Mapping Shangrila

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The inauguration of Pudacuo National Park in 2007 added a jewel to Diqing Prefecture’s Shangrila brand. Proclaiming it China’s first national park, promoters hailed Pudacuo as a new model joining tourism development to effective conservation and community involvement. The effort to set up national parks in northwest Yunnan grew out of endeavors of the Nature Conservancy (TNC) to encourage governments and other constituencies to adopt new models for conserving the area’s biodiverse landscapes. Yet, when established, these parks emerged as mass tourism attractions that little resemble TNC’s proposals, while the process of creating them transformed relationships among groups interested in northwest Yunnan’s landscapes.

This story reveals a succession of alliances that grew up around efforts to set up China’s first national parks in Diqing Prefecture, Yunnan (see map 1, C, D, and E, and map 2). When TNC first arrived in China, it catalyzed a remarkable coalition of local residents, religious figures, local governments, and conservation organizations determined to halt mountaineering at the sacred peak Khawa Karpo (Litzinger 2004). By 2010, this coalition had dissolved. Local governments assumed a more powerful role, employing national parks to promote tourism but diluting provisions for resident participation and active conservation management. TNC retreated from direct
engagement with local governments and communities and sought new government counterparts as initial partners cooled on the national parks effort. The introduction of a new protected area category exploited ambiguities in laws and regulations concerning protected areas, leading provincial and national agencies to vie over the legitimacy of Yunnan’s national parks. TNC increasingly watched from the sidelines as these parks became entangled in struggles within the state.

While proponents of national parks in Yunnan depict them as win-win ventures, national parks worldwide have multifarious relationships with local governments and communities. National parks provide employment opportunities and hubs for development but also constrain people’s activities (Machlis and Field 2000; West and Brechin 1991). These constraints frequently fall hardest on rural residents, who find agriculture, hunting, and resource extraction restricted (Stevens 1997; West, Igoe, and Brockington 2006). At other times, extractive interests demand concessions within parks or changes to their boundaries (Naughton-Treves et al. 2006). Within China, protected areas have often burdened local populations, frequently on the basis of poorly substantiated claims about the impacts of residents’ activities (Xu Jianchu and Melick 2007). Simultaneously, poor implementation of zoning policies and lax oversight of tourism and resource exploitation impede conservation (Han and Zhuge 2001; Xie Hongyan, Wang, and Schei 2004). Major development projects often erode both biodiversity and resident livelihoods. Nonetheless, following two decades of co-management efforts, some reserves have made notable accomplishments working with residents to support rural livelihoods (Mei et al. 2010; Weckerle et al. 2010).

Nothing shows the joining of shangrilazation with the extension of the “ecological state” in China more tellingly than the transformations of protected area tourism attractions. Across the Tibetan Plateau and beyond, local governments have repackaged nature reserves and scenic areas in order to support high-volume tourism attractions. Concentrating management authority in state-affiliated enterprises, local governments have turned these parks into powerful revenue generators while extending state oversight of land use within. Diqing’s national parks, dressed up in signifiers of Tibetanness—stone-faced visitor centers, cairns festooned with prayer flags, residents pasturing yaks—exemplify efforts to remake places to present a picture of a harmonious Shangrila. At the same time, the title “national park” has provided a way of distinguishing Diqing’s scenic attractions in competition for tourists, in particular bolstering claims of cutting-edge conservation. Yet
the mandate for active conservation management envisioned by the initial proponents of national parks, while central to local states’ discourse, gets meager financial and institutional support. Meanwhile, extralocal agencies charged with resource management, competing to raise their profiles and expand or defend their jurisdictions, have vigorously disputed the status of Yunnan’s national parks.

These conflicts suggest the need for careful consideration of what constitutes the ecological state. The “ecological construction” programs transforming western China’s biophysical and social landscapes give an impression of massive and coordinated extension of state power directed toward managing resources (Yeh 2009b). But the history of Yunnan’s national parks complicates this picture. Rather than the coherent expansion of a singular project of state building, these processes expose conflicts among state agencies and governments at different levels, contending over the meaning of green development and the control of the organizational machinery for directing conservation and tourism. Agencies link with one another and with non-state actors in ways that suit perceived organizational interests, building relationships that shape how those interests develop further. Whose efforts win out at any given juncture has major ramifications for how people and landscapes are governed. Developing an adequate picture of the ecological state in China requires taking a disaggregated view, examining how agencies with different purviews, support bases, and resources pursue varied goals (see Tilt 2010).

Given these considerations, that TNC’s initial vision for national parks is only patchily incorporated into actual parks should be no surprise. Indeed, it exemplifies the friction through which engagement with local situations transforms transnational projects (Tsing 2005). In northwest Yunnan, rich not only in biodiversity but also in mineral deposits, hydropower potential, and tourism amenities, the national park initiative, with its aspirations to expand protected area coverage, empower protected area conservation agencies, and broaden residents’ roles in management, aligned with some state projects but ran afoul of others. To understand how the ideas and resources TNC introduced into these engagements were transmuted in the making of the national parks requires delving into the changing configuration of a heterogeneous and conflicted ecological state.

This task necessitates methods that take into account the changing motives of and relationships among state agencies, enterprises, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and collectivities of citizens. Based on inter-
views and observations conducted between 2008 and 2011 with people in local and provincial government agencies, NGOs, national park administrative bureaus, tourism operators, and several villages in two national parks, as well as conservation scholars and tourism planners, this chapter examines key actors and arenas in the making of national parks. These observations, along with documents and policy statements from some of these actors, show how the stances and proposals of different actors changed over time. No picture can show all relevant perspectives or happenings, but these interleaved accounts from varied participants highlight patterns of engagement of various state agencies with other actors, sketching the changing shape of the ecological state in southwest China.

