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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Yung Yau students, teacher Owen Chan and How Man on CERS research vessel. CERS staff and intern in Hainan. Intern circle dancers at Zhongdian/Shangri-la. Intern Natasha competing at Lisu Crossbow Festival.
**President’s Message**

It seems cyclical. Every summer, seeing how much time and human resources we need to pull together for the student’s program and I would say to myself, let’s skip this next year.

After all, there are many ways to execute our education mission of the younger generation, be it through lecture, writing, online material, or film. But somehow offering hands-on field experience is unique, especially to those who want to learn from CERS, a frontline organization.

Then year after year, when I saw how excited the students became, coupled with changes that I could see over the period they were with us, and lastly the writing they produced afterward, I always felt it was all worth the trouble.

So here we are again, presenting to our friends and supporters this Special Issue of our newsletter, fully contributed by our 2014 summer interns.

This year’s intern came from Hong Kong, China, UK, US, even one from the Middle East. It encompasses both college as well as high school students. One may not only see repeaters among students. But in our case, it was gratifying to see several second-term, or even third-term (Ingrid, Valerie and Curtis), repeating students who have been with us before. Apparently they found their experience worthy of their repeated efforts.

The students of Yung Yau College have joined us for a fourth year. Their collaboration with our organization.

The students of Yung Yau College have joined us for a fourth year. Their contribution in this issue is only a teaser for what would come next, the eighth of a series of animation films that the Yung Yau students have made for CERS. Their award-winning films have become a tradition of our education mission of the younger generation, be it through lecture, writing, online material, or film.

I thank Valerie and Audrey, both repeating interns, for accepting the responsibilities of editing the submissions by their fellow students. Please join me in enjoying their stories.

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FROM ANTICIPATION AND TREPIDATION TO REFLECTION AND DETERMINATION

by Students of Yung Yau College, Hong Kong

translated by Wong How Man – October 2014

Cruising on the majestic HM Explorer, getting into contact at close quarters with the Irrawaddy Dolphins, riding for eight hours on rough and windy roads, living in a Spartan bamboo house yet comparable to 5-star hotel, teasing mean-looking but playful Burmese Cats, the ten days of bits and pieces carved a deep impression in our hearts. It was like adding a strong brushstroke to our life experiences. We found it hard to leave to go home; we yearned to stay and linger longer.

Like our journey of ups and downs on the roads in Myanmar, our feelings also went through such a roller coaster ride. We remember when first told of the possibility of visiting Myanmar, our first emotion was one of excitement and anticipation. But soon, such feelings gave way to many worries. As Myanmar was a slowly developing country and there had been some recent riots and...
were curved as if carrying a big smile. Their appearance wiped away the gloomy air of waiting. As if infectious, all our faces were drawn into smiles as well.

But then, we all started to question; “In the past the dolphins appeared frequently and were quite abundant. How come now they rarely show their traces?” Our inquiry met with some answers. There have been some fishermen who, due to wanting quick gain, began using illegal electro-fishing in the area. Not only are they killing many living organism in the river, their action greatly affected the ecology of the entire river.

Their greedy behavior made us very upset. It further enhanced our intent to help protect this rare and endangered wildlife. For that reason, we want to create an animation film about these Irrawaddy Dolphins. This should help send the message out to other people.

This first trip to Myanmar not only brought our series of CERS animations out of China, it also brought out in our fellow students reflections on our own behavior in life. What happened in bits and pieces in Myanmar will now become our collective memory. We earnestly wish that while moving ahead in development, Myanmar will preserve its very stunning and attractive scenery.

"Guu….Guu…." Listening to the locals’ imitation of the calling of the dolphins while pounding wood to attract their attention, we all held our breath in anticipation. At long last, the rounded heads of the dolphins started popping above the water on the river. Accompanying their heads were mouths that diseases, it provided a shade of doubt and trepidation in our minds.

After ten days of visit to the country, however, we discovered how truly beautiful Myanmar is. The pristine environment has not yet been touched by development. The scenes have not been eroded by other practicalities of a society. They lay in front of us like a poem and a painting, with much of the relics and heritage still intact. Perhaps that is the reason why How Man is so eager to help preserve all this. After all, environment and relics cannot be made again or recycled; if they are lost, they would be lost forever. They could only live on in the memories of people and in books.

The fishermen get their fish and the dolphin gets some of the spoils. It is one of the few incidents where wild animals and people work together for a mutual gain. The cooperative fishing with the dolphins has sadly taken a lot of damage lately due to fishing poachers. The poachers use an illegal electrical fishing method that electrocutes the fish, making it easy for the fishermen to just pick them out of the water. It was very sad to hear that these poaching methods are also killing the dolphins. An already endangered animal is being killed, and they are also destroying the fishing culture of these villages. These poachers are not just responsible for killing the dolphins but also for taking a lot more of the fish, leaving little for honest fishermen.
Hopefully the efforts being done by CERS will change the current situation soon.

Inle Lake was very fascinating to see; it was amazing to see how the entire human population has adapted to live on the lake rather than living next to it. Instead of Cars on Roads you have Boats on Waterways driving through the village, every form of transport is done by boat. Inle lake seemed to be a popular tourist attraction in Myanmar, and I noticed many more hotels and resorts than I had on the banks of the Chindwin or the Irawaddy.

Seeing the local industries at Inle was definitely a highlight of the trip. I thought it was fantastic to see that these industries such as weaving and boat building were still so locally supported. At a weaving factory we were told that making a small lotus silk scarf requires around 80,000 lotus plants and is incredibly time consuming. The boat building was done entirely by hand with no machines involved; even cutting the wooden planks out of the timber was done by a two man saw. It was really fascinating to see how the locals had adapted to this way of life. I hope that the dramatic rise in tourism does not change that way of life. After having spoken to two of the staff members at the Inle Heritage House, I got the impression that the younger generation is leaning away from local industries and are getting more involved with the tourism industry. I really do hope that the current way of life at Inle Lake can stay the same and that the rise of tourism does not result in destroying what the tourists originally came to see.

