Joint team travels to China

Courtesy of Diédre Paterno Pai
The Nature Conservancy

In 2002, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and The Nature Conservancy formed a partnership to protect and restore American rivers. The success of the partnership — known as the Sustainable Rivers Project — has been profound, with nine demonstration sites currently under way, the recent launch of a jointly developed software program, joint trainings taking place twice a year and staff exchanges.

Stan Simpson, a Corps water manager for the Savannah River Basin, recently joined a team from the Conservancy and traveled to China, where a series of dams on the Yangtze are planned. The Conservancy is conducting a series of workshops, led by Andy Warner, to define the environmental flow needs of the river and to find a way to meet the needs of nature and the growing Chinese population, so both can continue to thrive.

Diedre Paterno Pai from the Conservancy interviewed Simpson and Warner to find out more about their journey.

When completed, the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River will be the largest hydroelectric dam in the world. *(Courtesy photo from The Nature Conservancy)*

Paterno Pai: With China's growing population in need of water and energy, what is the current situation on the Yangtze River?

Simpson: China is growing at leaps and bounds. The Yangtze is a major transportation route and a big producer of hydropower, which is an important energy source not only to meet the growing demands, but also to help improve a serious air pollution problem. While the dams have provided these great benefits and significantly reduced flooding, they are also altering the natural flow patterns of the river, which has already caused some serious problems for the ecosystem. This is not an easy balance to manage, but hopefully some of our experiences will help them and vice versa.

Warner: The importance of the Yangtze to China can not be overstated. Throughout its history, the country's politics, economy, ecology and culture have all been branded by the river. The Chinese are understandably turning to the river to help meet their rapidly growing demands for water and energy. We think they can do so in a way that will leave their children a river to be proud of — a river that still supports its rich natural diversity.

Paterno Pai: When you both started working together on the Savannah River back in 2003, did it ever occur to you that you would be having a similar experience in China?

Simpson: Not in my wildest dreams. I had previously been to China to adopt both of my daughters. On both trips, we traveled along the Yangtze River past the Three Gorges Project. It was obvious that the project was going to have a big impact on the environment. I thought to myself that this would never happen in the United States today. In the Savannah Basin, the Corps Environmental Operating Principles and the Sustainable Rivers Project are encouraging water management with more emphasis on the environment. It never crossed my mind that I would have the opportunity to apply what we are trying to achieve on the Savannah River to the Yangtze River.

Warner: I hope it leads to something

similar because the Savannah River is a great success! Ecologists working hand-in-hand with water managers to meet human needs for water while protecting a rich ecosystem on the Yangtze would be great for the river and the people of China.

Paterno Pai: There are cultural differences between our organizations. Did your experiences learning how to work together help with working with such a different culture in China?

Simpson: In some ways, yes. The Conservancy is focused on change, and I like that they do science based conservation. The people they have working for them have very positive attitudes which shows, and it rubs off! The Corps vision has shifted with the establishment of the Environmental Operating Principles. For the last three years, we have adaptively managed the Savannah River focusing on making environmentally friendly springtime pulse releases. This would not have happened without the Conservancy.

Warner: I think so. A lot of what we do together involves translating between the languages of ecology and engineering. There is a huge difference in these professions and how specialists in both are trained. I have worked with a number of Corps districts and employees, and I am continually impressed with the quality of people and their understanding of water management. We have all gotten pretty good at translating and that is proving useful as we work with ecologists and engineers in China.

Paterno Pai: This question is just for Stan, what did you learn in China that you can bring back to your job?

Simpson: Wherever you are, we all need to play an active, thought out role in the development of our natural resources. In China as in the United States, it requires stakeholders from varying disciplines and interests to convene and look through each others eyes to understand the problem and work together as a team compromising towards a solution. This adventure has encouraged me to push for more adaptive water management focused on improving the ecosystem.

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