

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01 AM APRIL 24, 2006 (PST)

2006 Goldman Environmental Prize Recipient for Asia

**Yu Xiaogang
Kunming, China**



"Mr. Yu has dedicated himself to helping local communities affected by dam construction rebuild their lives using his watershed management program. Mr. Yu is committed to working with the disadvantaged and has given them a voice in the development process. His approach will help China achieve economic progress without sacrificing its natural resources or people." - Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch Institute.

The Power of the Individual in a Land of Many Voices

Environmentalist Yu Xiaogang is creating groundbreaking watershed management programs in China, a country that has spent decades trying to tame its powerful river system by building hydroelectric power plants.

Yu, 55, created the Lashi watershed project after writing a social impact assessment on the effects of a dam built at Lashi Lake for his Ph.D. thesis. The dam had destroyed the local ecosystem, severely disrupting the lives of fishermen and farmers in the area. As farmland was destroyed by the dam, villagers turned to fishing. Then, as fish stocks dwindled, birds ate the seeds and grain from the remaining fields, further jeopardizing the people's well-being.

Yu brought together residents, the local government authorities and private entrepreneurs to rebuild the area, which today is acclaimed as one of the top 10 sustainable developments in the country. Among the project highlights were establishing a township watershed management committee, a lake-based community fishery association to protect wetland ecosystems and fish resources, minority women's schools and micro-credit loan programs, poverty reducing projects and road-building projects. All involved the participation and empowerment of the local villagers. It was the first watershed project in the county to involve NGOs, residents and the local authorities.

In 2002, Yu submitted a report to the central government on the social impact of the Manwan Dam on the Lancang (Mekong) River, which prompted the government to give the local community 70 million yuan (\$8.7 million) in additional resettlement funds to mitigate the negative social impact of the dam.

In the past, dam-building plans were simply dictated by government officials, but today, thanks to the advocacy efforts of Yu and others, the Chinese government now includes a social impact assessment in the decision-making process for all proposed major development projects.

Taming the Three Parallel Rivers

While Yu's work has illustrated dams' potential negative impact on communities, huge dam projects still are being proposed. As China's economic health improves, pressure increases to supply more power by building hydroelectric power plants on the country's river system.

In 2003, the Yunnan provincial government announced plans to construct 13 new dams on the Nu River, one of the Three Parallel Rivers – the Nu, the Jinsha (Yangtze) and the Lancang (Mekong.) The Three Parallel Rivers and surrounding watersheds are a World Heritage Site, the epicenter of Chinese biodiversity containing virgin forests, 6,000 species of plants and 79 rare or endangered animal species.

The dams would forcibly displace 50,000 people, indirectly affect the livelihoods of millions living downstream in China, Burma and Thailand, and negatively affect the flora and fauna in the surrounding areas. Yet, development continues, despite the lack of river management plans, public input and participation by affected villagers.

The Legacy of the Lashi project

Yu used the story of Lashi Lake and Manwan Dam to educate villagers in the Three Parallel Rivers area, taking them by bus to dam-affected communities on the Mekong River. There, villagers saw men and women, their way of living wiped out by the dam, picking through garbage dumps for scrap to sell. Yu also worked with CCTV on a television program about the effect of dams that aired nationwide.

In 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao suspended plans for the dams on the Nu River, saying more research and scientific analysis was needed. The project still is on hold, but the provincial government, intent on building the dams, has proposed a scaled-back version with four dams.

Yu is particularly interested in empowering the local villagers in the dam decision-making process through workshops and training programs. In 2004, he took five village representatives to a United Nations symposium on dam issues in Beijing, where they met with high-level government officials, dam company CEOs and experts on dam construction. Yu's goal is for Chinese NGOs to advocate for the institutionalization, implementation and practice of social impact assessments for the interests of communities that are threatened by dam construction.

“Having villager participation forever changed the history of the dam decision-making process,” Yu said about the experience. “In the past, affected peoples were silenced. They had no voice in what happened to them and had to accept decisions made by the government and dam companies.”

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Recipient Quote:

Name in print: Yu Xiaogang

“We face so many environmental problems that these successes are only the first steps in the Long March. To realize true sustainable development throughout China, we need the full participation of all Chinese citizens.”

About the Goldman Environmental Prize

The Goldman Environmental Prize allows individuals to continue winning environmental victories against the odds and inspire ordinary people to take extraordinary actions to protect the world. The Goldman Environmental Prize was created in 1990 by civic leaders and philanthropists Richard N. Goldman and his late wife, Rhoda H. Goldman.

The Goldman Environmental Prize winners are selected by an international jury from confidential nominations submitted by a worldwide network of environmental organizations and individuals. Prize winners participate in a 10-day tour of San Francisco and Washington, D.C., for an awards ceremony and presentation, news conferences, media briefings and meetings with political, public policy and environmental leaders.