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## **The Yangtze Forum**

### ***Background***

The Yangtze River – the largest river in China and the third largest in the world – is not only one of the cradles of Chinese civilisation, but also a crucial lifeline to secure the sustainable socio-economic development of China.

The Yangtze River Basin, covering less than one fifth of the nation's area, feeds one third of the Chinese population. Both grain production and gross domestic product of the Basin account for two fifths of China's total amounts.

As one of the most vigorously developing areas in China, the Yangtze River Basin is rapidly changing through economic development. In providing 36.5% of China's freshwater resources, 48 % of exploitable hydropower potential and 52.5% of inland navigation waterway mileage, the Yangtze River Basin is a node for hydropower development. The river basin is a key water supply source for northward river-diversion schemes via three routes: east, middle and west. In linking east with west, the "Golden Waterway" is a treasury house of endangered, rare and precious aquatic species.

Improving the protection, management and development of the Yangtze River is not only immediately relevant to the well-being of over 400 million inhabitants in the river basin, but also to the nation's socio-economic development in general.

### ***Current situation***

The Yangtze River Basin ecosystem has been badly damaged due to rapid and unsustainable economic growth, and dramatic increases in population. Moreover, conflicts among sectors *i.e.* infrastructure development, urban development, fisheries, agriculture, forestry, flood control, have given rise to poorly planned and irrational development / utilisation activities, and inadequate investment.

These have caused a series of environmental problems, including a large reduction of lake and wetland areas, serious levels of pollution in some water bodies, reduced runoff retention capacities in the floodplain area, severe soil erosion in the upper and middle basin, exhaustion of fish resources, endangerment of many species, and growing desertification in upstream areas, and fragmentation of the river ecosystem due to dam and embankment constructions.

### ***Options and solutions***

The first Yangtze Forum was held in Wuhan from 16-17 April 2005. The Forum was attended by leading officials from all 11 Provinces and Municipalities in the Yangtze River Basin, ministers and vice ministers of relevant central bodies, representatives of 14 countries and several international organizations, including WWF and the Global Water Partnership (GWP). The conference was opened by the Governor of Hubei Province, and the Minister of Water Resources gave the keynote speech.



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Conceived by the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development (CCICED) Task Force on Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM) in 2004, the Forum called for a collective approach to tackling environmental and social issues. It was the first time that such a large number of major stakeholders had convened to discuss the development and conservation blueprint for the entire Yangtze Basin, which was clearly beyond individual sectoral and administrative mandates.

### ***The Yangtze Declaration on Protection and Development***

Participants agreed on a joint statement of shared priorities and goals: the Yangtze Declaration on Protection and Development. The Declaration promotes "*ensuring health of the Yangtze and promoting harmony between humans and nature*". The basic of "*combined and concurrent protection and development*" should be applied as a guiding principle for management of the river.

Specifically, it calls for a revision and updating of the Master Plan for Comprehensive Utilization of the Yangtze River Basin and for adding the principle of insuring good ecosystem health as a key target. The IRBM approach is fully adopted by the 26 co-sponsors and the participants. It was clear from the Forum that there is considerable political commitment for implementing IRBM in the Yangtze Basin, which will significantly influence the philosophy of river basin management in China and beyond.

### ***Next Steps***

Hunan's Provincial Government has already committed to organize the next Yangtze Forum in 2007, for which WWF has recommended the advance preparation of a comprehensive Yangtze Development and Conservation Report by concerned parties. This report would cover a number of critical issues in the Yangtze Basin from a conservation perspective, including sustainable wetlands use, mitigating lake eutrophication, sustainable forest management, climate change/impacts and adaptation strategy, protected area network across the river basin, freshwater dolphin conservation, sustainable fishery, environmental flows, water infrastructure and impacts on ecosystems, ecological compensation, poverty and environment. WWF China has programmes and expertise on these issues in the basin.

Many of the bilateral government aid agencies that were present at the 2005 Yangtze Forum had expressed a high level of interest in future involvement, with funding implications. Equally important, several had noted that the Yangtze Forum and Declaration would be useful for development of their water-related programmes in China.

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