ORIGINS OF NATIONAL PARKS IN YUNNAN

When TNC’s China program was initiated, its staff appealed to experts and policy makers to take part in the Yunnan Great Rivers Project, aiming first to demonstrate the importance of the region’s resources and thus the necessity of setting up institutions to conserve them and second to compile a basis for systematic conservation planning. A process of consultation with scientists, cultural experts, and local governments and residents culminated in the “Conservation and Development Action Plan for Northwest Yunnan” (JPO 2001) (see also ch. 5 in this volume).

The “Action Plan” sets out a vision for turning northwest Yunnan’s protected areas into centers of revenue generation and professionalized conservation through the adoption of a new protected area model, the national park, in a context of conservation-friendly institutions with broad stakeholder involvement. National parks are framed in six principles: enabling legislation for each park, a management agency with unified authority within park territory, broad participation of multiple stakeholders, separation of park oversight and business operations, systematic management according to International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidelines, and coordination and benefit sharing with nearby communities, urban centers, and protected areas (JPO 2001, 25–26). The accompanying Ecoregional Assessment identifies five priority areas for conservation action: Lashi Lake, a wetland near Lijiang; Laojun Mountain, a region west of Lijiang, home to red sandstone outcrops, alpine lakes, and Yunnan golden monkeys; Shangri-la Gorge, a swath of northern Shangri-la County; the Meili Snow Mountains, an area along the Lancang River in Diqing Prefecture including Khawa
Karpo; and the gorge of the Nu River west of Diqing (Great Rivers Planning Team 2001, 9). The “Action Plan” proposes that northwest Yunnan be designated a special conservation zone in the spirit of the special economic zones that have had a famous role in coastal China’s economic ascent; this would complement its unofficial designation as a special ethnic zone, a location of authentic Tibetan difference (see ch. 2 in this volume). This special conservation zone would have several committees and councils dedicated to coordinating conservation and development, a comprehensive protected area management system, community-based co-management efforts, secure forest tenure, “green tourism” fostered through improved policies and capacity building, and efforts to constrain environmentally destructive industries (ibid., 25–34).

The “Action Plan” invokes international and domestic policies as sources of legitimacy. It calls for adopting internationally recognized forms and practices, citing the IUCN categorization of national parks and examples of national parks in the United States and elsewhere. Simultaneously, the plan is presented as “a practical implementation blueprint” that seizes opportunities provided by the Great Western Development strategy (Great Rivers Planning Team 2001, 1) (also see the introduction to this volume). It invokes forest conservation under the Natural Forest Protection Program and Sloping Land Conversion Program; technological innovation to raise industrial energy efficiency and control pollution; consolidation of polluting industries in large, efficient enterprises; nature tourism development; and transportation infrastructure and urban construction. The authors justify their proposals by tying them to existing policies and aspirations to international model status.

The “Action Plan” gives conflicting pictures of residents. Residents were by default treated as threats to biodiversity in TNC’s Conservation Action Planning standards, complicating the efforts of the organization’s China program to combine conservation of biodiversity with that of culture. The predominant view in state circles of residents as profligate resource users compounded these difficulties. As a result, the “Action Plan,” while asserting that residents should have a role in decision making, advocates changing their “crude production practices” in order to reduce dependence on natural resources rather than supporting resource use practices that do not harm ecological integrity and does not even ask residents what they would prefer to do. TNC’s subsequent proposals validate resident-led resource conservation, but this narrative of destructive resource dependence would remain in later government pronouncements.
Although persuading Yunnan authorities to issue such a plan was a landmark achievement, building on the plan and the relationships it established would prove difficult. TNC was working with agencies that considered the conservation aims of the Yunnan Great Rivers Project as accessory to other goals. During the project, the organization's main government partner was the provincial Planning Commission (Jihua Weiyuanhui), renamed the Development and Reform Commission (Fazhan yu Gaige Weiyuanhui), in 2003. The Planning Commission refused to disburse promised funds for a subsequent project, creating difficulty for the partners TNC had recruited. One of these partners, a conservation scientist, attributes the Planning Commission's refusal to its preoccupation with economic growth and lack of genuine concern for conservation issues. TNC's next major collaboration took a similar trajectory. Between 2002 and 2003, it worked closely with the Yunnan Province World Heritage Office of the provincial Department of Housing and Urban-Rural Development (Zhu-fang he Chengxiang Jianshe Ting), providing assistance in the successful application for World Heritage Site status for the Three Parallel Rivers region. This partnership, too, was short-lived. Although national park proposals indicated the department as the central implementing agency as late as 2005, it was uninterested in that vision for protected area management and did not support the new category.

TNC was also intensifying its work with local governments. Representatives of numerous prefectural and county government agencies in northwest Yunnan had provided input for the Great Rivers Project. The organization set up several local offices that served as bases for field operations and enabled the organization to maintain a continual presence in local policy discussions.

Meanwhile, local governments were consolidating efforts around new development strategies. Since the late 1990s, the Diqing Prefecture government has mobilized around four “pillar industries”—mining, hydropower, biological products (farmed and wild products that can be gathered or cultivated for sale), and tourism—with the idea of “turning Diqing’s resource advantage into economic advantage” (Li Yiming 2000; Diqing Prefecture Development and Reform Commission 2008). Tourism is central among local government priorities because, in contrast to mining and hydropower development, whose revenues are subject to requisitions from higher levels of government, tourism revenue potentially can remain entirely within the prefecture. Well before the 1998 logging ban, local leaders had begun urging
a shift in development focus from forestry to tourism. The Diqing Prefecture government’s resolution converting scenic and cultural resources into high-quality attractions meshed with TNC’s wish to promote national parks. However, efforts to scale up biological products, hydropower, and, especially, mining would raise hurdles to achieving TNC’s vision of conservation at an ecoregional scale.

