

Bringing Activism into Design/Planning Education and Bringing Design/Planning into Activism – An examination of S.A.V.E (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo)

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Introduction

This article considers SAVE (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo) as a case study to see how a design/planning can be involved in environmental/community activism. SAVE is a university campus based environmental group focused on a specific species, the Black Faced Spoonbill, and a specific site an ocean away and is no doubt a very unique case. How SAVE plays the role of mediating between academics and a grassroots movement, and brings academic resources to a local level is also worth exploring.

This article contains two major sections: The first section concentrates on how SAVE functions and compares SAVE Berkeley and SAVE NTU (National Taiwan University). The second section focuses on two of SAVE's recent actions : "the Flyway" and "the Stepping Stones", as examples to review the process and the effect.

Background

In 1997, a proposal to develop a 2,000-hectare steel and petrochemical plant called Binnan Industrial Complex was approaching approval in the Chi-ku area, a seemingly endless flat landscape which contains one of the largest remaining lagoons along the southwest coast of Taiwan. This presented a big crisis for the endangered species, Black Face Spoonbill (*Platalea minor*), who numbered only 500 and whose major winter habitat is the lagoon.

The black-faced spoonbill is a migratory bird that nests in northeast Asia in summer and then flies south to its winter ranges in Japan, Taiwan, China, Vietnam and Philippine. Among its wintering sites along the coasts of East Asia, the Chiku lagoon site, is the most significant habitat.

Alerted to the crisis, Professor John Liu of the National Taiwan University invited Professor Randy Hester of the UC Berkeley to attend a conference to discuss an alternative sustainable plan in Chi-ku along with other Berkeley professors and students. As a result of the trip, Hester was not only alerted to the gravity of the issue, but also fell in love with Chi-ku and its unique landscape, culture, and the spoonbills. After the conference, Liu and NTUBP (National Taiwan University, Graduate Institute of Building and Planning) decided to support the 'anti-Binnan' movement in order to delay and eventually stop the process of Binnan development.

At the end of 1997, Liu visited Berkeley to seek help. He asked the Berkeley conference participants to join NTUBP's effort to stop Binnan. Berkeley professors and students decided to organize a group in order to contribute and that was the moment when SAVE (Spoonbill Action Voluntary Echo) was born.

Since SAVE Berkeley was founded in 1997, it has been working successfully to increase public awareness of the issue and enlist support in fighting various threats to spoonbills, while working on alternative plans for future sustainable development in order to prevent the extinction of the black-faced spoonbills by preserving its habitat and maintaining local quality of life in Chi-ku.

In 10 years, SAVE has fought a series of battles such as the approval of the Binnan development project and the proposal of Chi-ku International Airport. SAVE has also taken part in events like the establishment of the first spoonbill habitat protection zone, and the founding of a National Scenic Area. In addition, SAVE has witnessed the population of spoonbills rise significantly from 500 to over 1,200 in a decade.

Tool kits

SAVE Berkeley has used different approaches and actions to involve in different stages of the Anti-Binnan movement. As an activist group an ocean away, how SAVE operates is very different from how a local group operates. In addition, its connection with academics makes it distinct from other grassroots groups. In summary, the actions SAVE usually takes are listed below:

- **Endorsement campaign**

SAVE started an endorsement campaign among environmental groups in the United States during the early stages of the Anti-Binnan movement. Over two hundreds groups signed the endorsement. This endorsement list became very powerful for the movement strategy.

- **Researching**

Compared with other environmental activist group, one big advantage of SAVE is its close relationship with academic resources. By assigning Chi-ku as the site for studio classes, SAVE has accumulated a solid base of knowledge about the site, the species, and other related topics. The research has become a powerful "weapon" in the movement.

- **Editing**

One of the most important actions of SAVE is to digest, edit, and transfer the academic knowledge and scientific reports into simpler, usable resources for the local people.

- **Campaign**

SAVE runs a campaign by writing letters, sending materials and conducting formal visits. At critical moments, SAVE sends out letters to related government departments, congress, officers and influential individuals. Official visits and meetings are also arranged during member's various trips to Taiwan.

