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How can Heritage assist People to enhance “Living Together”?

Realising Earth Charter Principles: a case study of community development and education in the Bazhu Community, China

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Abstract

Through a case study of Bazhu Community in Southwest China, this article showcases an example of how a community can achieve the successful balance of people, planet and profit (livelihoods). From the perspective of the 3Ps the article outlines an alternative model for community development, one based on traditional philosophies that emphasise frugality, humility, and harmony. It demonstrates how local communities, rooted in their natural environment and cultural traditions, empowered through a process of collective learning and action, can improve all aspects of their lives and contribute to the development of a sustainable future in their area and beyond. The article highlights the importance of spirituality (the 4th p: pneuma) and of re-connecting the links between local culture and nature in order to attain the harmony of the 3Ps. This is explored by examining the commonalities of the traditional Eastern philosophies practised in the wider area of Shangri-la, and how these link with national, regional (Asian) and global values and ethics for sustainable living. Common values are identified and the need for collective values and “common responsibilities” for local and global sustainability emphasised.

Introduction

The neo-classical economic model of development which focuses on economic growth and the accumulation of capital is ecologically unsustainable. (Duroy, 2011) The consumer culture that has developed to sustain this system, promotes desire, want and greed in order to continue the cycle of capital investment and profit making. Despite growing monetary wealth in the world today, increasing numbers of people are unfulfilled and always “wanting something more” to fill this void. (ibid) If we are to continue as a human race and sustain life on earth we need to find and adopt alternative, sustainable lifestyles and models of development.

It is through the awareness of this need for change that Environmental Education (EE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) were developed. In over forty years of teaching and learning about EE/ESD the community has accumulated a wide range of theory and practice focussed on teaching and learning about issues of the environment and development. It now recognises that creating awareness, imparting knowledge and developing skills are not sufficient to bring about a change in the model of development and associated lifestyles. (Gray-Donald, J., & Selby, D., 2008) There needs to be a fundamental questioning of dominant beliefs and values if development is to take a more sustainable path.

“The litany of environmental and development problems is well known, but what is becoming ever more self-evident is that they cannot be solved by science, technology,

law, politics, or economics alone. That is because we are more aware that environmental and development issues are, in large measure, social issues...The challenge, then, is to create whole communities, where humans are not dominating nature, but rather recognize their profound dependence on the larger community of life.” (Tucker, 2012:1)

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the importance of culture and spirituality in fostering values for sustainability and in offering alternative paths for development. (Tucker, 2012) The key to this is the development of or re-connection with values and beliefs that foster sustainability, such as those outlined in the Earth Charter. The same values still find expression in many indigenous cultures around the world. In this case study the community of Bazhu serves to demonstrate an alternative model of development which by re-connecting with local culture and traditions and linking these with global values, has achieved the balance between people, planet and profit (livelihoods). This process will be described and the values and process of learning behind this development outlined.

The Balance of People, Planet and Profit in Bazhu Community

People

Bazhu is set within the culturally, ethnically, ecologically and biologically diverse region of Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in Yunnan province southwest China. This diverse region has been a melting pot of different ethnic groups for hundreds of years that comprises Naxi, Lisu, Yi, Tibetan and Bai peoples, among other ethnic groups. The history of Bazhu village can be traced back more than 800 years when 13 Tibetan families from Batang, Sichuan province, travelled south and settled down in this mountainous area. Set high up in the mountains of Weixi County, Bazhu is an administrative village composed of 21 natural villages scattered over an area of 88 km². The total population of 1,377 people, which is made up of 278 households, mainly relies on the village’s 121 hectares of farmland to make a living. (Cao, 2011)

As a key stopping point along the old Tea Horse Route caravans and traders from the surrounding regions passed through this area and there was frequent interaction between different ethnic groups. As such the area is multi-cultural and multi-ethnic and many different cultures and ways of thinking have influenced the people living in this region. As ethnic Tibetans in a multi-ethnic region the villagers of Bazhu had to adapt to local customs under the influence of Naxi culture. This included the adoption of Naxi architecture and the addition of certain Naxi words into their language. Bazhu also maintains strong Tibetan traditions which are manifested in its language, music, dance and especially their belief in Tibetan Buddhism which emphasizes the worship of mountains and rivers and the protection of the natural environment.

There is a primary school in Bazhu with 157 students attending grades 1-5. Recently most children in the village have the chance to receive a formal education up to middle school level. Dharma Community College, which is built on the site of an old monastery through collective efforts led by a monk from Bazhu, is also an important place for learning, and it offers an education in Tibetan language and Buddhist scriptures for young monks. Some boys may attend the this local Buddhist College full time from a young age while others may go to school first and spend some time in

the monastery after that.

