

# Bamboo Sprouts After the Rain: The History of University Student Environmental Associations in China

By Lu Hongyan

*Since 1990, Chinese university student environmental associations (SEAs) have rapidly increased in number. While concerns for the growing environmental degradation in China motivated students to create these green groups, Chinese environmental nongovernmental organizations, universities, local governments, and the news media have assisted SEA development. Student groups also are receiving assistance from eight citywide or regional green student networks, which are playing active roles as information providers, mini-grant distributors, and regional activity initiators. Two extensive surveys of Chinese SEAs reveal that in the late 1990s these groups expanded their scope of activities, but faced many challenges in finding funds and improving internal management capacity. Notably, after years of working to strengthen their groups and develop creative activities, SEA student leaders have acquired not only strong organizing skills but also environmental literacy and passion that they will integrate into their work as China's new generation of officials, teachers, entrepreneurs, reporters, and NGOs leaders.*



Since 1990, Chinese university student environmental associations (SEAs) have sprouted quickly, like bamboo shoots after a big rainstorm. This analysis of how Chinese SEAs have expanded their footprint across China over the past thirteen years was shaped by two major surveys of student environmental leaders, as well as my seven years of experience acting as the founder and faculty advisor of the Sichuan University Environmental Volunteer Association SEA and as the initiator of the Web-based SEA Green SOS. In 1999 and 2001, I coordinated two surveys of Chinese university SEAs with the aim of understanding the development and challenges facing these dynamic new green groups in China. The 1999 and 2001 surveys covered 27 and 94 SEAs, respectively. In addition to analyzing survey results, this paper includes four short anecdotes by SEA members or supporters to give voice to the students building these groups.

## THE THREE DEVELOPMENT PHASES

The first student environmental associations were founded in the early 1990s. The dramatic growth of SEAs over the past years can be divided into three distinct development phases: first steps, reaching out, and takeoff.

*First Steps Phase (1990-1995).* During the initial phase, 12 university green associations were founded—six in Beijing, three in Shanghai, and one each in Tianjin, Jilin,

and Chengdu. Eight of these were established at the suggestion of university student activities administrators or faculty in order to strengthen study and facilitate communication among environmental and science majors; four were student-led initiatives created to promote environmental awareness among the student body.

Throughout this early phase, associations carried out activities primarily within university campuses, with little inter-SEA communication taking place. These green groups were simply considered a normal extra-curricular association on the campus and SEA members mainly majored in environmental related subjects. Moreover, SEA outreach to the community was underdeveloped. While university student activities administrators and faculty supported the creation of these environmental associations, they were not inclined to expand these associations and environmental study beyond environmental majors. Notably, in the early 1990s no university had environmental elective courses open to non-environmental majors. See Box 1 for a story on the beginning challenges of a Shanghai SEA.

*Reaching Out Phase (1996-1997).* During this intermediate stage of development, ten new university SEAs were established within two years, four of which were initiated by students. The number of cities with SEAs increased by four with one new group in each of the following cities: Kunming, Guangzhou, Nanning, and

## Box 1. A Green Student Group Matures

By Philip Shan (Fudan University) (translated by Jennifer L. Turner)

In September 1999, when I entered Fudan University only a few environmental groups had emerged within Shanghai universities. The student environmental associations (SEAs) that existed were undertaking only a few small activities and their impact was quite limited, because funding and membership were low. Moreover, there was little networking or information exchange among the university green groups. However, these small groups were staffed with extremely enthusiastic and creative students—early green student groups in Shanghai were like blank canvases awaiting the artists.

In 2000, one inspirational spark for these aspiring environmental “artists” was a talk at Fudan University by Liao Xiaoyi—a leading environmental nongovernmental activist from Beijing. I was but one of the eager students who helped to fill the auditorium—her talk was exciting to budding green activists like me. Not surprisingly, in the fall of 2000, Fudan’s student environmental society was created.

My second year at university was a time for momentous change in environmental protection in China—the government, schools, and many citizens began to prioritize environmental work. This broader concern for the environment had a direct impact on student and other environmental groups by opening up more funding opportunities. Schools and universities even began to support some SEA activities. Moreover, membership in student green groups increased considerably. Fudan University’s environmental society began as a fairly financially prosperous group, but soon some significant management problems emerged. For example, members and the green group staff often did not communicate well and the group did not do many activities. The inefficiency of the group was due in part to unclear staff work responsibilities. In short, 2000 was a turbulent first year for Fudan University’s SEA, but it was an important trial and error process for the staff and members to learn how to get the green group off the ground.

As I entered my junior year at Fudan, the environmental society was in its second year. The management of the group had changed, which was expected, but for various reasons, the leader of the group changed two more times early in the year. However, because all of the staff continued to carry out their work well, these changes in leadership went rather smoothly. The second leader was key in making the group more visible and popular by initiating two campus-wide initiatives—a battery collection drive and a tree planting project in parks.

Now that I have entered my last year at Fudan University, I am struck by how the campus green student group has matured. Activities that were difficult to set up and execute a few years previously have become easy routines. Moreover, the management of the group has become more regularized and effective. Project management and supervision systems have been built up and perfected. Fudan University’s environmental protection society is just one of many new student green groups in China. Some groups are more advanced than ours, while others are just beginning. I believe all Chinese university green groups will become stronger and more efficient over time, for there is only one earth and it is important for students to work together diligently to protect it.

