

CHINA

Protecting North China's Chagan Lake

Measures to safeguard natural resources, promote eco-tourism have proved beneficial and effective

By MICHAEL FUKSMAN and LIU MINGTAI in Songyuan, Jilin

Every year for over a millennium, fishermen have braved the subzero temperatures, biting winds and deep snow of Songyuan, a city in Northeast China's Jilin province, to search for an underwater fortune at Chagan Lake — one of the biggest freshwater lakes in the country.

Chagan, which is also referred to by locals as the "Holy Water Lake", is the only place in China where you can still find fishermen using a Mongolian fishing method that dates back centuries. The method, which is listed as a form of National Intangible Cultural Heritage, has barely changed over time.

Holes are drilled in the ice to lower a massive 2-kilometer-long net into position underwater. Once it fills up with fish, the net is hauled out of the water using a capstan turned by Mongolian horses. The biggest fish of the season's first catch sells for a large sum of money, marking the official start of the winter fishing season. This year's fish, which was caught on Dec 28 during the 20th Chagan Lake Ice and Snow Fishing and Hunting Cultural Tourism Festival, sold for 2,999,999 yuan (\$455,337) at the auction.

As it is important to ensure that this tradition can continue without damaging the lake's ecology, starting this year, the money earned from the auction will be donated to the Chagan Lake Ecological Environmental Protection Charity Fund, Global Times reported. It will then be used to purchase fish fry to restock the lake. As they mature, the fry will ensure that there is always a stable population of healthy fish for fishermen to catch.

Chagan is located in the Qian-guoluosi Mongolian autonomous county, or Qianguo county. Since 2018, county authorities have spent 2.6 billion yuan on pro-



Clockwise from left: Fishermen work together to catch fish on the frozen Chagan Lake on Dec 28. YAN LINYUN / XINHUA A visitor takes photos of big fish from this winter fishing season's first catch. ZHANG YAO / CHINA NEWS SERVICE The Mongolian fishing method practiced on the lake has been listed as an intangible cultural heritage. YAN LINYUN / XINHUA



tecting natural resources, including the lake. Wetlands have been restored, 30 million fry have been introduced to Chagan, and numerous projects to protect the forests, fields, and lakes in Qianguo have been implemented.

The initiative is one of many that have taken place around China in recent years to protect the country's vast natural resources. It has not always been easy to protect places like Chagan.

According to Yan Laisuo, a staff member of the Chagan Lake Tourism and Economic Development Zone, the lake nearly dried up in

the 1970s after being cut off from its water source. Fishermen were forced to give up their annual tradition and take on odd jobs to survive. But in 1976, the local government rallied the people to build a canal.

After eight years of construction, the canal was able to bring water from the Songhua River to Chagan. Decades later, the lake's total area has expanded to 400 square kilometers. In 2013, Jilin started a river-lake connection project, linking Chagan to surrounding lakes and rivers, making the lake's water even cleaner and clearer.

Other problems have plagued Chagan over the years, including pollution from chemical fertilizer and pesticide runoff from farms. The region is arid and gets little to no rainfall. The development of tourism, which brings millions of people to the area every year, also had an impact.

But these problems have been solved through the implementation of projects that have allowed environmental protection, agriculture and tourism to develop in tandem.

In particular, the construction of a town focused on eco-friendly

tourism has helped development. Located 13 km away from the Chagan Lake Reserve, the Chagan Lake Ecological Town offers accommodations, dining, sightseeing and other tourist-oriented businesses that have increased local incomes and made it more convenient for people to visit the area. It is powered by green energy — specifically, wind power and biogas — and according to Zhang Guannan, a clerk at the town's construction office, this has reduced the environmental burden on the lake, as farms and tourism projects that were previously affect-

ing the environment have been removed or relocated.

Tourism brought in 1.65 billion yuan last year, putting money in local pockets and allowing more visitors to share in the beauty of Chagan. All of this was achieved without harming the lake or the animal and plant life that call it home.

Now, the fishermen are free to do what they have done for centuries past — bag the biggest fish possible and share it with their family and friends.

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Apple growers wait for a slow train to Guiyang in Guizhou province at a station in Zhaotong, Yunnan province. QU HONGLUN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Slow train, the secret to growers' success

By LUO WANGSHU in Beijing and YANG JUN in Guiyang

High-speed trains, providing links to hometowns and running as fast as 350 kilometers per hour, are a source of pride for most Chinese people.

But in a mountainous part of southwestern China's Yunnan province, the apple growers are grateful for the prosperity brought by a line on which trains travel at just 40 km/h.

December is the harvest season for apples in Zhaotong, Yunnan, and it's common to see farmers carrying baskets of apples at Zhaotong Railway Station each morning, waiting to board the train bound for Guiyang, capital of neighboring Guizhou province.