- **Publicity**

As a campus organization, how to promote and introduce itself to the outside world is one of SAVE's primary goals. Some of the approaches include publishing articles about SAVE in journals and magazines of the umbrella organization, and holding annual events. SAVE has also tried publishing press kit in order to attract the attention of the media.

- **Hosting Events**

SAVE's annual event "Migration", an outdoor exhibition of over one hundred spoonbill sculptures made by Randy Hester's student, is another important action of SAVE. Other events such as orientations, recruitment presentations, and conferences have been held.

- **Networking**

To express support, exchange information and ally with other environmental groups from national to local level in Taiwan, or to communicate and build up relationship with other spoonbill protection groups in other countries, SAVE uses letters, invitations and attending conferences to build up a network of like-minded groups.

Organizational structure

SAVE has always been a small, voluntary based grassroots organization since its founding in 1997. It has over 200 members who receive the newsletter from SAVE but the majority of the work is done by the executive committee with its core members. The number of executive committee members has varied in 10 years but typically has between 6 to 12 members. Major members of this core group are professors, students, staff, and alumni of UC Berkeley's Department of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning. There are members from outside the department who participate briefly as well. Beyond the executive committee, SAVE invites scholars, scientists and environmentalists to be the "advisory board". These advisors have provided important professional suggestions and contributions over time.

Another unique structure of SAVE is that it belongs to an umbrella organization, 'Earth Island'. Earth Island is an organization which supports and incubates innovative environmental projects around the world by providing cooperative,

centralized administrative and organizational services and basic administrative functions. Currently there are over thirty independent groups under Earth Island.

Earth Island provides SAVE a better opportunity for publicity and fund raising. It also provides various resources such as training, fund raising events and publications. SAVE maintains its independence but is protected by powerful administrative support.

Operations

SAVE maintains monthly meeting frequency and communicates by email the rest of the time. These routine meetings are important for SAVE to sustain itself. One member expressed that point during an interview:

“If we did not meet on a regular basis, my involvement would not exist.”

Once a month meetings fit into most students or working alumni’s schedule well. The frequency is enough to keep SAVE members in touch with the project and also works well with the longer reaction time due to the long distance. In fact, the fact that SAVE is not able to get instant response from Taiwan sometimes helps SAVE to participate on a more regular and steady basis. SAVE can set its own pace and concentrate on the goals that it makes.

Routine events such as the annual Migrations display, quarterly released newspapers, and fundraisings also help SAVE to maintain small but consistent motivational power. *“There’s always something happening”*(if this is an actual quote, it needs a reference) is the key to routine meeting. The annual goals set through discussion every year also help. These goals are usually divergent and unorganized at the beginning. But it always helps SAVE to be able to plan important actions even if there’s no urgent need for the movement. Two examples mentioned in the second half of this article were both starting from this.



Figure 1. Every November SAVE will host an outdoor spoonbill status exhibition (Migration) on Berkeley campus.

In comparison with SAVE Berkeley, SAVE NTU did not have an ongoing organization or group outside of the studio classes in order to keep people's attention and interest. Therefore, NTU has to find other ways to continue following the case. Common scenarios to achieve this are: 1. Students apply for independent studies. 2. Students choose a related issue to be his/her thesis title. 3. NTU foundation works on related public projects. Through these three approaches, SAVE NTU actually exists in a dispersive and flexible way which is to have a key person (usually the thesis author or the project managers) follow up and do mobilization anytime it is needed for campaign purposes.

Finance

The volunteer base helps SAVE maintain itself with minimum expense. The major income comes from annual membership renewal fees and a bake sale during the Migration event. In past years, SAVE has tried several different way to raise funds such as garage sales, T-shirt sales and spoonbill sculpture auctions. These are small scale, inconsistent incomes. But it is these dribs and drabs that have helped SAVE ru for 10 years. Major expenses in the past have included: hiring a professional PR conducting press kit, inviting oversea guests to visit, sponsoring members to attend oversea conferences and meetings, and holding conferences and symposiums in Berkeley. SAVE rarely "runs short" mainly because of its "spend only what you earn" attitude.

