CLOSER TO NATURE

Can China’s new national park system integrate communities and conservation?
Cover Story

All Natural

About 18 percent of China’s landmass is home to approximately 10,000 protected areas, but the local governments and bureaus that manage them have frequently prioritized tourist numbers and financial gain over effective conservation. Now the country wants that to change. Last year, China launched nine pilot national park projects that will be the first step in developing an integrated national park system that aims to put conservation first. NewsChina travels to sites in Sichuan Province where both the progress and problems of implementing such a grand conservation strategy are clearly visible.
Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve in western Qinghai Province is one of China’s nine pilot national parks.

The wetlands in Inner Mongolia’s Ergun Wetland National Park cover 126,000 hectares.
The poachers had crept in to dig up cordyceps, a caterpillar-shaped fungus highly prized in traditional Chinese medicine. Two other trespassers used the land to herd cattle and horses. All of them were locals from neighboring villages, caught by patrolling officers on a routine raid last April. The land on which they encroached was northwestern Sichuan Province’s Wanglang National Nature Reserve, a government-backed protected area.

The area surrounding Wanglang, including the Min Mountains to the northeast, is all part of a region called the “mountains of southern China,” one of the planet’s 36 biodiversity hotspots, according to the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. Biodiversity hotspots are characterized as areas that meet extremely high standards of biological richness yet also face environmental threats. Established in 1965, Wanglang was one of China’s first giant panda reserves. It earned international recognition in the late 1990s due to its effective management and support of local communities’ sustainable development. It kept close ties with research institutions and environmental management specialists. Since the late 2000s, however, external threats have begun to impinge on the once model reserve. Parties with vested interests push for upping tourist numbers, government departments that oversee different aspects of Wanglang vie for power, and out-of-date protection laws allow individuals and companies who damage the reserve to slip through legal cracks.

Wanglang exemplifies the issues faced by China’s numerous protected areas as a whole. The total area of the country’s approximately 10,000 protected regions covers about 18 percent of China, a proportion higher than the global average. However, weak management and insufficient funding are threatening most of their conservation efforts.

For many of China’s 10,000 protected areas, conservation has come second to economic development for decades. A new national park pilot project attempts to reverse this trend and establish a system that puts nature first.
The central government is trying to turn things around. In late 2013, President Xi Jinping included the development of a true national park system into the central committee’s official plans for deeper reform. Nine pilot park projects were announced in June 2015. But in a country where the concept of a national park remains undefined, systemic change is needed before these sites can successfully prioritize nature conservation while remaining an educational attraction open to the public.

**Messy Network**

In China, the term “protected area” encompasses many different categories. Nature reserves, scenic spots, geoparks, forest parks and wetland parks all fall under this umbrella. Of the 10,000 total such sites in the country, 2,697 are designated as nature reserves, with the first one established in Guangdong Province’s Dinghu Mountain region in 1956.

Officially protected areas are managed by different supervision agencies, depending on their environmental characteristics with the two major players—the State Forestry Administration and the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) – heading the list. Other supervisors include the Ministry of Agriculture, the State Oceanic Administration, the Ministry of Land and Resources, the Ministry of Water Resources and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development. Each of these agencies has different priorities. The resulting bureaucratic web muddles the chain of command when it comes to protected areas and erodes area managers’ ability to do their jobs. Bai Chengshou of the MEP’s nature and ecology conservation department once expressed publicly: “The different ecological factors, different supervising departments and different measures taken in different protected areas have all contributed to the destruction of the ecosystem from both a construction and managerial perspective.”

Worse, while these protected areas are overseen by different government departments, they also have no up-to-date legal shield. As a result of this gap in Chinese law, local governments rewarded for economic growth and private, profit-driven companies both plunder the land through under-the-radar mining, construction projects and tourist activities (see “Protecting the Protected,” *NewsChina*, December 2012, Issue 52).

**Crippled System**

The results of these issues have infiltrated the Wanglang reserve. Locals exploit the reserve’s resources by overgrazing and poaching valuable wild plants, all of which damage the panda’s natural habitat. Hydropower station and highway construction encroach upon the area. At the same time, the Mianyang city government, which oversees the reserve, pressures Wanglang to bolster tourist numbers.