Chongqing. Irrespective of whether they were founded by administrators or students, during this phase all 22 associations started to promote environmental awareness throughout their campuses and among the general public in their communities. SEAs also began to exchange information with one another.

Social outreach of SEAs became a feature that increasingly distinguished SEAs from other student extracurricular groups. This outreach gradually gained the attention of students, university administrators, EPB officials, and the news media. In the mid-1990s, local news media began to report on SEA activities, which brought their existence to the attention of local government officials, especially the environmental protection bureaus (EPBs). During Earth Day and Environmental Day in 1996 and 1997, EPBs invited their local university SEAs to perform public environmental education activities in the streets.

During this phase, the growing environmental

awareness on and off campus promoted by SEAs and increased media reports, helped push university administrators to start offering elective environmental courses to non-environmental majors. For example, Sichuan University’s SEA Environmental Volunteer Association (EVA) performed highly successful educational activities on campus and in the surrounding community, which led the administrators to initiate the elective course, Environment and Sustainable Development, in 1997. This course became a *requirement* for all undergraduates beginning in 2000. A natural synergy has developed between EVA and the course—specifically, EVA members enrolled in the course have learned to think critically about environmental problems and solutions, while numerous non-EVA students in the course have become motivated to do something good for the environment and begun to support the activities of EVA. One significant EVA-University collaboration emerged from EVA’s Green Theater Program that shows

environmental films. EVA offered to share their films with the course and the university subsequently has begun to invest in some new environmental movies and allowed EVA to screen them on and off campus.

*Takeoff Phase (1998-2002).* Since 1998 the number of SEAs has exploded—from 22 at the end of 1997 to over 150 in 2002. In 2003 SEAs are located at 176 universities in 26 provinces; most of China's top universities have at least one. On average, over the past four years, 40 new groups have been founded each year. Table 1 shows the seven cities in which there are now more than ten SEAs.

**Table 1. Chinese Cities with Ten or More University SEAs**

City	Beijing	Xian	Tianjin	Guangzhou	Shanghai	Chengdu	Wuhan
Number of Associations	39	20	12	12	11	11	10

Map 1 shows the distribution of 152 SEAs, which exist in nearly all provinces except Shanxi, Ningxia, and Tibet. The data in Map 1 was collected by Green SOS ([www.greensos.org](http://www.greensos.org)) and captures most of the current SEAs within Chinese universities.<sup>1</sup>

One striking development revealed in the surveys is that during this time period some associations created unions to link student green groups within the cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Xi'an, and Dalian, as well as within Jiangsu province. In addition to promoting better communication and information sharing among groups, these unions of student green groups have established strong relationships with their local governments. China's SEAs now have reached a critical point in their evolution—though popular and numerous, they now must learn how to function more effectively. Quantity is not enough. SEA leaders and members must decide how to improve the quality of their activities and create more sustainable organizing systems.

#### THE SPARKS OF INSPIRATION

China's rapid economic development over the past two decades has created serious environmental degradation. This mounting problem, which poses health and economic threats to China, represents one strong motivation for university students to learn how to improve environmental quality and to raise public awareness. The SEA surveys also revealed a second motivation—attending university offers many students their first experience in major cities where they are not only exposed to serious urban pollution problems, but they also are given the

opportunity to observe the interrelationships among industry, government, and communities in creating environmental problems.

The student founders and key members of the green associations translate their concern about environmental degradation into passionately creating programs for local-level environmental research, public awareness education, and sound environmental action on their campuses and communities. In the process of learning to design and implement projects, these students raise their own environmental awareness and knowledge, as well as strengthen their critical thinking and communication

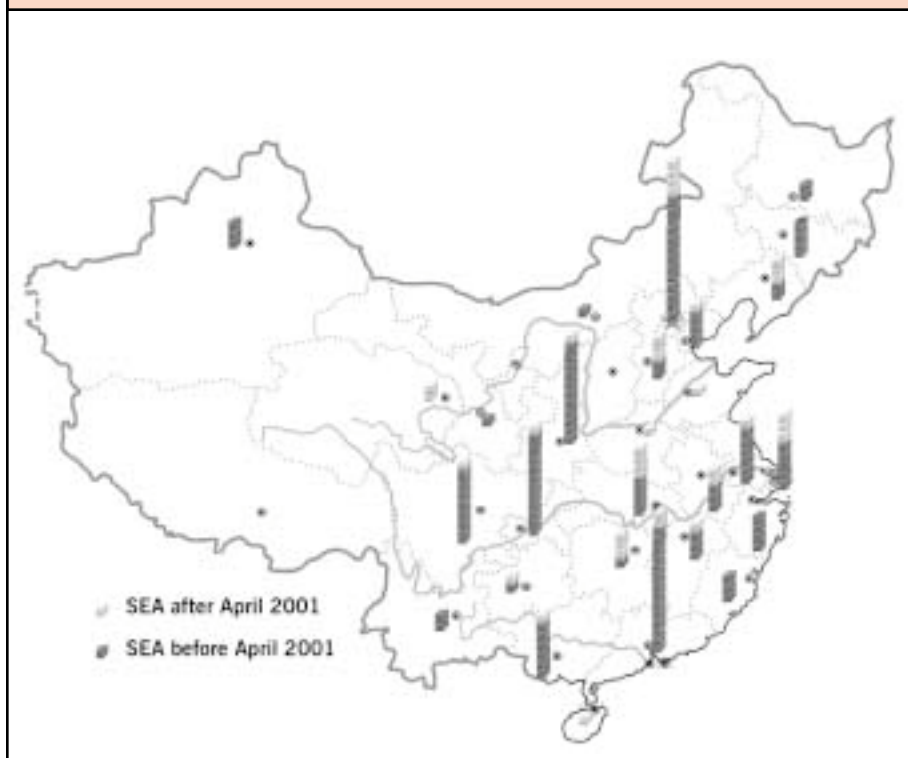
skills. Several crises revolving around endangered species and floods sparked Chinese SEAs to become more dynamic and more involved in environmental issues beyond the campus boundaries. Recognition by government, foundations, and businesses has further emboldened the expansion of student association environmental activities.

