Ecotourism has become a prominent player in changing the economic and social dynamics of small mountain communities. It is an industry that has spread worldwide, throughout almost every continent, including countries such as Kenya, Brazil, Canada, Switzerland, China and certain places in Australia. The specific type of ecotourism I came into contact with the most during my month long stay in China was the implementation of community ecologodes such as the ones located in the villages of Wenhai and Gyalthang. Other forms of ecotourism exist also, including eco-trekking and agro tourism. The Nature Conservancy defines ecotourism on its website as “environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples.” Exploring and examining the impacts and successes of ecotourism in a Naxi (Wenhai) and a Tibetan (Gyalthang) village within Yunnan Province helped me to understand what made ecotourism unique to this part of China. Throughout my explorations of the industry, I sought to answer what characterizes ecotourism in Yunnan and what contributes to its success as a whole. The things that I found through my research collection was that in order for an ecolodge to eventually become beneficial, a multi faceted plan had be implemented and carried out over a five to ten year period. A plan for sustainability must be tailored to specifically meet the needs of the targeted community, meaning the continued investment of the original founders over a long term period of time. Also, rather than concentrating on what has made the ecolodge environmentally sustainable, the perspective of focusing on an “eco-community” with the benefits that are accrued from efforts at cultural preservation, a working environmental education program and leadership opportunities strengthens the credibility and likelihood of success of the program for the village.

High up in the mountains, at the end of a beautiful grassy meadow, a small farming village sits, nearly covered in the shadow of the towering Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. This meadow is responsible for providing grazing land for these villagers, who receive around forty percent of their income from raising livestock which feed on the valley grass. Seventy six families of the Naxi heritage reside here, one of fifty six ethnic groups formally recognized by the government of the People’s Republic of China. At first glance, this community may seem like any other small village. But a closer examination will reveal that when it comes to environmental issues, this place has had a rocky past and now faces an uncertain future. Problems with deforestation have plagued the valley for several decades; logging had destroyed the large growth forest and left the hillsides bare. However, for the last ten years, Wenhai has become a part of a growing industry known as ecotourism. This is a type of “sustainably green” trade that has sprung up throughout rural China in recent years. Ecotourism has played a part in this village’s economy by providing an alternate income for the fifty six families invested in the Wenhai Ecolodge. Set up there by the Nature Conservancy in the fall of 2002, the project was originally intended to involve the community in an interactive eco-program. By combining
tourism with environmental education to promote responsible management of the surrounding land and resources, the Nature Conservancy hoped to help boost economic prosperity and cultural preservation in Wenhai. Engaging locals in learning how to earn money through tourism gave incentive for the village people to practice environmental responsibility. At the Wenhai Ecolodge, before the Nature Conservancy came in, the trees on the nearby hills were being logged for extra income, and now there were no longer any trees left. The novel plan was that together, the community would share the responsibilities of managing the ecolodge and evenly distribute the profits derived from the business generated. Environmental education programs were provided by the Nature Conservancy, along with other skill classes, like business management and English language basics. At its peak Wenhai ecolodge attracted international attention as a huge environmental success, even ranking a top ten in Outdoor Magazine for travel destination ecolodges. But Lily Zhang in our interview informed me that management of the ecolodge has been extremely unstable, changing hands several times and receiving bad reviews with visitors online due to this mismanagement. Searching the web for Wenhai ecolodge evaluations reveals this to be true. Through my research, however I found that after setting up a business such as an ecolodge, by the nongovernmental organization (NGO) responsible should stay involved in the management of the business for a lengthened amount of time afterward. By providing continued support and solutions for any issues that may arise before entirely handing over the running of the lodge to the community, the likelihood of the interactive eco-program’s success for the long term is much greater.

The grazing lands of upper Wenhai village, which will soon be underwater within the next five years after the building of a new reservoir. The village can be seen at the far end of the valley, below Jade Dragon Snow Mountain.