After Inle Lake we got back on the boat and started driving up the Chindwin River. It really was an adventure; there were far fewer boats and much more vegetation on the banks. It was like being in an undiscovered land and gave me the true experience of exploring. We spent the first few days getting north to see the places that CERS had not yet been too. From there we spent more time at different villages and exploring different places. It was incredibly exciting to got for treks through the jungle and exploring different areas and really experiencing the nature of Myanmar. At every village where we stopped the villagers swarmed around the boat, carefully examining it with curiosity and fascinated looks on their faces. These villages were still quite secluded and gave us a glimpse of the real Myanmar.

After nine incredible days on the Chindwin we headed back home to Hong Kong. This trip was really an eye opener to the life of Myanmar and how it is slowly opening up to the outside world. It was great to get to visit and explore the different places trying to see where help is needed with conservation, be it for culture or wildlife. Hopefully Myanmar will stay as unique as it is and the culture and nature can be properly managed and conserved.
Myanmar. ‘Burma.’ Just the name of this country provokes a mystical yet historical thought. The fast-growing cities of Mandalay, Yangon and Saigang are no longer the picturesque scene described by authors, however some villages along the rivers still hold true to their descriptions. My experience in Myanmar with CERS provided much contrast in many different aspects. For one, it is an entirely different feeling stepping into a country about to be globalized and stepping into one that has already changed completely. I have spent the last two summers in Zhongdian, where Old Town is completely tourist driven and New Town is just yet another concrete jungle. Many other villages in Yunnan are also changing, for better or for worse. Since Myanmar opened up, tourists have flooded in, wanting to see what exactly this mystical country is like. Of course, tourism helps the Burmese economy greatly, so I’m not exactly trashing it, but there is a sense of disappointment inside me that wishes some things were just kept traditional.

Of the handicraft makers, we visited a pottery village, a blacksmith, silversmith, boat maker, and silk factory. The boat makers were quite magnificent. Two workers used a saw to cut through wood, but one was balancing on some scaffolding while the other one stayed on the ground. Together in a rhythm, they sawed the wood. There were two pairs of these workers, sawing in unison. At some moments it felt like they were a machine, however their progress was much slower than an industrial saw. These images took me back decades in history, maybe even a century or so ago. Save the clothes the workers were wearing, what I was seeing might have been what someone else saw fifty years ago.

The boat maker’s workshop also sold small wooden handicrafts, and to my surprise, most of the girls that stood by the tables spoke some amount of English. My mind was still stuck in an adventurous utopia where every village I would visit would have one spoken language and that would be the villagers’ native language. I would feel like I was one of the first ones to discover this place, when, in fact, scores of tourists have already watched the locals making or selling handicrafts. Again, this may be my hope that some things would be kept the way they were. Alas, no one can stop Myanmar, or any country, from modernizing and advancing. What we can do now, and what CERS has done for many years, is document and preserve what can be documented and preserved.

John W. Gardner once said, “History never looks like history when you are living through it.” I have lived through history in the 10 days I spent in Myanmar, as, day by day, history is being made in Myanmar.
MYANMAR REFLECTION
by Ingrid Ma

Shortly after coming home from Myanmar, I realized that my experience in Myanmar could not be simply summed up in a sentence or two. “How was Myanmar,” I was asked multiple times. As I scrambled around in my brain to find the right words to explain my 10-day experience, nothing that came out did the experience any justice. At the end of the conversations, I found myself saying “You should really visit Myanmar.” But something inside me hesitates.

From a short and simple interview I did with two of the local staff at the Inle Lake Heritage Vocational School, it was clear that the people of Myanmar were starting to desire more as tourism grows in this country. Various emotions flickered across the eyes of the girls I interviewed, from disappointment to confusion with a glimpse of hope and passion. “I want to go work in Thailand,” says thirty year old Yadanar, whose family owns a small snack shop for a living. “I want to work in hotels in Mandalay, the biggest province in Myanmar,” says eighteen year old Aye, whose family grows traditional Myanmar tea leaves in the mountains for a living. The girls speak easily of their future plans, but when questioned about the loss of local traditions like small snack shops and local tea leaves, “I don’t know,” is the only answer they can give me. Despite the lingering thought of their traditions slowly fading away, their ambitions are centered around their obligation to earn money for their family. At the end of the day, will their desire for wealth triumph over their love for their country?

From watching dolphins to walking through local markets to visiting local workshops, Myanmar left a strong impression on me. As much as I want others to experience the beauty of Myanmar, the contradictions of modernization hold me back. The color of the water is slowly changing from the contamination of soap, oil, and other substances. From what used to be found in organic powder form, the body-care products in Myanmar are slowly being replaced with modern day chemical filled products. Not only shampoo, but other modern day clothes and technology are making their way into homes in Myanmar. The boats that used to be operated by wooden oars are replaced by modern day roaring boat engines. It is only a matter of time before the ox carts, pottery furnaces, and handmade boats are replaced. With modernization comes consequences that affect both the lifestyle of the people and the nature of the country, the most apparent now being the extinction of the Irrawaddy Dolphins. When will the younger generation realize the importance of these local animals and local traditions?

This experience showed me that it is one thing to grow up living in a modern city, but another to witness the transformation first hand. “Take more pictures, all of this will be gone in the next few years,” said How Man. These words stuck with me throughout the whole trip and even now, as I think back to Myanmar wondering how much of this country I might never get to experience again or at all.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Local women teaching us the traditional pottery making method. Clothes shop at the village market. Woman “heading” to the dolphin village. Local men at Inle Lake paddling the traditional way, with a leg wrapped around the ore. Local women at pottery village. Man with his child at pottery village.
Travelling around to see the wonders of Myanmar was an unforgettable experience. I consider myself lucky because I was able to see Myanmar in such a special way where the sites are either new or not well studied.