Besides these 2 institutions most knowledge and skills are informally “learnt by doing” in daily activities. Important traditional practices and indigenous knowledge relating to farming and the land are passed on in this way. The village elders pass knowledge and wisdom to the younger generations, and participation in Tibetan Buddhist rituals and religious festivals plays a key role in this.

Planet

Despite the destruction of surrounding areas of natural forest, 98% of the land around Bazhu is still covered by primary forest (Cao, 2011) largely thanks to the community’s strong traditional beliefs that support them in living in harmony with the land. These ancient natural forests have been around longer than the community itself and many trees are thought to be several hundred years old. Ranging from an elevation of 2,300 to 3,840m with a temperate climate, Bazhu forest boasts rich biodiversity and is home to many rare and endangered species of wildlife. A survey organized by the village in association with the Shangri-la Institute for Sustainable Communities (SISC) in 2007 found that there were 205 species of bird, a large number of mammals and hundreds of plant species in Bazhu forest and the surrounding areas. (Bazhu Community Nature Reserve, 2008 a, b, c and d) Among these there are many First and Second Class nationally protected species in China such as the Black-necked Crane, the Yunnan Golden Monkey (or Snub nosed Monkey), Lynx, Yunnan Leopard, Black Muntjac, Muntjac, and Green-tailed Red Pheasant. (Bazhu Community Nature Reserve, 2008 a, b, c and d) There is an array of unusual and beautiful orchids, rhododendrons, and many other indigenous plants including the Himalayan Yew, a coniferous tree whose sap is a source of the anti-cancer drug, paclitaxel. Rare medicinal herbs and wild mushrooms also abound. At the foot of the forested mountains, Bazhu River flows through the village before reaching Tacheng and joining the Lapu River, a major tributary of the upper reaches of the mighty Yangtze. The protection of Bazhu forest has a direct impact on the ecosystems downstream and on the millions of people living throughout the Yangtze Basin; vegetation loss and soil erosion are the biggest problems in the Upper Reaches of the Yangtze, and cause severe flooding downstream. (Ma & Xue, 2003 and Yin & Li 2001).

Profit (livelihoods)

Bazhu has recently emerged from being one of the poorest counties in China to one where the villagers earn slightly above average incomes for the local region. In 2005 the average income per capita was only about 700 RMB a year (less than \$100 USD at that time). By 2010 it had increased to 2705 RMB. (Cao, 2011) Bazhu is blessed with very fertile land, a good climate and plentiful water resources for growing crops. There are 2 growing seasons per year and highland barley, wheat, Indian corn, buckwheat, sweetcorn and soyabeans are all grown. Bazhu villagers started cultivating wild papaya as a cash crop in the 1980s and have since added apple orchards, walnuts, canola and beans, all of which are organic and bring income to the village. The main source of income however is the collection of non-timber forest products such as medicinal herbs and mushrooms. These grow wild in Bazhu’s forests but in recent years have been cultivated in order to provide extra income without depleting the natural stocks. In 2010 the average total income from medicinal herbs was about 400,000 RMB per year. (Cao, 2011) The sale of free-range chickens and eggs also provide some income. Through the support of Shangri-la Institute training

and equipment was provided in order to produce value-added goods. The processing and packaging of local produce means that the products have a longer shelf-life and can be marketed as organic produce for a higher price than they would be able to attain for the goods locally. In recent years apiculture has also been developed and Bazhu villagers sell local organic honey to outlets in the Shangri-La Old Town. Bazhu has also started to open up to eco-tourism, and promote eco-products as another way to stimulate the economy.

Mechanisms for Learning for Sustainability

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was employed by the Shangri-la Institute as the main tool for facilitating a process of learning and action for sustainable communities in Bazhu. Five mechanisms for learning for sustainability are outlined below. They include: 1.) the establishment of learning platforms and partnerships, 2.) re-connecting with nature, 3.) combining traditional practices with modern technologies, 4.) re-connecting with cultural heritage, 5.) intercultural exchange.

Mechanism for Learning 1: Establishment of Learning Platforms and Partnerships

In 2005 a Community Learning Centre (CLC) was established in the village. This has provided an effective platform for informal learning to take place and encourages 'shared learning'. Capacity for development is enhanced through community activities and projects and non-formal training sessions such as those on organic farming techniques and women's health. These develop relevant knowledge, skills and values in partnership with local people. Cultural activities also take place here, facilitating the preservation and revitalization of traditional culture and heritage and helping to define and value local identities.

