

## ► ILO Brief

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# Good practices using social protection to promote a just transition in China (1): Case study of former Yangtze River fishers

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## ► Context

Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss (referred to as the 'triple planetary crisis' by United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - UNFCCC) have become significant global challenges profoundly affecting people's lives and livelihoods. More frequent occurrence of extreme weather events such as floods and droughts, slow onset changes and the depletion of natural resources pose great threats to the economic development of all countries. Environmental sustainability is a pressing concern for China, which has made major strategic decisions to achieve "carbon dioxide peaking" and "carbon neutrality." These initiatives include lowering the intensity of energy, water, and land use, and enhancing the circular economy and green development to promote harmony between human beings and nature.

In the context of addressing climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss and promoting green development, some groups have faced the risk of unemployment and livelihood difficulties during the transition. China has taken steps to safeguard the immediate and long-term livelihoods of these groups through a series of positive initiatives, including social security measures. This case study focuses on social protection policies developed by the Chinese Government for resettled fishers in the key waters of the Yangtze River Basin. By analyzing the effects of these policies and summarizing China's experience on social protection, the study aims to highlight China's solutions – good practices – to advance the global response to the triple planetary crisis and the realization of a just transition.

## ► The ten-year fishing ban on the Yangtze River

Revered as the "mother river" of the Chinese nation, the Yangtze River is China's longest waterway, boasting a unique ecosystem and rich biological resources. The Yangtze River Basin is the most representative area for showcasing biodiversity in China. However, in recent years, human activities have degraded the ecological function of the Yangtze River, leading to a decline in rare and endemic fish species and creating an urgent need for protection. The phrase 'the more fishing that is done, the fewer the resources are, the worse the ecology gets, and the poorer the fishers become' accurately described the situation in the Yangtze River Basin.

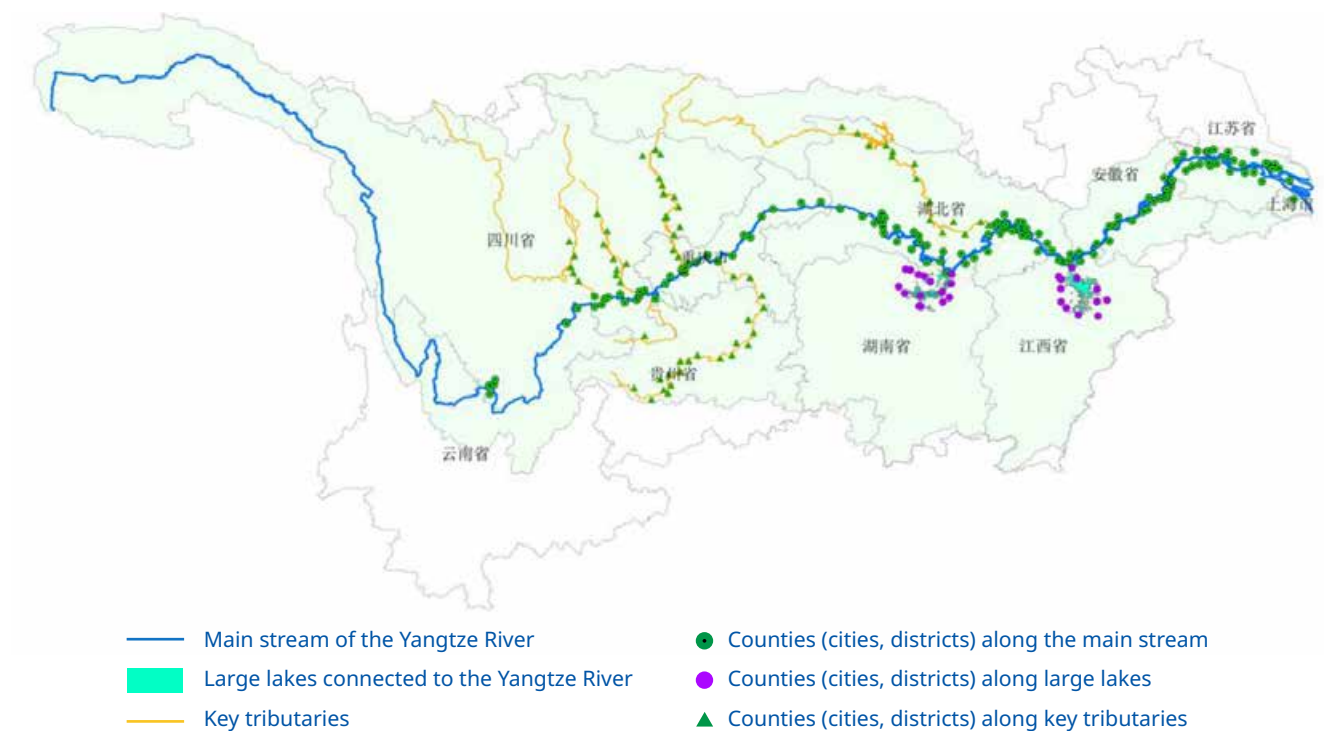
The implementation of the fishing ban on the Yangtze is essential to address the ecological crisis of declining aquatic biological resources and decreasing biodiversity in the Yangtze River Basin. It is also an effective approach to end the dispersed competitive fishing by individual families and alleviate fishers' plight of "no fish in the water and no land on the shore", ultimately serving their long-term interests.

