

PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour:

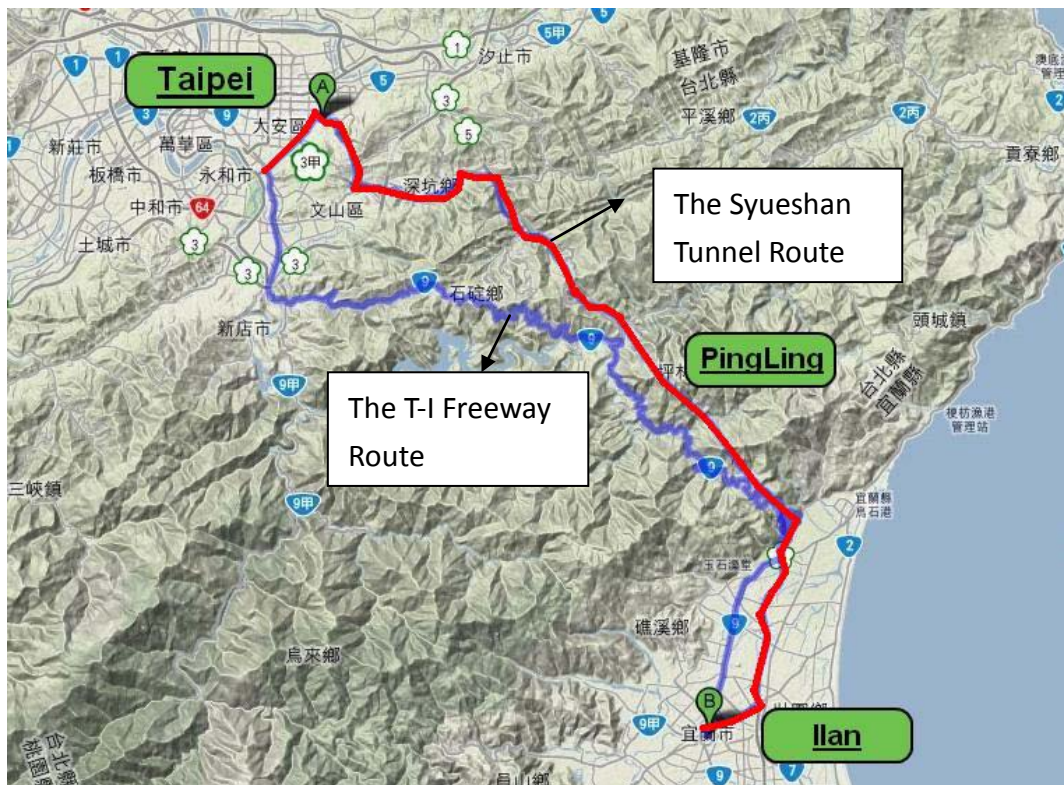
1st Low Carbon Eco Tour in Taiwan

Judy Chen
Green Design and the City
11/12/09

First in Taiwan: PingLing Low-Carbon Eco Tour

■ About PingLing Township

Located southeast of Taipei County, PingLing Township is the third largest township in the county. With an area of 170.83 square kilometers, PingLing is surrounded by highlands, hills and mountains. PingLing's unique landscape and climate gave rise to its prosperous tea industry, which has bloomed for decades. In addition, with its unique cultural and natural resources, PingLing has attracted tourists from all parts of the country. On top of this, Taipei-Ilan Freeway (T-I Freeway) is perhaps the most critical factor that contributes to tourism of PingLing Township. The Taipei-Ilan Freeway connects Taipei Metropolitan Area to Ilan County, another major county located northeast of Taiwan. The T-I Freeway runs through PingLing, which located midway through Taipei and Ilan. The advantage in location makes PingLing an important "rest station" which draws thousands of passerby and promotes sightseeing industry of the township.



■ Syueshan Tunnel: PingLing's Challenge

On June 6, 2006, Syueshan Tunnel began its transport service which links Taipei to Ilan. The project took 13 years to complete and overcame numerous risky and dangerous geographical features. The Syuesan Tunnel is the most extensive freeway tunnel in Asia. With a total length of 12.9 km, the Syueshan Tunnel shortens travel distance and travel time between Taipei and Ilan. For travelers travelling on T-I Freeway, it takes three hours to reach Ilan from Taipei. However, with Syueshan Tunnel, travelers from Taipei are able to reach Ilan in as fast as 45 minutes. As more and more travelers rush into Syueshan Tunnel, PingLing found itself facing great challenges. Losing the advantage in location, PingLing is also losing visitors and passerby. This brings tremendous impact to PingLing sightseeing industry and business activities are undergoing period of recession.