The NTU financial model is very different. In the early stage of the movement SAVE Taiwan was mainly relying on academic resources. Therefore, when studio class ended it had to switch to income from government projects. It has never tried small scale fundraising.

Value and motivations

From the interviews of SAVE members, we find that the major motivation for participating in SAVE is the desire to contribute to preventing an environmental crisis. Students learned about spoonbills through studio classes, orientation or presentation, or personal connection with Randy and Marcia. They then chose to become involved because of personal interests in environmental protection and wildlife restoration. One of the member said during the interview:

"Basically, after attending one meeting, you are hooked. Because of the value of the effort and the habitat destruction the spoonbills are facing. In addition, it is virtually impossible to quit and deal with the associated guilt. It's almost worse than being apathetic and uninvolved from the start, because it becomes an active choice to do nothing."

It is important not to neglect the influences from the key persons. In SAVE's case, Randy Hester and Marcia McNally have had great effect not only because they fully make use of the benefit of their faculty positions but also because of their personalities. Several members said they joined SAVE initially because the encouragement from Hester and McNally.

Feelings of achievement are also one of the major motivations cited by members. *"I can see it's making an impact"*, has been repeated in several interviews. In LAED only a few studios will combine classes with issues in the real world, and SAVE is the only group outside of the class that continuously concentrates on specific issue outside of school. Therefore students are thirsty for chances to contribute their professional skills in the real world.

NTU students become involved because of a sense of social responsibility and their personal reactions when facing an environmental crisis. Many NTU students were interested in this topic because of the geographic proximity .

The influence from school is another factor. Although SAVE Berkeley tries to introduce itself to the new students in the beginning of every semester, the aquirement of new members is always difficult. The LAEP department has always been positive but not specifically encouraging for students' participation in SAVE, or other special related movements. On the contrary, NTUBP's unique atmosphere provides much stronger motivation to students. In NTUBP, involment in the public domain is a given, not an option. We can say that in Berkeley students can choose to take part in an issue in the real world, in NTUBP, students can choose which issue they are interested in more.

After the crisis of Binnan passed, SAVE was facing the fact of needing to find new attraction for students to participate. Being an "international" group is one of the main selling points. The chance to travel and [articipate in international coordination is highlighted during recruitment. Following the 'Flyway aciton', discussed below, new members became involved for the geographical connection (students from Japan and Korea) as well.

Operation – using two recent actions as an example

Flyway action

In the early stage of Anti-Binnan movement, SAVE played a supportive role to back-up NTU and other environmental groups at the battlefield.

After the Binnan crisis ended, SAVE started to think about expanding its own role and Flyway action was its first try. The origin of this action was SAVE trying to understand more about spoonbill habitats outside of Chi-ku and further more, to try to search if there are any local grassroots groups that SAVE can connect with. Starting from drawing a flyway map and listing all of the habitats, SAVE members compiled lists of potential groups by doing internet searches and information collecting. They sent out letters and questionnaires to introduce SAVE and expressed an interests in learning more about the spoonbill habitat and the group.

Overall, Flyway action was not very successful. For one thing, most of the groups that focus on spoonbills in Japan, Korea and China belong to the wild bird society network, while the groups concentrated on spoonbill research belongs to

the scientific field. Both of these are significantly different from SAVE. Additionally, SAVE did not receive responses from Philippine, Vietnam and North Korea.

Flyway action it is a good case study to examine how SAVE works. SAVE usually sets up a goal that is important, and works toward that goal even with very limited resources. SAVE tend not to evaluate how much can be done with the given resources. This is very different from the experience to run an action in Taiwan. In Taiwan, a group usually evaluates how much resources it can obtain and how capable the group can be with these resources, and sets up the action plans accordingly. In other words, SAVE Berkeley always has an attitude of "every little bit helps", while groups in Taiwan often have to achieve the goal in a more efficient way.