To support the implementation of major strategies for the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt and protect the aquatic biological resources of the Yangtze River Basin, the Chinese Government officially imposed a "ten-year fishing ban" starting on 1 January 2021. This ban enforces a year-round fishing prohibition in key waters of the Yangtze River

Basin for a decade. The ban involves ten provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River (Shanghai, Jiangsu, Anhui, Jiangxi, Hubei, Hunan, Chongqing, Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan), covering 332 aquatic life conservation areas,

the main stream and seven key tributaries of the Yangtze as well as two large lakes connected to it (see figure 1). The ban affected about 231,000 fishers who required resettlement.

► **Figure 1. Map of ten provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River covered by the ten-year fishing ban**



► **Box 1. Main guiding policy documents for the ten-year ban on fishing in the Yangtze River**

In 2020, the General Office of the State Council issued the “Notice on effectively implementing the fishing ban in the Yangtze River Basin”, disseminating action programmes led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the State Administration of Market Regulation (SAMR):

1. Implementation of the fishing ban in key waters of the Yangtze River Basin and the resettlement of fishers - MARA
2. Special action for combating illegal fishing in the Yangtze River Basin - MPS and MARA
3. Special action for combating the market sales of illegally caught fish - SAMR

Additionally, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS) issued several guiding documents to support the transition for fishers affected by the ban:

- Circular on old-age insurance for fishers
- Circular on assistance on employment for fishers
- Circular on vocational skills training for fishers

These documents and programmes were designed to ensure the comprehensive deployment and successful completion of the fishing ban in the Yangtze River Basin on schedule.

## ► Social protection policies and related institutional arrangements

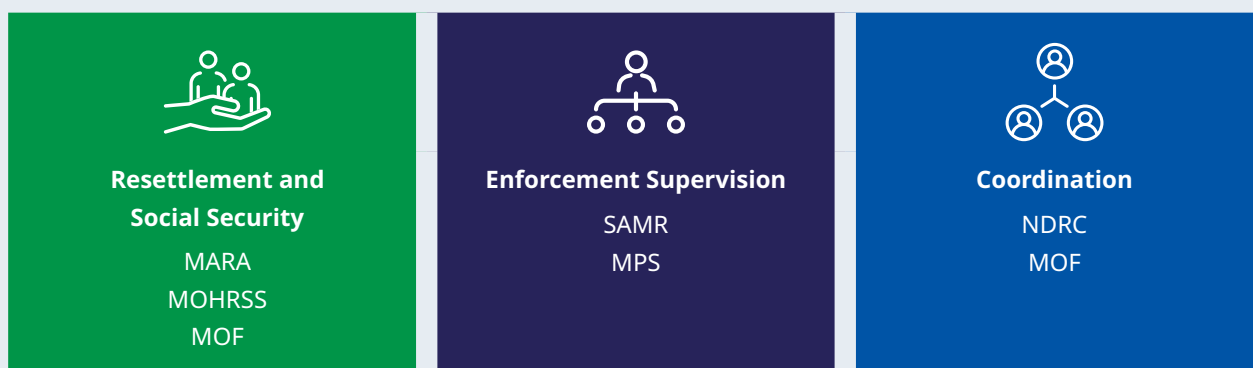
In 2020, MARA, together with other relevant government departments, established a special work group to enforce the fishing ban on the Yangtze River and manage the resettlement of fishers affected by the ban (hereafter referred to as former fishers). The work group convened thematic meetings to clarify the responsibilities and tasks of each department and actively introduced policies, providing solid institutional safeguards for enhancing the prohibition of fishing and incentivizing fishers to go ashore in key waters of the Yangtze River Basin (see figure 2).