■ Low-Carbon Eco Tour: Preface

According to the "New Strategy for Development of Sightseeing Industry of Taiwan in the 21st Century" issued by Tourism Bureau, Ministry of Transportation and Communications of Taiwan, the plan for sightseeing industry is to combine local culture, ecology, sightseeing and community into one entity. Realising its losing advantage, PingLing Township local council emphasised on the need to initiate new and innovative strategies in the hope of bringing back visitors. Learning the fact that carbon footprints per person for each trip is at least 23 kilograms, PingLing Township mayor, Mayor Wang, saw an opportunity in integrating PingLing's natural landscape and resources with a powerful issue—environmental sustainability. The idea was to integrate the concept of environmental sustainability into tourism at PingLing. Together with the aid and advice from Low Carbon Center of Taipei County Government, PingLing Township set up the first low carbon eco tour in Taiwan.

Low carbon eco tour was designed to promote industrial transformation of PingLing while at the same time educating the public of the importance of natural environment and sustainability. Successful industrial transformation requires the input of substantial amount of related resources and the support from both public and private sectors. More importantly, people's attitude and way of thinking should change in the same manner. For the residents at PingLing neighbourhood, they need to face the challenges and realise the essential role of such an eco tour. For the general public, participating in the eco tour is an opportunity to appreciate natural environment while contributing to environmental sustainability.

■ **PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2008**

The Low Carbon Center of Taipei County Government and PingLing Township local council set PingLing as the first low carbon eco tour demonstration area in Taiwan. From October 18, 2008 to March 14, 2009, the first PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour Festival began running. The PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour was a one day tour which took place every Wednesdays and Saturdays. Visitors wishing to attend the tour had to register online prior to the tour and maximum tourists per tour (per day) was 120 tourists. Visitors do not have to pay any fee for the tour except for their personal shopping, lunch will be provided. Automobile access restriction was implemented on these two days in a week. Only touring buses and bikes were allowed in several areas. In addition to automobile access restriction, various measures were taken in order to meet the goal of cutting back carbon emission per tourist in this low carbon eco tour:

Content of the Tour and its Contribution to Greening

1. Green Transportation:
 - a. Shared transportation—all participating tourists take shuttle bus to PingLing. Shuttle bus service is provided at Taipei County Government Station (metro

- station), carrying tourists to reach PingLing via shared transportation.
- b. Car access restriction—on every Wednesdays and Saturdays, PingLing implements car access restriction; in certain areas only certified touring buses and electric cars are permitted. Tourists are welcome to bring their own bikes or travel on foot in these areas.
 - c. Low carbon touring bus—there are four touring buses and six electric cars circulating in PingLing area, transporting tourists from one site to another.
2. Green Act:
- a. Litter bag—participating tourists must bring along with them a litter bag to hold the litters they produce during the tour.
 - b. Chopsticks—participating tourists need to bring their own chopsticks.
 - c. Meal—the lunch box provided to tourists was made by fresh, local, and seasonal food produce.
3. Green Declaration
- a. PingLing low carbon eco tour tourist center—the first low-carbon oriented tourist center in Taiwan was set up at PingLing Township—the “Taipei County PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour Tourist Center”. The center provides information on the low carbon eco tour, low carbon dining options, and bike rental.
 - b. Green stores—stores that meet the “green criteria” received certification from Taipei County Government. Tourists are encouraged to choose these green stores while shopping/dining at PingLing. The four major criteria are: i) reduction in the use of disposable tableware; ii) implementation of well-conducted recycling system; iii) restriction on providing free plastic bag; and iv) prioritization of the use of local food produce.
4. Natural Environment & Eco Features
- a. On land— natural landscapes, farm villages, hiking tracks, biking lanes

- b. In water— ponds, water playground
- c. Guided eco tour—led by trained guides, tourists learned the history, geographical features, landscape, ecology and tea industry of PingLing. All eco tour guides underwent a series of courses offered by PingLing Township local council and were qualified by the local council.

5. Green Reward

- a. Carbon emission counter—at the end of the low carbon eco tour, participating tourists were brought to the plaza where carbon emission counter located. With the aid from the guides, tourists entered the amount of carbon emission they cut back by participating in the tour (in compare with a regular tour).
- b. Green certificate—all participating tourists received a certificate from the staff at the end of the tour. The certificate certifies tourist’s contribution to cutting back carbon emission.