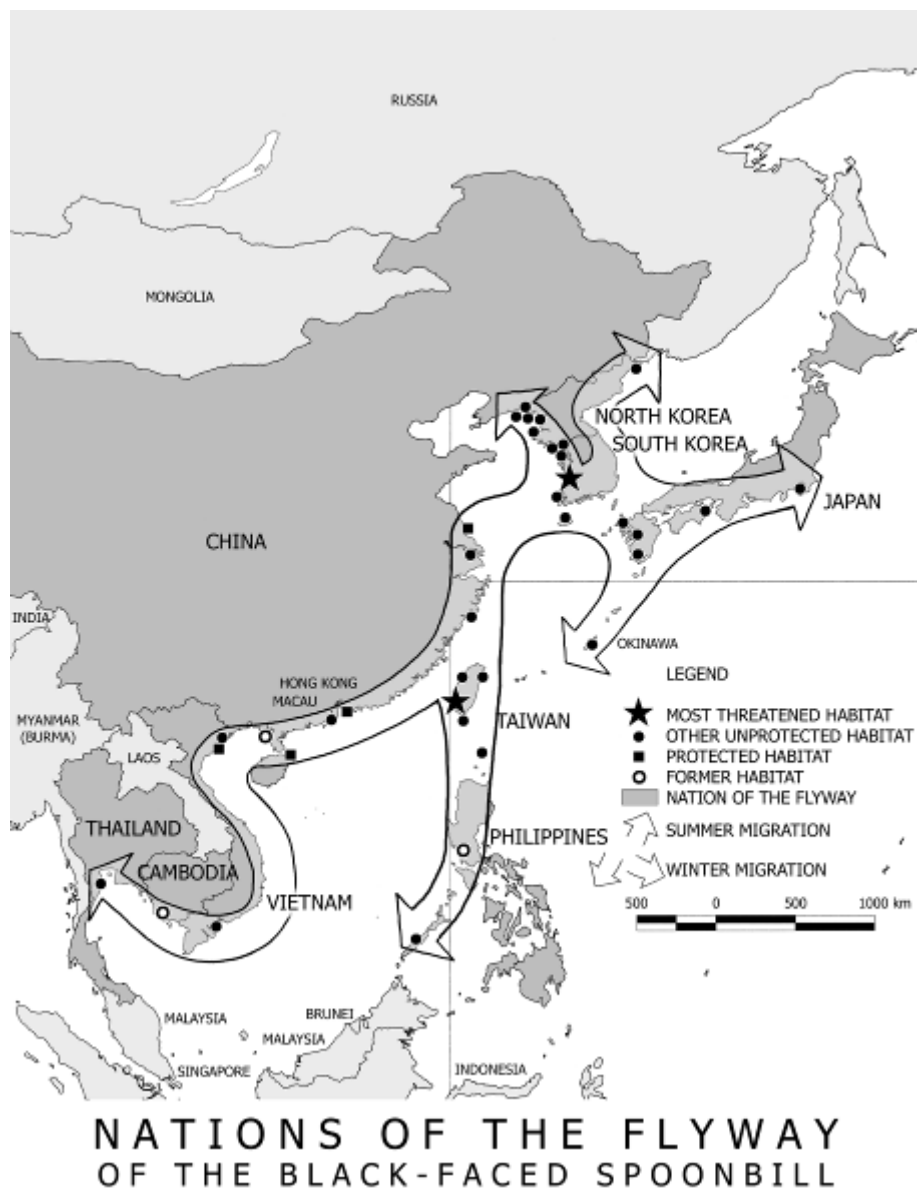


Figure 2. The flyway map shows the migrating route and habitat locations in different countries. Produced by SAVE member Derek Schubert.

Although Flyway action did not fully succeed, it did indirectly connected SAVE with KFEM (Korean Federation of Environmental Movement), the biggest environmental group in South Korea. Invited by KFEM, SAVE attended the Blackface Spoonbill conference in 2003 June and visited the summer habitat of the spoonbill for the first time. This could be consider the first international step of Flyway action.