In 2013, Tenio Group, a private company in charge of tourism in Wanglang, planned to invest 3 billion yuan (then US$488m) into transforming the reserve into a major attraction that could support more than 600,000 visitors a year, according to media reports. Previously, the most visitors Wanglang had ever received in a year was 50,000, said Zhao Lianjun, deputy director of the reserve’s management bureau. One of that bureau’s former directors once stated that the reserve could only sustain a maximum of 30,000 visitors a year before the impact from tourists would start damaging the pandas’ habitat.

Yin Kaipu, a professor at the Chengdu Institute of Biology and the author of *Tracing One Hundred Years of Change: Illustrating the Environmental Changes in Western China*, told *NewsChina* that the situation in Wanglang is almost at the “point of no return.”

Although Wanglang is nominally a “national” reserve, in reality it is affiliated with the local government of Pingwu County, which is situated within the city of Mianyang. The Pingwu government, simi-
Lar to local governments nationwide, tries to maximize its tourism-related tax revenue in order to boost the local economy. The problem for Wanglang, however, is that this comes at the expense of the reserve’s habitat. Complicating matters are the contradicting motivations of different local government departments. “For example, the local animal husbandry bureau wants to increase herding range, the tourism bureau’s target is increasing tourism, while the transportation department aims to build highways,” Zhao Lianjun told our reporter. “However, all these departments are fulfilling their roles without considering whether their actions cause ecological damage to the giant panda’s natural habitat. Conservation requires the combined efforts of multiple stakeholders, rather than just one group.”

The most serious conflict is that between Wanglang’s interests and those of the local tourism industry. “We will definitely face more pressure from the tourism industry in the future, and I can’t imagine how we are going to handle things when the number of tourists rockets up to the hundreds of thousands,” Zhao said. “The contradiction between the local government’s need for economic development and our nature conservation efforts are not an issue unique to Wanglang; it’s common in almost all of China’s protected areas.”

Official Pressure

Xi Jinping pushed for change in November 2013 when he added that China needs to “establish a national park system” into a central committee report, an unprecedented statement in such a high-level document.

In early 2015, the State Council instructed the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) to cooperate with 12 other relevant government departments and form a plan for a national park system. By mid-2015, the government announced nine pilot national parks projects in eight provinces and one municipality. (All of the sites were already protected areas.) The ultimate aim is to establish an integrated national park system that fits the Chinese context yet reflects international standards. The deadline for this is the end of 2017, after which time the new system will roll out across the country.

Amid central government calls to build China into an “ecological civilization,” officials are viewing the national park initiative as a flagship project for this greening movement, said Su Yang, a researcher at the Development Research Center, a think tank under the State Council.

Yang Rui, head of Tsinghua University’s landscape architecture department and a member of a team of experts appointed by the NDRC for the national park project, explained to NewsChina that this initiative is a rare opportunity to revamp the management of all of China’s protected areas.

Yang said that while the number of protected regions in China skyrocketed from the late 1970s through 2013, they have been haunted by two major structural deficiencies. Firstly, speaking of their overall condition, Yang explained that there is no complete network unifying them, leading to fragmentation. The areas also lack systemic protec-
tion, and many of their boundaries were drawn without considering the natural ecosystems they contain or bisect. Secondly, the areas are racked with managerial problems: because there is no system unifying all of the protected areas, infighting amongst different stakeholders is rampant, with no overarching legal entity to settle their quarrels. “If these two structural deficiencies can be conquered [during this national park initiative], China will not only be able to smoothly establish a national park system, it will also create a brighter future for the country’s protected areas in other categories,” Yang added.

Most experts and researchers interviewed agreed that this is a crucial moment for Chinese conservation. If the newly instated national park system successfully unifies dissenting interest groups and changes the mindsets of local governments that are hungry for economic development, it may be the first step to realizing the central government’s aspiration of what it has termed an “ecological civilization.”