■ 2009 → Low Carbon to Zero Carbon

This year, PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2009 runs from October 28, 2009 to June 11, 2010, every Wednesdays and Fridays. The goal of the event persists: educate the public on the importance of low carbon activities while at the same time promoting sightseeing industry of PingLing. Moreover, through participation in the event, tourists are able to contribute to environmental sustainability as well as experience the beauty of nature. In addition to the content set up in 2008, the PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2009 adds in another concept which aims for “Zero Carbon Tour”—the “Carbon Exchange Coupon”.

The Introduction of New & Innovative Carbon Exchange Coupon

PingLing Township local council partnered with 16 participating “green stores” and issued the “Carbon Exchange Coupon” which was introduced to the tourists through media earlier this October. Tourists can purchase the Carbon Exchange

Coupon at PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour Tourist Center. The coupons allowed tourists to make equivalent purchase at 16 green stores based on the face value of the coupons. For every transaction made by Carbon Exchange Coupon, 10% of the transaction goes to the “Tree-Planting Funds”. The idea of this is for tourists to shop and plant-a-tree at the same time. The Carbon Exchange Coupon aims to neutralize the carbon emission produced from the tour through tree planting. The ultimate goal is to strike a balance between the carbon-producing touring activities and the carbon-absorbing act of planting-a-tree. The “Tree-Planting Funds” is set up by the 16 qualified green stores that participate in this program. Thus, tourists are strongly encouraged to purchase and use Carbon Exchange Coupon when shopping at these green stores. This new and innovative concept of Carbon Exchange Coupon is the very first initiated in Taiwan. At the end of the Low Carbon Eco Tour 2009, PingLing local council and partnering stores will allocate the funds collected and plant trees at areas in PingLing as evaluated by careful field studies and research.

■ **Benefits vs. Drawbacks & Possible Improvements**

Benefits

A. Related Statistics from 2008 Low Carbon Eco Tour:

1. A more than 25,460 increase in visitors to PingLing.
2. Carbon footprints per person: 4.55 kg (vs.23 kg)
3. Economic benefits—the event created about 25,943,740 NTD economic benefits (about 786,173USD) to PingLing area.

* Based on the 2007 Citizens Travel Analysis Report issued by Bureau of Tourism, Ministry of Transportation and Communications, Taiwan. The report stated that average touring expense at Taipei County (less transportation and accommodation fee) per day is about 1,019NTD/per person (about 31USD).

4. Job Creation—39 people.

5. Carbon reduced—more than 48, 726 kg.

* this number has the same effect as planting 10,000 trees in a year.

B. Other Benefits:

1. Revitalize PingLing's sightseeing industry.
2. Create jobs for local residents—about four-fifth of the staffs were recruited from local residents.
3. Successfully conveyed the concept of low carbon and educate the public of the importance of protecting the environment while enjoying it.
4. No age limits—anyone from 7 to 77 can join and thus the education of sustainability goes from kids to grandpas/grandmas.
5. Extension—tourists at PingLing who were not participating in the tour also voluntarily performed green act such as biking, walking, choosing local meal, and shopping at green stores.

Drawbacks

1. Green certificates—participants received green certificates at the end of the tour. The certificates were made from paper. When each participant received one certificate, many certificates were being made and presented thus using up substantial amount of papers. This act does not seem to be sustainable.
2. Physical activities—on the PingLing low carbon eco tour registration website, it specifically notes that this eco tour is not suitable for elderly or anyone with health concerns.

Possible Improvements

1. Alternatives for green certificates—eliminate the use of papers. Possible alternatives are: provide digital record/certificate instead of paper-based certificate, set up a screen/wall for visitors to sign their names, or give out nature souvenirs (ex. seeds) to participants.

2. Increase partnerships with schools, communities, organizations, or other entities (increase public awareness of the tour)—draw people of all ages from different sectors with different backgrounds. Through participating in the tour, people will then have a chance to meet with others coming from different backgrounds with different specialty. It will be great for participants to take the chance and exchange thoughts and views and learn from other participants. The purpose of this is to create a platform for people to exchange information and share thoughts.
3. Design different types of low carbon eco tour—the idea of this is to design different types of low carbon eco tour that will better meet the demands of visitors. For example, there could be different types of low carbon eco tour for kids and for elderly. Kids and the youth are good for biking, hiking, and other physical activities while elderly tend to be less involved in physical activities due to their health conditions. Thus, the low carbon eco tour could be presented in several different forms which give visitors more choices and options.