#### *Monkeys, Antelopes, and Floods*

In 1994, the first Chinese environmental NGO, Friends of Nature (FON), was registered in Beijing. This NGO stimulated public involvement in environmental activities and was a major inspiration for SEAs to transition out of their timid first phase into a more assertive second development phase. In 1995, the nature photographer Xi Zhinong reported on the destruction of the golden monkey habitat in Yunnan. The reports eventually drew Mr. Tang Xiyang (a highly respected environmental activist and writer), FON, and SEAs in Beijing and Kunming to initiate a campaign to conserve the habitat. The news media quickly picked up the story and public opinion overwhelming supported protecting the monkeys.

The interest in the golden monkey made the animal's habitat in Deqing County, Yunnan the logical choice for the first annual National College Students' Green Camp in 1996.<sup>2</sup> All of these activities, combined with the public outcry, induced the central government to order the preservation of golden monkey habitat. The publicity and success of these habitat protection activities acted as a great stimulus for the expansion of SEAs and set the precedence for cooperation among SEAs, government,

**Map 1. Current Distribution and Quantity of Student Environmental Associations**



concerned individuals, and NGOs.

These initial campaign activities with Friends of Nature led members of different SEAs in Beijing to communicate, providing the spark to create the Green Student Forum. The founders of this Beijing-based network wished to maintain and expand the working relationships among Beijing student environmentalists through the publication of a newsletter and joint meetings among members of different SEAs. The Green Student Forum has now become a communication hub for SEAs.

Today there are eight SEA networks: Green Student Forum (Beijing and other SEAs in China), Shanghai Green Student Forum, Green SOS (Western China), Green Stone (Jiangsu), SEA Union (Dalian), SEA Union (Xi'an), SEA Union (Chongqing), and SEA Union (Shenyang). Among these networks, Green Student Forum (Beijing), Green Stone, Green SOS and SEA Union (Chongqing) play the most active roles as information providers, SEA skill management exchange organizers, mini-grant distributors, and regional activity initiators.

According to the student surveys, the flood disasters on many Chinese rivers, especially the Yangtze in 1998, were another strong impetus for the explosion in numbers

of student green groups. The 1998 floods also sparked local and national news media to report vigorously about environmental issues, which further influenced student concerns and desires to join environmental associations.

In 2000, a movement for protecting the Tibetan antelope became another hot topic that inspired SEAs from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Xiamen, and Chengdu to organize activities to protect this endangered species. Student activists noted in our survey that the Tibetan antelope campaigns not only stimulated more exciting activities within SEAs, but also encouraged critical thinking about the impacts of consumer behavior, illegal international trade, poverty, and mismanagement of nature reserves on the fate of Tibetan

antelope. SEA Internet groups promoted discussions on the importance of students to launch broader environmental activities such as antelope protection

#### *Outside Support and Recognition*

2001 was an important turning point in the development of SEAs. On Earth Day 2001, three SEAs (two from Beijing, one from Chengdu) received national recognition by being given the Earth Award, which has been cosponsored by the Chinese State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) and Friends of the Earth Hong Kong since 1997. Previous recipients of the award had been environmental journalists, environmental educators, NGO, or community environmental activists. 2001 was the first year in which SEAs, as well as primary and secondary schools, received Earth Awards. It is possible that SEPA is realizing the value of encouraging students to promote environmental education, one of SEPA's central missions. Indicative of this, two SEAs—in Xiamen and Guangxi—won 2002 Earth Awards. Besides the nationwide honor, each of SEAs was given 20,000 RMB.

Besides this Earth Award, Ford Motor Company has recognized SEAs, awarding Guangxi Medicine

University's Green Salon its 2001 Environmental Award. In 2002, the Campus Recycling Program (Beijing Forestry University SEA), Wetland Protection Program (Yunnan University SEA), and SEAs Network Platform Program (Jiangsu Greenstone) all received the Ford Motor Environmental Youth Prize—and its cash award of 30,000 RMB.

The second major event for SEAs in 2001 was the May announcement in the popular state-owned newspaper *China Youth Daily* that the Worldwide Fund for Nature, China Program (WWF-China) would cooperate with Chinese SEAs to launch a program called "Wetland Messenger" (*Shidi Shizhe*) for the protection of wetlands along the Yangtze River. This program invited SEAs to submit activity proposals regarding wetland protection. At the end of June, WWF-China organized an on-line competition among the SEA applicants. Ten SEAs were finally selected and given 5,000 RMB (\$609) to implement activities. WWF-China offered training in wetland conservation to the students before the start of the SEAs' on-site activities in August 2001. WWF-China's "Wetland Messenger Program" was highly publicized in the national news media and very well received within the university SEA community. The 2002 competition was also popular and SEAs considered it a great honor if their wetland activities were selected and recognized by WWF-China.

