WildChina: Pioneering Responsible Tourism in China

Chaoyang Distric, China
Cara Chebuske

Project Summary

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

WildChina has shown that small group travel focusing on culture and the environment can be economically viable in China. By developing programs that focus on people to people interaction, we make it possible for our clients to gain a better understanding of Chinese people’s lives and culture at the same time that we bring direct benefits to the communities visited. On all our trips, we encourage our clients to share meals and experience homestays with local families. We offer opportunities for clients to take part in service projects, volunteering at an orphanage, farming, or helping with a village school project. We also train and employ local and ethnic minority guides and patronize ...

About You

Contact Information

Title
Mr.
First name
Albert
Last name
Ng
Your job title
CEO
Name of your organization
Location

Street Address
801 Oriental Place, No. 9, East Dongfang Road

City
Chaoyang Distric

State/Province
Beijing

Postal/Zip Code
100027

Country

Your idea

...This will be the address used to plot your entry on the map.

Geotourism Challenge Addressed by Entrant
Quality of tourist experience and educational benefit to tourists, Quality of benefit to residents for the destination, Quality of tourism management by destination leadership, Quality of stewardship of the destination.

Organization size
Small (1 to 100 employees)

Indicate sector in which you principally work
Tourism-related business

Year innovation began
2000

Indicate sector in which you principally work
General tourism.

Innovation

What is the goal of your innovation? Please describe in one sentence the kind of impact, change, or reform your approach is intended to achieve.

To pioneer responsible travel in China by developing a network of local operators who work at the community level to ensure cultural preservation and environmental conservation.

Please write an overview of your project. Include how your approach supports or embodies geotourism or destination stewardship. This
WildChina has shown that small group travel focusing on culture and the environment can be economically viable in China. By developing programs that focus on people to people interaction, we make it possible for our clients to gain a better understanding of Chinese people’s lives and culture at the same time that we bring direct benefits to the communities visited. On all our trips, we encourage our clients to share meals and experience homestays with local families. We offer opportunities for clients to take part in service projects, volunteering at an orphanage, farming, or helping with a village school project. We also train and employ local and ethnic minority guides and patronize local shops, restaurants, and artisans. Traditional heritages become economically viable, and local communities learn to value their heritage and environment.

Explain in detail why your approach is innovative

Currently, the China travel market is overwhelmingly geared towards mass tourism. 1. Unhealthy industry dynamics financially benefit the few at the top and adversely affect – both culturally and environmentally – local communities. WildChina changes the focus to service standards and unique experiences, rather than building assets. We help local communities in China to make their cultural traditions economically viable without exploitation or oversaturation. We employ local guides, drivers, and homestay families, and patronize local restaurants, artisans, shops, homestays, guesthouses, and hotels. 2. Create a healthy working environment not based on kickbacks We pay fair wages, and don’t accept kickbacks – innovative within the China context. In our trainings, we build a strong understanding of sustainable principles and practices from the ground up. At WildChina, we are working hard to change the industry. Although our model operates at high cost, we believe it is a sustainable and much more rewarding way to provide travel in China. We work with guides who have a passion for China and its history, and who are excited to share it with visitors; thus they are open to forgoing kickbacks for a wage above industry standard.

Impact

Describe the degree of success you have had to date. How do you measure, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the impact on sustainability or enhancement of local culture, environment, heritage, or aesthetics? How has it transformed or contributed to the power of place or demonstrated the sustainability of tourism? How does your approach minimize negative impacts?

1. Since 2000, WildChina has grown as a firm in terms of people and scale. We now have a network of over 50 staff, 20 partners across China, and over 50 guides. More than any other measure, WildChina’s growth tells us that our responsible model is viable in China. The company has grown from 0 to around US $5 million in revenue, and – apart from 2003, when SARS hit – has recorded a net profit every year. 2. We also measure our success in the excellent feedback we receive from clients. Travelers’ interest in the kind of interactive, in-depth experiences we offer is what makes WildChina’s programs a possibility. Repeat customers from institutions make up 50% of our clients. 3. We measure our qualitative impact on local communities in changes to local community standards of living. For example, in Guizhou Province’s Jishou village – open to a limited number of tourists 9 months out of the year – the community has been able to set up drainage systems and build toilets. While tourism adds an important contribution to the village economy, it is not the major focus. We minimize the negative effects of tourism on the communities we visit by carefully limited the number of travelers we bring to a village or site and by thoroughly educating and training partners, guides, and local communities about responsible travel.