Stepping stone Action

In 2002, the crisis of Binnan had just ended. SAVE's long time ally, Magistrate Su of Tainan County proposed developing an international airport in Chi-ku to replace Binnan as the major local development. SAVE felt disappointed about Su's decision. In the same year in December, two waves of botulism outbreaks happened in Chiku. Over 70 spoonbills died.. This was an enormous crisis for a species with a population of only 800 . The outbreak was examined and found out to be the result of high temperatures followed by a sudden temperature drop causing the death of algae, fish and shrimp in the oxygen-depleted water and produced the ideal conditions for the bacteria producing the botulin toxin to multiply rapidly. A common view has been that this outbreak was an early symptom of an overcrowded habitat problem.

In 2003, Hester decided to use Chi-ku as the site for his environmental planning studio for the third time. The studio was to concentrate on studying the necessity of the airport development, the impact from the airport on spoonbills and the alternatives for the airport. During the class, one team of students researched how to expand the spoonbill habitat in order to ease the impact from the airport. Base on research of spoonbill's roosting, foraging and migration patterning, and the observations of the existing habitat, the students calculated the amount of extra habitat needed for a stable population of spoonbills. Furthermore, they marked potential habitat locations based on the current site conditions and land use in costal area in south-west Taiwan and the 'stepping stone' theory in wildlife ecology. This theory states that instead of big habitat, using smaller, unconnected areas of preserved or restored habitat to help species migrate through the areas disturbed by humans are more efficient and successful.



Figure 3. The habitat expansion plan base on research of spoonbill and the current land use. Produced by L205 students, UC, Berkeley, LAEP.

After the studio ended, Hester encouraged students to attend a conference related to the botulism outbreak in Taiwan and presented the student's research. They also visited the just-established YCN (Yungling, Jianyi, and Tainan county) National Scenic Area office. This trip brought back two very important messages to SAVE: 1. Spoonbills are currently expanding their habitat and one of the largest tracts of new habitat is outside of the protection zone and right on the proposed airport site. 2. the YCN National Scenic Area office had started working on the master plan which will be the main guideline for future development for the scenic area.

Receiving these messages, SAVE made a quick decision to work on a proposal promoting expanding protected spoonbill habitat. This proposal was to have dual purposes: to fight against airport development, , and to try to influence the decision that is going to be made by the Scenic Area Office for the master plan. The final goal is to have the Scenic Area Office include the expanded habitat in their master plan thus entitling the spoonbills to protection under law. To continue the students' concept, SAVE named this action "Stepping Stones."

SAVE collected studies related to spoonbill habitat done in the past six years, and marked 5 major "Stepping Stones" for spoonbills in scenic area. These five pieces of land were not marked by strict boundaries. Instead, SAVE suggested the master plan ought to yield a minimum amount of land reserved for habitat in 5 different zones. The strategy is to preserve flexibility for development while also gaining enough habitat land. Furthermore, SAVE showed a module with the minimum requirement of a habitat including water- depth, open water area, foraging area and buffer zone width, etc. This module defines a standard minimum requirement for managing a successful spoonbill habitat.