The third example of high-level recognition took place on 5 June 2001, in an Earth Day speech by Prime Minister Zhu Rongji. Zhu Rongji emphasized the importance of news media and artists collaborating with government environmental agencies to popularize information about China's deteriorating environment. This speech also announced government approval of environmental outreach and encouraged SEAs to widen their scope of activities to include the general public.

#### MISSION AND STRUCTURE OF SEAS

Chinese SEAs share a common concern for environmental protection and have similar priorities. According to the 2001 survey of 94 associations:

- 96 percent seek to promote environmental awareness among university students;
- 86 percent stress public environmental awareness;
- 78 percent aim to provide members with training for lifelong environmental protection literacy; and,
- 56 percent address contemporary environmental problems through activities such as planting trees, circulating environmental petitions, and encouraging environmentally friendly lifestyles.

At present, most SEAs have 20 to 100 members with only a few containing more than 200. Furthermore, on average, within most groups only 20 to 40 members are active participants and these key members of SEAs normally serve from 6 to 18 months. Most associations have a chairperson, a secretarial committee, a publicity committee, a logistics committee, and a public relations committee. In terms of leadership selection, of the 94 SEAs chairpersons, 61 were selected by passive consent, 22 were elected by membership votes, 6 were appointed by a university administrator or faculty advisor, and 5 were selected by combination of these methods.

Eight of the SEAs surveyed in 2001 have a special program committee, and nine created a board of directors, usually composed of key members who set policy and make decisions. Special program committees usually focus on used-battery recycling, bird protection, forest protection, children's environmental education, green camp, social issue surveys, or wilderness activities. Although having a special program committee helps concentrate a SEA's resources, the quick rate of member turnover and the lack of skilled leaders are always major challenges for SEAs to maintain these programs.

#### FUNDING AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT

Based upon the surveys and additional conversations with student environmentalists, it was clear that lack of money is often a big issue for SEAs. Major funding sources are individual member fees (usually 10 RMB per semester) or grants from universities and donations from businesses. In 2000, the total yearly funding of 80 SEAs was 225,209

**Table 2. Funding of 80 SEAs in Year 2000**

RMB Received	100-499 RMB	500-999 RMB	1000-1999 RMB	2000-2999 RMB	≥ 3000 RMB
Number of SEAs	20	19	17	9	15

Note: 1 USD=8.3 RMB

**Table 3. Proposed Activities if Funding Available (94 respondents)**

Proposed Activity	Number of SEAs
Off-campus activities and/or campus lectures by invited speakers	42
Improve publicity, establish Web site, and/or issue newsletter	20
Buy more environmental books, magazines, multimedia materials	18
Buy equipment such as computers, beepers, poster materials, office stationary	17

RMB (\$27,465, see Table 2).<sup>3</sup> Of the 15 with funding exceeding 3,000 RMB, three are located in Fujian province, two in Kunming, two in Chengdu, and one each in the cities of Guangzhou, Nanning, Chongqing, Xi'an, Hefei, Wuhan, Beijing, and Harbin. Among these wealthier 15, three received significant support from universities and businesses in 2000 for specific projects and their total funding constituted 43 percent of the funding of *all* 80 university SEAs:

- **Yunnan University SEA in Kunming** (founded in 1997) used most of the 45,780 RMB (\$5,583) in funds (49 percent from its university) to conduct field research to seek protection and conservation strategies for old-growth forests and black-neck cranes in Yunnan.
- **Sichuan University Environmental Volunteer Association** in Chengdu (founded in 1995) and other local SEAs used part of their 31,000 RMB (\$3,780) funding (46 percent from businesses) to organize a major fundraising and educational event. The Tibet Antelope Charity Evening included the participation of the director of the Sichuan Environmental Protection Agency and the president of Sichuan University. The event raised 7,200 RMB for the Wild Yak Team (*Ye Mao Niu Dui*) to support Tibetan antelope conservation.
- **Xiamen University SEA** in Fujian province (founded in 1999) used its 21,000 RMB (\$2,561) in support (90 percent from businesses) to organize the first traveling exhibition of college students' photography on environmental protection. The exhibition visited 9 universities and 2 middle schools in Fujian province.

In addition to university and local business grants, there is an increasing tendency for Chinese SEAs to receive small grants from national and international organizations (foundations, NGOs, and businesses) since 1999.

- Friends of Nature, with funding from Misereor

Foundation in Germany, supported 18 activities initiated by SEAs through their Dandelion Grant Program in 2002 (each SEA received nearly 3,000 RMB, \$360).

- In 1999, the Green Student Forum (Beijing) was able to rent an office in Beijing and maintain office operations with support from Friends of the Earth Hong Kong.
- Global Greengrants Fund (GGF) has provided small grants to 13 university green groups in 2001<sup>4</sup> and 22 in 2002.<sup>5</sup> (*Editor's Note: See Feature Box on GGF in this issue*).
- In 2002 and 2003, the Vermont-based ECOLOGIA helped Green SOS set up a mini-grant program to support 10 activities of SEAs in western China each year, giving approximately 2,000 RMB (\$250) for each activity.
- The Oakland-based NGO Pacific Environment has funded student groups in northeast China and Russia to promote student exchanges and cooperation between SEAs in both countries.
- The Wildlife Conservation Society (based in New York City with an office in Shanghai) has supported SEAs in Anhui and Heilongjiang provinces in efforts to raise wildlife conservation awareness.