Since the implementation of the ten-year fishing ban in the Yangtze River, the State has prioritized the resettlement and protection of the 231,000 former fishers affected. As the leading department for the work of resettlement and social security, MOHRSS has, in collaboration with relevant departments, taken comprehensive measures to promote the employment of former fishers, provided targeted training to enhance their skills, and developed tailored policies to safeguard their rights and interests. Currently, the involved provinces and municipalities have ensured that eligible former fishers are enrolled in basic old-age insurance, and those who meet the conditions for retirement are receiving pension payments and subsidies. Meanwhile, efforts have been made to maximize employment promotion and ensure that former fishers have access to employment services.

### ► Box 2. Main responsibilities among various departments working on the ten-year fishing ban

- **MOHRSS, MARA and Ministry of Finance (MOF)** guide and promote the implementation of policies on resettlement and social security for former fishers.
- **SAMR and MPS** lead enforcement and supervision efforts:
  - SAMR leads special actions to combat the market sale of illegally caught fish in the Yangtze River Basin.
  - MPS leads special actions to combat illegal fishing in the Yangtze River Basin.
- **National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)** coordinates the strategy for green development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt.
- **MOF** coordinates funding arrangements for the fishing ban and the resettlement of former fishers.

### ► Figure 2. Division of responsibilities among the departments working on the ten-year fishing ban



► Table 1. China's basic old-age insurance system

Schemes	Basic old-age insurance for urban employees	Basic old-age insurance for urban and rural residents
<b>Covered groups</b>	Employees of all types of urban enterprises, employees of government and public institutions, and self-employed individuals and flexibly employed workers	Rural and non-working urban residents
<b>Mandatory/voluntary enrolment</b>	<b>Mandatory</b> for employees of enterprises and government and public institutions <b>Voluntary</b> for the self-employed and flexibly employed workers	Voluntary
<b>Number of participants</b>	520 million	545 million
<b>Sources of financing</b>	<b>Employee:</b> joint payments by the employer and the employee <b>Flexibly employed:</b> personal contributions	Government subsidies + personal contributions
<b>Level of financing</b>	<b>Employee:</b> Employer 16% + Employee 8%; <b>Flexibly employed:</b> 20% by the individual	Government subsidy standards vary by region, and individual contribution levels also differ across regions
<b>Eligibility</b>	Reaching the statutory retirement age and meeting the minimum contribution period requirements. <sup>1</sup>	Reaching the age of 60 and having paid contributions for 15 years.
<b>Level of benefit</b>	National average level: 3,100 yuan/month	The level of benefit varies considerably across different regions

Note: Based on the latest available data

## Resettlement and social security: preparatory work

### Communication and awareness raising

Multiple measures have been taken to ensure that former fishers are informed about resettlement and social security policies available to them. These included, specifically, creating policy leaflets and leaving them on the doorstep

of where former fishers live or handing them out individually; communicating policies through door-to-door visits and face-to-face conversations; publicizing policies through channels appropriate to grassroots communities, including via policy briefings, television, rural broadcasts, WeChat public accounts and WeChat groups. These efforts aim to raise former fishers' awareness of relevant policies through comprehensive outreach.

