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CHINA'S



NATURAL



PLACES

As Rapid Development Looms, Civic Land Conservation Blooms

By Matt Jenkins

IN CHINA'S SICHUAN PROVINCE, a craggy, mist-shrouded corner of the Min Mountains occupies a fabled place in the country's land conservation history. Spanning more than 37,000 acres and known as Laohegou, this protected area is home to more than a dozen giant pandas, as well as Sichuan golden monkeys, musk deer, and takin. It also serves as a link between two neighboring, nationally designated nature reserves, filling a gap in continuity across an ecologically important swath of giant panda habitat.

Yet unlike the reserves it connects, Laohegou isn't protected by the government. It's a nature reserve run by a civic conservation organization, the first of its kind to be established in China. Ecologically important in its own right, it gives a glimpse of the role that civic land conservation efforts can play in supplementing the long-standing—and rapidly expanding—system of governmental land protection.

Since Laohegou's creation in 2013, China's civic land conservation movement has burgeoned. Today, more than two dozen organizations, backed with funding from foundations affiliated with some of the biggest companies in China, work at a national scale. Their efforts have added nearly 4,000 square miles of protected land at more than 50 sites throughout the country, complementing a government system of protected lands that has recently expanded to include the first official national parks.

These flourishing civic efforts are being aided by the Lincoln Institute's International Land Conservation Network (ILCN) and the Peking University-Lincoln Institute Center for Urban Development and Land Policy (PLC), which are working to connect conservation practitioners within China and across the world, and to help shape national land protection policy.

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Conservation areas in China protect animals including the golden monkey, giant panda, Koklass pheasant, and red panda. Credits (top to bottom): Erika Parfenova via iStock/Getty Images (1, 7), luxiangjian4711 via iStock/Getty Images (2, 6), TNC China (3), slowmotiongli via iStock/Getty Images (4), cgtoolbox via iStock/Getty Images (5).

AT THE UN BIODIVERSITY CONFERENCE in Kunming in 2021, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the establishment of five national parks—the country's first, although it manages a system of nature reserves that dates to the 1950s (see sidebar). The newly established parks, in locations ranging from the high Tibetan plateau to the verdant, panda-rich mountains of Sichuan Province, and from southern island rainforests to a haven for tigers and leopards in China's far northeast, will give a taste of the kaleidoscopic profusion of habitats across the country while providing a bulwark against rapid development. Xi's announcement was the latest sign of the government's broad commitment to protecting ecologically important land.

Government-protected land now totals about 18 percent of China's land area, and includes 2,750 nature reserves and thousands of other protected areas of various forms, according to the State Forest and Grassland Administration. In 2015, the government began moving toward a more comprehensive system that will improve land management, increase protected land, and integrate "crown jewels" like national parks with nature reserves and other protected land into a cohesive, ecologically robust whole.

The government's steps are a significant shift for ecological protection in China. But there's another promising dimension to this quiet revolution. Originally seeded in part with ideas adopted from outside China, particularly the United States, the efforts of domestic land conservation organizations are growing into a distinctively Chinese movement.

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Workers patrol the woods of Wuyi Mountain National Park in Fujian Province. Credit: Jiang Kehong/Xinhua/Alamy Live News.

In October 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping formally announced the establishment of China's first five national parks: the massive Three-River Source (Sanjiangyuan) National Park in the remote, northwestern Qinghai Province; Wuyi Mountain National Park in coastal Fujian; Giant Panda National Park spanning Sichuan, Shanxi, and Gansu provinces in the west; Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces; and the Hainan Tropical Forests National Park in the southern island province of Hainan.

The road to Xi's announcement began in 2015, when the Chinese government launched the development of a national park system and established 10 pilot national parks; three years later, the government established the National Park Administration. In addition to the five national parks designated in October, five more are still undergoing evaluation: Qianjiangyuan-Baishanzu in Zhejiang Province; Pudacuo in Yunnan Province; Shennongjia in Hubei Province; Nanshan in Hunan Province; and Qilianshan National Park in Gansu and Qinghai provinces.