Student groups vary greatly in terms of office facilities and communication equipment—the 2001 survey revealed that among 85 responding SEAs:

- 28 have office space assigned to them by their university;
- 35 have their own telephone number;
- 58 have their own association e-mail address;
- 41 set up their own Web sites, of which 33 update their Web site once or twice per semester; while,
- 28 possessed no equipment at all.

Moving beyond the basic equipment, our survey discovered 48 of the 85 SEAs responded that they have an association flag, T-shirts, poster material, and office stationery, but only 25 have a sufficient number of books and magazines related to the environment to use for educational activities. While only eight groups have video equipment and eight others have recycling receptacles or pollution monitoring equipment, many groups borrow audio-visual and other activity equipment to carry out their activities. Table 3 illustrates how the SEAs would use more funds if they could obtain them.

## SEA ACTIVITIES

The 94 student leader respondents to the 2001 survey listed 399 activities (which included the total participation of 40,500<sup>6</sup> people) their groups had undertaken, of which:

- 58 percent were directed towards environmental education;
- 32 percent involved direct action to achieve positive environmental results; and,

### Box 2. Green Classroom: An Environmental Education Project for Children of Rural Migrant Workers

*By Baohua Yan (Coordinator for Friends of Nature Antelope Car Project)*

On the morning of 22 March 2003, in a classroom at Capital Normal University, students from several university student environmental associations (SEAs) in Beijing were holding their monthly meeting for “Green Classroom”—an environmental education project for children of migrant workers. I attended as a representative of the nongovernmental organization Friends of Nature, which helped initiate, and currently supports, Green Classroom (particularly in the supply of teaching materials). Several university SEAs in Beijing began the Green Classroom project in August 2002 with each green group establishing cooperative relationships with a school for children of rural migrant workers near their campus. The project organizes volunteers to carry out environmental activities to raise the children’s awareness and passion for protecting the earth. Currently, seven SEAs<sup>1</sup> participate in this project and many more student green groups are expressing interest in joining the project.

Li Wenpei (Beijing Industrial University SEA) and Cao Jingjing (Capital Normal University SEA), the elected project coordinators, called the March meeting to ask representatives from each SEA to relate the current status of their Green Classroom activities, which led to an in-depth discussion on the difficulties each group faced in implementing the project. Sharing their problems sparked the group to begin brainstorming on solutions and planning for future expansion of this university green group project, which aims to address a pressing social and educational challenge in Chinese cities.

Over the past twenty years the floating population of rural laborers moving into China’s cities evolved from a trickle to a flood. As these laborers find more stable urban employment, their families come to join them, which creates challenges for cities in educating this booming community of children. A survey of China’s floating population indicated that 3.6 percent of the 3 million rural migrants in Beijing were school-aged children ranging from 6 to 14 years old—of these 108,000 children only 13,000 entered public schools.<sup>2</sup> Most of the children can only afford to receive education in schools set up for migrant workers. The quality of teaching in most of these under-funded schools is very low and most only provide courses in Chinese and math. Lacking a strong formal education, the children of migrants can only hope to gain a low level of basic education and they will learn much less about nature and environment than their contemporaries in public schools. The Green Classroom project is not just teaching these children environmental awareness, but helping to enrich their overall education. Thus, the project represents an important contribution university students can make to their community.

The project is still in the rocky initial stage of development, but the monthly meetings of participating SEAs is helping the groups come together and address some key challenges, which include:

(1) recruiting, managing, and training volunteers who will make long-term commitments to the project; (2) providing sufficient teaching materials; and (3) coordinating and sharing lessons learned among all the Green Classroom projects and increasing overall efficiency. Despite these challenges, I am impressed with the strong passion, maturity, and sense of responsibility these students are developing as they execute a project to help underprivileged children.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Beijing Science and Technology University, Beijing Industrial University, Beijing Forestry University, Beijing Broadcasting University, Capital Normal University, China Agriculture University, and China People’s University

<sup>2</sup> Data drawn from *Fifth Census of Beijing City in 2000 and Beijing Floating Population Census in 1997*.

- 10 percent were on-site research, surveys, and environmental suggestions for local decision-makers.

*Environmental education.* Among the 58 percent of activities directed towards environmental education (230 in all), 167 activities were conducted on-campus for college students, while the other 63 were held in the surrounding community, including primary and secondary schools. The content of these environmental education activities was very diverse, including: “reduce, reuse, recycle” resources and energy; relationships among ecology, environment, and human behavior; and simple environmental technology. Methods of organizing these educational activities varied considerably and included lectures, book-signings by famous environmental writers, discussion forums, displays of handicrafts that use recycled materials, and campaigns to encourage the public to sign pledges to support environmental protection. The results of these activities, as evaluated by the SEA leaders themselves on the questionnaire, showed that 32 percent considered their results to be very good, 32 percent rated outcomes as good, and 17 percent rated them as fair. Nineteen percent did not answer this question. Box 2 provides insights into an exciting new educational initiative undertaken by a network of SEAs in Beijing.