Steps Forward, Back

After years of debating the importance of tourism development in future national parks, stakeholders are reaching some common ground. Xi Jinping made a speech earlier this year that emphasized that the purpose of developing national parks was to “protect the original state and completeness of our natural ecosystems for future generations.” The two main goals of China’s national park system have already been specified: the first priority is to protect the parks’ ecosystems, and the second is to provide educational and recreational services.

At present, according to an inside source, the nine pilot projects have all completed their draft proposals and presented them to the NDRC. Six of the nine were approved and they will move on to the next step, the restructuring of the existing protected area. Peng Fuwei, the deputy director of the NDRC’s social development department and a key official figure in this process, declined to be interviewed for this article.

The three pilot plans that failed the first round of evaluations were those of the Mount Wuyi area in Fujian Province, the Pudacuo park in Yunnan Province and the Badaling section of the Great Wall in Beijing, one of the Wall’s most visited sections. Different interest groups’ reluctance to change tended to hold the sites back. For example, the local government of Beijing’s Yanqing District, which includes Badaling, tried to wiggle out of the pilot program, according to the same inside source. “The Yanqing government is afraid of losing income from Badaling tourism, which accounts for almost one third of its total revenue,” explained the source.

The Mount Wuyi situation is one of the most complicated among all nine sites, according to Rose Niu, chief conservation officer at the Chicago-based Paulson Institute, a think tank that is partnering with the NDRC on the national park system project. Four different local government departments supervise different parts of the Mount Wuyi area, all with their own management mandates, and the complicated land rights rules within the planned national park boundaries made
the situation even more complex.

To balance and appease different stakeholders, many of the other sites’ plans involved establishing a new government agency to oversee national parks and nature reserves. “In Mount Wuyi’s project proposal, no separate organization was included, and that is why the plan was not approved by the NDRC during the first round of review,” a different insider told NewsChina.

The Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve in western Qinghai Province appears to be a much more clear-cut case, due to its underdeveloped tourism industry. Yang pointed out that it does suffer from some serious issues, however – for example, its boundaries were not defined based on sufficient scientific study. “Scientists did not even determine the boundaries of the Sanjiangyuan reserve, as far as I know,” Yang Rui explained. “Research on an ecosystem’s integrity should be the first step before you demarcate a reserve.” Yang stressed that experts also need to study the species living within park boundaries and the relationships between them, as well as any difficulties park managers may encounter in the site’s protection, such as community or infrastructural issues.

But according to an inside source familiar with the Sanjiangyuan plan, the local government is focusing on “poverty alleviation” in the establishment of this park. “This is a deviation from the two core values of the national park system,” added the source.

Park Proliferation

As the nine pilot projects undergo their individual planning, some provinces are proposing ambitious national park plans of their own.

For example, Sichuan Province, which is home to about 76 percent of China’s wild panda population, has proposed to the central government that three of its giant panda reserves become national parks.

According to an inside source, Wanglang National Nature Reserve is one of them. The plan to make it a national park started brewing back in 2006. The reserve’s management bureau director Jiang Shiwei told NewsChina that Wanglang’s managers hope the approval of the plan will solve some of the threats that it continually faces, such as overgrazing.

Other provinces are preparing national park proposals with the main goals of protecting the Tibetan antelope, the Asian elephant and the Siberian tiger.

“Frankly speaking, I still worry about the current [national park] situation when almost all attempts to build national parks in different provinces are still based on attracting tourists and economic profit,” Yang said. “If national parks are blindly built before national park reform is concretely defined, the results would be disastrous.” He added that the pilot program is a satisfying start, but it will require better communication between the central and local governments. “People involved in the pilot projects at the local level are not seeing timely feedback or guidance from the upper levels, which might lead to chaotic situations,” Yang continued.

Professor and author Yin Kaipu shared Yang’s view. Yin helped to review one of the giant panda national park plans proposed by the Sichuan government and he said the plan included tourism development practices that were similar to practices of the past, something that is against the new national park system’s goals. Yin emphasized that a complete overturning of the old system is the key to establishing national parks. “The top-down design is very important – there is an urgent need for an overarching, national-level system to be mapped out,” he added.

