

ROUNDTABLE PROPOSAL
For the Conference on China-U.S. Relations: Trade, Diplomacy and Research

TITLE: Wetland Conservation, Nature-Based Tourism, and Rural Economic Development

1. ORGANIZATION TEAM

Name	Role	Address
Dr. Jianbang Gan	Co-chair	Dept. of Forest Science, 2135 TAMU, phone: 862-4392, email: j-gan@silva.tamu.edu
Dr. Yongxia Skadberg	Co-chair	RPTS, 2261 TAMU, phone: 845-0868, email: yskadberg@ag.tamu.edu
Dr. Andrew Skadberg	Co-chair	AdventGX, Inc., 1700 Research Pkwy, Ste 165, phone: 575-6401, email: andyskadberg@adventgx.com
Dr. Rick Giardino	Other Organizer	OGS, 1113 TAMU, phone: 845-3631, email: rickg@tamu.edu

Dr. J. Gan, Associate Professor in the Departments of Forest Science and Agricultural Economics, has extensive research experience in natural resource conservation and rural economic development in the US and China, as well as in southeast Asia and Africa. He has been PI/Co-PI for more than a dozen of research projects funded by USDA, USAID, and EPA, among others.

Dr. Y. Skadberg (Environmental Geography) is currently working on applying GIS and IT technology to nature-based tourism development. She is a co-creator of the Travel Information Network Kiosks installed at the Texas Department of Transportation rest areas. She also worked at the Institute of Ecology, Chinese Academy of Environmental Sciences and served as a division head at the Chemical Registration Center of State Environmental Protection Administration of China (SEPA).

Dr. A. Skadberg (Environmental Geography) is specialized in examining how the Internet is impacting rural economic development as it relates to marketing natural resource amenities for tourism development. He is currently Chief Knowledge Officer at AdventGX, Inc. and was previously an assistant professor in Recreation, Parks and Tourism Science at TAMU. He advised the Texas Historical Commission in planning state-wide heritage tourism programs.

2. DESCRIPTION AND FORMAT

The proposed research roundtable will discuss opportunities and challenges that face both China and the US related to wetlands protection/restoration, water conservation (quality and quantity), rural economic development alternatives, and sustainable strategies for tourism development. The roundtable topics will include: (1) opportunities and challenges for protecting wetlands and their associated habitats (terrestrial and aquatic); (2) creation of technical assistance and access to information and services to enhance rural economies through diversification into nature-based tourism; (3) development/integration of information technology (IT) and GIS-based tools for decision making; (4) development of research approaches for socio-economic and environmental impact assessments; and (5) policies and management strategies for environmental and economic sustainability.

2.1. SIGNIFICANCE

Both China and the US have recognized the need to protect and enhance wetlands and to promote rural economic development. The US and Chinese rural agricultural economies have been experiencing what has been called a “crisis” for many years. China has recently initiated significant policy changes to address the situation because of the economic rift that exists between rural and urban settings. Rural places in the US are experiencing similar but less critical problems. The experience and lessons learned from wetland conservation, nature-based tourism, and rural economic development in each country will be beneficial to the other. This roundtable session is designed to foster the exchange of such scientific knowledge and to develop partnerships between researchers/scientists in both countries for future collaboration.

China has enjoyed a phenomenal economic growth during the past two decades, with an annual GDP growth rate averaged at about 9.4%. Yet, the growth is coupled with environmental degradation and urban-rural disparity. One of the major environmental concerns in China is water quantity and quality, which are clearly tied to wetland resource. A major challenge for rural economic development is how to enhance income generation ability. Nature-based tourism can play an important role in both wetland conservation and rural economic development. Although both countries have common issues related to wetlands, rural economic development, and the phenomenal growth of rural tourism, China's situation is more critical. Thus, this brief discussion focuses more on the opportunities and challenges in China.

Policy Changes to Address Disparity between Rural and Urban Economies

While the economy of China is booming, the economic gap between urban and rural places is also expanding. Recognizing this problem, the Chinese government recently re-issued their "No 1 document," that stresses the need to improve farmers' incomes. This was the first time since 1949 that the central authorities issued a document specifically designed to improve the incomes of farmers. The "No. 1 Document" has accelerated the implementation of the agro-tax exemption. To date there are 25 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities in the country, that have announced the full exemption of agro-tax and it is likely to realize the exemption of agro-tax within 3 years, i.e. 2 years ahead of the timetable. These policy changes indicate the compelling need to address the urban-rural disparity issue.

Wetlands

Both the US and China have recognized the criticality of preserving wetlands. Benefits are well documented. The US EPA identifies the following benefits: fish, recreational opportunities, improvement of water quality, and flood control. All of these benefits can be converted to real economic values.