*Direct Action.* The 128 (32 percent) activities involving direct action included persuading university mess halls to convert to reusable plates and utensils, collecting used batteries, planting trees, and waste reduction activities such as collecting items that would otherwise be discarded by university graduates and redistributing to younger students and others. Almost all the SEAs rated these activities as providing results superior to their educational activities (54 percent very good, 35 percent good, and 10 percent fair). Only one association rated its direct action activities as poor. The reasons given for preference of direct action activities were the ability to conduct them within a small area and the elation these activities provided

members, who could clearly observe their achievements. Student leaders did express a wish to engage in more complicated and large-scale direct actions such as wetland/endangered species protection or water pollution control. However, such broader activities require considerably greater technical skills and funding, and currently remain beyond the capabilities of most SEAs. Nonetheless, a handful of student green groups are making strides in undertaking more ambitious direct actions:

- Jimei University of Xiamen SEA (Fujian province) succeeded in preventing a commercial enterprise from purchasing and developing land in an egret nature preserve;
- Guangxi Teachers College SEA induced its local government to strengthen mangrove forest protection; and,
- Zhejiang University SEA persuaded the Dadi Company to recycle used batteries.

*Research and Surveys.* According to their self-evaluations, many SEAs believed their on-site research and surveys obtained the best results. Research and surveys of water quality, animal species, and forest health were particularly attractive to the students because they had the unique opportunity to personally observe Chinese nature areas. However, of the 399 activities listed, there were fewer than 41 of this hands-on type of activity, because such surveys are time-consuming to identify and carry out and difficult to fund. Moreover, achieving credible survey and research results often requires a higher level of technical skills than other types of activities.

While members in university environmental associations are mainly concerned about environmental challenges within China, global issues such as climate change and ozone depletion were included among issues of greatest concerns. (See Table 4). In order to sharpen their understanding of these environmental issues, SEAs need to obtain better information and technical skills. In

**Table 4. Issues of Greatest Concern to the 94 Chinese SEAs in the 2001 Survey**

Domestic Issues	Number of SEAs	Global Issues	Number of SEAs
Desertification (especially sandstorms)	50	Global warming	37
Water pollution and shortages	48	Ozone depletion	30
Non-biodegradable trash	21	Water pollution and shortage	27
Air pollution	21	Deforestation (especially tropical forests)	26



### Box 3. Green Stone—SEA Network in Jiangsu

By Wang Yao (Green Stone and Miles of Blue—SEA at China Pharmaceutical University)

On 12 May 2001, Qu Zhujie was having an animated discussion on environmental issues with one of her friends on a bus heading back to Nanjing Forestry University. A tall young man suddenly jumped into their conversation. After introducing himself as Huang Zhenping, a key member in a student environmental organization Green Stone, he began an eloquent monologue on the issues they were discussing. Though Qu Zhujie and her friend had difficulty getting a word in edgewise they were intrigued with his stories. He told them about Green Stone, which is a union of student environmental associations (SEAs) from universities around Nanjing (Jiangsu province). He also shared with them his experiences in doing large joint campaigns with numerous SEAs. In fact, he just had finished a get together of Green Stone with students from more than ten universities.

Qu Zhujie was quite excited by Huang's descriptions of student green groups in Jiangsu. She had envied the environmentalists in Beijing for a long time, because many green nongovernmental organizations and SEAs headquartered in the capital thrived, while little environmental activism appeared to be taking place elsewhere. Sensing that she was a kindred green spirit, Huang suggested Qu Zhujie establish an environmental association at Nanjing Forestry University. He stressed that she would not be alone in this endeavor, for people in Green Stone would do their best to help her.

What a superb idea! She had never thought of initiating a green group on her own campus. That night she could not sleep as she pondered whether she was capable of undertaking such a difficult task and wondered if Green Stone and Huang Zhenping would really support her. In the five months following the chance meeting on the bus her college life thoroughly changed. Outside of classes she busied herself with meeting or calling key members in Green Stone to get advice on creating a SEA.

Wu Haoliang, the founder of Green Stone, drew from his experience in managing a green student network to give Qu advice on how to set up a group and what resources Green Stone could provide. Qu Zhujie met with me, Wang Yao, to find out about the challenges I had encountered in creating Miles of Blue (*Balli fenlan*)—the SEA at Nanjing's China Pharmaceutical University in May 2001. I gave her examples of promotional fliers and letters I had written to school administrators to get registered. Huang Zhenping, the eloquent, loquacious boy on the bus played the most important role in preparing Qu Zhujie. Through numerous calls and meetings he taught her how to communicate with the head university administrators, as well as the news media. All of her efforts paid off in October 2001—on the day of the launching ceremony for the new SEA at Nanjing Forestry University more than 40 students from 11 colleges were in attendance. In her first two years she has overseen several environmental education projects that do outreach in the community and established an effective campus recycling campaign. By the spring of 2003, Qu Zhujie not only still leads the Nanjing Forestry University SEA, but she is also a key member in Green Stone.

Today Green Stone has brought together more than 20 universities in Jiangsu province. In addition to helping the various SEAs exchange ideas, Green Stone carries out environmental education activities that attract students and the general public. Anywhere from 10 to 15 individuals help maintain the Green Stone network. Besides volunteer support, some Green Stone projects receive support from foundations, such as the U.S.-based foundation Global Greengrants Fund. The potential impact of Green Stone is great because if this SEA can help more students like Qu Zhujie set up university green groups, more students will learn the value of environmental protection.

addition, SEAs need to strengthen their ability to communicate their messages to the public, news media, and government.

