

How the Snub-Nosed Monkey Built China's Environmental Movement

SUMMARY

The endangered Snub-nosed Monkey in Dechen County, eastern Tibet (Yunnan Province) inspired China's first coordinated environmental protection effort—a movement that successfully halted logging in the monkey's habitat. In 1992, Chinese photographer Xi Zhinong captured the attention of people across China and internationally with pictures of the monkeys in the wild. The photos also sounded the alarm about the monkeys' survival since deforestation and poaching had pushed them to the brink of extinction. Despite this, the Dechen County government was authorizing logging in an enormous 20% of the monkeys' habitat.



Source: wildchina.com

Xi and a prominent Chinese environmentalist tried to get the attention of the Chinese government, writing a letter to China's Ministry of Environmental Protection. They secured the help of Friends of Nature, a Chinese environmental group, who got the story covered in the media and helped build support among students and other Chinese people. They organized lectures and even took students to Dechen as volunteers. Momentum to save the monkey grew and the Chinese State Council ordered the local government to stop logging. It was an unmitigated victory.



Source: chinascenic.com

But just a few years later, people discovered illegal logging was taking place again in the monkeys' habitat. Exposed by a documentary film, there was another national outcry and the Chinese Premier himself complained to the Yunnan Forestry Department. The local officials who had been involved with the logging had to face charges and the deputy head of Dechen County was fired. Although the monkey population is still small—probably just over 1,000—it is now growing every year, and there is awareness and interest in protecting its habitat. The campaign to save the Snub-nosed Monkey developed the skills and networks of Chinese environmentalists and helped develop the environmental movement in China.

ISSUE

Environmental destruction was leading to the extinction of the Snub-nosed Monkey

WHO

Chinese environmentalists

WHERE

Dechen County, eastern Tibet (Yunnan Province)

GOALS

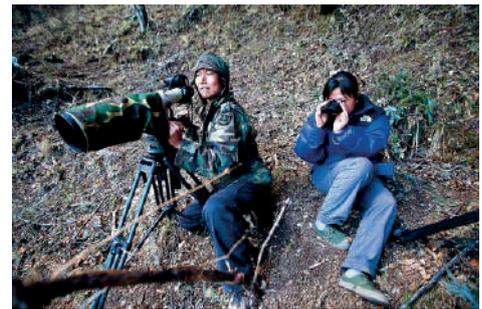
Saving the endangered Snub-nosed Monkey by reducing logging in its habitat

STRATEGY

Coordinate with other environmentalists, attract the attention of the central Chinese government by using the media and grassroots outreach to build popular awareness and support, and get the central government to control the Yunnan provincial government

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

The campaign was planned, with campaign leaders reaching out to environmental organizations who organized public lectures, trips to the area, and secured media coverage. In particular, photographer and Yunnan Forestry Department employee Xi Zhinong was very instrumental in bringing the issue to the attention of other environmentalists and nongovernmental organizations.



Source: chinascenic.com

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was presented in a straightforward way as one of habitat destruction due to logging—often illegal—and animal extinction, but organizers used images and the rarity, beauty, and mystery of the monkeys to build sympathy and attract attention.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders: Individual environmentalists and the Chinese environmental organization Friends of Nature

Participants: Students, the Chinese public, and other environmental groups

Elite allies: In the second phase of the campaign, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji got involved, complaining to the Yunnan Provincial Government about illegal logging

TARGET

Officials in the Yunnan Provincial Government

OPPONENT(S)

Yunnan Provincial Government and Dechen County officials, loggers, poachers

TACTICS

First Phase:

- Extensive media outreach to build public support, including emphasizing photos of the monkeys
- Individual letter written to the Ministry of Environmental Protection
- Lectures and grassroots outreach
- Organizing students to volunteer in the region through “Green Camps”

Second Phase:

It is less clear what tactics were used in the second phase of the campaign, but they included a documentary film and public awareness raising.

The tactics were relatively high-risk and concentrated, but there was space at the time for the new environmental movement that was developing in China and no one was threatened or detained.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

The organizers’ message seems to have been “Save the Snub-nosed Monkey and its forest habitat.” There was extensive media outreach as described above, and also substantial media coverage internationally as well as within China. This played a big role in building popular support.



OUTCOMES

- The Snub-nosed Monkey population is increasing every year
 - There is awareness and interest in China in protecting the monkeys’ habitat
 - Networks and skills of Chinese environmentalists were developed, contributing to a stronger and more mature environmental movement in the country
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