

# Reverse the hidden loss of China's wetlands

2022 marks the 30th anniversary of China's accession to the Ramsar Convention, the international treaty for wetland conservation and wise use. News headlines celebrate recent increases in the total area of protected wetlands [e.g., (1)], but focusing on total extent masks decline in specific wetland types. Despite some progress, the degradation of many Chinese wetlands habitats continues. Renewed efforts, supported by more international collaboration, are required to protect the nation's remaining wetland environments.

Since joining Ramsar, China has promoted wetland conservation and restoration. The National Wetland Conservation Program, now in operation for 20 years, has invested more than US\$3 billion, established 602 wetland protected areas, and officially protected 52.7% of the total wetland area (1). After declining by 61,800 km<sup>2</sup> (12%) between 1980 and 2015, China's wetland area reportedly increased by a relatively modest 903 km<sup>2</sup> between 2015 and 2020 (2).

However, China's wetlands are still under threat. Recent net increases in wetland area were driven by expansion of reservoirs and aquaculture ponds as well as climate change-related lake expansion on the Tibetan Plateau. These environments are functionally very different from inland marshes, which declined by more than 69,100 km<sup>2</sup> between 1980 and 2020 (2). Agriculture and urbanization are still encroaching into huge areas of wetlands (3, 4). Water pollution and climate change are chronic challenges facing wetland conservation (5).

On 1 June, a new Wetland Protection Law came into force (6), providing more legal protection for China's wetlands. Such national efforts should be supported by international collaboration. In November, Wuhan will host the 14th Conference of Parties to the Ramsar Convention (COP14), providing opportunities for China to share experiences and learn from others (7). "Zero net loss" protection targets (8) should be required for specific wetland types, and nature-based solutions (9) should be applied in wetland restoration. Wetlands have huge potential in China's climate change mitigation (10), biodiversity conservation (11), and carbon sequestration strategies (12). Conservation efforts to protect them should be meaningful and comprehensive.

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