With one-fifth of the world's population, conservation of wetlands in China is crucial. China is ranked fourth in the world in wetlands surface (65.9 million ha – 10% of the world's wetland areas), yet it ranks 109th in the world in fresh water per capita. However, under the pressure of population growth and economic development over the last several decades, some 13% of China's lakes have disappeared, half of China's coastal wetlands have been lost to reclamation and 50% of China's cities have no drinking water that meets acceptable hygiene standards.

To deal with these trends China has adopted Priority 5 for Agenda 21 "Conservation and Sustainable Utilization of Natural Resources". Section 5.3 of the Priority Programme focuses on Conservation and Sustainable Utilization of Wetland resources. What are lacking in these approaches is sustainable ways to derive economic returns from the protection of these resources.

Natural Resource Based Tourism and Rural Economic Development

In both the US and China natural resource based tourism and recreational activities are increasingly enhancing natural resource protection activities. This form of tourism has been identified as the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry. Globally there has been a significant increase in rural communities, regions, and landowners integrating a tourism initiative into their economic development strategies. This suggests that a paradigm shift is underway. Traditional economic strategies derive value from the land by consumptive, agricultural or extractive activities. Nature-based tourism, however, can provide economic returns without altering the landscape. In fact often times, the economic value can be increased by "improving" (e.g. clearing invasive species) these natural settings.

For China, the emphasis on the expansion of rural agricultural capacity would understandably place greater pressures on environmentally sensitive areas. The Administrative Center for China's Agenda 21 already acknowledges that "conservation and management of wetland resources have received inadequate attention for a long period of time. ... Marshes have continued to decrease and are used for cultivation, fish or shrimp ponds. Wildlife species have been killed, and wetland ecosystems have deteriorated due to poor planning and management, as well as other reasons." Although Agenda 21 outlines a deliberate approach to conduct research and resource assessments, the means to create "sustainable use wetlands" seems to be overlooked. When agricultural production is what drives the rural economy, pressures to convert non-productive lands to tillable lands increase tremendously. Nature-

based tourism provides a plethora of opportunities to supplement and support long-term, sustainable economic development.

2.2. POTENTIAL TOPICS FOR THE ROUDTALBE SESSION

- a. Wetland protection and conservation to ensure/improve water quality & quantity
- b. Development of sustainable economic development strategies for rural areas (focus on tourism to compliment existing economic strategies)
- c. Barriers to adoption of sustainable tourism in rural places
- d. Adapting successful wetland/tourism demonstration/research projects to China (e.g. Iowa State Riparian Buffer Strip, Big Bend Region Marketing Study)
- e. International tourism business and trade and China-US cooperation
- f. Comparative advantages, specialization, and tourism development strategies
- g. Innovation, management improvement, and private enterprise governance
- h. US experiences of private enterprise development and its implication to China
- i. Applications of GIS and IT in regional and community tourism development
- j. GIS and IT decision support systems for natural resource management and tourism development

2.3. JUSTIFICATION

With tourism as a primary economic driver and natural resource protection a major concern, these topics are relevant to governments, scholars, and business leaders in both countries. Opportunities are significant, but strategies for success face a number of obstacles. The common goals for effective collaboration between the Chinese and U.S. governments provide rich opportunities for cooperative research. Collaboration between researchers in the U.S. and China extend existing partnerships in research and scientific exchanges between Texas A&M, other US Universities, and institutions in China.

2.4. FORMAT

Paper presentations from various session organizers, participants, and collaborators followed by an open panel discussion.

3. PARTICIPANTS AND COLLABORATORS

Name	Affiliation
<i>US Participants/Collaborators</i>	
Dr. Carson Watt	Professor Emeritus, COALS/RPTS, TAMU
Dr. Dan Sui	Professor, CGS/Geography, TAMU
Dr. Andrew Sansom	Director, River Systems Institute, Texas State University
Dr. Joe Colletti	Professor and Interim Head, Forestry, Iowa State University
Dr. Richard Schultz	Professor (national/international expert in riparian buffer strips), Hydrology and Ecology, Iowa State University
<i>Chinese Participants/Collaborators</i>	
Prof. Cao, Hongfa	Former Director of the Institute of Environmental Ecology, Chinese Academy of Environmental Sciences
Prof. Wu, Bihu	Director of Center for Tourism Planning, Dept. of Geography, Beijing University
Prof. Gao, Jixi	Professor, Chinese Academy of Environmental Sciences
Prof. Liu, Junchang	Professor and Dean, Beijing Forestry University
Prof. Liu, Weiping	Professor and Dean, Fujian Agriculture and Forestry University

4. FUNDING

Because of the broad and potentially significant implications of this discussion we will be seeking funding from various sources to support travel for all nine US participants; proceedings and reception cost will be supported internally. We will seek funding from government, philanthropic and corporate entities to support future research.