■ **Future Outlook: Lessons and Implications**

The PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2008 was the very first low carbon eco tour initiated in Taiwan. With the success and experience from last year, this year the PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2009 is presented with greater integration and new concepts and strategies are being introduced that aim for environmental sustainability. It can be predicted that the eco tour 2009 will again attract thousands of participants and the ideas and thoughts of “green” will then further rooted in people’s minds. In addition, the tour serves as a great example for other counties in Taiwan whether they are facing the same location challenges or other difficulties. The PingLing case proves that with proper integration and well-mapped strategies, a small county like PingLing definitely has what it takes to succeed. In

Ping-Ling's example, it emphasised on the importance of environmental sustainability which proved to be a main concern for people and is also the key to success.

Moreover, government officials from Nanjing, a city in mainland China, visited Ping-Ling this year in September. With the guide from Taiwanese government officials and staffs of the eco tour, Chinese government officials experienced a one-day tour of PingLing low carbon eco tour. Government officials from China noted that the concepts and lessons they learned from Taiwan were valuable and the PingLing case was for sure a great example for cities in mainland China. In addition, the Nanjing government is also planning to work with Taipei County government in promoting green industry and green education in the foreseeable future.

■ Conclusion

Growing up in the capital city, Taipei, I'm one of those "Taipei Folks" as called by people from outside of Taipei. Generally, "Taipei Folks" are associated with people who seldom have chances to visit countryside, people who lead busy lives, and people who know little about nature and the environment (either because they do not have the time to explore the nature or simply they just don't care). To be honest, growing up in Taipei, I'm one of those who seldom have chances to leave the city and fully explore the nature. Taiwan is a subtropical island rich with beautiful landscapes and is also home to a variety of flora and fauna. Western coast of Taiwan is famous for its coastal recreational activities while eastern coast is famous for magnificent mountains and highland areas. As for transportation, generally it is much more convenient to travel along the west coast due to its well-developed freeway and railroad systems. Because of the geological limitations, freeways along the east coast are generally more twisted and precipitous. In my memory, when I was young our family always traveled to the west for vacations. As for the east, we had been to Ilan County and another county south of Ilan (there are only three

counties on the east). However, the times that we traveled to the west were greater than the times we visited the east.

Yet things started to change after I got into undergrad. Year 2006 was my first year of undergrad. Being a freshman, I had more time on my own (high school students in Taiwan are intensively busy and stressful in preparing for the college entrance exams). One notable change was that I found myself visiting I-lan for many times. Truly, with the Syueshan tunnel, it is really fast and convenient from Taipei to Ilan. Ilan has great scenic spots, fresh seafood, delicious local dish, famous hot spring, and is praised for its breathtaking natural phenomenon. My family enjoyed traveling to Ilan. My friends and I were always attracted by the night markets at Ilan. Many college students in Taipei also chose Ilan as their destination for group trips. In short, Syueshan tunnel and Ilan became an important part in my college life. I had been to PingLing before. I don't remember the exact time but I knew I had been there because the name PingLing is really familiar to me and I also knew it's famous for its tea industry. However, prior to this eco tour, I had no idea that PingLing is actually losing its advantage in location and is deeply affected by the Syueshan tunnel. For sure it is not only the sustainability concepts that I have learned after the research on PingLing low carbon eco tour. In addition, I have also witnessed the transformation of PingLing County and the strategies being used to revitalize its sightseeing industry. I'm glad that the government, local authorities, and local residents gave birth to PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour. I believe that it is a great chance for visitors to appreciate the natural environment while at the same time experiencing and witnessing how a small county strives for its sustainability, both environmentally and economically. When I go back to Taiwan this winter, I will definitely take a chance to participate in the low carbon eco tour so to experience and enjoy the beauty of the tour!

■ References

- Chang, Kuo-Huay. "Looking Back 2006: The Impact of Syueshan Tunnel on Ilan." *Taiwan Environmental Information Center*. 2006. Web. 30 Oct. 2009. <e-info.org.tw>.
- Lin, Miao-Ling. "The Impact of Syueshan Tunnel." *G-V Magazine*. Aug. 2006. Web. 30 Oct. 2009. <www.gvm.com.tw>.
- "Low Carbon Center and Its Mission." *Taipei County Government*. 2008. Web. 30 Oct. 2009. <www.tpc.gov.tw>.
- "Nanjing Government Officials Experiencing the PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour." *United Daily News*. 21 Sept. 2009. Web. 30 Oct. 2009. <www.udn.com.tw>.
- "PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2008: Outcomes." *PingLing Township Local Council*. 2009. Web. 25 Oct. 2009. <www.pingling.com.tw>.
- "PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour 2009: Activities Overview." *PingLing Township Local Council*. 2009. Web. 25 Oct. 2009. <www.pingling.com.tw>.
- "PingLing Low Carbon Eco Tour: Preface." *PingLing Township Local Council*. 2009. Web. 25 Oct. 2009. <www.pingling.com.tw>.