Wenhai Ecolodge in the early hours of the morning. It consists of twelve rooms, a main dining room and a kitchen. It was once solar powered and used with room for bio fuel stoves. The collapsed remnants of a greenhouse lie in the foreground.
But, the Nature Conservancy has not participated in supporting the Wenhai ecolodge in over seven years. Finding reasons for this was hard to do, and the ones that were found were vague, somewhat shrouded in mystery. But talking to local people revealed that the person originally heading the project no longer worked for the Conservancy and ever since then invested support had declined. On the Nature Conservancy website, under a list of environmental projects located in the Yunnan Province, both from past and present, the Wenhai ecolodge is not listed among them. A fall out like this has led to complications in the original plan of having an up and running environmental education program, helping to keep the ecolodge on track with its “green blueprint” for success. Talking to several of the people who have been involved with the ecolodge since it was founded confirmed that the lack of follow up from the Nature Conservancy severely hindered the ecolodge’s benefits. One of these people was Lily Zhang, a young tour guide who had gone through the training classes provided by the Nature Conservancy back in the fall of 2002. She informed me that it was difficult to bring in new ideas for the ecolodge, and now many people in the village did not even remember or know what the term “eco” had originally been intended for. Now additional uncertainty lies in the making of a huge reservoir that will soon cover most of the valley meadows underwater. The reservoir is being built by the government in order to send water to Lijiang, a large growing tourist town located in the next valley over. Consequently, with creation of the reservoir, the government hopes to develop the area, selling the valley as a potential lakeside resort in order to jumpstart outside investment. Because of these developments, the ecolodge may very well go the way of the villagers’ grazing lands, becoming a thing of the past, a forgotten story in a vast country of many.

One of the packstock horses used to haul our gear into Wenhai Ecolodge. Horse packing and riding are a large part of the ecotourism industry.

Many factors are responsible for making community ecolodges a success in the long run. One of those dynamics is how well planned out the ecolodge management is. This is vital because once the community is given management of the business, only a well laid plan for its success will ensure the survival of the lodge. Another important part of making ecotourism a hit is how well the original NGO keeps in contact with the community after the project is completed. This is to help the village continue to come up with effective planning and to provide solutions for any problems that may arise. Over the years, many things have changed in Wenhai that have altered the course of the ecolodge. Some families have stopped taking part in the lodge
management, the lodge has not been that profitable, and the “green sustainability” part of the lodge is not really something that plays an active part today. Indeed, the Wenhai ecolodge cannot even really be considered “eco” anymore. In the main dining room of the lodge, there are several framed posters telling the visitor about what makes the ecolodge “eco.” It includes plans for a green house, a hydroelectric generator for clean energy, and bio-fuel stoves. The bio-fuel stove was the only project that ever took place, but it soon fell into disuse after several years.

Environmentally speaking, the lodge no longer has working sustainability projects or an environmental education program. Both of these features are listed in the Nature Conservancy’s plan for a functioning ecolodge. Asking Lily and the former ecolodge manager Peng about why this is revealed that these projects had never gone through because of the lack of guidance on how they were to be accomplished. Jerry, (another guide who leads groups to the ecolodge) recalled how after almost ten years, many of the families involved with the ecolodge were not even sure what an ecolodge was actually supposed to be. The need for an environmental education program is quite big, but Jerry informed me that there is really no one who knows how to start or run such a curriculum for the local people.

Local tour guide Lily Zhang talks with Peng, the former manager of the Wenhai Ecolodge. As manager for over ten years, he admits that the concept of an “ecolodge” was an uncertain term, that many people in the village involved with the ecolodge management did not understand.