At the beginning when I was in the Irrawaddy River basin, I was able to see the Irrawaddy Dolphin from very close range. Seeing the dolphins may be a once in a lifetime experience, because the dolphins are very rare and electro fishing is getting more and more popular, so this means that the dolphins will soon be gone. Electro fishing will give fishermen better catches for a while, but in the long run, it is actually a very bad thing, because it will drive the dolphins and native fish species to extinction. I personally think that people need to be arrested for doing this.

After visiting the Irrawaddy basin, I was lucky enough to be able to have a very comfortable ride to Inle Lake. Inle Lake is a beautiful lake where the fish species are very diverse, as there are many endemic fish species only found there. During my stay at the CERS Bamboo House there, I was lucky to be able catch different species of fish, including the Inle crab, an endemic cyprinid fish, and also some puntia barbs.

I think that the lake needs control on the invasive species, including tilapia, walking catfish and some gouramis, because these fish are bigger and tougher than the natives. The invasive species of fish will easily outnumber the native fish due to the fact that they are released annually by the government and they are big enough to eat most native species of fish. On the day before I left Inle, I saw how local people make a living by making boats, knives, cigars, and silk clothing the traditional way. I think that if I visit a couple of years later, these may all be replaced by machine made goods, so I think I am lucky to be able to see it before it disappears.

When I continued my trip to the Chindwin River basin, I learned a lot about fish identification with Dr. Bill Bleisch, as we were able to either buy or catch fish to study. We were travelling a lot as the river was very long, so while we travelled, I studied with Dr. Bill. I think that the lower Chindwin, although a beautiful place, has already lost its natural inhabitants. Logging near the bank caused bad river siltation, and the jade mine upstream caused the water quality to be unsuitable for fish to live. This is a really serious issue, because just 5 minutes upstream from the inflow of water from the jade mine at Homalin, the water was much clearer and fishing was popular. I tried some fishing there and I was finally rewarded with more than 100 small fish, by just dipping my net into the water and waiting.

Out of the entire trip, I thought crossing into India was the best experience I had by far. Before going into India, we had to go through hills over 2,000 m above sea level. The scene was beautiful as the water evaporated from the trees causing fog and rainbows. Riding on the “Green Explorer” car, a local jeep with open back, was also an extraordinary experience, as it was very well designed for me to be able to see the valley much closer, and it is not easy to find one of those cars anywhere else. That night, we stopped for the night at a guest house and I found out that Chin people were very different from Burmese people, because they were mostly Christians and they spoke good English. The old man who ran the guest house even liked to watch American baseball. After staying over for the night, we drove for 3 more hours and we finally arrived at the Indian border. Being able to go to India in such a way was very exciting, although we only stayed 20 minutes there.

I think that Myanmar is a very beautiful country and the people are also very nice. I wish I could visit again one day.

The lower Chindwin, although a beautiful place, has already lost its natural inhabitants.
As sunlight was fading, we made the last turn around the hill. Finally, a big hornbill flag hanging in front of the first house could be seen, after driving through rocky and muddy roads for more than five hours. From the flag design, I knew I would be arriving into a Chin tribe house. Around every five to ten houses, there would be a cross sign and quotes from the bible written on the walls.

After passing thirty houses and more cross signs, the rollercoaster-like jeep stopped in front of a small sign that barely showed the two words “guest house”. Walking around the sign, I saw a white clock tower with rounded domes on the sides that differed from the local Burmese architecture. Passing the clock, I arrived in front of a wooden house with rusted metal plates used for the roof. The instant we arrived, an old couple welcomed my crewmates and me. As I was looking down from the fence two to three feet away from the door, layers of clouds were hovering around the hill. The Hill started at 2500 meter above sea level as a bald and bare steep slope angling to around 60 degrees, then it slowly transformed into a deep jungle that stretched all the way down to the river bank.

Walking up to the tall and old wooden door, there was a pile of firewood towering up to ten feet. I was also able to smell the strong scent of a stew that went all the way down my stomach. When I saw a narrow flight of stairs that barely fit a person, and heard the laughing noises of a British Comedy show in the background, I knew this was the spot. Before making another step, the old man came up to me; he did not greet me but said, “Nice Yankees hat!” I didn’t expect a person living on top of a 2500m hill would give me that comment. The old man then showed my crew and me the guest rooms on the second floor; on the right side of the top staircase, there was a wooden table with 4 plastic stools around. On the wall behind the table, there hung a 4-foot long grandpa gun with an end that looked like a trumpet; it only worked with gunpowder. Just above the gun, there was a picture of an old Burmese man and a British army man; that picture dated back to the 1940s. After passing the semi-living room area, I arrived to my room. My room was separated by wooden boards and a hanging light bulb, making things inside the room barely visible. Just in front of the door, there lay a wooden bed that could barely fit a person.

Walking back downstairs, I sat with the old couple around a 20 inch wide, classic 1990s style TV watching CNN news on the Ebola Crisis, which I hadn’t known existed until then. I talked to the old couple and found out that they were one of the first Christians of the village and learnt English directly from the British. Although they have been living in the territory of Myanmar for more than 10 generations, they still believed that they descended from China. After spending the night at the house, I was ready to leave the house. At that moment, the old man gave me a note. I opened it when I got back on the rollercoaster-like jeep and found out that it was a list of Christian-related book that I should read.

I have kept the note until this very present day, because it reminds me of this wonderful place.

THE GUEST HOUSE
by Ryan Ma
Feelings of anticipation, mixed with tinges of trepidation circled through my mind as I touched down on the runway at Mandalay International Airport, for this was my very first foray into a country which I had been longing to visit for many years. A country which traditionally appeared in the media for all the wrong reasons, but since the 2010 democratic reforms, increasingly for the right ones. Periods of transition are invariably as exciting as they are challenging for any country, especially one that has been changing as rapidly as Myanmar. A perfect time to explore and learn about it, I thought. As a seasoned traveler, I was well aware that television images hardly tell a complete picture of any place, so there was a good dose of uncertainty about the lands I was about to set foot on. One thing was for sure though. The Bangkok Airways Airbus 319 I arrived on, leased from and in Bulgaria Air livery, made for a bizarre sight on the tarmac against the Burmese-style terminal building.

