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The UKNCC Guest Contributor Programme offers contrasting 'short, sharp reads' for those seeking a fuller exploration of key questions. This April 2022 edition explores the question:

**"How can the UK and China strengthen cooperation on
climate change and biodiversity?"**

Authors, alphabetically by surname:

- *Christine Loh, Chief Development Strategist, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for the Environment*
- *Erik Solheim, Vice Chair, China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development*

Contact us at:

perspective@ukncc.org



How can the UK and China strengthen cooperation on climate change and biodiversity?

Christine Loh
Chief Development Strategist
Hong Kong University of Science and
Technology's Institute for the Environment
April 2022

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China's rich biodiversity is threatened as a result of four decades of fast-paced growth. A long-term strategy is now in place to reverse degradation and achieve sustainable development although many gaps still need to be filled.

Designated as one of the United Nations' 17 mega-diverse countries, China has 10% of the world's plant and 14% of its animal species. Industrialisation, urbanisation, deforestation, introduction of alien species and lack of protection have caused huge damage.

"Ecological civilization" is the new development principle. Since it was added to the Chinese Communist Party's constitution in 2012, and the Chinese national constitution was amended to include it in 2018, many new environmental laws, regulations, guidelines, targets, and timelines have been published on top of which China pledged to achieve carbon peak by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2060. Ministries too have been restructured to reflect the importance of ecology in decision-making.



Taken together, China is on a revolution path to cleaning-up pollution, decarbonise, reviving biodiversity, and strengthening ecosystems. The principle of ecological civilisation mandates ecological protection, environmental management and restoring degradation that at the same time improve rural livelihoods. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese scholarship in biodiversity has increased dramatically. Chinese scientists are doing cutting-edge work at the level of genes, species, ecosystems and their services, landscapes, and conducting regular surveys and monitoring so as to establish baseline data and trends.

Their work provides the basis for understanding biodiversity status and threats. The poster child is the increasing population of giant pandas as a result of new breeding methods and establishing nature reserves. Although threats still exist, pandas are no longer endangered as they once were. The close relationship between the government and research institutions at universities and academies enable learning to be mainstreamed into policy deliberations and eventually into local and national plans. For example, the national 13th Five Year Plan (2016-20) emphasised the need to strengthen ecological

protection and restoration, requiring the incorporation of major conservation initiatives including the creation of a new national park system and red line designations for ecosystems conservation.

A network of five national parks covering 230,000 kilometres and containing 30% of China's terrestrial species was finally formally declared in October 2021, coinciding with the first part of the United Nations Conference on Biological Diversity, held in Kunming, referred to as COP15. Once completed, this network will be the world's largest national park system and an improvement on a patchwork of smaller preservation areas with suboptimal protection against illegal developments and resource extraction.

Alongside the national parks is the red-line system, which has been written into environmental- and security-protection laws to give it the legal status essential to implementation and enforcement. Its origin was the flooding of the Yangtze in 1998 that killed 3,000 people and caused US\$20 billion in damage.

The government realised over-grazing and deforestation exacerbated the flood, which eventually led to new policies to protect whole regions using an ecological yardstick. For example, around the Yangtze delta, 29,000 square kilometres of land is protected, including the river's shorelines, wetlands, and grasslands. The region has 11% of the population and produces 20% of China's GDP.

The current national 14th Five Year Plan (2021-25) builds upon the previous plan. A goal is set to increase forest cover from 23.4% in 2020 to 24.1% by 2025.





Other notable new targets include protecting many more hectares of land against soil erosion, restoring wetlands and grasslands, and the protection of coastlines and marine and coastal habitats.

The recently published development plan for the forest and grass industry (2021-25) is yet another prong of activity to protect land and promote sustainable practices. The plan sets a boundary between land for food production so that no arable or farmland will be lost, and for forestry and grassland, which are important for carbon sequestration. It also seeks to modernise the forestry and grass industry with sustainability approaches.

Despite these and many other positive efforts, there are still gaps in protecting biodiversity comprehensively in China. What scientists and policymakers are grappling with are the same challenges as what their counterparts face elsewhere – how to integrate sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and climate change holistically into effective evidence-based policies that are implementable on the ground.

As a development country, China acknowledges that its systems and institutions still need to evolve so that regulations and enforcement are clear and workable.

Successful implementation depends on support from the people, which in turn depends on public education, as well as skilful political negotiations with vested interests that often include some form of compensation. Getting it all done requires tremendous and considerable time.

Just as 2021 was a pivotal year for climate change, with Britain playing the important role of hosting COP26 in Glasgow, it was equally important that China hosted COP15 on biodiversity in Kunming. In fact, COP15 is not all done yet, as concluding meetings will be held in October 2022 when delegates return to Kunming.