The reality of the land management system in China dictates a different approach to conservation. Most land in China is either state- or collectively owned; individuals and private or civic organizations can't own land themselves. Nor can they employ the signature tool of U.S. private land conservation: conservation easements. These negotiated agreements grant a government agency or an entity like a land trust the right to restrict development, natural resource extraction, or other activities on a particular piece of land in order to maintain its ecological integrity. But conservation organizations in China have been patiently testing approaches to working within the particular constraints of the land management system here. And in 2008, they got an opening.

As part of a broader effort to defibrillate the centrally planned economy with a jolt of market forces and competition, the central government allowed for “use rights” to collectively owned forestland—which accounts for nearly 60 percent of the forestland in China—to be leased to non-government entities.

It was a significant policy shift, one that would make it possible for non-governmental organizations to essentially act as land trusts, which conserve land by acquiring property, acquiring conservation easements, or stewarding property owned by others. In this case, The Nature Conservancy's China program (TNC China) realized that the regulatory change might give conservation groups an opening to lease use rights to forestland—and then *not* use the land.

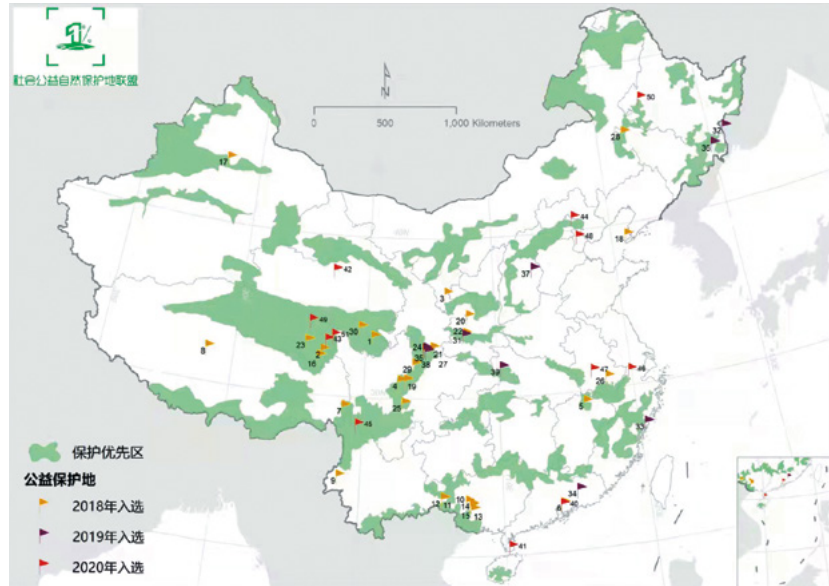
“Initially, we didn't see any potential to copy the land trust model into China,” says Jin Tong, director of science for TNC China. “But [the 2008 changes] really opened the door.”

In 2009, TNC China and the State Forestry Administration signed a memorandum of collaboration to explore land trusts as a new conservation model in China. After an exhaustive search for an ideal pilot location, TNC China zeroed in on Laohegou and helped create a separate entity called the Sichuan Nature Conservation Foundation—the first private land trust in China. The foundation then negotiated a 50-year “conservation lease” for Laohegou with the local county government.



At Longwu reservoir protected area in Zhejiang Province, The Nature Conservancy's China program (TNC China) is working with the local community to address pollution from bamboo farming. The reservoir supplies drinking water to about 3,000 people in two nearby villages. Credit: Jie Pan/Courtesy of TNC China.

Civic protected areas in China as of 2020. Flags represent protected parcels; green shading represents priority areas for conservation identified in China's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. Credit: China Civic Land Conservation Alliance.



THAT, IT TURNED OUT, was just the start. The effort to establish Laohegou soon led to the creation of China's first truly domestic private land conservation organization. TNC China's board had long been a who's who of influence in China. In 2015, the TNC China board reconceived the Sichuan Nature Conservation Foundation as a vehicle for taking the land trust concept far beyond Laohegou, and renamed it the Paradise Foundation. They seeded the organization with several staffers from TNC China.

