

The Living Lakes Network grows up

by Arya Degenhardt

What began as a small collection of like-minded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has become a full-fledged and highly professional organization championing lake protection around the world. As one of the founding members of the Living Lakes Network, Mono Lake has been a partner since the Network's inception in 1998. Far from its modest beginning, today the Network is comprised of 45 lakes, and as it approaches its 10-year anniversary, it is working effectively towards its goal of "the conservation and protection of natural resources, chiefly the drinking water reservoirs of the earth."

International conference at Lake Poyang

In November 2006 I attended the 11th International Living Lakes Conference held at Lake Poyang, China. The Network holds conferences each year at one of the partner lakes, where the host lake and its issues serve as the focal point. These are not your ordinary sit-down conferences, and it's not unusual to see activities such as cultural performances, meetings with local representatives, and nature hikes on the agenda.

Lake Poyang is the largest freshwater lake in China, and its health suffers due to pollution from agricultural runoff, siltation, and poverty. The visiting Living Lakes delegates had two days of non-stop field trips to learn about the place and to investigate these issues.

Highlights included visiting one of the only organic tea gardens in China—located in Poyang's watershed. We were also treated to a show of Buddhist, Mongolian, and Ming Dynasty traditional tea ceremonies complete with elaborate costumes and delicious teas.

We were invited into the small village of Cuijia where the whole population is involved in a sustainable energy project.

Led into the town by a parade of singing women and Chinese dragon dancers, the townspeople opened their homes to us—showing with pride their individual home biogas (methane from waste products) energy setups. Traditionally these townspeople lived with unsanitary sewage systems and coal-fired power plant electricity.



However, the Chinese government, along with the



Getting bearings at Lake Poyang.



The home biogas project.



Children in Cuijia Village.

PHOTOS BY ARYA DEGENHARDT AND THE LIVING LAKES NETWORK



Exploring the shores of Lake Poyang.

local NGO, has implemented a program that provides individual biogas production and conversion systems for every household. This has not only

increased the people's standard of living and helped reduce both air and groundwater pollution, but it has proven to be an inexpensive way to do so.

We also went birding down at the shoreline of Lake Poyang. Birding is still a foreign concept in the region, and there are no trails or lake-access facilities in the areas where birds are usually found. However, after bumping along a maze of dirt roads in our police-escorted motorcade we came to a spot where five cars were parked waiting for us with spotting scopes—positioned on Swan Geese, Greater White-fronted Geese, Eurasian Spoonbills, and many others in the thousands.

Along the way we met with numerous officials and stopped

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Martha Davis, Riverside



I believe in our power to shape our future and to do it in a way that respects and preserves the environment.

Mono Lake represents an opportunity to undo past mistakes and to create a new future for the Mono Basin, one that shares precious water resources between Mono Lake and the needs of a distant urban

population in Los Angeles.

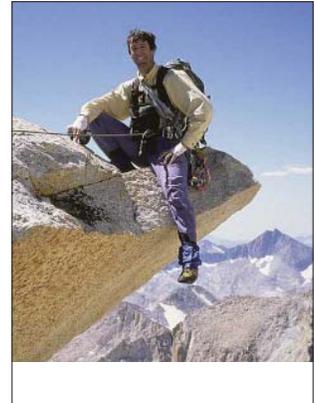
When I see the water flowing into Mono Lake and how the lake is rising, I realize how much can be done to restore and preserve our natural resources. For me, Mono Lake is a celebration of our united ability to make a difference ... and it is a promise to future generations that we can do better.

Doug Virtue, San Pedro

Beauty. The manifold beauty of Mono Lake and its basin is an endless source of inspiration. Wherever I am or whatever I'm doing, I can close my eyes, imagine a view of the lake, and feel refreshed.

Sanctuary. Thanks to the work of the Mono Lake Committee and other dedicated organizations and individuals, the Mono Basin continues to be part of the global skein of migratory bird refuges.

Public Trust. Mono Lake was the catalyst for this crucial concept of balance between public and private interests. The Mono Basin is now poised to be a "mentor region" for collaborative problem solving throughout the rural west.



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at the lake's visitor and science center as well. By the time we started the main conference sessions the group had a solid understanding of what the local NGO is working to protect, and the issues it is up against. In spite of the feeling that China's environmental problems are unfathomably huge, it is important to show the Chinese government that the world is watching, and also to encourage the people who are working towards healthier environmental practices—this conference helped to do just that.

Something else happens during these field trips—there's time to really connect with fellow delegates. Many joint initiatives and innovative collaborations have grown out of the connections made this way.

For example, there are exchange programs between students studying Barn Swallows at Lake Constance in Germany and Lake Baikal in Russia. Experts from Sri Lanka, Germany, and Spain have come together to address issues of sustainable livelihoods and the restoration of land and water resources in the

The Global Nature Fund is a non-profit, private, independent international foundation for the protection of environment and nature, and serves as the driving force behind Living Lakes. For information on the Living Lakes Network visit www.globalnature.org.

areas hardest hit by the tsunami of 2004. In 2006 nature work camps were held at St. Lucia and Lake Vörtsjärv and Lake Peipsi in Estonia. And there are many more examples of collaborations between Living Lakes Network members.

Bringing something meaningful back home

The Network supports one representative from the Mono Lake Committee to attend each Living Lakes conference. While the conference was stimulating, it is the exciting contacts and ideas for collaboration that are most valuable.

For example, this year the Jordan River, the main tributary of another of the world's saline lakes, the Dead Sea, will run dry. While the situation, which involves multiple countries with a long history of conflict, is different from Mono Lake, there are important things, like the Public Trust decision that underlies the principle on which Mono Lake now receives water, which might be able to help. Likewise, Friends of the Earth Middle East (www.foeme.org), with representatives in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine, surely has tools we could learn from to help bring people with different opinions and beliefs together over water issues.

Mono Lake is a good fit for the Network—bringing a much-needed message of hope, the wisdom of years of lake-protection experience, and a true story of the power of individuals to do the right thing. Participating in lake protection on an international level is doing the right thing too, and this type of collaboration is an exciting and meaningful way to do it. The Living Lakes Network has grown up to become a conduit through which these collaborations flow to create a healthier world for us all. ❖

Arya Degenhardt is the Committee's Communications Director. Going for a hike on the Great Wall of China was one of her top ten highlights of 2006.