The establishment of the CLC and of a community management system has been a key instrument in empowering community members and facilitating collective learning and action. Through discussing, negotiating, listening to different opinions and sharing collective wisdom, collective decisions can be made that inform community learning and action. For example within the Bazhu 5-year plan development process, the decision was made not to partake in pine resin tapping, and to develop a community nature reserve in order to ensure protection of the surrounding natural forests in the long-term. Community decisions have shaped the process of learning, including types of training held, resources and knowledge acquired and partnerships established. A community management committee was elected by the community to guide them and represent them in higher-level decision-making processes such as involvement in township, county and prefecture level decisions and policy development.

Partnerships for learning have been established between formal, non-formal and informal learning settings in order to enhance learning for all by sharing knowledge, skills, values and different approaches to teaching and learning. The CLC coordinates activities with the local primary school (for example through joint school and community learning and action along Bazhu River, as part of the Water School for a Living Yangtze project) and the monastery, as well as formal educational institutions at a regional level including Shangri-la Vocational College, and Mianyang Teachers College. Joint projects are initiated such as the eco-tourism course at the vocational college. The Bazhu community offered advice on the development of this eco-tourism

course and on an ESD course which was developed between Shangri-la Institute and Shangri-la Vocational College. In this way shared learning is facilitated and knowledge, skills and values for sustainability deepened.

Mechanism for Learning 2: Re-connecting with Nature

Alienation from nature (the separation of people from the nature that surrounds them; the nature they produce through work, and their own human natures) is a product of the capitalist model of development (Mandel & Novack, 1970) Urbanization is one feature of this process as is the separation of academic knowledge into compartments (natural vs social sciences) and the separation of academic knowledge from indigenous knowledge. Such alienation inhibits people's understanding of their connectedness and interdependence with the rest of nature and encourages individualism and consumerism. As capitalist social relations displace relations of co-operation and mutual aid in many of China's rural communities, the Bazhu community is demonstrating that alternatives are possible that do not involve alienation and generate livelihoods for all the people on a sustainable basis.

Place-based and experiential learning can cultivate a sense of belonging and connection to the land, encouraging communities to protect it rather than exploit it. Such learning results in the creation of communities that participate in and care for their surroundings rather than trying to control and tame nature and surroundings for their own benefit (Tu 1998). In Bazhu, fostering this sense of connection has been key to achieving a more harmonious relationship with the natural surroundings.

Traditionally much emphasis was put on the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist belief of sacred lakes and mountains, which meant that villagers would not go to certain areas and therefore wide expanses of forest and water would be protected from pollution or destruction. The sporadic cutting down of trees and killing of animals is likewise against the Buddhist belief system. So if wood was needed or animals had to be killed for hides or meat it was strictly regulated and monitored. In order to consolidate these values into the actions of the community, the village committee decided to implement rules about land use and the collection of natural resources in order to protect the land and local eco-systems. For example there are guidelines as to when and where crops can be planted and rules about the harvesting of timber; ancient trees must not be cut down. Fines and other systems of punishment are now in place for those who break this community code of conduct. In the mid 1990s a women's patrol team was formed in order to make sure that people from Bazhu or other areas do not break these rules by poaching or cutting down trees illegally. The patrol operates once a month and has been a very effective defence against the misuse of local natural resources. Other activities to re-connect with nature in Bazhu have included the documenting of local biodiversity and the revival of traditional land management practices and ceremonies worshipping sacred mountains and lakes.

It was the success of these initiatives that led the community to come up with the idea of developing their own Community Integrated Nature Reserve. This will be owned and managed by the community, and will draw on the harmony with the land and natural environment that they have established over many hundreds of years, to develop a mechanism to protect their natural surroundings in the long-term.

Mechanism for Learning 3: Combining Traditional Practices with Modern

Technologies

Bazhu villagers have been able to develop their economy whilst at the same time minimizing the impact on their local environment. This has been achieved through careful planning and consideration, and by drawing on their rich cultural heritage and then combining this with modern technologies in order to create new sustainable ways of sustaining livelihoods. With the support of Shangri-la Institute some traditional farming and land management practices have been revived such as crop rotation, use of organic fertilizer, and allowing farmland to remain fallow every few years. Eco-living technologies have also been adopted and adapted to the local lifestyle and needs. These include the construction of compostable toilets (which also provide a source of organic fertilizer), biogas stoves for cooking, solar panels to provide hot water, and micro hydropower for electricity. These modern technologies reduce pollution and minimize the use of natural resources. Through capacity building and learning about modern science and technology the development of new knowledge and skills is cultivated. SISC's provision of processing equipment has also enabled Bazhu villagers to generate a sustainable income whilst maintaining their environment and protecting their natural resources.