<sup>1</sup> China adopted a decision in September 2024 to gradually raise the retirement age. The statutory retirement age for men will be increased from 60 to 63 over 15 years starting 1 January 2025. For women cadres, the retirement age will be raised from 55 to 58, and for women blue-collar workers, from 50 to 55. Starting in 2030, the minimum years of basic pension contributions required to receive monthly benefits will be gradually increased from 15 to 20 years, at a pace of six months annually. [http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinavoices/2025-01/02/content\\_117641102.html](http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinavoices/2025-01/02/content_117641102.html)



Staff from the Lushan Municipal Human Resources and Social Security Bureau publicizing policies at Ximiao Village Senior Centre, Jiangxi Province, 2020 © MOHRSS

## Accurate identification and data management of former fishers

To ensure the accurate identification of and support for former fishers, China has created a real-name information system to help synchronize the collection, exchange, and verification of information about fishing boats and the resettlement of fishers. This system operates according to the principles of accurate identification, dynamic management, openness and transparency. The system records not only basic information about former fishers but also their skill levels, employment preferences, training needs, and social insurance participation, ensuring up-to-date information on their insurance and employment status.

## Resettlement and social security: specific policy measures

The resettlement and social security support for former fishers consists of four primary areas: old-age insurance, employment assistance, skills training, and social assistance.

### Provision of old-age insurance

In November 2020, the MOHRSS, MOF and MARA issued an implementation plan to guide ten provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River in effectively managing old-age insurance for former fishers.

**First**, eligible former fishers were guided to enrol in the basic old-age insurance in accordance with regulations. Those aged 60 (men) or 55 (women) and over and not yet enrolled were included in the basic old-age insurance for rural and non-working urban residents (residents' old-age insurance). Those younger could choose between basic old-age insurance

for employees (employee old-age insurance) or residents' old-age insurance, as per regulations. This initiative ensured all eligible fishers have basic protection.

**Second**, subsidies have been granted to eligible former fishers for basic old-age insurance contributions. For example, Anhui Province offers 3,000 yuan (approximately USD 410) per person annually for 15 years. Subsidies for residents enrolled in old-age insurance can be credited to their individual accounts, increasing their savings. For flexible workers enrolled in employee old-age insurance, subsidies can be used to make contributions, easing their payment burden. This policy of subsidizing contributions has enhanced old-age protection for former fishers.

**Third**, the local government pays a portion of contributions for former fishers in hardship, according to regulations. Specifically, for those receiving minimum subsistence allowances (dibao), or with severe disabilities, the government covers part or all of the minimum-standard contributions to residents' old-age insurance. This ensures that former fishers in hardship are directly covered, and their basic needs are met.

**Fourth**, old-age insurance administrative services have been improved to ensure timely payment of old-age benefits to eligible former fishers. The information system, launched in 2021, tracks participation, contributions, and benefits, ensuring accurate assistance and timely payouts. Additionally, procedures for old-age insurance services and subsidies have been optimized and simplified. Measures like door-to-door visits, centralized offices, proxy services, rural service delivery, and online services make it easier for former fishers to receive benefits or subsidies through one-stop or online processing.



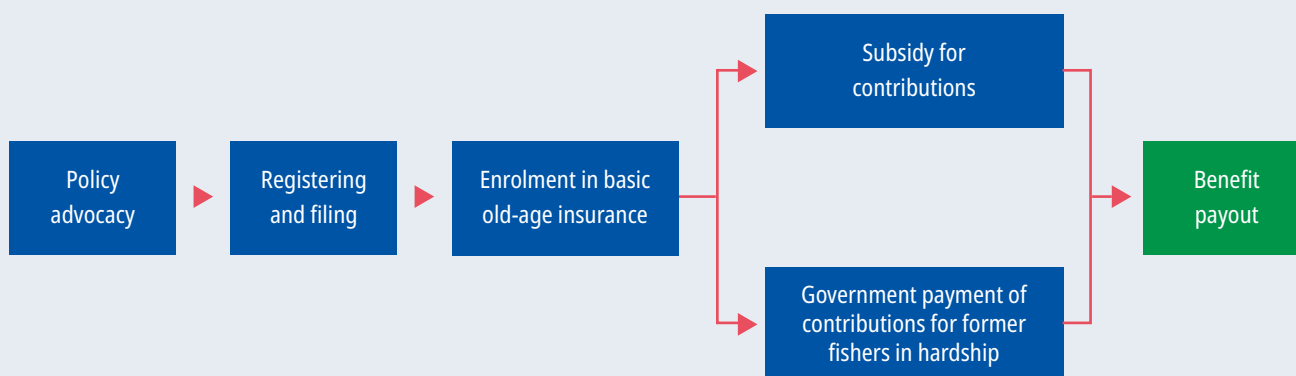
Staff from Yuguan County Social Insurance Administration explaining policies to villagers, Jiangxi Province, 2020 © MOHRSS