Planning for Nature Tourism

Following the introduction of the “Action Plan,” TNC facilitated further efforts to study and discuss the biological and cultural resources of northwest Yunnan. These projects focused on the Shangrila Gorge area, a rugged stretch of northern Shangrila County where fieldwork found high concentrations of vegetation, natural forest, and plant diversity targets (Great Rivers Planning Team 2001, 59). In 2002, the government of Shangrila County signed a memorandum of understanding with TNC on biodiversity conservation and sustainable development in Shangrila Gorge. With partners at research institutions in Yunnan, Conservancy staff undertook baseline surveys of geology, soils, vegetation, wildlife, and residents’ resource use practices. The resulting feasibility report, like the “Action Plan,” depicts a landscape of extraordinary biological value and entrenched poverty and urges in response the designation of Shangrila Gorge as a special ecological zone and the introduction of national parks (BCSD Program Team 2003).

This report further elaborates a vision in which national parks protect the environment, conserve biodiversity, support recreation that benefits the local economy, give rural residents a prominent role in decision-making bodies, and promote scientific research and environmental protection education. It makes specific suggestions for the organizational components of such a park, urging the establishment of a set of decision-making bodies, including “grass-roots local participatory management bodies” (BCSD Program Team, 27). This scheme has important offerings for governments at the county and, particularly, prefectural levels. First, while an administration agency would have overall authority over park affairs, local governments would have a stake in the park and the potential to obtain revenue from tourism operations. Second, “[t]he successful implementation of this program will mark a new phase of China’s conservation cause,” creating a model that might be imitated throughout the region, thus raising the profile of Diqing and its leaders (ibid., 18).
As TNC intensified its focus on Shangrila Gorge, while continuing efforts at Meili Snow Mountains and Laojun Mountain, changes were taking place within the organization. TNC expanded the Yunnan office into an official China Program in 2002. Also, the national parks project increasingly involved the organization with the Research Office of the Yunnan Provincial Government. This agency is charged with conducting research about a variety of topics, mainly concerning economic development, and providing the provincial government with reports that provide an empirical basis for policy decisions.

At the direction of provincial leaders, the Research Office worked with TNC to produce a report on the prospects for establishing national parks in Yunnan. The “Comprehensive Report on Establishing National Parks in Northwest Yunnan” (Dianxibei diqu jianshe guojiagongyuan zonghe baogao) (Research Office and The Nature Conservancy 2005a) follows the same narrative arc as the other documents reviewed here—great biological riches, underdevelopment, urgent threats, national parks as a win-win synergy of conservation and development—but reads very differently. The hand of the Research Office shows in the repeated invocation of policy formulas such as “scientific developmentalism” (kexue fazhan guan) and recent policy initiatives, including the “2004–2010 Action Plan for Redoubling Tourism in Yunnan.” The “Comprehensive Report” also accentuates the eagerness of local governments to adopt the national park model and the potential of this model to make the region stand out in China and become a world-renowned tourism destination. More than the preceding reports, this one speaks to government agencies in their own terms and, by envisioning a national parks coordinating office staffed by multiple agencies, gives them each a stake. Working with the Research Office made TNC more able to articulate the national park project in language officials were ready to hear.

The “Comprehensive Report” was accompanied by specific proposals for five national park units. These proposals emphasize the separation of oversight from business operations, stakeholder participation, integration with the surrounding region including resident communities, and a national park administration bureau with overall authority to manage and oversee activities within each park. They also suggest a major support role in park management for TNC. The plans divide each park into a set of functional zones, including a special conservation zone limited to scientific research use; a special scenery zone for ecotourism, basic research, and “ecological experience”; a backcountry recreation zone including settlements where residents
would run guesthouses; and a belt conservation zone containing a visitor center and other facilities. There is no mention of whether or how residents might continue their farming, herding, and gathering activities, though pasture sightseeing is to be one of the attractions. The main visitor facilities envisioned are hiking trails, visitors’ centers, resident-run guesthouses, and service stations along the trails. The proposals provide for business operations as concessions granted by the administration bureau, subject to its oversight and paying a proportion of revenues to support conservation management (Research Office and The Nature Conservancy 2005b, 2005c).

In conjunction with these proposals and countless discussions, TNC also took officials on a fact-finding trip to Yellowstone National Park in the United States. By the end of 2005, senior officials in Yunnan had “endorsed plans to begin building a pilot national park system in northwest Yunnan” (TNC China Program 2007). The Research Office and TNC prepared a book of sixty questions and answers about national parks and distributed copies to various government agencies in Yunnan as part of a campaign for support.

While TNC was honing its proposals and winning support among provincial leaders, regional authorities were elaborating their vision of an upgraded tourism economy in northwest Yunnan. In January 2004, a committee of provincial Tourism Bureau personnel, tourism industry figures, and scholarly experts on tourism issued the “Development Plan for the Northwest Yunnan Shangrila Ecotourism Zone” (Dianxibei Xianggelila shengtailüyouqu fazhan guihua [gangyao]) as part of a broader initiative to reinvigorate Yunnan’s tourism economy (Working Group on Drafting the Development Plan for the Northwest Yunnan Tourism Region 2004). Like the “Action Plan,” this “Development Plan” represents an effort to coordinate on addressing a broad range of issues in northwest Yunnan. However, its emphases are quite different. The “Development Plan” pushes upgrading and coordinating tourism in an environment of competition with other regions. Whereas national park proposals situate northwest Yunnan in a biodiversity hotspot at the confluence of different ecological zones, the “Development Plan” emphasizes northwest Yunnan’s location within the Greater Shangrila Ecotourism Zone, which also encompasses western Sichuan and eastern Tibet, in competition with these other areas to attract tourists.