The deep belief systems of the Bazhu villagers have been a guiding force in the adoption of new technology and modes of production. Key to this has been the Buddhist emphasis on frugality and simplicity, and the notion of "being more rather than having more". Bazhu villagers describe themselves as being happy with their lives. They are clear that they do not want to over exploit their natural resources in order to make more money. They realise their happiness increases as they improve their livelihoods and maintain the natural landscapes.

An example of the effect of these beliefs occurred when an opportunity to conduct pine resin extraction was offered to the Bazhu villagers. Pine resin extraction is a profitable source of income, however the villagers decided they did not want to establish this in their village or the surrounding natural forests because of the damage it would cause.

Mechanism for Learning 4: Reconnecting with Cultural Heritage

There are strong links and connections between cultural heritage, values, spirituality and the sustainability of communities:

"Culture shapes the way we see the world. It therefore has the capacity to bring about the change of attitudes needed to ensure peace and sustainable development which, we know, form the only possible way forward for life on planet Earth."

(World Culture report, UNESCO, 1999)

According to Ruud Lubbers "spirituality has to be part of the way forward". (Lubbers, Genugten, & Lambooy. 2008:31) Spirituality adds strength to the call for collective responsibilities, which is vital if we are to achieve global sustainability. This is highlighted in the Earth Charter: "The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature." (EC, 2000:1)

Traditional and indigenous cultures and belief systems offer alternative ways of developing and looking at the world, which in turn, can help to establish new values, attitudes and approaches to living together in harmony. In Bazhu community there is

a strong sense of local culture and tradition. Tibetan Buddhism permeates many aspects of life, and in fact cannot be separated from the lifestyle that has been created there. Daily living practices including farming methods are undertaken with due regard for Buddhist sacred lakes and mountains, as well as a deep respect for nature and the natural environment. It is these strong local traditions and the values that Buddhism encompasses which have guided the Bazhu community to protect their local natural environment and live a life of relative simplicity and frugality. This has informed an alternative development path.

The protection and revitalisation of Bazhu's cultural heritage, traditional practices and values has been vital in the ongoing process of building sustainable communities in Bazhu. There is a need to: "recognise and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being". (EC, 2000:3) By re-connecting with cultural heritage, important traditional knowledge can be preserved and values and beliefs assessed for their relevance to today's world. This facilitates a process of values clarification at the local level. The values that are deemed relevant, can then be combined with useful values and practices from other traditional cultures (facilitated by shared learning and intercultural exchange), and from modern science and technology in order to create a new revised version of values and lifestyles suitable for the contemporary context.

In Bazhu the key values are based on Buddhist teachings that emphasize humility, simplicity, unselfishness, nonviolence, compassion, and meditation. These are achieved by minimizing ignorance, desires, selfishness and greed. Many of these principles could be used to inform a green environmental philosophy and a set of sustainability ethics. Indeed many of these values are evident in the Earth Charter. (EC, 2000) It has also been noted that there is a strong correlation between the growing environmental crisis and the decline of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. (Sponsel & Sponsel, 1997)

Activities to re-connect with local culture and values in Bazhu have included traditional dance and song classes, the documentation of indigenous culture, revitalisation of traditional practices such as farming methods, the revival of traditional costumes, and the telling of folk stories and oral histories.

Providing opportunities for the continued use of local language is also vital as languages are vehicles for culture, in which values and indigenous knowledge are embedded; "they are the carriers of identity, values and worldviews." (UNESCO, 2009:67) It is no coincidence that "Dharma the Buddhist word for truth and the teachings is also the word for nature." (Techathamamoo in Sponsel & Sponsel, 1997:47) The deep belief systems of interconnectedness between people and the planet are embedded in language. SISC has supported the provision of Tibetan language classes at the CLC, as well as at the local primary school. The production of a Tibetan language newspaper for children has also been supported and is distributed to young people across the Tibetan Plateau twice monthly. Columns on culture and ecology and the deep links between Buddhism and nature provide opportunities for young people to learn about and connect with an alternative set of values than are found in modern society from the west.