A new, independent central government agency needs to be established to oversee national parks and protected areas, Yang Rui told our reporter. The agency should have the power to demarcate areas as natural reserves or parks, draw up conservation plans for them and take legal action against those who mismanage their resources. The current, fledgling national park system still has a long way to go before China’s conservationists will be content, but even in its pilot stage, it is a step in the right direction.★
China aims to establish a new national park system by late 2017. The first step is already in motion – nine protected areas from across the country are in the process of transforming into the country's first group of national parks. To help China move forward with this mammoth task, the National Development and Reform Commission has appointed nine conservation experts to act as an advisory body throughout the course of this project. Zhu Chunquan brings nearly three decades of experience to the team. He currently serves as the country representative for the China office of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and was previously the conservation director of the World Wide Fund for Nature's China branch from 2005-2012. As part of the expert team, he has helped evaluate all nine of the pilot national parks' initial plans.

This initiative has not been without controversy. Some stakeholders – mainly local governments that rely on strong tourism numbers to prop up the local economy – think that economic development within the parks should take priority over conservation. But Zhu said that after a few years of negotiations and discussions, opposing parties are finding more common ground. China's national parks will be protected areas that aim to safeguard the diverse species and integrated ecosystems within their borders. “Despite some differing opinions over minor aspects, the overall understanding of the concept [of national parks] is rather clear and meets international standards,” Zhu said.

NewsChina met with Zhu in the IUCN China office in eastern Beijing to talk about the future of China's national park system and conservation as a whole.

NewsChina: From an international perspective, what is the current state of China's existing protected areas?

Zhu Chunquan: This year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of China's first nature reserve, the Dinghu Mountain National Nature Reserve, which was established in 1956. Generally speaking, China's protected areas have made significant strides. They cover over 18 percent of China's terrestrial and inland water areas, and the State Forestry Administration pledged that number will reach 22 percent by 2020. Both of these figures are much higher than the world average.

China's protected areas are very valuable. If you measure by either number of species or types of ecosystems, China is a key region that enjoys high levels of biodiversity. For example, China boasts more than 34,000 higher plant species, half of which are endemic to China, and over 6,000 vertebrate species.

There are more than 10,000 protected areas in China, but they are not evenly distributed. Protected areas cover one million square kilometers in western China's Qinghai-Tibet plateau region, accounting for almost 10 percent of China's total land area. By contrast, in the eastern coastal areas that are heavily industrialized, protected areas are limited in both number and size.

From another perspective, the effectiveness of management in different protected areas varies significantly as well. Many protected areas do not operate independently, nor do they have specially trained staff or sufficient funding. For example, some personnel in protected areas are former loggers who previously worked for State-owned timber suppliers. They are not qualified to conduct conservation projects or even go on daily patrols.

NC: How will the new national park system impact the management of other protected areas in China?

ZC: The biggest problem affecting the management of China's...
protected areas is their lack of an integrated scientific system. Various government departments have introduced different types of protected areas at different times since 1956. The Jiuzhaigou nature reserve in Sichuan Province is an extreme case [of what can happen as a result]. Although it is a nature reserve, Jiuzhaigou also has a 'scenic spot,' 'forest park,' and 'geopark' all within its borders, creating a chaotic situation. First, it makes the target of protection ambiguous. Is it animal species, ecosystems, natural scenery or geoheritage? Second, having so many types of protected areas in one spot means all of those corresponding departments administrate that site. This makes management very confusing.

To combat such situations and to simplify the protected area system, the IUCN has been trying to standardize protected area categorization since the early 1960s.

China’s exploration of a new national park system is an opportunity to straighten out the various types of protected areas, and I hope it will refer to the IUCN categorization method when doing so. It would be beneficial for stakeholders from different sectors – government officials, business leaders, community members and representatives of international organizations like the UN – to all actively participate in conservation efforts. But it is also important to have unified standards and an effective management system that includes a working mechanism, adequate funding, daily supervision, community participation and the participation of international or domestic NGOs. National parks are just one kind of protected area, and not all current nature reserves will turn into national parks.