The “Development Plan” expresses the mind-set of the tourism industry, speaking in terms of brands, products, routes, attractions, and accommodations. It calls for moving beyond sightseeing tourism to cultural, natural,
and recreational products that would keep tourists in the region in order to raise northwest Yunnan’s competitive profile and specifies attractions to be developed, including sites TNC had urged be set aside for national parks, as well as management agencies for them. Whereas TNC-facilitated national park proposals recognized unplanned or poorly managed tourism as a problem, the “Development Plan” specifies areas of management to be developed and ways of developing them. It is less specific, however, on environmental protection and resident involvement. While the “Development Plan” states emphatically that environmental protection measures need improvement and names nearly every proposed project a “conservation and development project,” it does not indicate the conservation measures that will be undertaken. Meanwhile, it recommends increasing resident participation in the economic benefits of tourism, “thus raising their activeness and conscientiousness about protecting tourism resources and supporting the development of the ecotourism region” (Working Group on Drafting the Development Plan for the Northwest Yunnan Tourism Region 2004, 22). Resident participation is presented as a pecuniary exchange in an effort to induce cooperation in large-scale tourism development.

The “Development Plan” brings into view the intensification of tourism planners’ involvement in national park initiatives. The governments of Diqing Prefecture and Shangrila County had been hiring tourism planning specialists since the end of the 1990s and tasked them with developing prospectuses for particular attractions and for the general sweep of tourism development in Diqing. These planners are usually organized as teams headed by professors from tourism management departments at universities or staff from planning consultancies.

Planners gather a broad array of information and synthesize it into workable plans that set what must, can, and cannot be done at a given location over a certain period of time. An overall plan for a protected area generally includes an introduction indicating the goals, scope, and justification of the plan; a description of the landscape and its geology, topography, and ecology; a catalog of conservation targets; a description of human settlements and the living conditions of their residents; an outline of conservation measures; a list of guidelines for the treatment of residents; a set of general prescriptions for tourism practices and their locations; directions for infrastructure; and instructions concerning a variety of other objects and issues. Planning teams consult with local authorities about intentions for the site. They ensure that plans accord with relevant laws and regulations. They con-
duct archival and field research on the biophysical and social contents of a project area. They survey residents to ascertain their skills and aspirations related to conservation and tourism and conduct market surveys that aid in assessing visitor demand. They compile maps and draw up tour routes and layouts for facilities. They research the construction and cost requirements of transport routes, built structures, and waste disposal systems. When a plan is drafted, it undergoes review by relevant local authorities and must be approved by the next-highest level of government, which, in the case of national parks overseen by prefecture governments, is the province.

The heads of planning teams hold the keys to getting plans composed and approved and thus are quite influential. A head planner is a licensed expert who contributes knowledge about tourism operations in other places and has the potential to bring in profitable elements that local authorities might not know about. Head planners are usually well connected; they have worked on a succession of projects across a region or province and are hired by local officials who are keenly interested in their work, which sets guidelines for what is intended to be major revenue-generating vehicles. Over the course of a year or more, through meetings, conversations, meals, and site tours, planners build working relationships with local leaders. Tourism planners are able to exercise discretion by drawing on their expert status and trust sedimented through past projects. They may insert elements in a plan that reflect their own interests, whether trends in tourism products, conservation measures, or ways of involving residents. Planners would play a key role in translating national park proposals into working attractions, although their ability to persuade local authorities to adopt conservation and participation measures would be limited.

In 2006, the Government of Yunnan commissioned the Research Office to draft a report addressing concerns about the impact of national parks on other industries. The “Summary Report from Research on Relationships between National Parks and Industrial Development in Northwest Yunnan” (Guanyu Dianxibei guojiagongyuan yu chanye fazhan xianghu guanxi yanjiu de huibao) (Research Office of the People’s Government of Yunnan Province 2006) highlights the complicated relationships between national parks and the region’s major industries, tourism, forestry, hydropower, and mining, as well as transportation infrastructure. It claims that insufficient management measures for tourism have caused unneeded environmental damage, while unclear division of responsibilities for tourism development causes suboptimal utilization of tourism resources. National parks, it follows, provide precisely the tools that
would solve these problems, raising the quality of tourism and ensuring the protection of scenic resources—and establishing a new brand for tourism in northwest Yunnan. There would be little conflict between proposed national park boundaries and roads, rail, and reservoirs, although planned hydropower development might require zoning adjustments. National parks might even provide employment for people displaced by big dams. Finally, while some overlaps with mining might emerge in the area proposed for Shangrila Gorge, these would be minor and easily remedied.

The report concludes that, overall, national parks would have a synergetic relationship with infrastructure and industry; there are no irresolvable contradictions. It is hard to see how the report could conclude otherwise. It illustrates how efforts at promoting conservation have to contend with powerful interests that would benefit from resource exploitation. Provincial officials are under pressure to realize a vision of technological, industrial development. Conservation promoters had to do some apparently uncomfortable maneuvering in order to show how national parks might be reconciled with the project.

**NATIONAL PARKS IN PRACTICE**

These claims of accord notwithstanding, as governments prepared to turn proposals into actual parks, tensions surfaced. The first hint came with the appearance of an additional national park site, Bita Lake–Shudu Lake, in the “Comprehensive Report” and the “Development Plan.” These alpine lakes are just over twenty kilometers east of the seat of Shangrila County. Both had been receiving visitors since the early 1990s. At Bita Lake, residents of surrounding villages gave visitors horse rides around the wetlands and sold them refreshments. In 2005, the prefectural government assumed control of the site. The newly formed Diqing Prefecture Tourism Development Investment Company, an investment platform that enabled the prefecture to leverage funds to invest in tourist attractions, assumed control of tourism operations. The prefectural government hired planners from the ecotourism faculty of Southwest Forestry College (Xinan Linxueyuan) in Kunming to draft a plan for the new attraction. In summer 2006, the area reopened as Pudacuo National Park. Visitors to the park shuttle through a vast entrance hall and board buses painted green as a reminder that they meet stringent European Union emissions standards. On the buses, park employees with microphones recite facts and stories about the park’s geography and the ani-
mals, plants, and humans that live there. At two points, visitors can leave the buses to travel on foot on raised wooden walkways along the wetlands, and at another, they can disembark to view residents pasturing yaks in an alpine meadow.  