► **Box 3. Process for former fishers to receive old-age benefits**

1. **Communication and outreach:** Government departments inform former fishers about social security policies through policy briefings, door-to-door visits, face-to-face conversations, posters, WeChat, and other methods to ensure awareness.
2. **Registering and filing:** Implement real-name management by registering and creating files for former fishers, recording their basic information, skill levels, employment preferences, training needs, and social insurance participation. This lays a solid foundation for targeted resettlement and social protection.
3. **Enrolment:** Guide former fishers to promptly enrol in the basic old-age insurance at the social security office.
4. **Payment of contributions:** There are two main government support policies: government provides subsidies for those enrolled and making contributions; government pays part or all of the minimum-standard contributions to residents' old-age insurance for those facing difficulties (low-income or severely disabled)
5. **Benefit payout:** After reaching the legal retirement age, eligible former fishers can claim for benefits at the social security office and receive their pensions monthly.

► **Figure 3. Step-by-step process for former fishers to receive old-age benefit**



## Employment and entrepreneurship promotion

Targeted resettlement programmes have been developed for fishers to help them shift from fishing to other industries and sectors, along with tailored policies and precise support. There are three main channels of resettlement for former fishers: i) developing local industries; ii) helping former fishers obtain new jobs; and iii) providing support for entrepreneurship. More specifically these involve the following:

- Organizing “employment caravans” and other flexible, diversified special recruitment activities around where former fishers reside, bringing job opportunities directly to individuals and helping them to work in or nearby the places where they live.

- With local realities considered, promoting the employment transition of former fishers by developing special industries such as aquaculture, and special tourism.
- Creating more fishing-related jobs through public employment programmes in fields like fish farming, fish protection and fish processing, considering the old age and the relatively low skills and education levels of some former fishers, making them less competitive with respect to market-oriented employment opportunities; and that due to their previous fishing habits, they are not accustomed to a work environment and the regular work hours of enterprises.

- Encouraging enterprises to hire former fishers by offering subsidies and tax exemptions in accordance with regulations. Additionally, providing one-time subsidies for employment absorption in localities that meet the necessary conditions.
- Supporting former fishers to start their own businesses by providing lump-sum subsidies for entrepreneurship and offering guaranteed loans.



Former fishers at Poyang Lake visiting an enterprise that offers them new employment opportunities, Jiangxi Province, 2021 © MOHRSS

## Improved vocational training

Former fishers are encouraged to develop practical skills, such as aquaculture and aquatic product processing, through vocational training programmes to help them transition to shore-based employment. Jiangxi Province has, in conjunction with the promotion of vocational skills upgrading initiatives, prioritized former fishers for free vocational skills training, ensuring all eligible individuals and their unemployed children receive at least one free vocational training session based on demand, enabling them to master at least one employable skill.



Former fishers participating in a skills-training course, Yongxiu County, Jiangxi Province, 2023 © MOHRSS

## Provision of social assistance

The Ministry of Civil Affairs has implemented various support measures for eligible former fishers, including temporary emergency or expenditure-based financial support, a subsistence allowance (dibao), a relief and support system for people in severe financial hardship, as well as medical assistance, in accordance with regulations. In addition, a national database has been established to dynamically monitor low-income populations, which collects comprehensive information on low-income groups including former fishers in hardship. Information is gathered through self-declaration by applicants, visits to people in financial difficulty and recipients of financial support, and cross-comparison of cross-sectoral data. The database is regularly updated, dynamically adjusted and continuously improved, based on whatever assistance and support is categorized to provide a basic livelihood for former fishers.