The resumption of COP15 will hopefully end with an agreed global game plan for nature conservation over the next decade that is both ambitious and practical. Past biodiversity targets have not been met.

It should not be overlooked that at Glasgow, a large number of countries signed the Declaration on Forests and Land Use. They recognised the interdependence of protecting biodiversity, fighting climate change, and attaining sustainable development.

The signatories, which included Britain and China, pledged to collectively end forest loss and land degradation by 2030, and over US\$19 billion was pledged from many quarters towards the cause, with China and Britain both pledging contributions.

The second part of COP15 in Kunming can be seen as a continuation of COP26 and presents an opportunity for Britain and China to widen and deepen their cooperation. In fact, the leaders of both countries had worked hard to support each other on the success of both COP's so the goodwill can be extended to the second half of COP15.

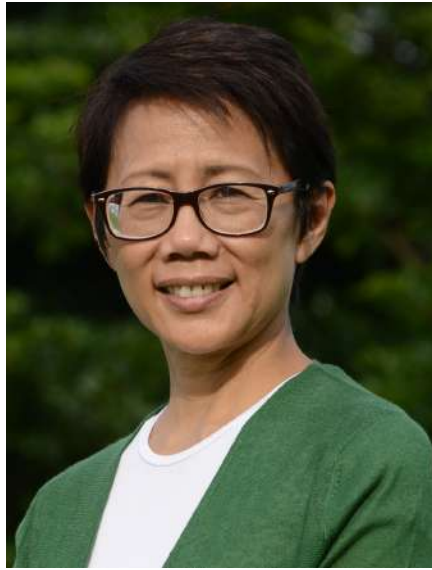
Beyond mutual support during negotiations of multilateral treaties, Britain and China can do more on a bilateral basis. There are already longstanding research and project specific efforts to build upon (cont...)

While China's efforts over the years have resulted in innovations, such as the red-line system that may be adapted for other countries to protect rare and endangered species and their habitats, Britain too needs to innovate as populations of its most important wildlife have dropped by 60% in 50 years, as revealed by the 2019 State of Nature report.

No matter what other problems Britain and China may have on other fronts at a time when the world is in serious conflict and disorder, planetary health is an area that should offer many opportunities for cooperation. For example, China as a manufacturing economy can work with Britain to tackle reducing the biodiversity and climate impacts from both a production and consumption perspective, such as in forestry products. Another area where the two countries have good cooperation is on green finance, which can help to raise capital and create new financial products to protect important natural assets.

The next decade is the 'make or break' time for the planet. Britain and China can make a pact to work on averting this existential crisis on both climate change and biodiversity.

About the Author



Christine Loh is chief development strategist at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Institute for the Environment.

She is also visiting professor at the Anderson School of Management, UCLA. Professor Loh was a legislator (1992-97, 1998-2000) and ministerial appointee in the Hong Kong government (2012-17).

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How can the UK and China strengthen cooperation on climate change and biodiversity?

Erik Solheim
Vice Chair

China Council for International Cooperation on
Environment and Development
April 2022

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Working together, China and the UK can help tackle the twin crises of climate and nature.

The year 2021 saw a spectacular limelight focusing on two events: The Climate Convention in Glasgow and the nature convention in Kunming. Having successfully hosted the first part of the UN Biodiversity Conference in Kunming in 2021, China will host the second part later this year. The Parties will meet to conclude negotiations and decide on a new Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

Described as the world's best last chance for action, Glasgow achieved progress on methane, deforestation, phasing down coal and a lot more. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi committed to ensure half of the country's energy mix comes from renewables by 2030. Despite the distractions of geopolitical tensions, China and the United States surprised the world with a joint declaration stressing cooperation on the implementation of the Paris Agreement.



It is now widely understood that climate and biodiversity are interconnected. Tackling the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss requires coordinated efforts between government, business and civil society. Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to stop China's overseas coal investments. US President Joe Biden has made big bets on green infrastructure in proposals to the American Congress.

The European Union is implementing its taxonomy for sustainable finance and its green new deal.

In last October, the parties reaffirmed their commitment to achieving the 2050 Vision of "Living in Harmony with Nature", adopting the Kunming Declaration. President Xi launched a 1.5 billion yuan (US\$233 million) fund for the protection of biodiversity in developing countries.

Business climate action taken by Microsoft, Ikea, Tesla, Huawei, Reliance and many more companies can be transformational and spur imitation if policymakers provide clear road maps and regulatory frameworks.

In most countries, business is now ahead of politics, driving the green shift. The drastic fall in the price of solar energy is more significant to our struggle than texts at a conference table. The political economy trumps diplomacy as the driver of action.