There are a few ways to go about establishing national parks in China. One is to turn some appropriate nature reserves directly into national parks. For example, protected areas like Changbaishan, Huangshan and Zhangjiajie all meet the standards of being in need of conservation and having gorgeous views. The other option is to integrate adjoining nature reserves into one large national park. For example, the area surrounding Sichuan Province’s Min Mountains, one of the giant panda’s main habitats when including the protected areas of Wānglāng, Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong, could become one single national park. The national park system should break the binds of administrative division, even between provinces, if necessary.

**NC**: What features of a Chinese national park system will make it different from those of other countries?

**ZC**: A national park in China should have the following five characteristics: first and foremost, it is composed of a large area that contains intact ecosystems; second, it has rich biodiversity, geodiversity, spectacular scenic views and outstanding cultural value; third, it is beneficial to the general public; fourth, it symbolizes China’s unique beauty and the country as a whole; fifth, it evinces Chinese people’s national identity and national pride.

Forming China’s national park system requires the sufficient study of models from other countries, yet we cannot simply copy from those that already exist. The reality is that almost all of the protected areas in China currently experience some sort of intrusive human activity both inside the protected zone and in its surrounding area, unlike similar areas in the US and Australia. The IUCN has advocated for balancing conservation and development [to counter this], and has focused its efforts on local community development. In order to effectively protect flagship [or iconic] species like the Siberian tiger and the giant panda, the only effective way is to help locals find alternate livelihoods that reduce their dependence on natural resources so that they no longer damage these animals’ habitats. There are already quite a few successful cases of community development projects in China that focus on nature conservation.

**NC**: How can China become a leader in biodiversity conservation and the development of an ‘ecological civilization’?

**ZC**: China has accomplished some significant achievements; for example it has made great progress in protecting some flagship species, such as the giant panda, Tibetan antelope and Asian crested ibis. Over the past three decades, China has learned a lot in the field of conservation biology from the many foreign experts who have come to China for research and the implementation of conservation programs. China has made many successful and unsuccessful attempts in its nature conservation efforts. If Chinese researchers were to compile these case studies into a manual to which other developing countries could refer, it would be very meaningful.

One major problem is that, despite China’s rapid development, the old mentality that domestic organizations must seek foreign funding remains. Experts from the developed world, like George Schaller and John MacKinnon, come to China and stay in local communities to conduct their projects, but Chinese conservation experts rarely travel to other countries for theirs. It is time for China and Chinese conservationists to change this outdated mentality, travel internationally and introduce themselves to the outside world.
Finding Peace

For environmental protection efforts to succeed, local communities must be on board. Otherwise, authorities are inviting a war between conservationists trying to protect nature and the local residents who resort to exploiting it to make a living.

By Wang Yan in Sichuan

On a humid day in late April, Li Xinrui trekked deep into the Guanba valley in northwestern Sichuan Province to tend to his cluster of beehives. Several other local beekeepers maintain their apiaries in this lush glen. Spring is a crucial time for bee colonies – the bees are breeding and may start to swarm, so Li needs to check on them often as the weather warms.

Li has only been a beekeeper for a handful of years, just like other apiarists in Guanba. The practice wasn’t introduced into the region until 2009. A series of crackdowns on logging, hunting and overfishing had shut local residents out of the industries that had been putting food on their tables for decades. In this battle of economic development versus environmental conservation, the development side was losing, so its members struck back with guerilla tactics – illegal poaching and logging – in order to make a living. Once enforcement tightened, they needed a new way to sustain themselves legally.

A domestic NGO stepped in and instituted a community program that made it possible for these warring sides to make peace. The organization taught locals beekeeping skills, giving them a business that helped to fill the financial void. The new enterprise provided them with the motivation to protect the environment as well, because environmental conditions directly affect their source of income.

As China wraps up the first year of its national park pilot project, which will lead to the establishment of the country’s first true national park system by the end of 2017, community-based development programs like Guanba’s will only become more important. More land will be protected more rigidly, preventing more locals from using its resources for their economic gain. With the establishment of each new national park or protected area, authorities need to figure out the right way to involve the local community in its preservation, while at the same time helping its members develop an alternate, sustainable livelihood.