#### OUTREACH AND COMMUNICATION

SEAs have many ways of obtaining environmental information. Seventy-seven of the 94 get information from newspapers, 75 from the Internet, 61 from magazines, 61 from domestic environmental organizations and individuals (including teachers and environmentalists), 60 from TV, 51 from lectures, and 42 from the radio. Increasingly, while student associations are learning to gather information from outside organizations, the strongest information exchange is

taking place among Chinese SEAs. Of 94 respondents, 78 regularly utilize contacts with other green student groups in their city and 44 have established strong relationships with SEAs in other cities. University SEAs also are making initial outreach to government, NGOs, businesses, and news media organizations, but these relationships are still underdeveloped. Among the 94:

- 62 have some initial contacts with their local governments;
- 55 have links with Chinese environmental NGOs;
- 54 maintain contacts with local news media;
- 42 have contacted local businesses, and,
- 15 have contacts with international environmental NGOs.

## Box 4. Steering the Green Movement in China

**By Li Li (China Europe International Business School and former leader within the Green Student Forum)**

My friendship with Jeremy Jiang began six years ago when we both worked for the Shanghai Youth Environmental Society—a green action group that aims to increase environmental awareness among young kids. Over the years, Jeremy's involvement in high school and university green groups strengthened his commitment to take care of the planet. Much to the surprise of his friends, however, after graduating from Shanghai International Studies University he headed for a business career at Unilever (China) instead of working in an environment organization. While some of his friends were shocked, I do not believe we are “losing” a promising young environmental leader, for Jeremy will take his environmentalism into his new job.

Jeremy, like many other university students in China, developed a passion for environmental protection through years of participating in student green groups. Since 1998, university green groups have increased rapidly and have played a key role in promoting environmental protection both on and off campus. While university administrators keep a cautious eye on student organizations, in some cities the government has actually sanctioned environmental activism at universities. For example, in 1998 the Shanghai municipal education bureau established the Shanghai Environmental Education Coordination Committee program to support college student environmental activities. The program encourages university students to carry out environmental activities based on the knowledge and skills they acquire in classes. Because students in green groups face the challenge of juggling environmental activities and a full course load, most do integrate their environmental work with their studies.

I encountered some good examples of students linking environmental activism with their majors when I recently spoke to a group of college students in Wuhan—located alongside the Yangtze River. In light of their location, they naturally focused on water, combining their academic majors with environmental education projects for local elementary school kids:

- Students who majored in chemistry helped children undertake a survey of water quality in the Yangtze;
- Women in the Chinese language and art departments wrote and illustrated an environmental education textbook for the local elementary school students; and,
- Students from the department of environmental engineering helped lead the children in an investigation of pollution sources in streams and rivers in the area.

Notably, some university green groups have attracted members by creating opportunities for students to apply their skills:

- Kong Peng—a woman in her third year at Shanghai International Studies University—created a project, in which journalism students are invited to help university green groups with environmental reporting activities.
- Law students in Shanghai are very keen to get involved in the Law Aid Programme, which was recently established by a student group at the East China University of Law and Policy. The Law Aid Programme aims to help pollution victims who live in poorer communities get some legal advice and assistance.

Besides practicing what they have learned in class, participation in green groups can show university students how they can affect change in their communities. One of my favorite examples occurred in 1997 when student environmental groups in Beijing created an incredibly successful project to curb the excessive exchange of New Year's cards (they were inspired by a Friends of the Earth Hong Kong “No Cards, No Trees!” initiative). Within their “Red Apple & Green Apple!” project, they convinced students, faculty, and staff at their universities to order New Year greeting apples (red for love and green for friends) that members of the student environmental groups would deliver around campus. In this case students clearly saw that effective “green marketing” could shift consumers away from wasteful products and practices.

University students are the future business, education, and government leaders in China and those like Jeremy, who have developed a strong devotion to environmental protection and gained experience in environmental activism, will bring green ideas to their workplaces. How these students integrate their work and environmentalism will be key in steering the green movement in China.

Outreach methods are very diverse. Among the 94 SEAs, 81 hang posters, 73 organize lectures, 70 broadcast on campus radio, 55 utilize local news media, and 41 maintain their own Web sites. A few show environmental films, exhibit photographs, and put information into campus window displays. Others promote student competitions for environmental writing, speeches, or artwork. A handful of groups try to raise awareness among large groups by sponsoring concerts or parties (both on and off campus) with environmental messages. Other SEAs opt for smaller educational activities such as organizing environmentally friendly outdoor camps or neighborhood bicycle tours with messages displayed on their T-shirts. Regardless of method, because of limited funding and member turnover it is sometimes challenging for SEAs to sustain their outreach activities.

### CHALLENGES

While SEAs are small, they have grown quickly and are broadly expanding their activities and information networks across society. Nevertheless, SEAs face many challenges, limiting the impact of their work. According to the responses of the 94 respondents to the 2001 survey: 84 SEAs stated that fundraising is a major problem; 57 said that effective publicity is a major difficulty; 56 listed lack of spare time for environmental activities; and 55 lamented the lack of organizational skills and experience within their groups.

Besides these difficulties, most association leaders worry about their ability to devise original, creative activities that will achieve notice and produce effective results. Designing successful activities is crucial, for they provide SEA members with a feeling of pride in the organization and attract more members and public attention. Key SEA members also are concerned about inadequate internal communication among their own association members and the perennial problem of frequent turnover of membership (especially key members) with each graduating class. The struggle of some groups with internal capacity problems highlights the importance of regional SEAs network organizations, like Green Stone (Jiangsu province) and SEAs Union (Chongqing city), which are playing an increasing role in nurturing the healthy growth of SEAs in their regions. Box 3 describes the dynamism of Green Stone in building more SEAs.