Any nerves were quickly settled soon after rendezvousing with Dr. Bill Bleisch, and later with Mr. Aung Myo Chit, an expert on the Irrawaddy River and its fauna, and advisor to the Fisheries Department, as we got straight down to finalizing plans for the coming days. We were here to learn about the endangered Irrawaddy River Dolphins, via visual surveys and interviews with villagers from riverside communities. Ultimately, we hoped to identify opportunities to solve issues facing both the dolphins and local people simultaneously.

So at 9:26am on January 4, along with Su Lai Chit, a biologist with an interest in riverside forest restoration, we cast off from the bustling quayside at Mandalay aboard the Dolphin, heading...
upriver to traverse the 74km length of the Dolphin Protection Area. This begins just north of Mandalay at Mingun, where the ruins of its giant unfinished pagoda towers over the town, a silent, ominous symbol of the beginning of the end for centuries of Burmese monarchy rule. Under the skillful piloting of Captain Myo Lwin Htay, who kept us away from the perilous, often unseen and constantly shifting sandbanks, we soon spotted our first pod of dolphins at about 11:15am.

Standing on deck, we were all transfixed by the dolphins’ bulbous heads breaking the surface. This was followed by a whoosh from their blowholes, before their grey backs arched as they prepared to dive again, dorsal fins clearly visible, and flukes too if we were lucky. Binoculars and cameras with telephoto lenses were in hand as we scrambled for the money shot of these majestic creatures, as I jotted down our GPS coordinates. Mr. Aung’s trained eyes tallied a total of at least 28 individuals spotted in five separate sightings in the space of 24 hours – heartening news given that a previous CERS expedition in the same area yielded none. A cold, but nonetheless incredible night under a spectacular sky filled with more stars than I’d seen in years capped off a fine day.

As we learned from subsequent interviews with villagers, the Irrawaddy River Dolphin is more than just an apex predator and cornerstone species of the river ecosystem, but also an integral part of co-operative fishing. In this remarkable practice which has been passed down for generations, dolphins respond to fishermen’s cues and drive shoals of fish towards their nets. In return, the dolphins get easy pickings from the panicked fish which do not get trapped. Sadly, this may all be becoming a thing of the past. There are now only two villages – Myit Kangeyi and Si Thi – with co-operative fishing groups, down from many more within the Irrawaddy floodplain. The river itself is partially to blame, with its wildly variable flows during the wet and dry seasons constantly changing its course, thus isolating villages which once stood along its banks.

However, humans are inevitably responsible for exacerbating existing issues and creating new ones. Excessive logging upriver, as evidenced by the numerous massive log rafts we saw being towed down to Mandalay, has worsened soil erosion and siltation, leading to the river changing course more rapidly in recent times as reported by villagers. That said, the most serious issue for every village head and fishing concession owner we interviewed was the increasingly prevalent electrofishing along the Irrawaddy. By connecting car batteries with electrodes at the end of bamboo poles and gill nets immersed in the water, electrofishermen would wipe out entire food chains at once.

The knock-on effects of this illegal activity are manifold. Aside from significantly reducing the fish stocks in the river, and hence the fishermen’s catches, it is apparently responsible for at least a half dozen reported deaths of Irrawaddy Dolphins in 2013 alone. With an estimated total population of fewer than 100, and females producing only one offspring every three years, such a mortality rate is surely unsustainable. Furthermore, we were told that dolphins, now justifiably wary of people, are much more difficult to engage with for co-operative fishing. In response to some fishermen successfully confiscating electrofishing gear in the past, the electrofishermen have since formed a gang, fishing in groups of up to 10 boats. Armed with clay marbles and slingshots, in boats equipped with powerful outboards funded by the proceeds of their illicit catches, electrofishermen have recently been able to evade villagers who have tried to stop them. What was once simply an unlawful activity has seemingly spiraled into all-out criminality, with some electrofishermen allegedly threatening to burn down villages if they are reported to the authorities.

All is not lost, however. The head of the Mwe villages, where the electrofishermen supposedly come from, informed us of a recent arrest warrant for an electrofisherman who has since been on the run. Monks at the Taw Ya Gyi Monastery told us of four electrofishermen who are currently serving 12 years in prison for their crimes; this hopefully acts as a deterrent. Electrofishing is clearly the chief concern shared by all villages within the Dolphin Protection Area, which hopefully makes collaborative, community-based efforts to halt it more likely. Such approaches may well be the only feasible option as the Fisheries Department seems woefully short on resources – villagers purportedly have had no assistance from any of the 4-man-strong local Fisheries office. Nevertheless, greater bilateral communication between villagers and authorities, as well as effective law enforcement is certainly needed on the part of the government and police, given the clout of the electrofishing gang. This is only fair to the fishermen, who have paid hefty sums (up to 200,000 kyats) to the Fisheries Department for 3-year-long concessions that supposedly guarantee protected fishing areas. And last but not least, it would only be fair to the dolphins tragically caught in the middle.

