

# Saving the Trees of **Mesho**

## SUMMARY

In 2010, the people of Mesho directly intervened to stop logging and save their forests from destruction. Residents of three villages—Puma, Dama, and Yüba—took action together, chasing loggers out of their camp, sabotaging their machinery, and setting up a blockade to prevent further cutting of the forest.

The villagers had accepted the logging earlier under the impression that the timber would be used to build houses for the poor, but it became apparent that this wasn't the case. Some was being used to build houses that nomads would be resettled into, and some was being sold illegally. It seemed that local Chinese officials were using the construction of nomad settlements as an excuse to break a ban on logging.



Drawn by news of the villagers' bold action and the rampant deforestation taking place in the whole region, the co-founder of the Green Beagle Chinese environmental organization spent time with the villagers and reported on the situation for a prominent environmental website, chinadialogue.net. Greenpeace China also researched and reported on the situation in Mesho as well as problematic logging taking place in the broader Kardze region. As of 2011, the year-old blockade had successfully prevented further logging from taking place.

## ISSUE

Rampant logging and environmental damage



## WHO

Villagers of Mesho

## WHERE

Puma, Dama, and Yüba in the Mesho valley, Dege County, Kardze Prefecture, Kham (Sichuan)

## GOALS

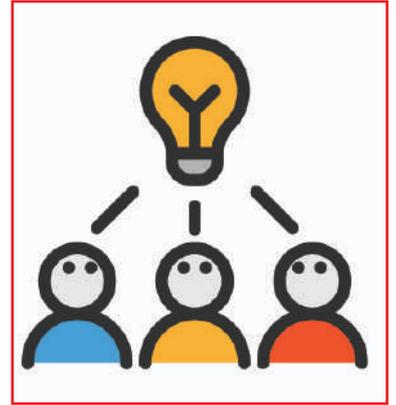
To stop logging of the local forest



## STRATEGY

We don't have enough information to know for certain what the villagers' strategy was, but it appears that it was some combination of:

- Physically intervening to stop the logging
- Invoking the government's ban on logging and securing the support of Chinese environmental activists



## PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The villagers' direct intervention was planned. They had been told the logging taking place since early 2010 was to provide timber for houses for the poor. When they realized that this was not the case, they decided to intervene to stop more trees from being cut.

## ISSUE FRAMING

The villagers presented the issue as being about environmental destruction and going against their cultural values of respect for the environment and all living things. They also emphasized that the timber might be being sold illegally.

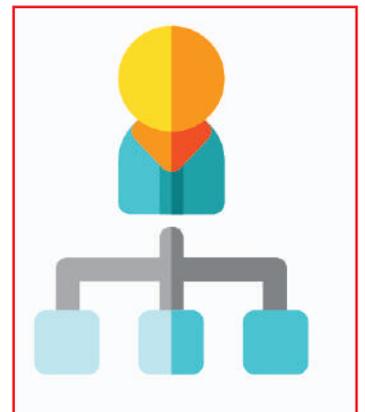
Allies like Greenpeace China—who got involved later—framed it as part of a larger issue being addressed by China that year. It was the United Nations International Year of Forests and a forest protection program aimed to stop logging along parts of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. The allies suggested that local officials were using the excuse of building homes as a cover for breaking a ban on logging that came from higher levels.

## LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

**Leaders:** It's unclear if there were particular leaders of the action.

**Participants:** The participation of three villages suggests that there was substantial community organizing to get widespread, grassroots involvement. We don't know how many people participated, but they were able to staff a blockade checkpoint with three people a day for at least a year.

**Allies:** Somehow the villagers' initiative was communicated to Chinese conservationists and environmental organizations, who helped by publicizing the campaign and doing further research and reports on the issue of deforestation.



## TARGET

The villagers targeted the loggers, physically preventing them from felling more trees. We don't know whether the campaign was successful in permanently stopping logging in the area. To get long-term protection of the forest, the villagers might have needed to target officials in the county or prefecture government as well, not just the loggers themselves.

## OPPONENT(S)

The likely opponents would have been:

- Loggers who lost their jobs after the blockade
- Corrupt officials in the local government taking bribes to allow illegal timber sales
- Other officials in the local government who had approved the logging program

## TACTICS

The villagers initially gathered information about what was going on. They then started spreading the word among the different villages in Mesho, deciding on a series of actions: first, destroying the logging camp, and second, blocking access to the forest.

Allies did research, including asking various local and national government departments for information and responses to their findings. They publicized the campaign and the broader issue of deforestation in Kardze on prominent websites and on personal microblogs. They also sent copies of their reports to China's State Forestry Administration.

The villagers' tactics were very high-risk. Not only were they concentrated—everyone participating was in one place—the blockade tactic depended on the participants using their bodies to physically prevent trucks from passing.

The allies' tactics were lower-risk. They were mainly communicating with government departments rather than physically taking action, and the environmental organizations were openly carrying out their mission of protecting their environment.

The different tactics were effective together. The villagers' dramatic action gave legitimacy to the campaign since they were the people being affected by the logging. The allies' lower-risk tactics of research and publicity showed that many people were watching the campaign and this probably helped protect the villagers who were placing their bodies on the line.

## RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

Unusually, the opponents to the villagers' action seem not to have responded in a forceful way. One official interviewed said they had no right to be blockading the forest.

In response to the report Greenpeace China sent to the State Forestry Administration, an official was sent from Chengdu to investigate the situation. Other government departments at provincial, prefectural, and county levels refused to cooperate with Greenpeace's investigations.

## MEDIA & MESSAGING

The villagers' message was: **Stop Logging in Mesho**

The story was covered extensively by chinadialogue.net, an English-Chinese website focused on environmental issues in China. Initial reports by Feng Yongfeng—the co-founder of the environmental group Green Beagle—were followed by detailed reports on an investigation by Greenpeace China, who did further research and reporting. The coverage put a spotlight on the villagers' campaign, placing it in a larger



context of deforestation in the area and connecting it to Chinese environmental networks far away. This likely played a role in the mild way the local government seemed to have responded to the villagers' blockade.

## **OUTCOMES**

- Logging in Mesho was stopped for at least a year. We don't know if the logging was permanently halted.
  - The destructive and often illegal logging taking place in Kardze was exposed and publicized.
  - Connections were built between local Tibetans and Chinese environmental organizations and individual conservationists.
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