



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
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FAO In Action
IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Growing rice and fish – together
A Chinese tradition for 1 000 years*



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CHINA

Zhejiang Province, China – “My son is in Brazil, and my daughter is in Spain,” says Wu Lizhen, a woman in her fifties, from Zhejiang Province’s Qingtian County, an area well-known as the birthplace of many overseas Chinese. Since the late Qing dynasty, many people from Qingtian had escaped poverty by migrating overseas to earn a living. It’s estimated that 230 000 people from this county now live abroad.

In 2005, China’s economy was growing quickly and the pace of outbound migration had been slowing. In Qingtian that was also thanks in part to FAO’s international recognition of a local 1 200 year-old ecological farming system still in use today.

In Wu’s hometown of Longxian village, the farmers combine rice farming with aquaculture, quite literally growing fish in their flooded paddy fields. The rice paddies offer protection and organic food for the fish, while the fish soften the soil and provide nutrients and oxygen for the rice crop. The fish also eat insects and weeds maintaining a perfect ecological balance that improves biodiversity while limiting problems caused by insects and plant diseases.

This ancient farming system has been designated a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by FAO, making Qingtian County famous for something other than emigration, and now well-known for an agricultural system that has stood the test of time and remains in harmony with nature.

New is not always better

“It turns out that our traditional fish-rice farming method is now seen by the world as a 1 000-year-old treasure,” says Wu, a participant and beneficiary of

FAO’s GIAHS programme. “People were so amazed by the beauty and wonder of the rice-fish culture system that our village has become the focus of international attention.”

As Wu’s village became famous, many city dwellers and some foreigners began arriving for holidays. Wu, like many other villagers, recognized that this proud and ancient agricultural tradition was about to improve their 21st century livelihoods. “I seized the opportunity to open the first locally owned and operated restaurant in Longxian village,” says Wu. “I began selling fish produced from the rice fields.”

The five criteria that must be met for GIAHS accreditation:

1. Contributes to food and livelihood security
2. Endowed with biodiversity and ecosystem functions
3. Maintains knowledge & management systems of natural resources
4. Cultures, value-systems and social organizations supported
5. Features remarkable landscapes, land and water resources management

In order to take full advantage of the new GIAHS designation, government experts helped the villagers plan for conservation and expansion. “We formed a special team and we became much more conscious of the importance of native/local plant resources conservation and environmental protection,” says Wu. “Today, many species of birds, like egrets, which had

disappeared for years, are once again seen flying around this area.”

Reducing rural poverty while supporting productive and sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries with GIAHS

Today the entire village is benefitting from the conservation of its agricultural heritage. The fish produced in the paddy fields of Longxian village that once sold for 20 Yuan (US\$2.5) per Kg, today sell for 120 Yuan (US\$19).

“There are now five restaurants run by farmers in the village,” says Wu, “and there is no shortage of customers.” Last year the village received more than 100 000 tourists.

The persistence of traditional farming through the centuries is living proof of a successful indigenous agricultural strategy and a tribute to the “creativity” of small farmers throughout the developing world. Today, millions of small family farmers and indigenous peoples, like Wu and her neighbours, use farming systems that highlight the remarkable resiliency of these agro-ecosystems. They can also contribute to unique rural landscapes that are specific to the region.

While GIAHS contributes to the protection of biodiversity, it also contributes substantially to household food security and traditional cultural heritage.

China – a leader in GIAHS designations

“Qingtian County was the first area in China to receive the GIAHS designation and it has become a base for

research on agricultural techniques and a showcase of traditional agriculture,” says Min Qingwen, Chinese Programme Director of GIAHS and professor of the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. “The traditional wisdom of our ancestors can be seen in this ecological and organic agriculture system. Qingtian is blazing a new path for sustainable agricultural development.”

“The success of Qingtian’s rice-fish culture system is just one example of China’s recent achievements,” says Dai Weidong, Global Environment Facility Programme Coordinator, pointing out that 11 of the world’s GIAHS sites are in China and that China is an active participant in South-South training programmes.

“The agricultural heritage designation from FAO has brought a world of change to Qingtian,” explains Wu. “Now our children don’t have to go abroad to make a living. They can stay here and invest in their future thanks to our heritage.”



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ACHIEVING FAO’S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Work in promoting GIAHS helps to achieve FAO’s second Strategic Objective (SO2), namely, to make agriculture, forestry and fisheries more productive and sustainable.

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