Even more encouragingly, there were abundant signs throughout our time on the Irrawaddy that despite what we learned from the villagers, other aspects of wildlife were still healthy. Dr. Bleish and Mr. Aung expertly identified over twenty bird species, from flocks of Grey heron standing lazily on sandbanks to Great cormorants skimming low over the water...
to a Streak-eared bulbul that we caught in our mist traps. After settling in, I was showed around the Inle Heritage House and aquarium in the hospitable and capable hands of Chaw Su. Aside from a morning experiencing the local culture and crafts, as well as evenings spent journaling and transcribing notes, it was the fish of Inle Lake which took center stage throughout the rest of my time here. Mornings were early, observing the day’s catch at Inle’s five markets, famous for starting at the central Big Pagoda Market and then rotating through the others in sequence, their locations corresponding with the four compass points. While fish native to the lake or Myanmar, including dwarf and spotted snakeheads, featherfins, spiny eels, loaches, and walking catfish were all available, exotic species such as carp and tilapia were also found in abundance. This was especially true of the tilapia at Nam Pan, the largest market. Likely introduced into the lakes and rivers by Burmese Generals and Fisheries Department ministers in the 1960s, they were part of a (presumably well-intentioned) initiative to boost the profits and variety of fishermen’s catches. Regrettably, these non-native species have been an ecological disaster, having outcompeted and decimated the populations of local species. Additionally, their prolificacy has also driven down market prices, thereby resulting in exactly the opposite of the economic benefits they were supposed to provide. Similar stories abound all over the world, so it is dismaying that new species, including African catfish and other carp, continue to be introduced to Inle Lake, both intentionally and accidentally. In addition, yet more destructive electrofishing activity has been reported here as well. Indeed, much has yet to be learned about its endemic fish species, and there is definitely opportunity to collaborate with zoologists we met from nearby Taunggyi University who are already conducting such research.

Inle Lake faces more threats in the form of floating gardens, which have proliferated in its southern portion in recent years. They are known to have accelerated siltation, noticeably reducing the lake’s surface area. Moreover, the pesticides used on the tomatoes—the main crop grown in these gardens—are undoubtedly contaminating the lake ecosystem, although its effects and their extent are still unknown. The large number of native barbs and shrimp we caught in traps set just off the CERS center is promising, however, as the latter is traditionally an indicator of clean water. All in all, in lieu of the ecological challenges Inle Lake faces, I sincerely hope that the aquariaums that CERS set up to display endemic fish species and the organic farms (which also grow tomatoes) at the Inle Heritage House will educate and serve as an example for farmers, tourists, and the wider community. One more idea sprouted in my mind during this time here. While it is clear that pesticides and exotic species are the most pressing issues, neither manifests itself in obvious ways to the regular tourist. According to Barbara Bauer, the local executive of the NGO Partnership for Change who we met at Nyeung Shwe, tourists’ biggest gripe is with the noise created by longboats, the default mode of transport on Inle Lake. And after spending a week here, I fully understood why.

Powered by Chinese two-stroke diesel tractor engines (which win the award for most number of different uses hands down), I was startled upon closer inspection how something so loud and haphazard, with a massive flywheel spinning rapidly in the open, only produced a paltry 25hp. All this was in a package that weighed 180kg without fuel and oil—well over twice that of a comparable conventional outboard. I couldn’t help but think of opportunities to replace them with quieter, lighter, greener, more frugal outboards, thereby improving the environment and tourist experience simultaneously. While the initial outlay would undoubtedly be much greater, I doubt they are beyond the reach of the tour companies that operate them. As the engine of CERS’s longboat sputtered to a halt once again with its flywheel jammed, perhaps this was the sign that CERS should take the lead on such an initiative. And just maybe, I will return to a more serene Inle Lake in the future.

Looking back on my time in Myanmar, it is clear that the plight of the Irrawaddy Dolphin and many of the endemic species of Inle Lake are inextricably linked to the communities and cultures with which they treat the tightrope of coexistence. They perfectly exemplify the complexity and immenseness of the challenges this country has to tackle, if it is to successfully and sustainably juggle economic development with preserving the very resources that support both its incredibly diverse human and wildlife inhabitants alike. Having experienced the sheer vitality and hospitality of the Burmese people first hand, one might find it hard to believe that the country had only recently endured what was undoubtedly the toughest period in its history. I am hence left deeply encouraged, but cautiously optimistic that these issues can be overcome in time.
IN THE MOMENT

by Audrey Chan

It is minutes to midnight. I sit in the CERS van, bumping and squashing others as the van rolls along the pothole-filled dirt path, exhausted from our day’s travel, but I am wide awake. In minutes my searching eyes will finally see the long missed glowing lights of the Zhongdian Center against the dark starry night. The van turns a corner and I strain my neck forward as my fingers restless tap my legs. My anticipation reaches its climax and a broad smile spreads across my face. My heart nervously pounds faster and faster against my chest. I see a glimpse of light poking through the trees, then another, and another. There it is. I am here.

The alarm rings at 7:30. I “snooze” it. It rings at 7:35 again. I “snooze” it again. When it rings for a third time five minutes later, I finally kick off the covers. Leaving the warmth of my quilt and heated bed doesn’t usually appeal to me, but at this morning at 7:40 AM I am more than ready to start the day. At eight, I brave the morning chill and walk to breakfast, but as soon as I am downstairs in the main hall the warm atmosphere surrounds me and drives the cold away. The faint sounds of clinking dishes and soft, tired voices echo around the room. I sit down with my bowl of rice noodles, surrounded by interns just as tired and excited as I am, and in this moment there is nothing better.

I fasten my helmet. I adjust the gears. I release the kickstand. I let the wind push me down the road. I zoom past the local villagers, dressed in traditional Tibetan clothing, beckoning me over to ride their horses. I pedal harder; the wheels turn faster. I look at the lake and see two ducks swimming near their nest, which rests on a patch of algae. I turn the corner and see a field of green, dotted here and there with yaks and horses. I gaze upwards and see the lush mountains that encompass the wetland. I pedal even harder; the wheels turn even faster. I take a deep breath. I feel the wind rush past my face and into my lungs. I feel free.

After a divine meal of mouthwatering yak hot pot and delicious dumplings in Old Town, we follow the music until we reach an open square. We see several hundred people dancing in circular rings, coordinated and harmonious. I decide to give it a try. I step into the outermost circle, a little nervous and hesitant. A few steps later, however, I feel completely lighthearted, even though my movements are not up to par. I stumble and trip over my own feet, but I laugh it off and smile at the observers as I follow the circle around and around the square. I go around eight, nine, ten times, until the sky is dark and the monastery radiates a heavenly glow above us. Dancing here, participating in a local activity, I am not just an observer. I am part of this circle, part of this culture, and for this night I am part of this community.

