

PAGE TWO



Cyclists ride alongside the Chishui River in Renhuai city, Guizhou province. CHEN YONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

10-year ban along Chishui nets welcome rise in fish populations

By **HOU LIQIANG** in Beijing and **YANG JUN** in Guiyang

The Chishui River, a major tributary of the Yangtze, has witnessed significant rises in its fish population since a ban on fishing was introduced more than four years ago.

According to a media release from the Guizhou Department of Agriculture, "Fishery resources on the Chishui have been restored very quickly, with significant rises in both population and average size."

Monitoring data show that the number of endemic species in the tributary has risen from 32 to 37, the release stated, quoting a report from the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Hydrobiology.

It said the trend of the fish population becoming younger and smaller had been effectively curbed along the waterway, the vast majority of which runs through Guizhou province.

For example, the average weight of *Spinibarbus sinensis* — a fish species endemic to China — has risen from 336.9 grams to 492.5 grams, according to the department.

There has also been a marked rise in the number of Chinese sucker fish, an endangered species under State protection in China, it said.

With no dams along its length, the Chishui is the last free-flowing tributary on the upper reaches of the Yangtze. Flowing for 436.5 kilometers, it rises in Yunnan province and joins the Yangtze in Sichuan province.

Home to more than 160 species of fish, the tributary is key to biodiversity conservation in the Yangtze River Basin.

According to the Guizhou Department of Agriculture, the achievements made are due to a series of measures taken by the province to step up conservation of fishery resources following the fishing ban in the Yangtze River Basin.

A 10-year fishing moratorium was introduced on the Chishui, which lies in the Basin, on Jan 1, 2017, before being extended to all natural waterways along the Yangtze at the beginning of this year.

Authorities in Guizhou decommissioned 331 licensed fishing boats and closed all floating restaurants selling wild river fish along the Chishui.

Guizhou also established a whistleblowing mechanism to report illegal fishing. The public can report such cases and sales of wild river fish via WeChat, email and hotlines.

In addition to regularly releasing the fry of rare fish, artificial fish nests covering a total area of more than 5,000 square meters have been established in Guizhou, and 300,000 Chinese sucker fish were released into the Chishui on June 6.

The department said it now monitors the Chishui's fishery resources 60 times a year. However, it added that more efforts are needed to address sporadic occurrences of illegal fishing in the Chishui River Basin.

As well as stepping up law enforcement patrols by various government bodies, Guizhou will accelerate construction of an intelligent surveillance system to automatically report suspected illegal fishing and sand mining, the department said.

It added that the province will carry out joint law enforcement operations with Yunnan and Sichuan to crack down on illegal cross-regional fishing activities.

More coordinated joint efforts are planned in the three provinces, whose legislatures in late May approved a decision to jointly bolster efforts to protect the Chishui River Basin.

The provinces will further promote a damage compensation system to protect and improve the Basin's environment and work together to restore mountains, waterways, forests, farmland, lakes and grassland.



Great egrets inhabit the Chishui River. WANG YUGUI / FOR CHINA DAILY

River: Quality of water improves

From page 1

The environmental protection society was formed in Wuma township in 2017 with just 21 members.

Luo Guohong, 52, its founder, said schools of fish were once a common sight in the clear waters of the Wuma River.

However, in the 1990s, booming coal mining and papermaking industries in the area left the waterway heavily polluted, he said. There used to be 278 paper-making factories in the township, which had a population of more than 30,000, Luo added.

Thanks to efforts by local authorities to shut down polluting enterprises and divert wastewater to sewage disposal plants with the help of an upgraded network of sewer pipes, water quality in the river greatly improved, Luo said.

Despite this positive development, Luo and his friends found that before they established the society, weak environmental protection awareness among residents was a major factor hindering local improvement efforts.

Illegal fishing frequently occurred and many people continued to dump waste and discharge domestic sewage randomly into the waterway.

"Waste could be seen almost everywhere in the river," said Luo, who worked as an auxiliary police officer for more than 20 years before resigning from the post after the society was formed.

The river's water was so dirty that few residents wanted to take part in a boat race he organized during Spring Festival in 2017, Luo said. This made him and his friends more determined to establish the environmental organization.

