

DESERTS AS A HAZARDOUS YET AMAZING PLACE



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Desert is distant from Hong Kong, both physically and conceptually. Naturally, the excitement of a desert trip pushed me through the daunting 17 hours of travelling. After taking 2 planes and 3 buses, we finally arrived the city of Ding Bian in Shanxi province of mainland China.

One thing that caught my eye, was the changing colour of my surroundings. Differing from the blue sky and greenish fields down south, the further up north we flew, everything outside the plane window, including the Miniature Mountains, farmlands, buildings, etc., seemed to be filtered with a yellow hue. This realisation, beyond the excitement of visiting a desert, hit me hard. Never have I ever felt the effects of desertification so real and in person before.

This trip had challenged me to venture out of my comfort zone and rethink familiar issues from a new perspective. We were honoured to hold a seminar on climate change at the camp. There were many sessions of trial-and-error for preparing the seminar.



We decided to downplay the academic approach and opted for relevance, focusing on inspiring our audience to reconsider everyday habits in clothing, food, housing, and travelling. It was extra rewarding when the Ding Bian local audience told us that they had never learnt about climate change in this down-to-earth approach before and they felt more empowered knowing that their choices could create impact in tackling climate change.

Witnessing the locals' determination to improve their environment was a humbling experience. They had great respect for nature upon which their lives were hugely dependent. Farmland was important because farm produce like corn, potato and watermelon were staples in their diet. This dependence made protecting land against desertification their priority, evident from sheep rearing



policies and tree planting projects. With villages being built on previously uninhabitable areas, the locals demonstrated that they can combat environmental problems with a "can-do" attitude.

Although desertification is a threat to the locals, a 3-hour trek in the Tengger Desert shattered my imagination of desert being a barren and lifeless place. There were plants, lizards, beetles, and foot prints of rabbits and birds. It struck me that although deserts may seem dangerous to us, it is essential for many organisms who could only survive in this ecosystem and call it home.

This trip was an invaluable opportunity to bust my presumptions and refresh my perspective. The unfamiliarity of the desert region and a group of passionate and open-minded companions enabled me to learn so much more. I look forward to seeing a prosperous woodland when I revisit Ding Bian in 10 years' time.



ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICE TRIP IN DESERTS

It was an initiative by Chinese YMCA of Hong Kong, Youth League Committee Dingbian County, and Xian YMCA, to help combat desertification in northern China by organising tree planting camps in vulnerable regions since 2009.

In 2019, MSc in Environmental Management programme (MSc ENVM) joined YMCA to run this environmental service camp to enrich students learning experience.

9 MSc ENVM students took part in the camp and worked with other participants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, and other mainland cities. Over 120 participants were in the camp.

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The desert tells a different story every time one ventures on it.
—Robert Edison Fulton, Jr.”