Sweet Success

The Guanba valley is located in Sichuan Province’s Pingwu County, about 300 kilometers from the provincial capital, Chengdu. Nature reserves that house dozens of giant pandas surround the valley, making Guanba an important migration path for pandas traveling between them. Roughly six or seven pandas inhabit the valley itself, according to a 2012 national survey. Guanba also serves as a source of drinking water for the 800-900 villagers who live in the region.

As was common in most of China’s mountain regions, loggers, poachers and fishermen milked the valley of its resources in the 1980s and 90s. The subsequent catastrophic flooding of the Yangtze River moved the central government to action. It launched the Nature Forest Conservation Program (NFCP) in 1998, which instigated a widespread logging ban to reduce flooding, and also started the confiscation of hunting rifles to put an end to illegal hunting. After the program spread throughout the region, its environmental situation...
noticeably improved. The logging ban was most strictly enforced in the Yangtze River's upstream regions, including Sichuan Province. Deprived of their main source of income and lacking sufficient government subsidies, timber-dependent residents like Guanba locals were hard pressed to find an alternate way to earn money. This pushed local villagers to make ends meet by hunting illegally, covertly cutting down lumber and gathering valuable mushrooms and herbs, often at the expense of the panda's habitat. In spite of the NFCP, threats to conservation remained.

Real change arrived in 2009, when the environmental NGO Shanshui Conservation Center came to Guanba looking to advance the local community's economic development with the ultimate goal of protecting the environment. Under Shanshui’s guidance, the locals formed a beekeeping cooperative so they could sell honey as a new source of income. They also organized teams to patrol the valley regularly, thus combating illegal poaching and logging in the area. These conservation efforts have already sparked a resurgence of local wildlife. Apart from the giant panda, the valley is home to populations of snub-nosed monkeys, wild boar, tufted deer, golden pheasants and the antelope-like takin.

To make Guanba’s honey as commercially successful as possible, Shanshui invited a commercial partner to help the locals brand their organic product, calling it Panda Honey, and explore market opportunities. In accordance with Shanshui’s strict requirements, Panda Honey beehives house indigenous honey bees and are set up a minimum of three kilometers away from human settlements in order to ensure that all of the flowers from which the bees collect nectar are free of fertilizers. To guarantee the honey’s quality, the whole production process of the beekeepers who work with Shanshui is monitored by the NGO and its partners. Because of the stringent standards, the NGO’s commercial partner buys the honey from the locals for more than 100 yuan (about US$15) per kilogram, which is 20 percent higher than the average market price of a similar product, according to Chen Yuanming, Panda Honey’s marketing officer. “With a stable income from harvesting honey, some local villagers no longer need to resort to hunting or digging up mountain herbs, and they have also stopped herding, something that can lead to the pollution of water sources,” Chen said. Finally, the commercial partner sells Panda Honey to the public, but it does not retain 100 percent of the resulting income. “Every year, 10 percent of the income from Panda Honey sales are returned to the local community for things like new beekeeping equipment, better technology for wildlife monitoring, supplies for patrolling activities, or simply for the construction of local village infrastructure,” Chen added. While Panda Honey remains a niche brand, it is in the process of being certified as organic for the European market, Chen said, and the partner company has plans to export their product to Japan as early as this fall.

Over the past seven years, Guanba’s number of beehives has risen from just a few to more than 500. In 2013, the honey-producing cooperative was officially transferred to the village. The cooperative’s 10 members and 34 shareholders, all of whom are Guanba locals, elected Li Xinrui as chairman. The new organization has set up a board of administration, nailed down its rules and regulations, and holds regular meetings for its members once each season.
While it still produces a limited amount of honey under the Panda Honey name, the cooperative has also launched its own local brand, Zangxiang Tumi (which translates roughly to Tibetan Fragrant Indigenous Honey), in order to explore both the online and offline market. “A big problem is that normally, once the funding from NGOs like Shanshui stops, things fall apart,” Li said, referring to similar community development programs. “So to achieve long-term results, we created our own brand to try some incentive marketing methods to keep up our progress. So far our cooperative can support itself, and the dividend yield for our shareholders was 40 percent [of market price] in 2013 and 2014, then 80 percent in 2015.”