The first thing members of the society did after it was formed was to advocate an environmentally friendly lifestyle by using loudspeakers fixed to cars and to hand out leaflets in local communities for nearly a month. They often performed such tasks during hot weather that left them bathed in sweat.

Their approach was so unusual to many villagers at the time that the team was referred to by some residents as "a group of people with a mental illness who don't know what to do after they fill their stomachs," Luo said.

Illegal fishing tackled

Undaunted, the team members quickly demonstrated how serious they were in promoting environmental protection by placing themselves at the forefront of a crackdown on illegal fishing.

On Jan 1, 2017, a 10-year fishing moratorium was introduced on the Chishui River, making it the first tributary of the Yangtze where fishing was banned. The prohibition was extended on Jan 1 this year to all the Yangtze's natural waterways.

Yang Liemeng, a founding member of the society who is now in charge of the patrol work, said, "We operate during the

day and also at night to see if there are people fishing illegally."

A liquor dealer with flexible working hours, Yang said he patrols the river whenever he is free.

"As long as I am not away from the township, I will do this," he said, adding that he sometimes drags himself out of bed late at night if he receives a call telling him that someone is fishing illegally.

In the small hours one morning in July, 2018, Yang was punched in the head when he tried to stop a man who was breaching the fishing ban. His injuries were so serious that he required 15 stitches. The man responsible was given 15 days' criminal detention after Yang reported the case to police.

Yang remained determined to continue efforts to restore the river's water quality to its former level.

"During my childhood, the fish occasionally leaped out of the water," he said.

Relatives and friends gave Yang a total of about 8,000 yuan (\$1,238) in cash when they visited him in the hospital, but he donated the money to the society to support its work. In many areas nationwide, it is customary for people to take cash gifts when they visit hospital patients.

After hearing Yang's story, some residents handed in their fishing equipment to the local government and applied to be members of the environmental organization.

According to the society, its member-

ship has risen to more than 500, with each member paying an annual fee of 200 yuan.

Efforts succeed

The persistent efforts of Yang and his colleagues have paid off, as many people who used to be indifferent toward environmental protection have become active participants in the society's work.

Liu Shunli is one of them. In late September, 2017, he was given one month's criminal detention for catching fish by using electricity. Now a member of the society, the 43-year-old often patrols the river at night after finishing his work as a decorator.

"When I was in detention, it gave me time to reflect. I was moved by those members of the society who volunteer to patrol the river," he said, adding that he joined the organization soon after being released.

Liu said he used to fish for fun, as he considered that the fish did not belong to anyone. The environmental organization's advocacy not only changed his view, but also those of many others. "Now, we know it's wrong," Liu said.

The society's influence extends far beyond Wuma. To date, at least another 20 grassroots environmental organizations have been established elsewhere in Renhuai county, according to the local environmental watchdog.

In late June last year, a city-level environmental protection society was established in Zunyi with 300,000 yuan in support from the local government. The new organization's membership includes the Wuma society.

Currently operating mainly in Renhai, the city-level society aims to cover all areas of Zunyi in an effort to tap potential in contributing to environmental conservation, according to Wu Zhengwen, deputy director of the organization's office.

In Wuma, marked environmental improvements can be seen.

Liu said: "The river used to be dirty and its foul smell could be detected far away. Sometimes it was even dotted with dead pigs. Residents upstream threw whatever waste they had into the water."

Now, there is almost no waste in the river, let alone dead pigs, he said, adding that he has seen the population of crucian carp in the waterway rise significantly — a rare occurrence in the past due to rampant illegal fishing.

Guo Xiaoyong, deputy head of the Wuma society, said one of the aims in launching it was to promote coordinated development of the local agriculture and tourism industries in the township. This goal has been achieved to a certain extent.

Thanks to environmental improvements, some local agricultural produce, such as vegetables and fruit, is now exported as green produce. The township also boasts four large rural resorts, while the river attracts at least 7,000 visitors a day.

"The river, which runs through the township, has become something of a local attraction," Guo added.

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Top left and above: Members of the Wuma Environmental Protection Society patrol the Wuma River, a tributary of the Chishui River in Guizhou. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY Top right: Yinshui village in Renhuai is situated in a mountainous area. GUO KUNLIN / FOR CHINA DAILY