► Table 2. Major social assistance programmes available to former fishers

Major social assistance programmes	Description
<b>Emergency assistance</b>	Emergency assistance recipients include families and individuals facing immediate and serious difficulties in their basic living due to sudden accidents such as fire, traffic accidents, personal injuries, drowning, electrocution, or food poisoning. They also include those with sudden major illnesses or accidental injuries that are life-threatening without timely treatment and urgently require funds. Additionally, recipients may be those affected by sudden attacks on planting and farming, natural disasters, accidental disasters, public health crises, public security issues, or other urgent circumstances causing serious temporary difficulties.
<b>Expenditure-based temporary assistance</b>	Transitional assistance is provided to families experiencing severe temporary difficulties in basic living due to a sudden increase in essential household expenses that exceed the family's financial capacity.
<b>Minimum Subsistence Allowance (dibao)</b>	Allowance is provided to families whose annual per capita net income falls below the local minimum living guarantee standard for urban and rural residents. Eligible families can apply for support.
<b>Assistance for people in severe financial hardship</b>	There are assistance standards across different regions for individuals in severe financial hardship. Eligible individuals can apply for support.
<b>Medical assistance</b>	Specialized assistance and support are provided by the State and society to citizens who lack the financial means to seek medical treatment due to poverty. This initiative is typically led by relevant government departments, with broad participation from society. Medical institutions provide treatment to restore the health and maintain the basic survival ability of impoverished patients.

## ► Results of policy implementation

### Outcomes of the resettlement and social security policies

All involved provinces and municipalities have developed and implemented policies for the resettlement and social security for former fishers based on local conditions. Authorities in each area have developed tailored policies on old-age insurance participation and contribution payments, employment transition and skills training, taking into consideration such factors as the number of former fishers, their demographics and regional financial capacities. Years of dedicated efforts have seen the 231,000 former fishers

in key waters of the Yangtze River Basin included in old-age insurance coverage, and they have received subsidies, vocational training and employment support accordingly. These efforts have effectively met planned goals.

**Old-age insurance coverage:** 100 per cent of the former fishers are covered by the basic old-age insurance system.

**Employment:** By the end of 2023, over 100,000 former fishers who wished to be re-employed were resettled. For example, in Jiangxi Province, nearly 50,000 former fishers who were able and willing to work successfully transitioned to employment. Approximately 50% were hired by enterprises, while about 30% became self-employed or found flexible employment.

**Skills training support:** Vocational training was provided to former fishers with the help of subsidy policies. Many areas have developed good practices and experiences in vocational training. For example, in Yongxiu County, Jiangxi Province,



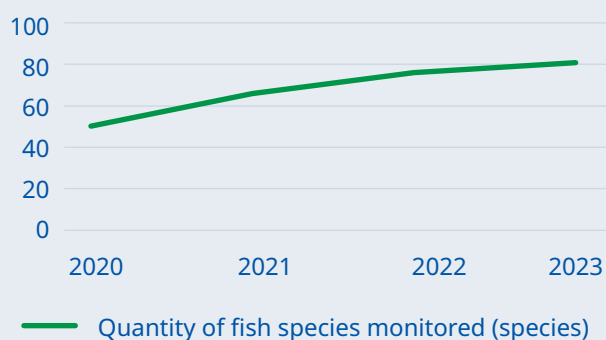
a training course on aquaculture techniques was launched to guide former fishers to engage in rice-shrimp aquaculture, thereby helping to address their basic livelihood needs.

## Outcomes achieved in ecological protection

The ten-year fishing ban has achieved preliminary progress since its full implementation started on 1 January 2021. Overall, rare aquatic organisms have been frequently spotted in the Yangtze River, aquatic resources with economic value have significantly increased, and water quality has continued to improve. More specific examples of progress are detailed below, with a focus on Jiangxi Province.

**Biodiversity is gradually being restored.** Fish stocks in the key Yangtze waters running through the province have partly recovered. According to local monitoring statistics, in 2023, 81 species of indigenous fish were recorded in Poyang Lake, an increase of five species compared to 2022, including rare fish never observed in the last ten years, such as copperheads and large-size cochineal fish (see figure 4).

