Two Way Exchange for American and Chinese Young Professionals on Environmental Issues

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By Suhan Chen, Director, Confucius Institute

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of The University of Montana was established to promote understanding of both Asia and ethics in public affairs: foci that embody the core characteristics of Senator Mansfield’s career. Last year, we told listeners about one of many programs under our umbrella: a Two-Way Exchange for American and Chinese Young Professionals on Environmental Issues. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, the program sends Americans to China and brings Chinese to the U.S., all with the objective of increasing understanding of natural resource issues – and of one another.

Just last June, I accompanied our 10 American delegates to China for three weeks. It was an amazing group of accomplished young natural resource professionals. Eight of those representatives came from across Montana, from Miles City to Missoula. They came from a range of professions, including business, government, non-governmental organizations, and the media. With stops in Beijing and throughout Guizhou province (which has important parallels with Montana), we visited historic and cultural sites, met with environmental groups, and participated in workshops with the Guizhou Environmental Protection Bureau. Our delegation then split into five teams to visit different sites in their areas of interest throughout the province.

One team visited the Dong minority village and the “last tribe of gunman— the Ba Sha Tribe,” the only ethnic minority in China allowed to carry guns. They learned how the cultures of minority ethnic groups can be preserved in China and exchanged views on how to launch environmental outreach
activities among minority communities – similar to issues faced by our own Flathead and Blackfeet tribes, both of which had representation on the delegation. Another team learned about water issues, including water supply and waste water treatment in urban, rural, and industrial sites such as coal mine regions. They saw outreach efforts made in the same vein as those made here in Western Montana. Yet another team hiked at the World Natural Heritage site at Chishui, recognizing many of the same issues we have at our own natural parks, including increasing needs and decreasing budgets.

As all this suggests, what stood out to our delegation was not so much our differences – though there were plenty of those – but how much we actually share. With the arrival of 20 Chinese delegates after a long flight on September 11, the program has moved forward to its second phase, as our U.S. delegation welcomes its counterparts from the People’s Republic.

Over the next month, these Chinese environmental professionals will travel to Glacier, Helena, and the Flathead Indian Reservation to develop their understanding of environmental issues in Montana that parallel issues in their homes. Members of the U.S. delegation are arranging visits with local businesses, NGOs, and state officials. For example, Brianna Randall, Water Policy Director at the Clark Fork Coalition, accompanied the group to the Missoula water treatment facility. Participant Lisha Liu, director of the Two Lakes, One Reservoir Foundation in Guizhou, noted the number of similarities with Chinese facilities, but also the number of things the Chinese could learn, such as pipe access. She noted, “In China, we usually bury those pipes underground, which makes it more difficult to monitor the waste water. Here in Missoula you have full access to them.”

You’ll see the group around Missoula as they eat and shop, walk to meetings, and simply enjoy our smokey autumn. They will then travel to Alabama and Washington D.C. to further refine their
knowledge of environmental policymaking in the U.S. Before the group departs Missoula, the U.S. and Chinese delegations will sit down to talk about parallels between China and Montana given their individual experiences. The focus will be on natural resource issues, but the conversation will inevitably include issues of culture and society. We invite you to join them in a public discussion and reception to celebrate this exchange, learn more about their experiences, and hear about the commonalities between our countries. You can also hear about plans for our next people-to-people exchange on another theme elsewhere in Asia. The event will be held on Thursday, September 29, at 7:00 pm, at the Stensrud Building on the Northside of Missoula, at 314 North First Street West.

For more information please see our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield, or call 243-2988.

This is Suhan Chen for the Mansfield Center. Thank you for listening.