

Scientist helps foster forest ecology in China

Zhao Shidong's look at ideas in the Northwest is credited as a catalyst for Chinese conservation

By MICHAEL MILSTEIN
THE OREGONIAN

Zhao Shidong says he is merely a scientist.

But when it comes to protecting China's native forests, which he saw clear-cut and denuded for decades, he may be the most important scientist of all.

Although he scarcely will admit it, he carried to China the same emerging ecological concepts that drove dramatic new safeguards for Northwest forests. He quietly helped persuade the communist regime to apply them nationwide, altering the livelihoods of more than a million people.

Today, China has stopped clear-cutting native forests. The nation of 1.3 billion people has begun one of the most aggressive reforestation and forest research programs anywhere, with a total investment that may approach \$50 billion.

"He went back and established the new way of think-

Please see **ECOLOGY**, Page B2

CONSERVING CHINA'S FORESTS

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: First Congregational Church, 1126 S.W. Park Ave.

Tickets: \$14, \$10 for students

Information: 503-222-2719,
www.illahee.org

Ecology: Chinese forests were 'treated very badly'

Continued from Page B1

ing," said Jerry Franklin, a professor at the University of Washington credited with identifying the new concepts Zhao took abroad.

In China, "the system requires that you be very deferential," Franklin said. "He did a tremendous amount of work, and he didn't get much credit. And he didn't attempt to take the credit."

Zhao and Franklin will recount China's embrace of forest conservation in a lecture Tuesday night at the First Congregational Church in Portland. It is the first of the year's Environment Matters lecture series organized by Illahee, a nonprofit group in Portland.

The fate of forests in China and the Northwest are intertwined.

Franklin and other Northwest scientists spent years at the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest about 40 miles east of Eugene rethinking the intensive clear-cutting that had long been widespread on Northwest timberland. They professed the ecological benefits of keeping landscapes intact for the long haul while leaving room for more selective logging.

In the 1980s, debate over that new direction heated up.

China's repressive Cultural Revolution had forced Zhao and other scientists into rural regions and factories. He collected willow and poplar samples that later led to a major research volume. He studied forestry, seen as inferior by Chinese who believed their future lay in booming cities, Zhao said in a telephone interview from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Bei-

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ZHAO SHIDONG

"Almost nobody wanted to learn forestry and agriculture," he said.

As his forest research widened, he went to the University of Michigan as a visiting scholar. In spring 1984, he set out by Greyhound bus to see America.

He arrived at Oregon's Andrews forest when scientists there were arguing that forests should be studied, and managed, as systems that produce not only wood, but also wildlife, water and other assets. Clear-cutting and converting stands into uniform tree plantations ran against their thinking.

"The discussion was a very heated one," recalls Art McKee, then director of the research forest operated jointly by the U.S. Forest Service and Oregon State University. "He was very immersed at a very critical time."

McKee and others recall Zhao as quiet, humble and determined to set a new direction in China.

"He was clearly bothered by what he was seeing," McKee said. "But he rarely expressed that."

Today, Zhao says matter-of-factly that China's forests of Kore-

an pine and leafy trees — reminiscent of forests in the Eastern United States — had long been "treated very badly." They cover less than half the range of U.S. forests but sustain more than four times the population.

"Deforestation was happening everywhere," he recalled. "We knew we cannot keep going that way."

His time in the United States showed him the difference forest research could make.

"It totally changed my attitude toward my career," he said. "I became very proud of what I was doing."

While logging in the Northwest collided with lawsuits invoking the Endangered Species Act and protected wildlife such as the northern spotted owl, no comparable obstacles existed in China.

"I think there was more of a sense of urgency there, because the scientists were saying, 'What can we do?'" said Mark Harmon, an Oregon State professor of forestry who has worked with Zhao in China.

Even colleagues do not understand quite how Zhao gained the ears of China's rulers enough to create the Chinese Ecosystem Research Network, scientific stations patterned after others Franklin helped create in the United States.

Zhao says the government seeks advice from scientists, especially after severe 1998 floods made them aware of how deforestation compounds runoff and erosion.

"They realized we had lost our natural forests," he said. "We had to find our own way, a sustainable way."

Besides ending clear-cutting, the government expanded reserves to some 15 percent of China, began wide reforestation and subsidized retraining of hundreds of thousands of loggers. It has launched a

50-year strategy toward a sustainable forest industry.

"We cannot just copy the situation from the U.S.," Zhao said. "We have to learn from Western countries but find our own solution."

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