We disembark from the plane in Haikou and leave the airport. I hop into the van—once again—and take my usual front-row-middle seat. As the others pile in and the doors close, chatter and noise instantly turn the quiet van into a buzzing and vibrant space. It gradually disappears, however, as we move further away from civilization. We pass a few small villages and then we drive by rice and rubber plantations, and soon we are on a meandering dirt road with nothing but nature surrounding us. I lean back, plug in my earphones and look out the window. As we wind up the mountains I wonder how I can teach local kids to protect their culture and environment. As we roll down the hill and drive by the river I let my mind wander. Gradually my eyes feel heavy and I slowly fall into a light doze.

Boom. Crash. Sizzle. The gushing rapids tear through the river, seize the bridge—our only way of leaving Hongshui village—and destroy it. Completely. With no power, cell phone service or way out of here, we are stranded. Literally. But we must find a way to get across. Soon enough, we have a shaky but working system to haul ourselves to the other bank. I stand under the beating midday sun, sweating through all my clothes. Sunburnt. Dehydrated. Tired. But those feelings are overpowered by greater, better feelings. Excitement. Optimism. Motivation. I feel like an explorer.

Leeches here, leeches there, leeches everywhere. As I walk through a damp, muddy, shaded forest, on a path barely there, I can’t help but notice the disgusting squirming creatures. They are silent but violent, unearthly, horrible things. They hide under leaves and stick onto rocks, wriggling and squirming constantly, searching for blood. And when a warm, sweaty body approaches, they never miss the chance to latch on, bite, and dig in. After a hearty meal of blood, fresh from the source, they take their full bellies ►

PAGE 22 CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

CHINA EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH SOCIETY PAGE 23
and leave without even a “thank you.” Instead, they leave a dripping, oozing stream of blood that stains clothes and causes anger. Although leeches seem to be everywhere, they have never succeeded in biting me. I caught one on my big toe right before it took its first bite, flicked it off, and left it hungry and miserable. I have conquered the leech! Well, for now.

It is a beautiful afternoon. Fluffy white clouds create lovely figures against the bright sky, and as the sun bakes the island I arrive at the river. I slide off my shoes and stand at the edge of the small cliff. I look down into the shimmering water, and look across to the sandy beach. Only the sounds of rapids upstream and the occasional breeze fill my ears. I jump. For a while I am suspended in mid air, neither up on the rock or down in the water. Then I splash and sink down into the depths of the river. A rush of cold, refreshing water covers me. Seconds later I pop up for a breath of air. I open my eyes and look around. I am surrounded by serenity, by peace, by nature. I lift my legs and tilt my head towards the blue sky. I close my eyes and float in the river. There is no place I’d rather be. Right here, right now, this is perfect.
There is no one definition of being “stranded” or “isolated”; different people can have distinct and conflicting opinions and perspectives on one word or topic. For instance, city kids like us are used to easily available internet. Therefore, being cut off from the virtual world could be an interpretation of isolation. During the first couple days of my stay at the Zhongdian Center, all five of us interns seemed to grasp every opportunity to use the wi-fi as if we were still clinging on to our virtual selves. However, after we were “completely cut-off” at the Lisu site, we bonded over card games, jokes and intellectual discussions. At the Hainan site, we lost power for three days, leaving us to amuse ourselves with climbing coconut trees and carving bamboo cups in our free time. By the time the power came on, we had become so engrossed in sawing bamboo that we did not retreat to the safety of our electronics.

Although we were very literally stranded in the village of Hongshui, since the main bridge had been destroyed by the typhoon, there are several aspects of isolation that may be interpreted in different ways. A common definition of isolation is to be cut off from the “outside world.” The village of Hongshui is situated in a rather remote region of Hainan, but it has been exposed to industrialization and modern technology. On the surface, Hongshui may seem to be quite open to new ideas because they have moved out of their “backward and impractical” thatched-roof houses into government issued cement houses. However, the villagers are quite wary of foreign people and ideas. The Li people of Hongshui, similar to many other ethnic minority groups in China, are subject to the influences of modern politics and economics. Although humans naturally want to make their own lives more comfortable, traditions that do not seem practical die away; their marks of identity are lost, and thus a once unique culture conforms to the majority.

On one particular excursion, we watched the Li women in Hongshui do traditional weaving. One of the women was using a back-strap loom to make a traditional skirt for her daughter. I asked her if she enjoyed weaving, expecting a positive answer. However, she replied that she did not enjoy weaving. It made her back hurt because she was getting old. She has been weaving since she was fourteen; even though she does not weave every day, she weaves to pass time and to preserve the little tradition that is left of the Qi-dialect brocade patterns, putting them into the costume that she is making for her daughter. Though her back hurts and her vision is not as clear as it once was, she still puts in the apparent effort of more than five years of sweat, blood and tears to carry on traditional weaving, even though it is not quite a hobby.

Despite the sacrifices the previous generation may make, traditions still fade fast when the new generation rejects their heritage. For example, the Yi people featured in the documentary about the CERS project on the Hanging Coffins supposedly rejected their ancestry in fear of being mocked by others because of the old legend of the Yi people being able to fly. Without the first person experience of a tradition, young people become less attached to their culture and desire to move on.

Prior to this year’s CERS summer education program, my perspective on China was dominated by cultural biases and generalizations. I used to think that most of rural China was homogenous; farmers, factory workers, local businessmen. I knew of the 56 ethnic groups, but I had not really understood how diverse each of these peoples were until I visted Zhongdian, the Lisu villages and Hongshui. By working together with the CERS staff and fellow interns, I was able to learn and interact with the local peoples of each of these places. As a result, these seemingly insignificant details from my experience have slowly altered my rather flat and two-dimensional perspective into something more complex and personal. For instance, my first time trying tsampa with butter tea at the Lisu rest house completely transformed my generalization of rice and noodles being the staple food of China. This detail led to a revolution of my entire mindset. My own personal experiences have also made me emotionally attached. My first person experiences make me feel more confident about our efforts to find a compromise between tradition and modernity.
Hainan is a great island, with tropical jungle and plenty of white sandy beaches. Because of this, it is a great tourist destination, attracting many national and international tourists. However, deeper into the forest, into the more rural areas, there are two growing, festering problems - besides the leeches!