► **Figure 4. Quantity of fish species monitored in Poyang Lake, 2020-2023**



**The downward trend in aquatic bioresources has been curbed.** The number of migratory and predatory fish has gradually increased, and the trend toward smaller, younger and weaker fish species has declined. Specifically, the length and weight of bighead carp and silver carp have increased, indicating that generally, Poyang Lake provides favorable conditions for fish growth. The rising number of large-size fish and increasing proportion of adult fish reflect the reversal of the younger-age trend.

**Rare and endangered aquatic wildlife has been effectively protected.** Since the implementation of the fishing ban, aquatic wildlife in the natural waters of the Yangtze River Basin has seen further recovery, and the ecological environment of the waters has gradually improved. In 2022, Chinese sturgeon reappeared in Poyang Lake after disappearing for 15 years, and the copper fish was spotted in waters in Jiangxi Province after ten years. Notably, the occurrence rate of swordfish rose to 94 per cent, up from 9 per cent in 2018. In addition, the finless porpoise, often seen with its young, has frequently lived in the waters of the Yangtze in Nanchang, making the Yangtze River a popular attraction for Nanchang residents.



A porpoise diving into the water at Poyang Lake, Jiangxi Province, 2023 © MOHRSS



Xiuhe World Wetland Landscape in the Ganjiang River in Jiujiang City, Jiangxi Province, 2023 © MOHRSS

**The water quality of the Yangtze River has continuously improved.** The amount of phosphorus is an important indicator for measuring water quality. Taking Poyang Lake as an example, after years of unrelenting efforts, the amount of phosphorus in Poyang Lake dropped from 0.068 mg/L in 2021 to 0.059 mg/L in 2023, a decline of 13.2 per cent.

From January to September 2024, the average amount of total phosphorus in Poyang Lake was 0.055 mg/L, a year-on-year decrease of 8.3 per cent.

## ► Lessons learned

### **China adheres to a 'people-centered' principle, prioritizing both the immediate and long-term interests of its people.**

To safeguard the livelihoods of former fishers, address their concerns and ensure that they are willing and able to transition to life onshore, the Chinese Government has consistently adhered to a "people-centered" development approach. This involves conducting in-depth research at the grassroots level, mapping out their actual situation and listening to the demands of the fishers to develop protection policies that align with their real needs. The implementation of these policies has gained the support and understanding of people along the Yangtze River Basin, providing a stable underpinning for the effective enforcement of the ten-year fishing ban on the Yangtze River.

**The protection and development of the Yangtze River are intricately linked, and the key is to balance the relationship between current conditions and needs with the long-term vision, and between treating symptoms and addressing root causes.** President Xi Jinping has convened several symposiums on the development of the Yangtze River Economic Belt, introducing the transformative concept of 'prioritize protection, not large-scale development.' Significant decisions and plans have been made, including the ten-year fishing ban on the Yangtze River. These measures provide a comprehensive solution for the protection and development of the Yangtze River.

Some fishers have expressed their support, saying: "The implementation of the ten-year fishing ban is for the sake of more fish and better water quality; fishing benefits the small family, while fishery protection benefits future generations." Former fishers have now become fishery protectors, and with basic old-age protection, they have transitioned to new livelihoods. Provinces and municipalities along the Yangtze River have restructured the development of green industries, observing the river gradually restoring its health and vitality. This has increased recognition of China's ecological principle that 'clear waters and green mountains are as valuable as gold and silver mountains.' As a result, local governments have reinforced their commitment to enforcing the ten-year fishing ban on the Yangtze River.

**There is a need to emphasize strategic planning and strengthen synergies to guide coordination mechanisms between regions and departments.** The ecological protection of the Yangtze River Basin requires interprovincial and interregional synergies, that is, coordination between areas in the upper and lower reaches of the Yangtze. In addition, the resettlement and social security of former fishers involves the collaboration of multiple ministries. Effective collaboration requires smooth information-sharing among these ministries and reaching a consensus on actions.

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