Pudacuo National Park was an immediate commercial success. The new bus route configuration enabled thousands of tourists to cycle through the park daily. Between its 2006 opening and October 2008, the park sold 1.3 million tickets, taking in ¥236 million in revenue (Yunnan Province Government 2009, 7). While figures on internal expenditures are not publicly available, respondents in park management claim that more than half of these revenues were submitted to the prefectural government budget, and most of the remainder went to paying down loans for development projects, so one may infer that the proportion of revenues allocated to operating expenses is relatively small.

Pudacuo’s performance did not go unnoticed. Xu Rongkai, then the governor of Yunnan, attended the official unveiling of Pudacuo National Park in June 2007, and further promotion of national parks was put on the provincial government’s work agenda for 2008. The provincial government’s blueprint for tourism development for 2008 to 2015 put national parks among five attraction types slated for concerted efforts (Yunnan Province Tourism Bureau and Yunnan Province Development and Reform Commission 2008). Diqing Prefecture surged ahead in promoting national parks, unveiling two more parks, Shangrila Yunnan Golden Monkey National Park and Meili Snow Mountains National Park, in late 2009.

The choice of this site was a disappointment for TNC staff. According to one former staff member, “The Nature Conservancy was trying to get protection where it didn’t exist already, in order to extend protected area coverage to key biodiversity-rich areas, so we had not sought national park status for Bitahai, which was already a reserve. We pushed . . . to get Shangrila Gorge made into a national park. But the Diqing government had its own considerations” (interview, June 4, 2009). TNC’s strategy for promoting national parks focused on expanding the region’s portfolio of protected areas by securing conservation designations for new sites. As noted above, field research had found Shangrila Gorge to have one of the richest concentrations of biodiversity in northwest Yunnan. But the local government, intent on rapidly setting up a new tourism attraction, was moving in another direction. An official from the Pudacuo National Park Administration Bureau explained that Shangrila Gorge “is 102 kilometers out of Shangrila, and there
Making National Parks in Yunnan was no infrastructure, so it would be really hard to set up tourism there. In terms of tourism amenities, it might be good for whitewater rafting and backpacking, but it’s not well situated for mass tourism” (interview, July 1, 2009). Local authorities wanted to build a high-volume tourism operation. The vision of low-volume, backcountry tourism presented by TNC and the Research Office did not mesh with their priorities. The overlap of the proposed Shangrila Gorge National Park with a major copper seam gave the local government further reason to demur.

Pudacuo National Park looks quite different from the hiking trails and backcountry bed-and-breakfasts proposed by TNC and the Research Office, and the independent, unified oversight that they endorsed has not been instituted. Instead of going on backpacking treks, visitors ride buses. While the new park limited tourism use to less than 5 percent of its area, dedicated facilities for conservation have not been built. Local authorities have set up a separate administration bureau and tourism company, but staff at the bureau are unable to make effective claims on the company because the company, which was granted the same bureaucratic rank, has greater clout. Minimal funds from tourism revenues are directed to conservation activities, and the administration bureau’s operating expenses come out of the prefecture’s administrative budget. This set-up is very different from the concessions system envisioned in the “Comprehensive Report,” in which an administration bureau would be empowered to define the scope of tourism operations and collect a proportion of revenues as a concession fee to be used for resource conservation. The Bita Lake Provincial Nature Reserve Administration Office continues to facilitate patrolling, monitoring, and research, without substantial added support. Multi-stakeholder decision-making committees are absent. While the national park has revolutionized tourism at the site and made it much more profitable, it is not clear that it has added anything to the practice of ecological protection or resident participation in decision making or conservation.

Although the realized park was far from TNC’s vision, planners were able to moderate some of the local officials’ plans. For example, while local leaders had wanted to construct a set of small dams along a wetland stream to replicate the cascades of Jiuzhaigou, an attraction in northern Sichuan, the head planner persuaded them that this would be an undue modification of the area’s scenery (interview, July 24, 2011). Planners also drafted a two-stage plan, designating areas away from the bus route for the low-impact, backcountry tourism activities envisioned in TNC’s proposals, to
be developed once the mass tourism route was established.

Residents were incorporated into the new national parks as employees and also received compensation. In return for relinquishing the right to provide services directly to tourists, park authorities granted residents the opportunity to take jobs as sanitary workers and promised to provide each household with several thousand renminbi annually. At Meili Snow Mountains National Park, residents continued to give mule rides and provide refreshments and accommodations to visitors. Each park set up organizations to mediate with rural residents. Pudacuo National Park established a community affairs committee with representatives from villages around the park, local government offices, the tourism company, and the administration bureau. At Meili Snow Mountains, administration stations charged with regulating tourism services and conservation efforts have become points of contact between the park and communities. Some station personnel are drawn from those communities. These personnel attend village council meetings and relay concerns from communities to national park management and vice versa. In each place, residents continue to farm, graze, and gather forest products, fuelwood, and timber from collective forests, as in communities outside the parks. As the parks lack conservation management capacity, residents are by default the primary implementers of resource management. In some cases, as with the accelerating use of timber to build guesthouses in Yubeng, a village in Meili Snow Mountains National Park, residents raise concerns about tourism’s impact on beliefs and institutions that had once constrained resource use—the very beliefs and institutions that TNC’s initial efforts had aimed to nurture.

