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Q&A: Green Forum, Not-So-Green Games

Jonathan Ansfield

The goal of a "Green Olympics", to Beijing's chagrin, has become just another green light to have a go at its environmental woes. It is hard to hold back. After all, water is being pumped into a man-made addition to a parched riverbed, just to hold the Olympic rowing regatta. A reeking lather of algae docked on the shores of sailing host city Qingdao last month, requiring more than 10,000 workers to remove it. China's weather mod squad – officially, the "Weather Modification Office" – conducts constant aerial experiments in man-made rain to cool the cities and clear the skies. And the only thing less transparent than the air seems to be Beijing's air pollution testing, which critics say is configured to lowball the numbers. Some Olympic runners are swooping into town for the days of their events alone, so leery are they of the haze. They'll come muzzled in super-sophisticated masks.

The government's had to pull out all the stops – ordering half the cities' cars off the road (alternating daily bans on even- and odd-numbered license plates), closing factories, and shutting down construction – in the mere hope of making Beijing appear a less forbidding city.

So acute are the problems, however, that China's also opened up to all sorts of innovative efforts at fixing them. At one newly established forum in Beijing earlier this month, environmental experts, green business gurus and grassroots activists pondered the future of the "environmental economy". We emailed with Richard Marks and Sophia Trapp of Productions 1000, co-founders of the "International Earth Forum" (IEF), about China's prospects of improving a grim environment and their own challenges operating in a toxic climate of pre-Olympic security. Excerpts from our e-interview follow:

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NEWSWEEK: Tell us what the International Earth Forum is and how it came about.

We brought together a mix of communicators, connectors, forestry experts, business people, renewable energy & carbon trading leaders, academic and youth leaders from the UK, US, Netherlands, Germany and China. Our core discussions centered around the theme of leadership within the new "environmental economy", in which attendees asked, "How can we do Business with Nature?"

Why China?

Four years ago, China invited us into early discussions about the urgency for addressing its serious energy concerns. That first renewable energy business delegation brought us face-to-face with senior government leaders from Shanghai to Beijing to discuss renewable technologies, investment and long range environmental planning, sustainable development in China, clean energy technologies and policy planning for the protection of China's environment.

To organize the International Earth Forum, we partnered with senior level Chinese business people and government officials to connect re-forestation projects with international venture partners. But as we proceeded, we realized the importance of communicating fresh international and inter-cultural thinking. We all want to know what China is doing about the environment. In addition, our third co-host, Jing Su, is a young Chinese woman who has undertaken to help the environment by bridging the gap between China and the international community on environmental ideologies and practices. She is now the China Program Associate for the American Council on Renewable Energy (ACORE).

Timing-wise, why did you choose the run-up to the Beijing Olympics?

Planning an international event in the run-up to the Olympics was an obvious opportunity to celebrate and communicate the positive changes happening in China, to share common ideas and desires for sustainability, and discuss how doing business that is good for the environment can be profitable and healthy. In a dialogue, people coming from different backgrounds typically have different basic assumptions and opinions. In the course of our dialogues, we seek to question our assumptions, set them aside, and are willing to set them free if we find we can do better with the words and ideas that will light the way for others.

But the Olympics hasn't made for the freest of times here. Plus conferences in China normally require local partners and official approvals. Yet you managed to avoid all that. How and why?

In the beginning, Productions 1000 was eager to partner with a Chinese environmental NGO that wanted its organization to be recognized as the host; otherwise "It wasn't interested." We had to hold firm that it's an inappropriate role for an NGO to host a business-oriented forum. We decided to risk it and continue on our own. Launching for the first time in China, it was touch and go until the end.

Through two years of relationship-building with private sector environmental business ventures in China, we had made friends with business people and NGO's in China. Our idea to bring international people to the table required an agenda that would be communications-driven, so our approach was to remain a private and social gathering – an invitation-only event. This ensured the integrity of doing business while protecting the exposure to our guests, many of whom are CEO's and presidents of significant venture funds for the environment.

While the original people we felt we needed to work in China did not stay along for the ride, some very senior government and business people working in China's environmental space ultimately gave us the "nod" to allow it to happen [on an unofficial basis]. We feel that's because they recognized we are good people who had something good to contribute to China's environment and people.



Greening the guanxi: Trapp, Marks, Su and fellow participants

Can you fill us in on some other stumbling blocks you encountered, and the adjustments you had to make?

A drawback of holding the forum [IEF] independently was the suggestion that guests trying to get their visas to enter China for any 'official' gatherings would not be allowed. Actually that was helpful to know up front. We therefore made sure that even though our agenda would be on relevant subjects for China's environment, our format was a more social one. We steered away from the word 'conference' and recommended that speakers and guests enter on tourist visas, rather than business visas.

Another tricky moment happened when we met with quite a high ranking official a week before the event and he wanted to discuss our guest list with us. It was surprising when the decision was made that he would not be attending after all, apparently because we had a number of younger people coming. We had a tough decision to make, but in the end we remained true to our vision that if the environmental situation in China – and therefore the world – is going to be solved it will be because all ages are in the room together. It paid off in spades but we were tested. The easier road would have been to back down and we would have had any number of high government officials coming. In the end, a few government officials attended to hear what the IEF was about and saw how successful it was. We hope they will all be there again next year.