In the years since, the Paradise Foundation has gone on to become the most influential private land conservation organization in China. Today, in addition to Laohegou, it runs five other projects spread across the country, including 63,000 acres of nature reserves in Sichuan that protect giant panda habitat, a 26,000-acre migratory bird site in northeast China's Jilin Province, and nature reserves in Anhui, Zhejiang, and Hubei provinces.

The foundation's work is part of an effort to more effectively round out the government's own conservation efforts. "We hope the Paradise Foundation's protected areas can demonstrate effective management and help strike a balance between conservation goals and community development needs," says Ma Jian, a former TNC China deputy director who is now a Paradise Foundation vice president.

Several of those protected areas were existing government-run nature reserves that the Paradise Foundation assumed management of after reaching agreements with local governments. China has not infrequently been bedeviled by the so-called "paper park" problem, particularly at county and provincial levels, in which areas are protected but local governments struggle to adequately fund their ongoing operation and management, including the policing of poaching and illegal logging.

"For many of China's protected areas, staffing, expertise, and funding often aren't adequate," Ma Jian says. "But civil organizations hope to help in the establishment and management of protected areas, not only in terms of providing financial assistance, but also contributing personnel and expertise, and they're ready to commit for the long term.

"Land trusts," he adds, "are a way to make this happen."

As the Paradise Foundation has expanded, the number of other civic land conservation organizations working in China has grown dramatically (see sidebar page 21). "Local NGOs are getting stronger and stronger, both in terms of funding and effectiveness," says TNC China's Jin Tong. "People generally have been putting a higher priority on ecological protection, and domestic philanthropic funding has been trending higher

and higher.” The civic conservation movement has been powered largely by funding from Chinese tech giants like Alibaba and Tencent, as well as large real estate firms.

Civic organizations also looked to the Land Trust Alliance (LTA) in the United States for inspiration about how to leverage their effectiveness (see page 26 to learn how the Lincoln Institute helped launch LTA). In 2017, the Paradise Foundation, TNC China, and 21 other NGOs and foundations launched the China Civic Land Conservation Alliance (CCLCA).

“We hope it will be a catalyst, like the Land Trust Alliance,” says Jin Tong. “It’s a platform to share experiences and best practices, and a way to amplify our voices by speaking together.”

The International Land Conservation Network has helped in this effort. “ILCN is a network to connect people all over the world who care about civic or private land conservation and give them a way to share experiences,” says Shenmin Liu, who is currently based at the PLC in Beijing as ILCN’s Asia representative and its representative to CCLCA.

In the early days of CCLCA, Liu explains, ILCN brought several conservationists from China to the United States to attend the annual LTA conference in Pittsburgh, and to tour New England to learn about sustainable forestry and conservation easements. That exchange helped spur new thinking about what CCLCA could accomplish, she says: “During that trip, the

participants made a list of the things they wanted to achieve when they were back in China.”

Among those achievements was the creation of a uniform set of standards for civic protected areas in 2019. The standards were informed by LTA and adapted from International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) guidelines. As of September 2020, 51 civic protected areas meet CCLCA’s criteria, covering nearly 4,000 square miles across 22 of China’s 34 provincial divisions. The Alliance, which now numbers 26 members, has set a goal of protecting 1 percent of China’s total land area—some 37,050 square miles—by 2030.

For the past several years, a team of CCLCA conservationists from TNC China has participated in an effort to acquire conservation agreements (a Chinese designation similar to a conservation easement in North America) adjacent to a national park being created at Baishanzu, southwest of Shanghai. In doing so, they will add to the scale of the protected area with the national park at its core, creating a mosaic of interrelated conservation land. This Chinese civic sector team is participating in ILCN’s second Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative, working with peer organizations in the United States, Canada, and Romania to continuously improve the quality of their strategy-making and implementation efforts.

Jim Levitt of the International Land Conservation Network (ILCN), center, speaks with conservationists from China at Harvard Forest in Massachusetts as part of a U.S. study tour hosted by ILCN in 2018. Credit: Lincoln Institute.



CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS in China have always negotiated a delicate relationship with the government, and in recent years the government has scrutinized NGOs of all stripes. In 2017, new regulations on foreign-affiliated NGOs came into force, requiring them to disclose their membership rosters and sources of funding, and to affiliate themselves with a government partner which then functions as an operations oversight unit. These NGOs must submit annual work plans for approval by both their government partner and the local Public Security Bureau.

Even in the context of these requirements, conservation NGOs are largely able to continue operating as before. In contrast with more sensitive issues like human rights and labor, “in the environmental protection world, the political overtones aren’t that strong, so there have been fewer restrictions,” says Lin Jiabin, a consultant to the PLC and former senior fellow of the Development Research Council, which makes policy recommendations to the State Council and the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Committee.

In fact, the goals of civic conservation organizations are largely aligned with the national government’s agenda. The government has made ecological sustainability a core plank in its policy and ideological platforms.

In 2007, Xi Jinping’s predecessor, Hu Jintao, endorsed the pursuit of “ecological civilization.” The concept has come to encompass a nationwide focus on ecological sustainability, but also serves as a rubric under which China is more broadly attempting to elaborate a uniquely Chinese alternative development model for other countries. It was subsequently incorporated into the Chinese constitution as one of the five core missions of the Chinese Communist Party, and Xi Jinping, who is trying to cast China as a global environmental leader, has been a fervent advocate.

The government’s emphasis on ecological civilization, Jin Tong says, “helps focus more attention on biodiversity protection and provides space for NGOs to develop their activities.”

The national government has also signaled that it expects wealthy individuals and companies to play a bigger philanthropic role in Chinese society. As part of his “Common Prosperity” initiative, Xi Jinping has increasingly called on wealthy enterprises and individuals to increase philanthropic giving in an effort to help reduce social disparities. Corporate donations totaled more than \$4 billion in 2020 and were on track to exceed that amount in 2021.

“The current emphasis on the construction of ecological civilization is really helpful to civic organizations,” says Ma Jian. “Not only that, but the Chinese government is emphasizing the ‘three distributions,’ and the concrete implementation of that is through philanthropic institutions. So I think all kinds of policies are providing good conditions for the development of philanthropic institutions.”



A sign at Jiulongfeng protected area in Anhui Province, the first civic nature reserve in eastern China, describes the history of the reserve and the species protected there. The protected area is one of several managed by the Paradise Foundation. Credit: Paradise Foundation.



Forest rangers patrol the Paradise Foundation's Jiulongfeng protected area to monitor wildlife and keep an eye out for conservation threats. The rangers covered about 17,000 miles on foot here in 2021. Credit: Paradise Foundation.

WHILE THEIR RELATIONSHIP with the government is sometimes ambiguous, civic land protection organizations have been able to forge numerous informal alliances with government ministries and government-affiliated think tanks, an avenue that allows them to assist the government in identifying conservation priorities and experimenting with policy reform.

Early on, TNC China lent both its own expertise and TNC's broader global know-how to identify areas of high conservation value. That assessment was incorporated into China's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, which was released in 2010. More recently, the Ministry of Natural Resources has commissioned the PLC to conduct broad policy research on its behalf on natural resource management policy that would support the formulation and implementation of national and provincial spatial planning. The PLC is also working to explore the application of remote sensing-based precision conservation techniques from the Lincoln Institute's Center for Geospatial Solutions for

water quality management in large lakes that involve multiple jurisdictions in China.

And for its part, the Paradise Foundation has worked to encourage the government to try out conservation easements. In 2019, Guojun Shen, a member of both the Paradise Foundation's board and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress—a powerful advisory body to the central government—submitted a proposal advocating the development and use of conservation easements in China. Easements are one way to address the complications that arise when protected parcels include farms or other collectively owned enterprises, like small-scale logging operations, within their boundaries.

“Tenure is a big challenge with protected areas, and we've learned that clarifying tenure and clarifying management responsibilities is a prerequisite for effective management of protected areas,” says the Paradise Foundation's Ma Jian. “We think conservation easements are a key to solving this problem, so we hope to try them out.”