Mechanism for Learning 5: Intercultural Exchange

The above values are echoed in many other belief systems around the world. Not least in the broader regions around Bazhu where Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, the three main traditional cultural and philosophical influences and belief systems in greater China are all evident. In Daoist beliefs “*nothing is better than the principle of frugality*” (Wang, 2010:247) and the ideal society as described by Lao Zi is characterized by “equality, self-efficiency, security, simplicity, peaceful co-existence, tranquillity, harmony and an idyllic life above all” (Wang, 2010:185) Lao Zi’s conception of the ideal society; “a small state based on simple frugal living conditions and activities”(Wang, 2010:185), is in direct contrast to the capitalist model of development which promotes restless growth through desire, greed, accumulation and inevitably, over-consumption. Confucianism strongly emphasizes harmony between all people and the planet through the concept of 仁 (rén). Confucianism denounces selfishness and greed, as this will mean there is not enough for other people. The good of the collective is key, and takes importance over individuals. Confucianism encourages the cultivation of individual learning and development in order to benefit others. Significance is placed on making sure the whole family, whole community, whole society and in extension the whole natural world is in harmony. This is illustrated by the Confucian diagram of a series of concentric circles radiating outwards from the individual to the whole world.

The sharing of cultural and spiritual wisdom and values encourages adaptation and clarification of values, and this is key to facilitating new alternative sustainable ways of valuing and developing:“We must deepen and expand the global dialogue that generated the Earth Charter, for we have much to learn from the ongoing collaborative search for truth and wisdom.” (EC, 2000:4) We need to re-align values for sustainability at local and global levels through: the re-connection with local and indigenous cultures and values, establishment of learning platforms and partnerships, intercultural exchange, re-connection with nature and the combining of new and old values, traditions and methods in order to inform a new path of sustainable development, globally.

In shared learning sessions Bazhu villagers explored the philosophies and inherent values of Daoism and Confucianism, and found that there are many commonalities with Buddhism and the values they practice. Intercultural exchange helps to inform collective learning and action that is relevant and suitable for the local context:“Our cultural diversity is a precious heritage and different cultures will find their own distinctive ways to realize the vision...[of a sustainable way of life]”. (EC, 2000:4) Sharing these different local visions through the establishment of learning platforms and partnerships is key to “developing and applying the vision [of a sustainable way of life]... nationally, regionally, and globally” (EC, 2000:4).

Intercultural learning in Bazhu has been facilitated through participation in regional, national and international workshops and training, such as those on bird identification and nature protection training in nearby Hamagu community; teacher training for primary school teachers in Shangri-la; national biodiversity leadership and ecotourism workshops; and a Buddhist Conference on Ecology in Mongolia. Through exchanges with other communities or institutions and participation in national programmes and conferences community members in Bazhu are sharing their cultural knowledge and experiences of ESD and listening to the stories and approaches of others. Bazhu villagers hope that through the publication of articles and reports, participation in

international conferences and events, and the hosting of visitors and eco-tourists in Bazhu, their approach to development and their values and practices will be shared with broader communities, and will provide alternative approaches to development that will contribute to the global debate on ESD.

Final questions: How can we maintain local sustainability and develop global sustainability? How can we learn to live together for global sustainability?

The Earth Charter (EC) is a powerful tool that prompts teaching and learning about universal human core values, and can be linked to the local level to create more contextualised learning, or considered from a broader regional or global perspective in order to make comparisons between different societies and how they are attempting to live more sustainably. However, the embodiment of values for ESD which have been outlined at a global level through documents such as the Earth Charter need to be linked to culture and belief at the local level in order to be effective. Likewise, local values and learning and action need to be connected to and combined with the broader levels –nationally, regionally, and globally if we are to make the necessary changes for global sustainability. Sustainable collective consumption is a key facet of sustainability, and if we do not work together to achieve this, but continue to compete with each other for resources then global sustainability is impossible.

To realize this vision of a sustainable world, we need to apply it at the global level: this “requires a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.” (EC, 2000:4) “We must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.” (EC, 2000:4)

In order to learn together for a more sustainable future we need to foster this sense of collective, and universal responsibility and re-align values at local, regional and global levels.

This case study of Bazhu community has briefly outlined an alternative path of development; one which has positive implications for global sustainability. Bazhu is an example of how local communities, rooted in their natural environment and cultural traditions, empowered through a process of collective learning and action, can improve all aspects of their lives and contribute to the development of a sustainable future in their area and beyond. Bazhu villagers hope that others will be inspired by their approach to community development, and will find ways to learn from their traditional beliefs and practices and adapt these for effective learning and action in other contexts, locally and globally. It is through the establishment of learning partnerships and platforms for shared learning and intercultural exchange that the means for cultivating the sense of universal responsibility will be fostered and the principles embedded in the Earth Charter will begin to be realized on a global scale.

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