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HEADLINE: Native Eyes on a Land South of the Clouds

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BODY:

He was herding goats high up the creases of sacred Mount Kawagebo when the morning light seemed right, recalled Ananzhu, an ethnic Tibetan from an isolated village of southern China. So he took out his camera. The scene he captured that day, of an emerald lake beneath two conical, ice-capped peaks, was both stunning and layered with meanings.

Ananzhu (he has only one name) was carrying a camera provided by the United States-based Nature Conservancy as part of a **Photovoice** project.

More than 250 people from 60 villages in northern Yunnan province, all from ethnic minorities, have been given a way to document, through their own eyes, their cultures and surroundings.

His alpine scene is one of some 45 photographs from the project now on display at the American Museum of Natural History in "Voices From South of the Clouds" (a reference to Yunnan, Chinese for "south of the clouds"). The exhibition is in the small Akeley gallery, behind the African mammals, and runs until March 12.

Ananzhu was one of three village photographers the conservancy brought to New York last week for a cultural celebration. The pictures provide a record of endangered traditions and landscapes but the main goal, said Ann McBride Norton, a conservancy adviser in Asia who organized the project, is to give a voice to northern Yunnan's diverse peoples.

The region's myriad ethnic groups -- including many people who are illiterate and do not even speak Chinese -- are facing surges in tourism, road-building and investment. The conservancy is working with local officials to promote environmentally benign development, an idea with shallow roots in economically booming China.

With some of the last unspoiled remnants in all of China, Yunnan is not only ethnically but also biologically rich, a "hot spot" for plant species including 162 species of rhododendron that sprinkle the hillsides with pink flowers each spring.

Helping indigenous people to document themselves with photographs is a longtime technique of anthropologists. The Natural History museum was drawn to the Yunnan pictures because they capture the nexus between culture and environment, said Eleanor Sterling, co-curator of the show and director of the museum's center for biodiversity and conservation. And crucially, she said, "the photos were spectacular."

In starting the project, Ms. Norton drew inspiration and advice from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, where the photographer Wendy Ewald has been a pioneer in the combined use of cameras and writing as a way to stimulate learning and community awareness in schools and elsewhere.

"Photography is a pretty democratic art form," noted Katy Hyde, director of the Literacy Through Photography program at the Duke center.

For the Yunnan project, the Eastman Kodak Company donated point-and-shoot cameras (a model that sells for \$7 in China). In short training sessions, villagers were taught how to use them and, rather than being told what makes a good picture, they were shown multitudes of photographs and encouraged to discuss what they liked and why.

They are provided with one roll of film each month, along with the results of the previous month's effort. They are asked to provide background information on the pictures that is sometimes quite revealing.

In the case of his mountain scene, Ananzhu, 41, wrote that when he saw the same spot as a child, the lake was much smaller. "The glacier is shrinking and the lake is growing, and we don't know why," he said in an interview.

When his picture was displayed in his home village of Yubeng, elders were prompted to tell children the sacred meaning of the pictured valley: the meeting place of the war gods of Mount Kawagebo.

Several of the fledgling photographers turned out to have a particularly good eye. Hong Zhengyong's image of a girl in distinctive ethnic dress slaughtering a chicken amid dazzling yellow fields, for example, is one of several in the exhibition with classic diagonals and symmetries.

Mr. Hong, 28, mainly photographed his father, one of the last great Yi shamans, performing healing rituals and animal sacrifices. "I worry that the knowledge will be lost," he said in New York. He documented the rituals just in time: his father recently died.

Some of the pictures celebrate scenic splendors and participants, including Ananzhu, said they did not fully appreciate the beauty around them until they saw it in a photograph.

Others document hardships: children collecting firewood, or writing their homework on the side of a basket as they accompany their parents to farm plots. The caption to a picture of a Tibetan woman milking a yak in a blizzard says, "Even in wintertime we have to go out to get milk."

After touring New York, the villagers said they were impressed but not overawed. The buildings are very tall, said Ananzhu. "But even the tallest building," he noted, "is not as high as our lowest mountain."

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GRAPHIC: Photos: In Yunnan, China, examining images of a Nature Conservancy project. (Photo by Nan Jie/Nature Conservancy)(pg. E1)

"Old Women Chatting," a photograph of village life taken by a member of the Bai ethnic minority. (Photo by Zhao Jihua/Nature Conservancy)

"Voices From South of the Clouds," an exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, features photographs by members of ethnic minorities living in northern Yunnan Province, China. Above from left, a woman offers prayers to the god of earth with chicken blood

a village elder reads scripture of dongba, an animist religion that is dying out

children carry firewood after school

women sweep up and bag bran

left, a valley in Wanglibi Village. (Photos by From left, Hong Zhengyong, He Xiudong, Wujiacili and Wang Xinyun/Nature Conservancy)

(Photo by Wang Tingguang/Nature Conservancy)(pg. E7)

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