The first one is littering. The people casually throw glass bottles into the creek in which their children play farther down stream. Nonchalantly, the villagers throw plastics into the creek in which they fish and the forest in which they hunt. It does not have direct negative effects for them; but not only is it horrible for the environment, but also it is a massive eyesore and saddens me personally. I grew up in Moscow and spent a lot of time in the forests near the city. They were very clean; people who littered were frowned upon and there was a hefty fine. The forest there was treated well, as it was a safe haven for partisans in World War Two and could host a large amount of wildlife inside it if it is clean. This is what the partisans relied on. The same mentality does not exist in Hong Shui village.

The second problem is electrofishing. It is an unsustainable practice that involves the use of electricity to kill fish enabling people to easily net the dead fish. The problem is that this process is indiscriminate; it kills everything, whether it is young or old, fish or not. Slowly this practice will make the river devoid of life, which is obviously negative for both the environment and the villagers. It will make the villagers rely more on illegal hunting for protein, which will strain the forest ecosystem. The villagers used to use regular fish traps that only caught the larger adult fish, but due to what was probably modernisation and a growing population and therefore growing demand, they turned to electrofishing. One of the CERS staff asked a young village woman about the issue and she was very stubborn and convinced on her stance.

The Li people historically haven’t been treated well by the dominant Han Chinese. They were called rebellious and unruly by the authorities, who used military force against them. They were pushed back and exiled to a remote part of Hainan before it was “colonised”. When it was integrated into China during the Qing Dynasty, the Li people weren’t treated very well either. Having this history with outsiders it is understandable that the adults completely distrusted outsiders. They avoided talking to us and sharing their beliefs and customs.

On the other hand, the children were very open and friendly.

This is why I believe that education is the best method to solve these problems. To employ more western teachers in the village school will help create awareness for the environment and the negative effects of littering and electrofishing. If the younger generation cares and is aware, the malpractices will hopefully stop in order to solve this problem over time.

With newly aware villagers that care for the environment, and new money gained from carbon markets, the future could be bright for Hong Shui village - so long as they are made aware. CERS will play a role in hopefully. This will allow the villagers to advance into the future while keeping their old culture, and help them open up to share their stories, beliefs and customs.
Even though it wasn’t raining when we left the Lisu village in search of the rare, endangered Yunan Snub-Nosed Monkeys, the constant rain during the past two days made the hike up to the feeding site muddy and difficult. We had to stop numerous times to catch our breath, and a few people tripped on the way up. Although I was excited to finally be able to see and photograph these monkeys, the prospect of scan-sampling — observing and recording the monkeys’ activities — for an hour in the pouring rain while holding an umbrella and a camera definitely put a damper on the whole thing for me at the time.

Just when we thought that we would catch a break from the rain, it started up again once we made it to the feeding spot. We waited for a bit before the feeding started. Then Natasha and I alternated between observing the monkeys and writing down observations while holding an umbrella. We observed a few families of monkeys, mothers, babies etc. After an hour of the uncomfortable task of scan-sampling, we had some free time to observe the monkeys as we liked. Free from the umbrella and clipboard, I managed to snap a few pictures of the monkeys doing different activities such as feeding, grooming, fighting, resting etc.

Although the process of scan-sampling wasn’t particularly comfortable, I now see the importance of it. It wasn’t exactly a perfect science, since you can’t see every single thing that the monkeys do, but it’s the best way that biologists have as of now to study the monkeys. It’s how we can see the patterns of the monkeys’ habits, such as feeding, and how they change in different seasons.

However, the fact that we were able to get so close to the monkeys was a result of human interference. Human activity caused the loss of habitat for the monkeys, and their population declined, leading to the establishment of the nature reserve. The fact that the government forced the nature reserve to either allow tourism or mining means that the monkeys now come into much more contact with tourists.

I could see that the monkeys were extremely familiar with, if not obedient to, the forest guards at the feeding site, because they went right to the guards when the guards blew a whistle and knew that they would get food. Two of the monkeys walked within a meter or two of me and looked right into my camera. Even a screaming child at the site wasn’t enough to deter the monkeys from coming within ten meters.

One could argue that giving the monkeys a steady supply of food is obviously beneficial to them, as it is easier for the monkeys to survive during the winter, therefore allowing their population to grow. The truth is, feeding makes the monkeys reliant on humans. Although there is no evidence yet to show that the monkeys become weaker foragers because of the daily feeding, the monkeys should not have to rely too much on humans giving them food, and instead should have more forest to forage in.

I think this endangered species requires more forest in order to be able to grow in population and wean off their reliance on human feeding. The people that are living in the area must find another source of income, such as through an improved Snub-Nosed Monkey Museum, rather than using the monkeys to attract tourists. Even though the monkeys are not in the best shape right now, once they are allowed more space in which to live and forage, and the forest regenerates, the Yunnnan Snub-Nosed Monkeys will be able to live healthily and independently again.
The crowd erupted as I won third place for the individual competition. As the only non-Lisu person to win at all in the third CERS Lisu Crossbow Festival, I felt ecstatic and bewildered at the same time.

First I shot nine points (ten points being the maximum on the round target), then another nine, and finally a seven to win third place. I dare say that it was harder to win third place than the first two places, where the winners had hit a perfect ten on the initial round before playing a quick second round to decide first and second place. All fun and games aside, the event showcased how modern methods could be utilized in saving traditional cultures.