Hot on the heels of Glasgow, the World Resources Institute established a "Partnership on Biodiversity and Finance", a cooperation mechanism among financial institutions, social organizations, enterprises and government departments. The Partnership is expected to provide financial institutions with more detailed information and knowledge about biodiversity conservation and combating climate change, develop innovative tools to address climate change and nature destruction as well as explore new possibilities to improve the climate and biodiversity financing mechanism.

When it comes to global cooperation in tackling climate change and biodiversity loss, China has plenty of good stories to share:

Shenzhen in Guangdong province is an inspiring example of how fast change can happen. In 1980, the city did not even exist; it was a fishing village. Now, not only is Shenzhen one of the most prosperous cities in the world—it is also one of the greenest. It runs 16,000 electric buses, more than in the rest of the world outside of China combined, and 20,000 electric cabs. Shenzhen also has some of the greatest green corridors in the world, forming a line of defence against pollution and a most appealing urban landscape. Wetlands, hosting critical bird habitats, are integrated right in the center of the city.





The 10-year fishing ban in the Yangtze River and similar efforts in the upper Yellow River is a visionary effort to restore the ecosystems and protect rare aquatic species such as the Chinese sturgeon. Having served as the Norwegian Minister for the Environment, I understand the short-term pain that the local population will feel, even though it's greatly outweighed by the massive long-term gains for the ecosystem. Fish will come back in abundance. We have experienced the same in the North Sea. Nature bounced back when Norway acted to protect cod and herring in partnership with our neighbours, including the UK. In recent years, the populations of many rare and endangered wild species in China have experienced steady growth. Wild giant pandas, Asian elephants snow leopards and wild Tibetan antelopes have rebounded in remarkable numbers. In addition to China's wildlife protection, the country's use of artificial breeding technology has also helped bring endangered animals such as wild horses and Milu deer back from the brink of extinction. As one of the most beloved animals in the world, more than 600 giant pandas have been bred using this technology.

China is working on its ambitious plan to build a national park system of 10 pilot parks, spreading across 12 provinces, covering a stunning 230,000 square kilometers, dedicated to protecting habitats of endangered species.

Regarding nature based solutions, the Chinese redlining system is a global best practice to protect Mother Nature. It offers a scientific approach to providing conservation status to green hotspots in densely populated areas such as the Pearl River Delta or the lower Yangtze. It is easy for most nations to conserve far away mountains. The real challenge is to protect nature where it is most threatened, close to the centers of great human habitation.

The greening of the Kubuqi desert in Inner Mongolia is among the greatest environmental achievements of our era. Through hard and smart work, the people of Kubuqi transformed the "sea of death" into a lush oasis where biodiversity flourishes. At the core of the "Kubuqi Spirit" is the idea that greening the desert and restoring biodiversity will drive economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The people of Hangjin Banner developed the "Kubuqi Model" as a win-win approach, enjoying three sources of income that come from biodiversity: farm products such as liquorice which can survive in dry places, the enormous space for renewable energy, and tourism.

China also has wonderful stories to tell about biodiversity preservation in its overseas investments: owned by Power China Group and Goldwind Capital Australia, the Cattle Hill Wind Farm in Tasmania, Australia powers 63,500 homes, increasing the state's renewable energy generation by approximately 5%. It uses the innovative Identiflight system. Identiflight is an avian detection system which provides effective means to protect select species from collision with rotating wind turbine blades. Turbines shut down 400 times a day when eagles approach. So far, the technology has proven highly successful in protecting the local population of "Wedgies," wedge-tailed eagles.

The UK on it's part can point to many environment success stories. The energy system is rapidly going renewable. (Cont...)

The UK is a wind energy superpower. The country where the industry revolution started, based on coal, is among the first nations in the world to be coal free. Good nature protections are bringing species back from extinction, the European beaver is a case in point.

The UK launched the “Clean Green Initiative” in Glasgow to help developing countries take advantage of green technology and grow their economies sustainably.

The global demand for green infrastructure is so huge that China and the UK should work together to meet the challenge. The two nations can also join forces in spreading best practice on nature conservation.

As an old saying in the Indian Vedas goes, the whole world is one family. We need to put aside differences and work together for Mother Earth . Working in partnership, China and the UK will contribute greatly to the world efforts in tackling climate change and mitigating biodiversity loss.

About the Author

Erik Solheim is a retired Norwegian diplomat and former politician. He served in the Norwegian government from 2005 to 2012 as Minister of International Development and Minister of the Environment, and as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme from 2016 to 2018. After stepping down from this position, Solheim later expressed his support for the centrist Green Party and was active as a strategic adviser for the party during the 2015 elections. He is now the Vice Chair of The China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development.

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