,000 yuan (US\$12,077) from its homestay business alone, now that Niyinzao's three sisters have lent a helping hand.

"People are coming into the mountains and we are travelling out of the mountains, too," she said.

In 2000, Niyinzao and some of her relatives travelled to the island Hainan Province in South China.

"We learned much about the tourism business," she said.

As the project develops, the villagers have learnt to link the changes in their natural environment with what they have done in the past.

"Heavy logging in the 1990s did take its toll," Yin Zhu said.

The water in the streams swells and surges faster and in greater volume today compared to when he was small, Yin Zhu said, and the water is now muddier during rainy days.

"We do have less water coming through the village when there is no rain than before," Niyinzao said.

Meanwhile, Fu said he no longer speeds up his van when driving through the village.

As the appointed mediator from the reserve, he has the responsibility to listen to the villagers' grievances and complaints.

Work to be done

Despite the successes, Li said they need to make a number of improvements.

For instance, the micro-loans for the village women to produce handicrafts have made little returns and some of their products have not sold well.

Yin Zhu said they still need to improve the village road and roads in between the homes. Sanitation and sewage systems need to be built, as an increasing number of tourists produce more rubbish — there is litter in the ditches between the houses.

Li said the gap between the rich and poor in the village is increasing. The amount of firewood being used is also on the rise.

New programmes are being designed to reduce the income gap and to find alternatives to burning wood.

Wherever the solution lies, Yin Zhu said the Wanglang National Nature Reserve staff had helped us "improve our lives and we help them protect the wild animals."