These changes have drawn varied responses. At Pudacuo National Park, residents were initially unhappy with losing their rights to provide horse rides and found the compensation offered by the park too meager. In 2008, the park raised the level of compensation, yet some discontent remained. Some residents see their share of the take from the national park, totaling less than 5 percent of annual revenues, as unfairly small. At Meili Snow Mountains, some residents complain that although the national park collects ticket fees from every visitor, it has not invested this income in beneficial infrastructure in the park. Others in both parks express faith that the national park management will make good in time, and some of these returns have already come to pass. By 2012, Pudacuo National Park had followed through on promises to provide running water to each household and to build a hotel that residents could take part in running.
With the commercial success of Pudacuo National Park, the prefectural government put national parks at the center of its tourism development plans. The chief of the Diqing Tourism Bureau declared, “Based on the successful experience of establishing Pudacuo National Park, Diqing will rapidly promote and boldly explore national park construction, management methods, and standards, as well as innovative tourism development and management methods, so that national parks become a key pillar of the Shangri-La tourism brand” (Liu Juan 2009, 1). In the competitive market sketched out in the “Development Plan,” local governments strive to make their localities’ tourism attractions more visible. Seeing this potential in Pudacuo National Park, leaders in Diqing seized on national parks as a way of advancing the area’s prospects.

RESPONDING TO NATIONAL PARK DEVELOPMENT

Pudacuo National Park created a challenge for TNC. Some staff members did not want to support an operation that departed so sharply from the organization’s vision. In the end, TNC decided to provide support in order to try to push Pudacuo toward something more like that vision and to ensure that it could remain involved in further efforts around national parks. TNC provided assistance for training staff and developing interpretive materials. TNC staff worked with prefecture authorities on drafting legislation. Finally, the organization’s staff and the ecotourism faculty of Southwest Forestry College conducted a participatory rural appraisal to identify residents’ skills and needs in relation to providing tourism services in the park, including traditional handicrafts, performances, and accommodations. Park management did not adopt the resulting report’s recommendations for enabling residents to comanage and directly provide tourism services (TNC China Program and International Ecotourism Research Center 2009).

A leadership transition in 2008 brought major changes to TNC’s China program. Yunnan native Rose Niu, who had led TNC’s efforts in China since their initiation in 1998, was replaced by Sean Zhang, a technical expert who had worked on policy projects based at TNC’s China program Beijing office. This transition cemented a shift in focus away from Yunnan and toward regional and national projects. Following the 2008 economic downturn, the China program’s funds fell by about half, and two-thirds of the Yunnan staff were cut, including several who had led place-based projects in northwest Yunnan. Several field offices in northwest Yunnan closed. People who had
long-term relationships with TNC before the transition report that these relationships, especially those with local cultural experts and governments dating from the 1900s, were damaged by the departure of experienced staff.

TNC continued to promote national parks, shifting its efforts toward shaping incipient national parks at Meili Snow Mountains and Laojun Mountain and engaging provincial agencies on policy and oversight. In 2007, TNC obtained cofinancing from the European Union–China Biodiversity Programme for a project aimed at developing and implementing legislation for these two national parks, establishing functioning organizational structures, building management capacity, facilitating participation of local communities, and promoting awareness and advocacy for replicating the new model.

In Diqing, while national park development surged, policy lagged. The establishment of national parks brought into being administrative bureaus and business operators whose organizational interests conflicted with those of many other agencies. A staff member at the Pudacuo National Park Administration Bureau, interviewed on July 1, 2009, reported:

Within the prefecture, forestry, tourism, land resources, and hydrology departments as well as the Tourism Development Investment Company all want a hand in what’s going on [in the national park]. . . . Forest management is in the purview of the Forestry Bureau. So Forestry employees regularly go into the park to do their work. Tourism and other bureaus send special guests, demanding that they not be charged for tickets. But if there’s an accident in the park—say, a tourist gets injured—everyone points their fingers at the National Park Administration Bureau. We need them to facilitate our work. Right now we have no power to fine people for infractions or get other departments to work along.

Staff at National Park Administration Bureaus struggled to play the roles that the founding statements of national parks prescribe. While local leaders boldly declared new national parks—ahead of approval from provincial agencies—they showed less eagerness to issue regulations that might constrain tourism and other endeavors.

Provincial agencies also contended over the new category. As of 2008, TNC had a new ally in advancing national parks, the Yunnan Province Forestry Department, which had previously been chary of the national park effort. The Forestry Department’s about-face followed events in Beijing.
Making National Parks in Yunnan and Kunming. In 2007, the chief of the Yunnan Forestry Department was replaced, and when the new chief went on a fact-finding trip to Pudacuo, he was impressed (interview, May 9, 2010). In May 2008, TNC cosponsored the China Protected Area Leadership Alliance Project, aimed at building management capacity at model national nature reserves. Twenty-seven participants from across China, including seven from Yunnan, took part in classroom training at Tsinghua University, two weeks of field study in the mainland United States, including visits to several national parks, and a week of workshops at the University of Hawai‘i. At that point, the Yunnan Forestry Department applied to the State Forestry Administration to allow Yunnan to pilot national parks. In June 2008, the State Forestry Administration issued the “Notice on Approving Designating Yunnan Province as a Pilot Province for Constructing National Parks,” authorizing the Yunnan Forestry Department to undertake work on a national park model and to set up an office for that purpose (China State Forestry Administration 2008). Shortly thereafter, the Nature Reserve Administration Office of the Yunnan Forestry Department assumed the added title of National Park Administration Office. In July, Southwest Forestry College held a conference on national park development, with the Yunnan Forestry Department taking a central role. TNC, the Research Office, and tourism planners at Southwest Forestry College had helped garner substantial support from the State Forestry Administration and its subordinate agencies in Yunnan.