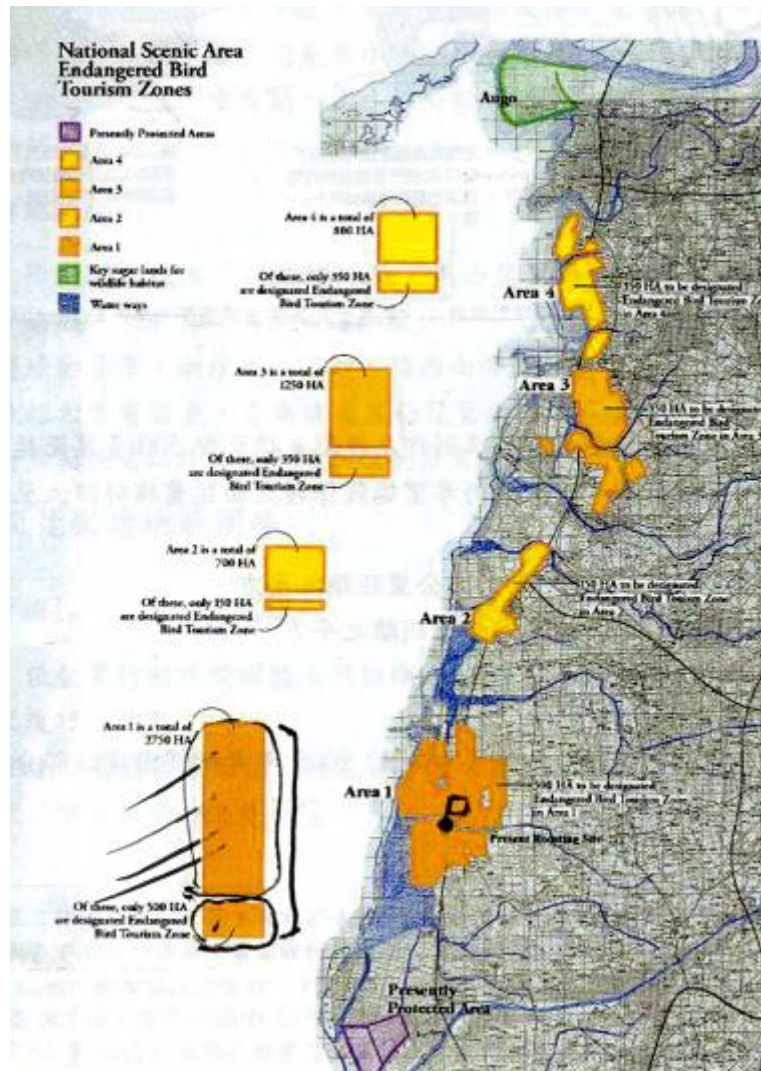


Figure 4. Five "stepping stones" habitats that SAVE proposed and their proportion to developable area.

Core roosting area.

It must be large enough to provide a variety of habitats for local foraging, social and play learning among spoonbills. 2.2 square kilometers provides minimal required open water. 4 square kilometers is needed for a variety of habitats required by spoonbills while still maintaining open water for safety. This also increases species richness by providing a variety of water, vegetation, and land habitats for other plants and animals.

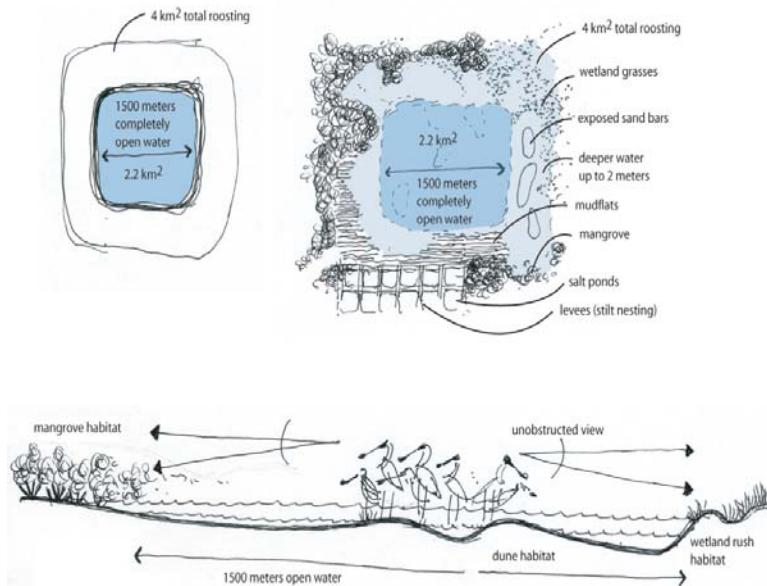


Figure 5. The minimum requirement of a roosting habitat for spoonbill.
Drawn by Randy Hester.

The proposal was mailed to over 20 national and local level environmental groups with a request for review and comments. In December 2004, SAVE member brought this proposal to Tainan to meet with several key local group leaders. After discussing further details about habitat size, boundaries and locations, SAVE and other local groups decided to campaign about this idea and put pressure on the NSA office separately. SAVE promises to send letters and arrange visits, while local groups will attend open hearings and watch over the process.