Li, a young man in his early 30s, believes honey production could become a sustainable industry for both the development of his village and the environment around it.

Guanba villagers also started working to protect their local river, to similarly mutually beneficial results. According to Qiao Liang, another village leader, there used to be a large number of local catfish called shipazi in the river, but because they were considered a Sichuan delicacy, their market price recently shot up to over 1,400 yuan (US$214) per kilogram and overfishing quickly decimated their numbers. “Both villagers and outsiders would use poison or electricity to catch shipazi, a species listed as protected by the provincial government,” Qiao said. “But since we set up patrol teams in 2009 and stationed some cameras to monitor the activity of both animals and humans, we have caught quite a few people fishing illegally.” Starting in 2013, Guanba residents have periodically released some shipazi fry into the river, which has spurred a significant revival of the fish’s population.

“To inspire other villagers to protect [the environment], we are considering catching and selling a small portion of the shipazi population after this year’s breeding season, then distributing the profits among the villagers so that everyone can see the effects and benefits of conservation,” Qiao said. He added that Guanba is working on other promising industries to supplement the income from the beekeeping cooperative, including walnut cultivation, planting valuable herbs and, in the long run, eco-tourism. “Spending about 10,000 yuan [US$1,500] on shipazi fry brings us more than 500,000 to 600,000 yuan [US$76,300-91,600] in profit, and more importantly, the hidden benefit of our conservation efforts is that the fish in our river is a sign of our healthy natural environment, which can further attract tourists to come and visit our region,” Qiao explained.

His words are reminiscent of a quote of Stuart Pimm’s, a professor of conservation ecology at Duke University: “If the local people do not see a benefit of local conservation, then whatever the laws are, they are going to be ineffective.”

**Group Goals**

Past experiences in China and other countries have proven time and time again that displacing local communities from their traditional lands to create natural reserves, restricting access to resources within those reserves and then providing the communities little or no compensation can make local residents hostile towards conservation groups and their efforts. This often leads to conflict. Community members feel backed into a corner, so they go against the established
rules and harvest and hunt illegally. “Local people have a basic stake in the land, their livelihood is not expendable, and any management solution must also consider their interests, knowledge, culture and cooperation,” wrote Anthony Sinclair and George Schaller in the foreword to the book *Wild Rangelands: Conserving Wildlife While Maintaining Livestock in Semi-Arid Ecosystems*. “Ideally, communities should take the initiative in protecting and managing their own resources: conservation ultimately depends on their goodwill and participation.”

The Guanba villagers’ goodwill is now very clear. In Guanba, the forests span over 133 square kilometers. Because the forestry administration doesn’t have enough staff to patrol the entire region, locals set up their own community patrol teams. The enhanced supervision has cut down on illegal activities within protected areas. Now, Guanba residents do not split the annual subsidies they receive from both the central and provincial governments to compensate for the economic losses caused by the protected forest area, as most other communities do. Instead, they use the money to pay for their patrol teams.

There are about 60,000 community conservation programs in China, with about 300 of them located in Sichuan Province. Guanba is a fairly successful example. Many of the country’s other programs only exist on paper or in theory; most have yet to actually execute a project or secure funding. The reason the program worked in Guanba was due to the community members’ drive; they were the key motivating force behind the conservation project, according to Feng Jie, the Shanshui Conservation Center program officer in charge of the Guanba initiative. “The limited annual government subsidies given to compensate for protected forests doesn’t even come close to meeting the real losses villagers suffer from being deprived of their livelihoods, so making the community benefit directly from conservation efforts can stir their ambitions,” Feng said. “In Guanba’s case, the honey, fishing and walnut industries are all closely linked with [the area’s] water sources and forests.” Guanba residents have stopped thinking of conservation as something that takes cash out of their wallets; now they view it as a money-earner.