The National Park Administration Office began working with TNC, the Research Office, and tourism planners to build policy and management capacity for national parks. In 2009, the Yunnan Forestry Department released a long-term plan for developing national parks, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive management authority within parks for national park management agencies that would now be supervised by the national office. This plan set out an agenda for establishing twelve national parks across the province by 2020 (Yunnan Province Government 2009). By the end of 2009, plans for four, including a new plan for Pudacuo National Park, had been approved by the Yunnan provincial government. With assistance from TNC, the National Park Administration Office facilitated three training workshops and conferences for staff at current or planned national parks. These activities, which put the national office in repeated contact with current and prospective national parks administration bureaus as a management resource, worked to consolidate its role as the main agency in charge of national parks.
Local governments contest efforts by the National Park Administration Office to influence national parks. Having taken the initiative to establish national parks, they assert their prerogative to make decisions about park administration. Responding to these challenges, the National Park Administration Office has pushed to advance national park policy within the province and to become involved in the day-to-day affairs of each national park. The Yunnan Forestry Department and the Research Office issued a report in 2009 affirming the potential of national parks to mitigate conflicts between resource use and conservation. It identified problems related to overlap with nature reserves and scenic areas, disconnects in provincial agencies’ oversight of local government agencies, national parks’ inadequate provision for community development, tourism’s contributions to meaningful conservation actions, and a lag in legislation that might resolve these issues (Yunnan Province Forestry Department and Research Office of the People’s Government of Yunnan 2009; see also Research Office of the People’s Government of Yunnan 2010a, 2010b). Provincial legislation faces hurdles similar to those impeding local legislation, as agencies balk at encroachment on their jurisdictions. The national office also commissioned four teams of attraction planners to draft technical standards for national parks, which required approval from a provincial bureau but did not need to pass through the legislature. With these standards, the National Park Administration Office asserted the authority to bestow or revoke the label “national park”; to require regular, science-based assessment of biological and cultural resources and how they are affected by activities within a park; and to stipulate where construction is allowed and how it must be approved.

The National Park Administration Office worked to get involved in the practical management of national parks through on-the-ground programming. Training sessions not only acquainted park personnel with a conservation-oriented vision of national parks but also drew them into continued interaction with the national office. Likewise, in 2010, the national office initiated biological surveys at several national parks. These surveys were intended to provide baseline data for longer-term monitoring of vegetation and wildlife. Through these actions, the Forestry Department has worked to demonstrate continual engagement with management agencies at national parks.

The Yunnan Forestry Department has pursued these efforts aggressively because the national parks initiative, as a new program with shaky legal foundations that could potentially affect various government agencies,
is politically vulnerable. Efforts around national parks have met with resistance from other provincial agencies, whose staff members fear encroachment on their spheres of authority. In addition, the parks’ lack of grounding in national law makes it difficult for park managers to make claims on other agencies. Park personnel avoid making strong statements about the administrative status of national parks, particularly any that would raise hackles with agencies that provide them with support. Asked about the possibility that the national park project might not survive, one participant asserted that even if the title “national park” were eliminated, the forestry department would have laid the foundation for stronger conservation management in these areas, which he says is important in itself.

Meanwhile, TNC retreated from on-the-ground work in northwest Yunnan. It closed its Shangrila office in 2009, and its last action at Pudacuo was the presentation of several flat-screen monitors to display the park’s wonders in the entrance hall. After the departure of the head of the Deqin office, interns struggled with local political complications around removing trash from rural tourism sites and a short-lived project to enlist villagers to monitor wildlife and poaching. When provincial agencies commissioned a new “Action Plan for Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Development in Northwest Yunnan” (Yunnan Province Environmental Protection Department 2009) in late 2009, TNC did not participate.

CONCLUSION

The making of Yunnan’s national parks illustrates how different state agencies mobilize around protected areas and how the roles of transnational organizations have changed over the past decade. These complications show the disunity within the ecological state, which shapes how state agencies engage with other actors on environmental issues. Because of the leverage local governments have in protected area management, their development priorities have been predominant in shaping national parks. Line agencies competing for funds, jurisdictional turf, and prestige have made scenic landscapes terrain for pursuing differing organizational goals. TNC’s approach has changed as its proposals have met with obstacles and government actors have seen or dismissed a role for TNC in achieving their goals. Meanwhile, other participants in the coalition that TNC catalyzed early in the years 2000–2010, particularly local residents and religious figures, have had little say in major decisions about these landscapes.
National parks have become sites of contestation within the ecological state as government units with divergent mandates compete for prestige and control. Local governments control the practical management of protected areas, but, in competing to build high-profile attractions, they are not inclined to support active conservation or resident involvement. The Diqing government seized on the national park idea to build a distinctive brand while at the same time mimetically replicating the mass tourism operations of places like Jiuzhaigou and Zhangjiajie. While protecting nature is front and center in local state discourse in northwest Yunnan, action on behalf of this goal is subordinate to the priorities of tourism revenue and resource extraction. Meanwhile, line agencies, especially at the provincial level, compete to acquire and maintain organizational turf. Development-oriented agencies have resisted the constraints inherent in TNC’s proposals, while the Yunnan Forestry Department has found in this new model a chance to expand its purview and produce visible accomplishments in protected area management. But the disconnect between its conservation goals and the aims of local governments has constrained the Forestry Department in strengthening park management. Local governments responding to pressures for tourism-led growth have become central actors in environmental management.