Since 2004, SAVE has formally visiting Taiwan several times for this campaign. In 2007, SAVE persuaded the LAEP department to assign the mission of designing one of the potential habitat sites as the topic for an annual student competition. SAVE invited Magistrate Su and the chief of the YCN scenic area office, Dr. Hong to attend the award ceremony and the following symposium. This campaign is still ongoing on at this point. The YCN scenic area office has shown positive feedback. In the master plan draft that they released in 2007, they not only have marked the number of habitats that SAVE proposed, they have even directly referenced SAVE's study in the proposal to interpret their concept for habitat protection. Currently, the unfinished master plan has not yet met what SAVE proposed completely, and the legal status of the protection zone has not yet been clarified. But this master plan has already set up a guideline for treating the spoonbill habitat as the main feature of the scenic area. SAVE members and the students who won the design competition will participate in the workshop that the office will conduct in June, 2008 in order to further implement the concept that SAVE proposed.

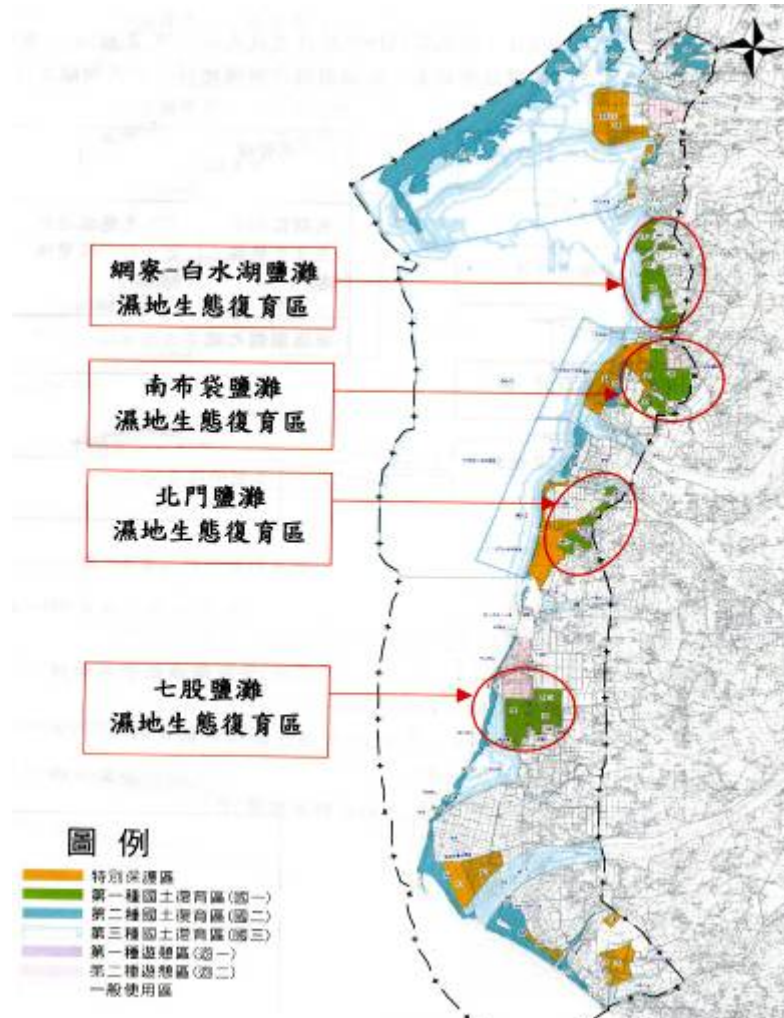


Figure 6. Habitat restoration Zone shown in the draft of YNC national scenic area development master plan. It has been closed to what SAVE proposed.

Further reflection

There are three main reasons that I would like to choose SAVE as the topic of this article. First is because my personal experiences of attending SAVE and Anti-Binnan movement both in Taiwan and in Berkeley allowed me to have a close look at SAVE. Second is for the purpose of celebrating SAVE's ten year anniversary. The third one is that I do believe SAVE IS a positive example of a activism group that brings together academics and an environmental movement.

