

## **Alibaba recruits users to identify polluted waters**

**Kinibiz.com**

**Apr 14, 2014**

**By Lulu Yilun Chen, Bloomberg**

China's battle against pollution is getting some help from Jack Ma's 500 million-strong army.

Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, the e-commerce giant founded by Ma, is asking the public to participate in mapping water quality across China to raise environmental awareness. With testing kits sold through the company for as little as 65 yuan (RM32), volunteers can measure pollutants in freshwater sources and upload the data to a digital map via smartphones.

The program, still in the startup stage, may prove to be a test of the government's resolve in cleaning up the environment. While harnessing the world's largest group of Internet users might help the cause, the data could also shine a critical light on the government's performance in particular regions or cities.

"The message that it gets out to the Chinese people is, 'Yes, you can measure this stuff, you have the right to find out what's in your water, what's in your air,' and that you have the right to ask your government to do something about it," said Judith Shapiro, author of "China's Environmental Challenges." "That's a very powerful message."

Alibaba's Taobao Marketplace boasts half a billion users, which has helped make Ma China's fourth-richest man. The 49-year-old said last year he wants to help make the nation's "water clearer, skies bluer, and food more secure." An environmental fund started by his company has raised at least 50 million yuan from donors, according to its website.

### **Threatening Growth**

Environmental degradation and pollution are threatening growth in the world's second-largest economy. That prompted premier Li Keqiang to promise greater efforts to tackle the problem in a speech at last month's National People's Congress.

Environmental damage cost China 1.5 trillion yuan, or 3.5% of the nation's gross domestic product, in 2010, according to April 2013 data from the Chinese Academy for Environmental Planning posted online by the Hong Kong Trade Development Council.

Concerns about the environment are the biggest source of unrest in China, Chen Jiping, a former leading member of the Communist Party's Committee of Political and Legislative Affairs, said last year. The nation has 16 of the 20 most-polluted cities on the planet, according to World Bank estimates.

About 10% of the water in China's biggest river basins was severely polluted, according to a report issued by the Ministry of Environmental Protection in 2012, the latest data available. The government, which has set a goal of providing safe drinking water to 298 million rural residents by next year, plans to spend 2 trillion yuan fighting water contamination, the Securities Daily said Feb 18, 2014.

### **Trial Run**

After a small trial run last year, Alibaba kicked off its water-testing initiative over the Lunar New Year holiday in January, when employees traveling to their hometowns across 28 provinces took company-provided testing kits with them.

Among the workers who measured water quality at a total of more than 420 locations was Yang Fangyi, a manager at the Alibaba Foundation, an arm of Alibaba Group that focuses on social issues including environmental protection. Yang recorded six different data measures at a lake in southwest China and uploaded them to a map.

In places where the data indicates pollution, the foundation's staff can consult with experts and cooperate with local environmental protection authorities and nongovernmental organizations on cleanup measures, Yang said in an interview.

### **Enlisting Participants**

Yang spoke before Alibaba announced the commencement last month of an initial public offering in the US. The company may sell about a 12% stake in itself, one person with knowledge of the matter said at the time. That would make it an US\$18.4 billion (RM59.3 billion) offering, based on the US\$153 billion average valuation of analysts, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

In preparation for the IPO, Alibaba bought full control of AutoNavi Holdings Ltd to bolster its mobile technology. The deal, announced April 11, 2014, gives Alibaba control of China's most popular mobile mapping service, helping it compete with Baidu Inc's Baidu Maps and with Tencent Holdings Ltd for taxi and restaurant recommendation services.

Alibaba began working last month with 15 organizations to engage more participants in the water-testing program. It will also help nine villages purify their water sources through measures such as wetlands restoration, Yang said. By engaging the public, the mapping effort can help raise awareness about the need to protect clean water, he said.

The palm-sized kits used for water testing are sold by Greenovation, a non-governmental organization, for 65 yuan or 80 yuan on Taobao Marketplace. Participants can upload the test results using a mobile app created by Liu Chunlei, the founder of Danger Maps, a website that allows people to look up environmental hazards such as toxic-waste treatment facilities and oil refineries.

### **'Idealistic Generation'**

The Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs, a Beijing-based organization, also created pollution maps to encourage regulation and accountability among corporate and government agencies.

Greater involvement by private companies and nongovernmental organizations in environmental causes may pressure the government to step up its own efforts, said Shapiro, a professor at American University in Washington.

"There are sectors of the Chinese government that very much want to implement the environmental regulations and laws that are in place, but these sectors in the government are not as strong as they need to be," she said.

At the same time, by collecting and publicizing information about local pollution, Alibaba could rankle officials who are responsible for those districts and threaten companies that are responsible. China has jailed environmental activists, including Wu Lihong, who campaigned against chemical companies he blamed for causing an algae bloom and choking a lake near Shanghai.

### **'A Little Risky'**

“It may be a little risky,” Shapiro said of Alibaba’s initiative. “They must have some kind of confidence from the central government that this is going to be OK for them to do.”

The company declined to comment on what role the government plays in its effort. China’s Ministry of Civil Affairs couldn’t immediately comment, said a person at the ministry who identified herself only by her last name, Wei.

For Alibaba, the program may help recruit and motivate workers, as well as appeal to customers.

“Tech companies are becoming political just by the sheer nature of their scale and their influence,” said Duncan Clark, the Beijing-based chairman of BDA China Ltd, which advises technology companies. “This is an idealistic generation, and it’s a generation that is very concerned about their future.”

Alibaba can also tell its users they’re more than just customers, said Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“They can appeal to their users by saying, look you’re going to be engaged in civic change, you’re going to be engaged by making China a better place,” Zuckerman said. “It’s pretty brilliant.”

Copyright © 1999-2012 Mkini Dotcom Sdn. Bhd

Source: <http://www.kinibiz.com/story/world-biz/80892/alibaba-recruits-users-to-identify-polluted-waters.html>