The establishment of national parks has recast the terms on which local residents and governments work with each other around landscapes. Whereas at the start of the period covered in this chapter, threats to the sacred landscape had brought these groups together to demand that activities accord with this sacredness, the growth of tourism changed the stakes. In the 1990s, local governments assisted communities in what would become Pudacuo and Meili Snow Mountains National Parks with setting up cooperative tourism services run by residents, who obtained the majority of benefits. With the advent of national parks, local governments found a revenue interest in channeling visitors into high-volume attractions, which is in tension with residents’ interests. Because local authorities conceive of participation narrowly as economic benefit, they have incorporated residents through employment and compensation schemes. Park authorities may take residents’ concerns into account, though they do so reactively, in response to complaints, rather than proactively, by offering involvement in decision making. Local governments have worked as much to cultivate and constrain residents’ activities and wishes as to promote them, and relationships between residents and park management have become characterized
by negotiation and, often, contention. At the same time, since local authorities have not invested in conservation management, residents have by default become, or continued to be, resource managers, but there have not been active efforts to understand and learn from their practices. In this context, TNC’s proposals, while limited from the perspective of democratic participation, were groundbreaking—and for this reason did not get very far with the local state. The national parks project worked to divide these parties as much as it did to bring them together.

These changes in the ecological state have contributed to a shift in the focus of transnational conservation organizations and a relative decline in their capacity to influence local practices. As domestic capacity for development and research have grown, what TNC has to offer has changed. In the late 1990s, the scientific studies and rural development assistance brought by TNC met demands that local and provincial governments had difficulty meeting, while its planning programs fit in with the efforts of local governments and development-oriented agencies to identify natural and scenic resources. With these offerings, TNC worked to win favor for its vision of national parks. A decade later, as domestic financial, scientific, and planning capacity grew and local government tourism agendas solidified, it became harder for the organization to promote a conservation model that constrains economic activity. Nonetheless, TNC’s resources for policy consultation, aided by ties to the Yunnan Provincial Research Office, appealed to a Forestry Department that was working to raise its profile in protected area management.

The course of TNC’s involvement in Yunnan shows an organization learning about the ecological state, working across scales to promote a conservation agenda, and adjusting that agenda in response to changing signals from state agencies. As extractive interests in northwest Yunnan grew, TNC had to withdraw from a vision of coordinated, constrained development across an ecoregion and focus on specific national parks. Its vision for national parks, in turn, increasingly diverged from the aims of local government agendas, straining relationships with local governments. TNC staff adapted their visions to respond to changing situations at national park sites and appeal to different government counterparts. New partners adjusted the organization’s proposals, bringing in elements reflecting their roles in mediating with other agencies. Still, TNC clung to several points, in particular, empowering administration bureaus to oversee parks, subjecting business operations to concessions policies, and securing the participation of resi-
dents in decision-making bodies, even when it became clear that local governments would not adopt them. Park planners incorporated elements of TNC’s visions into designs that could satisfy local government authorities. The vision of the National Park Administration Office, building on foundations laid by TNC and the Research Office, reflects the role of national parks in efforts to build the power and influence of forestry agencies.

This unfolding of events raises important questions about transnational organizations. It has been amply documented that these organizations’ projects often have perverse consequences due to the complications of on-the-ground engagement. Scholars often present such organizations as anti-politics machines that turn value-laden issues into technical problems that can be solved with their prefabricated tool kits (Ferguson 1994; T. Li 2007). TNC’s application of such a tool kit and its struggles with local politics fit this picture in some ways, but the political implications of its efforts to prioritize active conservation management and resident involvement aroused local state resistance. Weak connections to the communities involved constrained TNC’s capacity to advocate for them. While this account does not claim that TNC was entirely benign toward residents, the organization’s staff were aware of power differentials and actively worked to expand the involvement and autonomy of rural residents. Meanwhile, its efforts to promote active conservation ran up against local state agendas, and its higher-level allies had little leverage to exercise in achieving this goal. In this narrative, we see the staff of an organization realizing, however incompletely, the political implications of their efforts, which collide with the countervailing projects of state actors, and the limitations of their ability to assist civil society stakeholders.

Given current trends, it is likely that professionalized conservation in southwestern China, which implies the cultivation of professionalized bureaucracy, has stronger chances for success than building resident participation and autonomy, which requires investing in capacity building and granting residents space in which to pursue opportunities that they value. On either of these fronts, though, the story is not over. In Yunnan, TNC has made a notable contribution in bringing ideas about active conservation management and community involvement into policy discussions and institution building. A variety of possible events might propel these efforts forward, such as funding from above conditioned on implementing professionalized conservation, changes in national or provincial legislation on protected areas, increased assertiveness on the part of national park
administration bureaus and the National Park Administration Office, or perhaps even a change of heart or personnel in local governments (Zhou and Grumbine 2011). People who attempt to bring about such changes would have to address entrenched local state interests. Just what these wrangles will yield is hard to foresee.

4. MAKING NATIONAL PARKS IN YUNNAN

Interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

1 China’s protected areas include more than 2,500 nature reserves, over 200 scenic areas, and more than 600 forest parks, not to mention a collection of areas in other categories (State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2009; Ministry of Environmental Protection 2010). For discussions of the status and management of these protected areas, see Xie Yan, Wang, and Schei 2004 and Harris 2008.

2 “Meili Snow Mountains” is a translation of the commonly used standard Chinese name for the area around Khawa Karpo (Meili Xueshan). Government actors have promoted the use of this name, even though it does not correspond with local residents’ conceptions of these places. For more on these names, see Litzinger 2004 and Guo 2009.

3 These versions of national parks have complicated relationships to one another. IUCN categories refer mainly to the types of land use allowed in a protected area, presuming management “through legal or other effective means” (Dudley 2008, 8). In this context, the U.S. national park “model” concerns organizational traits, in particular, unified oversight by an agency like the National Park Service, commercial operations subject to concessions policies, and outreach and negotiation with surrounding communities (Machlis and Field 2000; Sellars 2009). TNC and government agencies in Yunnan strategically draw on both IUCN and U.S. National Park Service rubrics for different purposes.

4 In 2010, Southwest Forestry College was renamed Southwest Forestry University (Xinan Linye Daxue).

5 For more sustained discussions of Pudacuo National Park, see Tian and Yang 2009 and Zinda 2012a, 2012b.