Instead of conclusions, I would like to list several interesting points that are worth discussing below.

1. The duality of being both “international” and “grassroots”

The fact that SAVE is a student group base at UC Berkeley, which is very famous in Taiwan, and that it is covered by Earth Island, a world-famous environmental group, created a powerful voice during the early stages of the Anti-Binnan movement. It also helped to raise the Chi-ku issue from the local to

the international level. This strategy was extremely successful especially for the Taiwanese government, which is often constrained in the international community. SAVE itself did bring in international perspectives through members from all over the world.

On the other hand, through help from NTUBP, SAVE has built up long-term connections, and continuous involvement in local affairs. SAVE is not a stranger to local people. Therefore SAVE does have the ability and connections to communicate at the local scale. This kind of duality makes SAVE able to play multiple roles in the movement. At the central government level, it plays a role as an American/International group to turn the screws on the government; at the local level it is able to generate dialog and participate with the local community. This is rare for an overseas group like SAVE, and is a unique characteristic of it.

In the early stage of SAVE, some member proposed to have the term 'Global' be incorporated into the group's name. I do not think this term is suitable for SAVE at this point since SAVE hasn't yet set up an inter-national network. If the Flyway action can be pushed further and other groups on the flyway can join the alliance, then a global network can be formed.

2. Connection between academics and activism

Through the analysis of SAVE, we can see more possibilities of combining academic resources with activism. In general, students in design/planning school are eager to have the opportunity for real life experience. They are eager to see the possibility of changing things by using their professional knowledge and skills. Additionally, environmental or community movements typically need help from professionals. These two forces should be able to merge to good effect. However, in most cases, academics are passive technical advisers, and the local people or grassroots activists may not be able to digest or use the provided resources. Being aware of itself as design/planning activism group, SAVE is able to cross the gap in order to providing resources that have been digested and packaged to fit the need for the movement's strategy and for local use.

3. firefighter versus construction workers.

It is fair to say that NTUBP is a paragon of active design academics in Taiwan. But often, NTUBP does not have the cohesive and consistent power to concentrate on one specific issue. When facing an environmental or special crisis, it usually acts reactively and explosively. In other words, it is capable of concentrating big amounts of energy to run the movement but when the crisis is over, it usually has to rely on contracted projects or other contracted jobs in order to maintain the focus, while in the mean time, because too much energy has been consumed in urgency, the contributions from the professional level are actually limited. NTUBP is usually playing a role of being at the frontline in order to conduct and initiate the subjects. But it is lacking in the energy to implement ideas. It is like a firefighter team which is too busy to properly handle the aftermath.

On the contrary, SAVE is aware that its professionals are the most powerful weapons that it has. Therefore, finding a forum for a professional point of view is the rule of thumb for SAVE. This "forum" is usually found through long discussions and continuous revisions of strategy. Once a strategy has been identified, SAVE will then concentrate on it and try to accomplish the goal. In this case, in comparison with a fire fighter team, SAVE is more like a team of construction workers who focus on finishing the project bit by bit.

Firefighter versus construction worker is an interesting comparison. As professional designers/planners, are we to fill a position of a construction worker more capably? But how can we put out the fire without someone to be firefighter? This would worth further discussion.

4. Bringing Activism into Design/Planning Education and Bringing Design/Planning into Activism

It has been ten years and SAVE is still healthily running and focusing on a broader and broader spoonbill protection issue. It is undoubtedly a successful case. Can this case be duplicated in other design/planning schools or even the professional practice world? The answer is yes and there are many different cases existing around the world already. For example, the Rural Studio in Auburn university started by Samuel Mockbee is a one of the very successful cases. But it is not pervasive in most design schools in United States. Leadership undoubtedly plays an important rule. The success of SAVE is a credit to McNally and Hester's passion, consistency and the network that they brought in. Can this kind of leadership characters be inherited? Will there be more young faculty and young professionals to duplicate cases similar to SAVE or Rural Studio? If there's any concrete conclusion that I can draw from this discussion, it is that bringing in more activism into school and bring more design/planning into activism is not an impossible mission.

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