River basin task force for China's Yangtze River

8 April 2003

China

[This is a reprint of a WWF-China press release concerning the new Yangtze River task force. Ramsar's representative on the task force will be Alain Lambert, lambert@ramsar.org.]

Press release, 31 March 2003

River basin task force aims to strike a balance between the environment and development of the Yangtze River

Beijing - Top-level government officials and international development organizations together launched a task force aimed at providing policy recommendations to top leaders of China's State Council on how to implement an integrated approach to solve river basin issues and restore the balance of nature and people in the Yangtze. WWF and the Chinese government are jointly supporting the task force.

CCICED (China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development) is a high-level consultative body providing strategic consultation to China's State Council concerning the environment and development issues. Its Task Force on Integrated River Basin Management (IBRM) was officially launched in Beijing on March 27-28, 2003. The overall objective of this task force is to promote the maximization of the public welfare of river basins in China through better governance of water resources, ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation, and environment management through information sharing, demonstration and public participation.

The task force consists of twelve prominent experts, six from China and six international experts from the Netherlands, UK, US, Japan, the Ramsar Convention Bureau, and WWF International.

China's newly revised Water Law, which took effect on October 1, 2002, includes new clauses involving the exploration, use, saving and protection of water, and formally recognizes the importance of the integrated river basin management approach. A major undertaking of the task force is to find ways of improving coordination between provincial and national government agencies responsible for managing various aspects of rivers.

"In the past, the management of water resources involved many separate concerns. The different interests of stakeholders - social pressures, electricity, flood control, environmental issues, provincial boundary issues - made river basin management very complicated. Only an integrated approach can solve the issues of river basins," says Prof. Chen Yiyu, who convened the meeting and is the Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and a member of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, "The Chinese government is now setting up coordinating bodies so these issues can be addressed in a more systematic way."

At the meeting international and Chinese experts on IRBM shared their experiences and lessons. Government ministries represented at the meeting included China's State Development and Reform Commission; Ministry of Water Conservancy; State Environment Protection Agency; State Forestry Administration; Chinese Academy of Sciences; Ministry of Agriculture; and the Fishery Resource Management Committee of the Yangtze River. International organizations at the meeting included CIDA; AusAid; Japan Bank of International Cooperation; the US Embassy in Beijing; and WWF.

The major tasks of the IRBM Task Force are (1) to assess existing laws and regulations and make recommendations to state legislation authorities; (2) to review existing river basin management practices, assess the coordination of existing river basin management, and make recommendations to the State Government and river basin commissions at the national level, on the Yangtze River basin in particular; (3) to promote relevant economic tools such as water
The IRBM Task force is instrumental to WWF’s Yangtze programme, which aims to restore and effectively manage a significant area of the wetlands in the Central Yangtze River basin by 2010. It also aims to initiate Integrated River Basin Management policy work in Poyang Lake, to restore the Yangtze as a living river and to rehabilitate ecological processes of wetlands through pilot sites and magnifying experiences to the wider region of the Central Yangtze.

The Central Yangtze is regarded as a globally important ecoregion by conservationists worldwide and as the “home of rice and fish” by Chinese. However, fifty years of intensive land reclamation (the building of dams, dykes and polders) have sited agriculture and urban settlements where formerly there were flood plains and lakes. The wetland environment and species here has been severely affected, resulting in habitat fragmentation and the disruption of natural processes. Some unique species, such as the Yangtze Dolphin, the Yangtze Alligator and the Chinese Sturgeon are endangered.

Currently the Central Yangtze and its lakes are subject to threats and problems including the loss of wetland function due to fragmentation and degradation; frequent flood disasters; upstream erosion leading to accelerate downstream silting; lack of knowledge amongst decision-makers about the values and functions of wetland; policy failure; and institutional conflicts.

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