In what ways are local residents actively involved in your work, including participation and community input? How has the community responded to or benefited from your approach?

In every place that we go, WildChina trains and employs local guides, drivers, craftsmen, performers, and homestay families. They get to interact with and learn from our clients, and their wages go straight to them and the local economy. In communities we are opening to travel, local village heads are actively involved in planning our programs. They provide input and guidance on their cultural traditions and how to best develop our programs. Ultimately, all programs require their approval. In the communities we travel to, standards of living have raised, and residents have gained new appreciation for their traditional cultures. In many places, outmigration of young people to urban areas has slowed. While most responses have been positive, some reactions have been mixed. Many residents see the development of popular mass tourism sites and believe the mass model offers better opportunities for their communities.

How does your program promote traveler enthusiasm, satisfaction, and engagement with the locale?

Our travel programs promote real person-to-person interaction and engagement. Travelers have opportunities to meet and share meals with local Chinese and ethnic minority people, learn about and experience traditional handicrafts, meet with grassroots NGO leaders and local experts, and participate in service projects like farm work and community projects. Our clients get a chance to learn about people’s real lives and struggles, instead of merely sound bites written in guidebooks.

Describe how your work helps travelers and local residents better understand the value of the area’s cultural and natural heritage, and educates them on local environmental issues.

By helping local villagers make their heritage economically viable, we also help them see their cultural traditions in a new light. Their ways of life do not stand in the way of development – they offer a different kind of development. We hold extensive training sessions, for the partners, guides, and villages we work with, that aim not only to teach people how to operate sustainable travel programs, but also to help them understand the importance of cultural and environmental preservation. For example, in Guizhou Province, one village that we visit has decided to close to tourism 3 months per year to help villagers maintain the rhythms of their traditional routines. For our travelers, our programs provide hands-on, in-depth opportunities to experience local cultures in China. They speak and interact with local people, meet with grassroots NGOs, visit schools, and perform service work, getting a fuller, richer picture of life and culture in China.

Sustainability

How is your initiative currently financed? If available, provide information on your finances and organization that could help others. Please list: Annual budget, annual revenue generated, size of part-time, full-time and volunteer staff.

WildChina is self-financed. The primary expenses of our operation are the hiring of local staff and guide and partner training. Currently, there are 30
staff in our main office and another 30 staff amongst our regional partners. We have over 50 guides who work with us regularly and are committed to our standards. WildChina’s current revenue is able to cover these expenses.

Is your initiative financially and organizationally sustainable? If not, what is required to make it so? Is there a potential demand for your innovation?

Yes, our operations are financially sustainable. Our main investments are training people to understand and live up to our travel standards and surveying sites that may be appropriate for our type of service. Some of our training and site surveying has been partially funded by our partners, such as WWF, which gives us the additional bandwidth to continue to expand operations. In general, our cash flow covers all operating expenses. There is already a growing demand for our services, but, rather than overwhelm the destinations that we already visit, we need to create new products and increase our staff to meet such demand and maintain our standards.

What are the main barriers you encounter in managing, implementing, or replicating your innovation? What barriers keep your program from having greater impact?