“Easements are a way to lighten the burden: the landowner doesn’t lose ownership rights, but you’re merely separating the ecological protection rights, which can lower the cost of protection,” he adds. “At the same time, if the easement goes onto the land ownership registers, that provides long-term ecological protection for the land.”

Conservation easements are now being evaluated as a way to help protect ecological resources on collectively owned “inholdings” within Qianjiangyuan-Baishanzu pilot national park in Zhejiang province and Wuyishan national park in Fujian province.

IN CHINA, the phrase *shehui lilian* has come to refer to “the non-governmental sector.” Literally translated, though, it means “the power of society.” And it’s clear that even as civic conservation organizations continue to navigate their relationship with the government, they have become an established force for land protection in China.

Now, civic organizations are trying to figure out how they can amplify their effectiveness—and in particular, how the lands they’ve worked so hard to save can be better integrated with the larger mosaic of government-protected lands.

“We’re working this from different angles,” says TNC China’s Jin Tong. “We’re trying to explore how more inclusive governance could be institutionalized into ongoing protected area system reform. How can non-state actors, including NGOs, play a role in the protected area system? Multi-stakeholder engagement could link all this together to fill conservation gaps and strengthen management capacities in existing protected areas and national parks.”

TNC China and the Paradise Foundation are working with the Institutes of Science and Development, a high-level national think tank affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, to explore how non-governmental stakeholders, including local communities, NGOs, the business sector, and the public, might better participate in protected area planning and management.



The Park Service of Baishanzu pilot national park is evaluating the potential of using a tool similar to conservation easements to protect resources at the park, located in Zhejiang Province. Credit: Haijiang Zhang /TNC China.

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Even more broadly, Jin Tong says, “from the international perspective, there’s more and more recognition of the role that non-state actors are going to play in advancing the biodiversity agenda.” This was clearly illustrated in the lead-up to the Convention on Biological Diversity COP15 conference in Kunming in October 2021—the same event at which Xi Jinping announced the creation of China’s first five national parks—when the Chinese Ministry of Ecology and Environment hosted a two-day global NGO Forum on biodiversity organized by a network of civil society organizations including the PLC.

Over 400 participants from more than 30 countries took part in the event on-site and online, representing governments, businesses, NGOs, local and indigenous communities, and the public. The forum, whose livestream garnered more than 500,000 views, resulted in a joint call to action to invest in and protect biodiversity. And significantly, China’s Minister of Ecology and Environment, Huang Runqiu, extended an open hand to the non-governmental sector: “I call on non-state actors to contribute to the success of COP15 and open a new chapter on biodiversity governance.” This new chapter speaks to the ever-growing importance of private and civic organizations in land protection in China, and the staying power of the movement. □

Matt Jenkins, who has previously worked as an editor for *Nature Conservancy* magazine, is a freelance writer who has contributed to *The New York Times*, *Smithsonian*, *Men’s Journal*, and numerous other publications.



Participants in the NGO forum held in conjunction with the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming, China, in 2021. Credit: Ministry of Ecology and Environment.

The number of civic land conservation organizations of all sizes working in China continues to grow, with the Beijing-based Heyi Institute estimating the current total at more than 3,000. Twenty-six of those groups form the China Civic Land Conservation Alliance:

- The Nature Conservancy China
- Paradise Foundation
- Heyi Institute
- Shanshui Conservation Center
- SEE Foundation
- Alibaba Foundation
- Shenzhen Mangrove Conservation Foundation
- Conservation International
- World Wildlife Fund
- Wildlife Conservation Society
- Lao Niu Foundation
- Guangxi Biodiversity Research and Conservation Association
- Global Protected Area Friendly System
- Global Environmental Institute
- Shenzhen One Planet Foundation
- International Union for Conservation of Nature
- International Crane Foundation
- Tencent Foundation
- Yintai Foundation
- China Green Foundation
- China Green Carbon Foundation
- China Environmental Protection Foundation
- Friends of Nature
- Beijing Cihai Biodiversity Conservation Foundation
- Qiaonyu Foundation
- Yunnan Green Environment Development Foundation