The train leaves Zhaotong at 10:30 am, and after 18 stops in total over a distance of 407 km, arrives at Guiyang at 7:39 pm. The trip of more than nine and a half hours costs only 54 yuan (\$8.48).

The service, which opened in 2003, also passes 10 stations in small mountainside villages, becoming the most important way for rural residents to connect with the outside world.

Xiaolongdong village is next to

Zhaotong South Railway Station, a very small station. The village is home to more than 2,600 families and nearly 90 percent of them grow apples for a living.

The main local income is from an 800-hectare apple orchard with an annual output of 18,000 metric tons. Villager Ma Yongzhi, 54, has been growing apples for 32 years. He remembers the helplessness of waiting for clients to visit the village and buy apples, as well as the bitterness of having to sell apples for a low price.

Another grower, 30-year-old Ma Xiaoyu, said: "An apple grower's annual income is from 40,000 to 180,000 yuan in our village. Without the train service, it's difficult for us to take apples to the outside world or to sell them for a better price."

The train not only takes apples out, but also brings agricultural technicians to Zhaotong to help farmers boost production. Ma Yongzhi, who is also the head of the village, said about 30 to 40 tons of apples are transported by rail every day.

Train staff help farmers sell their apples.

Train conductor Xiang Xiaobo registers information about apple sellers and buyers during harvest

seasons and helps them exchange information to close a deal.

Last year, he helped farmers match up with 10 clients and sell over 200 tons of apples.

Train staff also promote apples in broadcasts to passengers, so farmers can sell some on the train, and the local railway department has added a cargo car at the end of the train where apples can be stored.

One of the stops the train makes is in the industrial city of Liupanshui in Guizhou, where a small apple market has sprung up thanks to the train service. At the market near Liupanshui Railway Station, some 20 stalls operated by farmers from Zhaotong allowed them to sell apples to city residents. During harvest season, the number of stalls can swell to more than 50.

Although China's high-speed railway network now stretches for 38,000 km, making it the longest in the world, railway authorities continue to run regular speed train services to benefit residents such as the apple farmers of Zhaotong.

Wang Jin in Guiyang contributed to this story.

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Standards on learning Chinese taking shape

By YANG CHENG in Tianjin yangcheng@chinadaily.com.cn

Top-grade teachers of Chinese are in demand around the world amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, said Zhong Yinghua, president of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching and president of Tianjin Normal University.

He made the remark at the recently concluded 14th International Chinese Teaching Seminar of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching in Tianjin.

He said the average age of international Chinese learners is trending downward, while more learners see Chinese language proficiency as a rung on their career ladder.

Amid rising global demand, individual countries and regions have different demands.

"More custom-made, innovative courses using intelligent technologies that cater to the needs of broad communities of learners are new features of current international teaching of Chinese," Zhong said.

As such, both Chinese and overseas educational authorities and organizations need to collaboratively establish a scientific system to properly train teachers at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels, he said.

The emphasis should be placed on the application of creative theories and achievements. A precondition of innovation is information integration and cross-disciplinary study, he added.

Recently established teaching standards drawn up by the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching to help regulate global Chinese teaching and learning have improved the sector's overall standards.

Zhong also noted that adding a Chinese component to professional studies has enhanced the sense of gain for Chinese learners by providing them access to a wealth of job opportunities.

Tania Meneses, a physician working in Lisbon who studied



Zhong Yinghua, president of Tianjin Normal University, makes a speech at the seminar in Tianjin. PHOTOS BY YANG CHENG / CHINA DAILY

and Indonesia's Global Maritime Axis strategy, have boosted civil and cultural communications between the two countries. Learning Chinese has become popular in Indonesia, and Chinese has become a frequently used foreign language in the country."

Wang Shangxue, former director of the Thailand Maritime Silk Road Confucius Institute, which is run by Tianjin Normal University, said, "In-depth Chinese learning associated with occupational skills, such as high-speed rail, electronic machinery and e-commerce, is becoming more popular around the world."

"AI-driven Chinese teaching methods and a growing number of livestreaming courses have become new driving forces, while more diverse training institutions including universities and companies are taking part in the international Chinese teaching sector," she said.

Statistics from the center show that its Chinese learning platform has provided online training to 20 million users from around 200 countries and regions, as well as services to 5,000 organizations since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the outbreak began, the platform has given 340 courses and more than 16,000 classes.

The center provided combined scholarships to 23,000 students, ranging from undergraduates to doctoral students.

It also offered training to some 20,000 international Chinese teachers and organizers.



Participants from different countries take a group photo during the seminar.