My initial reaction to such a festival was filled with reservations; I felt it was somewhat contrived. I had no idea how an event like this could preserve the culture of the Lisu ethnic minority group. The Lisu have a deep-rooted tradition of hunting and have not been allowed to hunt on any scale since 1997 due to government law. Participating removed my doubts about the festival. There is no denying that the government has smothered much of the Lisu culture in the process of preserving nature, yet this festival does bring about a renewed sense of hope towards the preservation of this culture.

We were so worried that no one would show up for the festival, as it was raining, like many of the other days that we had spent in Yunnan. However, our worries were quickly dispelled as people kept showing up: villagers from many different Lisu villages, graduate students doing research in the surrounding reserve, and tourists. We had a total of 27 teams competing, 16 male and 11 female, and these festivities took the whole morning. The individual competitions took less time, as each contestant only got one shot, whereas the teams each comprised three people, with each getting three shots.

At the beginning when people were just arriving, it seemed that the villagers were only coming to the event for the free gifts, such as the unlimited bottles of soft drink, the gift bags, or the Coca-Cola hats. But as the event began, despite the pouring rain and only a small canopy shielding us all, everyone was laughing and talking, enjoying this community event, reminiscing on the hunting days gone by. It brought about a bitter sweet taste: it is exciting that people are enthusiastic about this event and enjoying the cultural education and preservation that it brings about. But this event, an attempt to preserve what is left of the Lisu hunting culture, is incapable of ever recreating authentic Lisu hunting.

This is not to say that CERS isn’t doing what it has set out to do. They have made the best of the situation and have tried very hard to capture what is left of the Lisu hunting culture. So far, CERS has done everything that it can and continues to try and improve the festival every year. I am very glad that CERS had stepped in and gone through all the hardships to preserve this minority group’s culture. Without CERS, the Lisu may well have very few to no records of their traditions and artifacts, with their hunting culture all but disappeared.

Conservation is not a competition, but rather a collaborative effort between many people and many different groups. Only through working together with common goals can we achieve the difficult work of environmental and cultural preservation. As always, it has been a great experience working together with the CERS organization and it is nothing short of amazing what the people in it do. You could say they consistently hit their target.
The future.” We can see how even a small contribution can make a difference when we look back from our two hands.

Among many other life lessons, CERS has taught her to cherish and experience each moment with the most understanding and appreciation.”

Shaan Lalvani is 15 years old and is currently in 11th grade at Dubai College in Dubai, UAE. He was born in London, grew up in Moscow and lives in Dubai. His major interests are fencing, mountain climbing and computer games. “During my two weeks with CERS I really enjoyed the hiking, and the sense of adventure. Also the Lisu Crossbow festival was really fun, and a great way to revive the disappearing hunting culture.”

Henley Leong is a second term CERS intern, having joined us in the summer in 2007 when he was a student at the German Swiss School in Hong Kong. He later attended Imperial College in the UK, graduating with a degree in Material Science and Engineering before continuing his graduate studies at Cambridge University with a management degree. Before starting his career with PricewaterhouseCoopers, he again joined CERS in Myanmar, assisting Dr William Bleisch in his research on the Irrawaddy Dolphins.

Ingrid Ma, Age 19, is from Hong Kong and currently studying at Brown University. She is potentially concentrating in developmental studies with a focus on East Asian countries. This Myanmar trip marks her third year with CERS. She was with CERS for 2 weeks in the summer of 2011, 1 month in the summer of 2012 and 2 weeks in the summer of 2014. “Although hard to pinpoint the highlight of this Myanmar trip, for me, learning about the effects of modernization, especially on the Irrawaddy dolphins, and being able to get a glimpse of the local culture and lifestyle that is so drastically different from that of where I come from.”

Ryan Ma is 15 years old and is current at the Taft School in Watertown Connecticut. Ryan grew up in Hong Kong. He has a great passion for African cichlids and conserving them. His major interests are keeping tropical fish, fishing, basketball or maybe just partying. “My trip in Myanmar was cool. In the time of my life, I saw many new fish. I drove to India and that was so sick!! I thought that seeing the dolphins and staying over at the Qin village were my highlights. Also, studying fish with Dr. Bill.”

Valerie Ma is 15 years old and is a sophomore at Deerfield Academy. Though she was born and raised in Hong Kong, she enjoys life in the quiet Pocumtuck valley. She likes everything except physics, funky smells, and occasionally, cherry tomatoes. Valerie interned with CERS in the summers of 2012 and 2013. This past summer, she spent two weeks in Myanmar with the CERS team. “Going to Myanmar was a first-hand experience that I could never have better with anyone than with CERS and the interns. I loved learning about local culture and I hope to visit Myanmar again soon.”

Curtis Wong is 18 years old and currently a freshman at King’s College London. He was born in Hong Kong and lived there his whole life before moving to London recently for university. His major interests are volunteering work, entrepreneurship, and sneakers. He is a third year intern with CERS, having joined us in the summers of 2012, 2013 and 2014. “During my trip with CERS this year, I was able to revisit old sites in Yunnan while having a lot of time and opportunity to explore the Hainan site due to natural circumstances. The highlights of the trip would definitely be the crossbow festival (which I was able to win individual 3rd prize), as well as the hike we embarked on in Hainan.”

Sebastian Wong is 16 years old and is currently a junior at Hong Kong International School. He was born and raised in Hong Kong. His major interests are drumming and scuba diving. “During my two weeks with CERS, I experienced some amazing cultures in different parts of China, and learned about the importance of preserving some traditions.”
INTERNS IN THE FIELD

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Ready to explore Huangdi Cave near Hongshui Village. Interns competing with local villagers at the Lisu Crossbow Festival. CERS Director talking to interns in Hongshui. CERS Hainan Site. The group leaving Hongshui. Crossing the river after the bridge got washed during the storm. Interns observing Li traditional weaving. Sizing up the big tree. Interns observing golden monkeys under heavy rain as “field scientists”. A little interesting creature in my hand!

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The mission of the China Exploration and Research Society is to enrich the understanding of our cultural and natural heritage.