Economic development and environmental protection do not have to face off on opposing sides. Sometimes they can work together. An ideal community conservation model would be one that creates this sort of mutually beneficial situation, while at the same time being stable and sustainable. Guanba is close, but its honey cooperative does not produce enough to support all of the villagers. Locals hope that through the addition of other endeavors, such as walnut cultivation and cold water fishing, they will be able to sustain themselves while still protecting the environment.

**Finding Balance**

One of the best examples of an ideal configuration is the setup in another Sichuan Province village: Liziba, a town of 243 households located about 140 kilometers northeast of Guanba. While Liziba is technically located in Sichuan, it is under the administrative domain of the Baishuijiang National Nature Reserve, which is affiliated to Gansu Province.

Just like Guanba, Liziba suffered serious deforestation and poaching in the 1990s. Unlike Guanba, Liziba also suffered at the hands of a vengeful Mother Nature. Unprecedented floods pummeled villagers in the rainy season, and climate change wreaked havoc on local tea crops, bringing down one of the village’s pillar industries. Fed up with
the environmental chaos, local resident Ren Huazhang, with support from the local government and Baishuijiang, organized a patrol team made up of 20 community members to crack down on illegal loggers and poachers.

Over the following decade, the grassroots project paid off. “Thanks to the shifting of villagers’ mindsets, we stopped activities that were destructive toward nature,” Ren told *NewsChina*. “And as the forested areas’ environment and water quality improved, the quality of our tea improved as well.” Ren, now Liziba’s Party secretary, added that this has meant more money in villagers’ pockets: “Our tea now has a good regional reputation, and our sales have increased.”

Liziba tea farmers collect and process tea leaves from late March until early October every year. According to Ren, the average net income per person in the tea industry is at a stable 7,000 yuan per year (about US$1,100). The village has also established a tea cooperative, and the next step for them is to promote and enhance their own brand to up their price point.

As most of the local residents are well aware of the important role nature conservation plays in the quality of their tea and its sales, they no longer cut down trees or hunt animals in the protected areas. The development of the community has been directly linked with the preservation of its environment.

**Grassroots Power**

China’s community conservation projects vary in structure – some were initiated solely by local residents and some have assistance from local governments or NGOs. NGOs that have worked in Sichuan Province include the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Shanshui Conservation Center, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy and Global Environmental Institute, according to Yang Xuji, an official within the province’s wildlife protection office. “We have tried various types of conservation methods, we encourage ways to fully stimulate a community’s participation in the management of protected areas, and our diversified exploration attempts will continue in the future,” Yang told *NewsChina*.

Yet different situations require different methods. On *NewsChina*’s 10-day tour of five Sichuan villages, the disparity between certain areas was obvious. For example, some abounded with natural resources, while others had fewer ways to interact with the land. The most critical difference, however, was whether or not a village had strong leaders, like Guanba’s Li Xinrui or Liziba’s Ren Huazhang, who could inspire change, coordinate conservation efforts and eventually help the community become self-sustaining so its business endeavors could continue without assistance from NGOs or government subsidies. Villages without resources and leaders become trapped, stuck in their dependence on the outside world for help or compensation.

As China looks toward launching its first nine pilot national parks and establishing a new national park system, the local communities living adjacent to and inside the parks also require special attention, said Rose Niu, chief conservation officer at the Chicago-based Paulson Institute, a think tank that is partnering with the Chinese government on the national park initiative. “In fact, the livelihood of the local community should be part of the management agenda for the national parks,” Niu told *NewsChina*.

Not only should each plan for a new national park or protected area take local communities into account, it should also find appropriate ways to engage the communities in the protection and sustainable use of the national parks’ natural resources.

Wang Lei, an adviser with WWF China, shared a similar sentiment with *NewsChina*. “Be mindful of our traditional Chinese aesthetic as shown through our ink-and-wash paintings – despite the beautiful scenery, with its high mountains and long rivers, within the painted scroll there is always a pagoda or a figure, even though it might be small in size,” Wang said. In other words, humans and nature must learn to coexist. ★