Wenhai’s collapsed greenhouse, one of several failed projects at the Wenhai Ecolodge.
The Wenhai Ecolodge is only one example of how the setting up of an ecolodge can occur. Sometimes there are events, such as the reservoir being built, that are beyond the control of the people involved in the project. Through my research, I had the opportunity to visit another community run ecolodge in Yunnan that recently started operations in the fall of 2011. Set up by an NGO known as the Tibetan Poverty Alleviation Fund (TPAF), this project has been in the running for three years. Just built completely last summer, it is a beautiful two story building with very nice rooms and the choice of private western style toilets. Planning for the setup and running of the Gyalthang Ecolodge was much more complex than the one for Wenhai. Kelsang, a young 26 year old Tibetan has been in charge of this venture for the last three years. He is from the local area, and knows all of the 65 families invested in the ecolodge. Now that the lodge is complete, the families have been set up into three different groups, rotating through every four months to manage the lodge and gather any profits it makes during their allotted time. In order to effectively run the lodge, a committee of local people has been nominated and elected to oversee the management. Not only has it brought members of the community closer together, women have also been raised up into leadership positions within the village hierarchy. One of the jobs that have been created is housekeeper of the lodge, a position that is rotated through annually. Kelsa, the young Tibetan woman who is the acting housekeeper of the ecolodge, has become a leader within the community through her position. She runs the greenhouse located just outside the lodge, helps educate other women, and works to preserve Tibetan culture in the village. According to her, the coming of the ecolodge has been a positive development, because it has given many people a chance to become educated and learn business and language skills that they otherwise would not have had access too.

Kelsa, the housekeeper of Gyalthang Ecolodge, standing in front of the newly constructed greenhouse.

A front view of the newly built Gyalthang Ecolodge. The building contains bedrooms on both floors, going for different prices depending on what kind of a view or bathroom you want, communal or private.
TPAF will manage and run the ecolodge along with the community for five years. Then they will hand over the management completely to the 65 families and the members of the board that have been elected to supervise the ecolodge. TPAF will stay involved for another two years as a tech team, to help with marketing, public relations and advertising. After those seven years, the lodge will be completely run by the community, with follow-ups and support coming from TPAF should the need arise. Not only has an environmental education program been set up, a cultural program has also been started. TPAF has partnered with another NGO located in Shangri-la, known as the Thanka Academy, which is a school working to preserve Tibetan culture. With the versatile approach TPAF is taking, I think that its prospects for success are extremely high. Kelsang stressed the one detail that with regards to the ecolodge, TPAF is trying to move away from the term “ecolodge” and focus more on an “eco-community.” Approaching the situation this way makes it more appealing to a broader range of interests, and puts the emphasis on teaching the village people about sustainability, rather than simply making the ecolodge “green.” Additionally, this is not the only ecolodge that has been set up in the area. Just over the hill, within a six hour hike, is another TPAF ecolodge that has been up and running for about five years. By having two lodges, it is hoped that this will generate business and interest for a wider variety of people, city and country folk alike. Along with another ecolodge, there is an excellent volunteer program set up. People from all over the world have come in the last three years to help with various projects that had to do with the ecolodge and in the community. Having this connection with the outside world has really facilitated interest in the ecolodge on an international level, which hopefully will continue to grow, making the lodge a triumph for TPAF and the target community. Through sustained attention by its founders, it appears possible that these ecolodges will continue to thrive over an extended period of time. Perhaps if this had been the case with the Wenhai ecolodge, it would have been more successful with the many different programs it proposes to have that are included in the interactive eco program involving the community and environmental education.

Women from Gyalthang work in the fields located behind the ecolodge.
Built by the Gyalthang Ecolodge project manager, Kelsang, this interesting device in the kitchen takes dirty water from washed dishes and passes it through a filter that sends used water to irrigate the lawn.

Through my research, I found the ecolodge success hinged on many factors. Unfortunately with the Wenhai Ecolodge, there was no continued instruction for the people of the community, or good public relations to get the word out about the lodge. And now the coming of the reservoir will alter everything for the lodge and the local village people. With the Gyalthang ecolodge, it is only the beginning. With such a complex approach being carried out over the long run, the future is bright for this endeavor if allowed to run its course. Not only are the plans being carried out, new ideas are on the way all the time as well, which is one of the things that Lily told me is vital for ecotourism to take off as a whole. The perspective of focusing on an “eco-community” rather than an “eco-lodge” strengthens the credibility of the program for the village. Because TPAF is doing other things to strengthen the wellbeing of the village such as cultural preservation, giving women a chance to become leaders in the village, and partnering with other local NGOs, it has a stronger chance of being successful over a longer period of time. Many different interests are coming together, which will give the ecolodge a sturdier foundation rather than just being based in generating profit from the ecolodge. With a little bit of luck and a lot of foresight, it is my great hope that in time this project will be a victory for all involved. Now only time will tell.