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Keepers of the Waters
Visions & Solutions

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**"One tree,
one composting
toilet,
one garden,
one action at a
time....."**

Betsy Damon

An Amazing Model for Clean Rivers and Sustainability by Lonnie Feather

This summer I had the privilege of accompanying Betsy on her work in China. We explored and experienced all walks of life – in Beijing we had lunch with Noam Chomsky and dinner with a developer and his business partners who were all anxious to hear about innovative, sustainable practices; in Chengdu we dined with Central Communist Party leaders, grass-roots organizers from the Chengdu Urban River Association, and farmers at the CURA model village site; and in Lhasa, Tibet, we picnicked on the edge of a river with our Tibetan friends not far from the headwater, next to the most beautiful fertile valley I've ever seen, and provided an incredible lunch from a local family. And, finally, we worked side by side with sculptors at a stone factory on a 14' diameter granite image of a living water drop for a public art project in Carnation, WA.



Living Water Drop carved in granite, Stone Factory near Beijing

There are so many wonderful stories to share that I will limit my thoughts to our experience in Chengdu in Sichuan, China. For four years I've worked for Keepers of the Waters and have known Betsy for nearly twenty years and for all of that time I have been hearing about her travels in China and remember the very beginning, the very thought of the Living Water Garden. And, over the years, I've been creating newsletters, organizing photographs and reading wonderful descriptions and articles about the garden that was created 12 years ago. The surprise and pride I felt at finally seeing it in person was extraordinary. It is truly a revolutionary idea and to have it fleshed out for real in an urban setting in a major city in China is a feat of endurance, courage and utter belief in the reality of this vision. Thank you, Betsy.

The park itself is vital in the life of the city. People were everywhere. Children had their shoes off and were playing in the water with their bug-catching nets and water-shooting toys, parents were watching close by in the shade of a tree, musicians and singers gathering in groups to play and laugh and sing, and, as in typical Chinese parks, hundreds were playing cards on the seats of the amphitheatre that looked out over the river. Immediately next to a busy street, you had the feeling of an oasis, calm and soothing, green everywhere, and profound beauty. The flow forms were mesmerizing, watching the water flow and move, and listening to the intense hum of crickets in the overhang of trees mixed with the sounds of water splashing and cascading down the forms. The paths through the park were intimate and zen-like. I felt like I could commune with nature, with the water, and experience quiet moments to myself.

Betsy Damon at the Living Water Garden Pond, Chengdu



Picnic in Lhasa, Tibet



What I also noticed was that people really understood the intension of this place. First, it has garnered much attention in the media. Since it was copied in the Shanghai World Fair they were doing a TV story on the Living Water Garden and Model Village. As Betsy was seminal to both they were delighted to be able to film her. Secondly, the park has a natural flow with signs that hint at the process that's happening -- that the water from the river is being cleaned and revitalized as it moves through the series of flow forms, cleaning ponds and the naturally landscaped creeks. This park truly is about the water. Simple and clear and beautiful.



Musician at Living Water Garden



The Ponds



Our next day was spent outside of Chengdu in an upriver village that has passionately grasped the concept of sustainability and environmental protection. (But first, we made a quick stop at a local elementary school that cleans and returns their grey water and waste to the nearby stream. I'm amazed!)



University students monitoring water quality at local school



Moving on to the An Long Village, the Model Village as a project of Chengdu Urban River Association is directly the result of Betsy's work and involvement. Her guidance and encouragement has made this a very successful experiment and an ongoing project that benefits the farmers, their families, the village and the region. I've heard about the Model Village but didn't really understand the incredible impact that it has. What I saw during our visit was a river left to flow free without hardscaping, farming that used no pesticides or chemicals, and composting toilets that separated the urine from the solid

and, combined with animal waste, created a source of bio-fuel that made electricity. It is designed to strengthen environmental awareness and water conservation in rural communities that are up-stream from Chengdu in the main watersheds that feed the city's waterways and it aims to reduce chemical run-off into the rivers -- as well as improve livelihoods in those rural areas, by introducing organic agriculture, capacity building and other sustainable practices.

After a day in the midst of the program and sharing time with the families in the village, I fully understood that this is a project that really works, that the families are proud of their involvement and that they have support from the government and the agency that created it. Their gardens and farmland were beautiful and rich and their farm animals were healthy and thriving. And their faces were full of hope, life and happiness. What could be better?



Greywater filtering pond at farmer's residence



Lonnie at the village



Betsy talking about the river with village residents



UPDATES FROM BETSY

Eco Art Treasure Coast

Currently I'm directing a yearlong project as the first mentor artist on the South Florida Ecological Art Project, conceived by Mary Jo Aggerston. The project, Eco Art Treasure Coast, is based in Stuart, Martin County, on the Indian River lagoon, the largest fresh water lagoon on the east coast. Our work invites the public to respond with care for the future sustenance of the local eco systems and is designed to form and mobilize local community collaborations that are broad based. The six artists involved in the project have been in collaboration with each other and community groups.

We began with the challenge of integrating art and science. It has been a messy process on many levels from developing collaboration to stretching the boundaries of art. After nine months, floating islands, which provide shade and nutrition to the saltwater aquarium, are being created. On the Audubon site there are bank restoration activities and riparian habitat installations. Rainwater harvesting and urban gardening are projects some have taken on. The collaborative project is focused on reducing plastic spills and the impact of these on aquatic life. (Discovering the large populations of sea life killed by the vast deposits of plastics in oceans is perhaps the most discouraging news I've learned in a long time.) To date, the project development is promising because the once skeptical public is becoming aware, active, and hopeful.

Chinook Bend Art Project

I am completing a public art project with 4Culture in King County, Seattle. The site is 58 acres where King County is releasing effluent from the nearby wastewater treatment plant. The enhancement and health of the wetland depends upon site remediation. Many agencies were involved in the process and the consensus was to remove the flood control berms and revive a wild habitat. My work in the development is educational and relates directly to the needs of the local community. A 14 foot diameter granite compass with a Living Water Drop is sculptured, a 24 ft pole to measure floods composed of 12 beads (6 in glass, 6 in stone) references a spine topped with a raptor roost, and glacial boulder sitting places are etched with images and the words 'Reveal', 'Restore', and 'Revere'.



Buckminster Fuller Challenge Award

This year, I was a semi-finalist for the Buckminster Fuller Challenge grant for my project "Resources: Saving Living Systems" which has been a project of Keepers of the Waters since 2007. With a Tibetan media artist, I have been documenting the Tibetan water culture. This rich up land culture is undocumented and vanishing in the wake of globalization, extraction and industrialization, as are most other sources of fresh water. We photograph and film each site and talk late into the night with villagers and monks. We discuss possible sustainable systems and hope to begin implementing integrated systems for wastewater, electricity, and rainwater harvesting and farming. The most significant benefit that I see is reconnecting Tibetans to their culture.

The Buckminster is an annual international design Challenge awarding \$100,000 to support the development and implementation of a strategy that has significant potential to solve humanity's most pressing problems. It attracts bold, visionary, tangible initiatives focused on a well-defined need of critical importance. Although not an award winner, I'm proud to be among the very impressive and forward-thinking semi-finalists. For more information about the Buckminster, go to challenge.bfi.org.

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QUALITY OF WATER, QUALITY OF LIFE