How did the some of the changes you had to make going in ultimately affect the event?

We originally planned a forum that would bring Chinese business opportunities to international business leaders together, but the IEF evolved into a gathering of frontier-thinkers deeply interested not just in doing green business, but for people who wanted to be exposed to a deeper understanding about positive opportunities for doing business that will improve China's – and the world's – environment. It wasn't just about making "a lot of noise", as one senior-level invitee remarked, but about "making the right kind of noise". The recent tragic earthquake also helped to reinforce the message that people together discover ways to help one another across all political and environmental lines.

How did things go? What did you learn? Highlights?

Beautifully, we thought. The IEF was an eye-opener for people who made the journey. For a number of people, this was their first time in China. For some, rapid changes have transformed China since they were here last.

The highlight was making new friends, the most important thing to be working anywhere, but especially in China. The government people who are associated with NGO's in China recognized that we were mixing senior-level and youth leadership, which is not the ordinary structure in business-driven forums. And that was ultimately perhaps the most unique thing about its success.

In one dialogue session, we asked what people need to know about China in order to do green business. We learned – from an all-Chinese group of leaders – that "China is [a system of] governmental capitalism." For example, [it's the] government who is creating new policies for obligations of companies to recycle. Second, we learned that education (at the moment) works from the top-down. Government rules are far above the people and need to be more connected. Youths want [the message] to go out locally that "green isn't always more expensive" – it's not a luxury. Third, what's needed to know about doing green business happens to be a universal business creed: working with good people is what one needs. NGO's are good for advocacy but not for business.

Young leaders also expressed that they would like a ranking of companies for their "green-ness." The right green information - and trust in that information - is missing. If that changes, then we'd see a positive consumer swing and people would be confident to start more green businesses. They also want to spread the thinking that "green equals change and opportunity" and that this message would help to create new jobs.

The European and American guests were truly impressed by the level of seriousness, talent and intelligence of the younger people. Likewise, some of China's best NGO's came along for the ride came. Among them, the directors of forestry for the World Wildlife Fund in China and Washington DC took notice of this opportunity, and introduced us to the Director General of the Department of International Cooperation at the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Landscape and Forestry. They jumped into the IEF with two feet just days before it began, presenting in-depth and cutting-edge ideas not just about their solutions for the greening of Beijing prior to the Beijing Olympics, but also about their role in facilitating China's first carbon sequestration program launched this month.

You're in the business of environmental consulting. So what about the "Green Olympics"? A lot of critics and reports still contend that it's a bunch of mumbo jumbo. Based on what you've observed in China and heard at the forum, what impact do you think the Olympics has made on environmental practices, whether positive or negative?

Isn't there a 'Blue-Sky Day' count that has been recorded for 10 years ... and statistically, [according to the government](#), aren't there are twice as many blue days now than 10 years ago? But is the situation [still bad](#)? Yes. But are they doing something about it? Yes as well.

Is there a lot of 'green hype'? Yes of course. The whole world is going through green hype! All of a sudden your bank is 'green' because they send you your bill via email. They would have done that anyway, they are saving money doing so, but now all of a sudden they are 'green'!

The Beijing Olympic Committee set out to make some necessary changes and then oversell it as well as they could. That is the age we live in. But amidst all the hype there are people using this window of opportunity to enact real change and it's a pity that they get attacked with all the rest. The [Beijing Forestry Department of International Cooperation](#) for example have put real science behind their improvement plans and have established the first carbon sequestration plan for any city in the world. That is something real.

In general the "Green Olympics" has helped expose certain relevant environmental issues such as energy saving, renewable energy, and the importance of air quality, so that it became a national discussion point. Now, as a result, some people are even more eager to make the 'green' dream a reality and that can only be a good thing in a country as motivated and resourceful as China is.

What would you do differently next year? What lessons did you learn? What advice would you give to other event organizers in China?

One important thing to know about the 'form' of the International Earth Forum is that we paid for it ourselves. Productions 1000 did not go for corporate sponsorship of any kind. We felt it was essential to keep the IEF independent, and now that we've done it this way, we feel it should remain independent. Three committed individuals made it happen. That's a story of personal commitment – to actually doing something and not waiting for someone else to slow it down, stop it, weaken it, judge it beforehand, or make it beholden to ideas that might not be in line with the need for creating a new and necessary space for open dialogue and communication. And it allowed us to work without any strings attached with the government officials and NGO's whom we met initially.

The idea of the 'two day dinner party' had a more real effect than we could have known. You had to see the energy at the Forum to believe it. We are going to host the IEF again in Beijing next year to have even more people at the table and to push the discussions even further.

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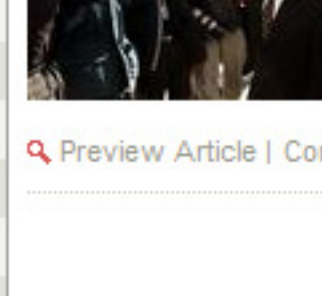
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