### CONCLUSIONS

Like bamboo needs soil and rain to thrive, the effective

development of SEAs relies on the internal motivation of students and external support. Internally, students need to strengthen their organizing skills and enhance their literacy of environmental issues and solutions. External support, in the form of training and information exchange, can help build SEAs' organizing capacity and knowledge. Community recognition of SEA achievement helps to empower the groups as well. Moreover, developing regional networks and strengthening the dialogue among regional, national, and international SEAs are as important as money Chinese SEAs. Lastly, although the Internet has played an increasingly important role for SEAs, it is far from reaching its potential—only a few of SEAs have stable and frequently updated Web sites.

The many committed student leaders of SEAs who participated during the early first step and reaching out phases of SEA development in China have become a new generation of decision-makers. They are working as officials, teachers, entrepreneurs, reporters and NGOs leaders—they possess environmental literacy and passion. As Box 4 highlights, helping to be one of the growth of “green” decision-makers is likely to be one of the most influential impacts of SEAs in China.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> University SEAs registered their information between September 2002 and February 2003 with Green SOS in order to receive the book *Student Environmental Association Management*. This Green SOS book provides advice on how to manage student environmental associations and was written

by Lu Hongyan, Yan Jiong, Tian Feng, and Zhou Peng. This book project was sponsored by Betsy Damon.

<sup>2</sup> Former editor of *Nature* magazine, Tang Xiyang, and two students (Wen Bo and Yan Jun) were the initiators and important organizers of the National College Students' Green Camps that have continued annually under student direction, most of whom are members of SEAs.

<sup>3</sup> Fourteen of those surveyed did not answer funding questions.

<sup>4</sup> *Editor's Note:* The GGF 2001 SEA grantees include: China Green Student Forum; Environment and Development Society, Dalian Maritime University; Environmental Society of Dongbei University of Finance and Economy; Green Ambassadors of Northeast Forestry University; Green Association of Central University for Nationalities; Green Home Volunteer Youth League of Xinjiang Agriculture University; Green Path of Tongji University & Green Wisdom of Shanghai University of International Studies; Green Stone City of Nanjing University; Green Team of Lanzhou University; Green Wilderness Society of Xiamen University; Guizhou Environmental Student Network Initiative Group; Ili River Green Organization/ Environmental Education Center of Ili Normal University; and Source of Green, Xinjiang Medical University Information on

the grants is available at [www.greengrants.org](http://www.greengrants.org).

<sup>5</sup> *Editor's Note:* GGF 2002 SEA grantees included: Green Shield, University of Science and Technology of Beijing; Green Home Association of Anhui Agriculture University; Nature Protection Association, University of Science and Technology of China; Orchid Avenue Society of China Pharmaceutical University; Environmental Society of Nanjing Forestry University; Green Stone; Green Belt Society of Southeast University; Green Cross Society of Shenyang Architecture Engineering University; and Environmental Protection Association of Dalian Medical University; Environmental Society of Xi'an Jiaotong University; Environment and Development Society of Dalian Maritime University; Green Student Forum; Green Sunshine of Xinjiang Normal University; Green Volunteers Association of Capital University of Economics and Trade; Green Wildlife of Xiamen University; Green Spring of Central South Forestry University; Green Hainan at Hainan Normal University; Green Homeland at China University of Politics and Law; Green Action at Nankai University; Green SOS, Green Angels of Northeast Forestry University; and Green Association of Harbin University of Technology.

<sup>6</sup> This counts some people who participated in multiple activities.

## Global Greengrants Fund in China

**G**lobal Greengrants Fund (Greengrants) makes small grants (usually \$300 to \$5,000) to support grassroots groups working for environmental justice and sustainability around the world. Greengrants believes that grassroots groups are key to solving some of the world's most intractable problems and halting cycles of poverty, powerlessness, and environmental devastation.

Greengrants has created a low-cost grant making system that engages networks of volunteer advisors who know local issues first hand. This helps Greengrants streamline its grant making and link its advisors and grantees in a community that can share knowledge, viewpoints, and strategies. Since its first China grant in 1998, Greengrants has made more than 150 grants to Chinese groups.

For most Chinese groups, Greengrants provides the first grant they have ever received. Grants in China often support student environmental activism, biodiversity conservation, and environmental rights issues. Greengrants recently supported the establishment of the Xinjiang Conservation Fund, which facilitates the growth of the environmental movement in China's northwestern Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

### GGF China Advisory Board

Global Greengrants Fund's China Advisory Board brings together five leaders whose on-the-ground presence helps Greengrants identify groups that are working effectively on key local challenges and have the potential to make a significant impact. The China Advisory Board allows Greengrants to tap into local activist circles and support initiatives of local and regional importance. Pacific Environment also works alongside Greengrants and the China Advisory Board to support development of grassroots groups in China. The board members meet three times a year to decide on grant recommendations. In 2003, the board will recommend \$100,000 in grants and will continue to expand the advisory board in anticipation of increased funding next year. The current China Advisory Board is coordinated by Wen Bo and includes:

Hu Kanping, China Green Times  
Li Hao, Beijing Earthview Environmental Education and Communication Center  
Li Li, Green Students Forum  
Lü Zhi, College of Life Sciences, Peking University/Conservation International

For further information on GGF, please visit [www.greengrants.org](http://www.greengrants.org) or email [savechinaseas@163.com](mailto:savechinaseas@163.com)