

Polytechnic launches China-based Earthkeepers

Tai Poutini Polytechnic (TPP) is launching a brand new joint venture in Southern China this week, bringing environmental and outdoor education to urban Chinese children.

Earthkeepers is new programme being delivered from this week by TPP on the ground in China in partnership with a local sports and recreation organisation. The programme uses the natural environment to teach students, aged between six and 18, nature and gardening skills, along with an English language component. There has already been interest from other Chinese cities, and the potential exists to introduce a similar concept through schools here in New Zealand.

TPP Director of Experiential Learning Dave Ritchie says the joint venture came about through TPP's relationship with Guilin Tourism University (GTU), a partner in joint tourism-focused exchange programmes. The programme development was driven by local Guilin businessman Liang Yan, who wanted to make a positive environmental impact and address Chinese cultural concerns about an increasing disconnection between young people and the environment.

"The very first Earthkeepers programme is about to kick-off at the organic Hua Jiang (Flower River) Farm, 30 minutes east of Guilin city," Mr Ritchie says. "The goal of the programme is to introduce environmental education to local students, using TPP's expertise in outdoor and experiential education practice.

"Hua Jiang is an idyllic location where local villagers now work the organic farm, supplying food to an on-site restaurant that has attracted the interest of staff at the nearby university campus.

"This is a first for TPP and we have already had a lot of positive attention from other Chinese cities. We have three TPP New Zealand graduates working on this first programme; their presence, combined with the fact most of the programme is delivered in English and New Zealand's reputation as a clean, green environment, is a real draw-card for the programme."

Mr Ritchie says the message behind the programme – "helping develop a greater sense of social responsibility, environmental awareness, leadership ability and connection to the planet" – strikes a particular chord in China. "Parents are very concerned about the ability of their children to be resilient and competitive in the new world. They instantly understand the benefits of the holistic approach this programme advocates. At a recent promotional event in Guilin City, parents of children as young as three were keen to enrol their young Earthkeepers."

If interest continues, the programme can be rolled-out at other offshore locations and plans are underway to offer it in schools here in New Zealand.

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