1. Managing tourism capacity: A delicate balance must be maintained when developing a site for tourism. You need to generate enough business to make the project sustainable, but you also need to mitigate impact on the area’s indigenous culture and environment.
2. Ensuring sustainability: There are many examples in China of villages-turned-theme parks – where a few people get rich while a traditional culture is slowly (or quickly) transformed into canned, easily photographed parts. The lure of material wealth and development promised by this model is hard for local communities to resist.
3. Training: Because WildChina works with many different partners across all of China, it is difficult to ensure that everyone we work with is trained to our standards. Training is one of WildChina’s main expenses, as we need to ensure that all our guides and partners have a true understanding of our principles and processes.
4. Finding like-minded partners: The prevailing logic amongst tourism operators in China is more is better. Because the Chinese travel market is geared toward mass tourism, it can be difficult to find partners and guides who see the value in small scale, responsible tourism. Though we pay our guides a fair wage, we cannot match the money they might be able to make from shop and restaurant kickbacks.

What is your plan to expand or further develop your approach? Please indicate where/how you would like to grow or enhance your innovation, or have others do so.

The type of travel that WildChina provides is scalable, but growth depends on our ability to both train people and stay ahead of industry trends in China. With the help of NGOs and local communities, we are working on opening up villages in Guangxi, Guizhou, Qinghai, and Sichuan to geotourism. We believe that more and more people are getting interested in experiencing China in a different way. We hope to work with more like-minded people, gain a larger audience, and educate people that our kind of travel in China is responsible and money well-spent. In our aim to transform the travel industry in China, we hope to inspire other companies to follow WildChina’s approach. We have already seen the beginnings of this, with small trekking companies in Yunnan and the sustainable Unknown China (started by a former WildChina colleague). We hope this development of sustainable travel in China continues to expand.

The Story

What is the origin of your innovation? Tell the Changemakers and media communities what prompted you to start this initiative.

canned tourist packages and “scenic areas,” company founder and Yunnan native, Mei Zhang, found herself without a guide, braving high altitudes and a harsh landscape. After completing the kora (a walk around the sacred site) and spending the night in an abandoned guesthouse, she awoke to beautiful snowcapped mountains alight with the sunrise. Mei was deeply affected by the experience and moved to share it with others.

Disillusioned by how little support was available for travelers looking for a real view of China, Mei decided to start her own business dedicated to offering environmentally and culturally sustainable small group travel to China’s more hidden destinations. This insight became WildChina’s motto: “Experience China Differently!”

Please provide a personal bio. Note this may be used in Changemakers’ marketing material.

As a native of Yunnan Province – China’s most bio- and ethnically diverse – WildChina founder Mei Zhang has deep ties to China’s cultural and environmental heritage. After graduating from Yunnan University, Mei worked briefly for a railroad company before winning a scholarship to Harvard Business School. She went on to work for McKinsey & Company and then founded WildChina in 2000. Her cultural background and passion for off the beaten path travel are at the root of Mei’s commitment to geotourism.

Describe some unique tourist experiences that your approach provides. Be specific; give illustrative examples.

Every July, Tibetans from all over northwest China gather in the grasslands of Qinghai for the Yushu Horse Festival. WildChina has pioneered visits to this region, building a premium, custom-made Tibetan campground that uses solar power for its energy needs. Our guests get far off the beaten path to see an amazing display of culture, horsemanship, and religion; yet still enjoy a premium, authentic experience. In the rural areas of Guizhou, Guangxi, and Yunnan, WildChina guests are given the opportunity to spend a night or two at a local family homestay; experiencing the rhythms of their lives, seeing how they make a living, and truly becoming immersed in rural China life.

What types of partnerships or professional development would be most beneficial in spreading your innovation?

On the business side, we would like to continue developing our public-private partnerships. WildChina currently collaborates with a number of NGOs, such as WWF and the Huangshan Yin Yu Tang Culture Chinese American Research Institute in Anhui Province, in developing responsible tourism programs to effectively manage the impacts and benefits of tourism in certain culturally and environmentally important areas of China. These partners have the resources to implement large-scale conservation projects, carry out pre-work, and help with funding for training and surveys. On the client side, we would like to attract more organizations, museums and special interest groups with specific interests in China. For groups with custom interests and needs, we have the resources to fit them with the right people and foster meaningful cultural interaction and learning.

Source URL: https://changemakers.net/geotourismchallenge/entries/wildchina-pioneering-responsible-tourism-china#comment-0