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## China aims to build the world's largest national park system

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*March 1, 2023*

A conservation plan that is well underway in China puts the country on track to establish the world's largest national park system by 2035. The nation has identified 49 areas as national park candidates, which, together, cover about 1.1 million square kilometers. The plan will leverage community conservation techniques to increase feasibility and disperse the park benefits across society.

Since 2015, China has been promoting its work in growing its unified national park system. That year, it launched 10 pilot parks. About five years later, at the first phase of the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) in October 2021, President Xi Jinping unveiled the first five official parks on the national stage. Keeping the momentum going in 2022, China



*Trails in Baishanzu National Park. Credit: Haijiang Zhang, The Nature Conservancy China*

announced a plan to conserve 1.1 million square kilometers—10.3 percent of the nation's landmass—by 2035, sharing the news at the second meeting of COP15.

Candidate parks were selected based on national representativeness, ecological value, and management feasibility. To be formally established as national parks, the areas need to meet an elaborate set of standards and then maintain those standards in perpetuity or risk losing their status as national parks and the accompanying protections.

The park system will conserve a variety of natural resources. Of the 1.1 million square-kilometer goal, 990,000 square kilometers will be protected land area, while 110 square kilometers will be marine area, spread across the country. The [Qinghai-Tibet Plateau](#), a high-elevation region in southwestern China, houses 13 of the national park candidates. Another 11 are within the Yangtze River Basin and nine are in the Yellow River Basin.

While the goal may seem lofty, the nation is using community conservation techniques to build a robust workforce and maximize equitable outcomes. China's plan calls for a "whole-of-society effort" to

participate in conserving and managing the new park system. Community residents and the public can directly participate in the protection, construction, and management of national parks through concessions, voluntary services, ecological management and protection positions. Thus, the ecosystem benefits are also meant to be shared across society, providing employment, income, and access to natural resources.

One innovative policy mechanism introduced through the park system was highlighted by participants in the International Land Conservation Network's Large Landscape Peer Learning Initiative—which brings together conservationists from across the globe to share ideas and learn alongside each other. Haijiang Zhang, Director of Zhejiang Programs at the Nature Conservancy China (TNC China) and Tong Jin, Science Director at TNC China, shared their work improving planning, natural resource management, education, and volunteering in Baishanzu National Park, where the nation's first conservation easement certificate was issued.

Conservation easement certificates are similar to easements used in the United States—transferring management and use rights, while maintaining an area's original ownership—but are tailored to China's legal landscape, which precludes private land ownership. In Baishanzu, the tool was used to transfer forest management rights from collective forest farmers in Longquan City, Zhejiang Province, to the management unit of Baishanzu National Park. This gives the park managers the ability to conserve about 50 acres of collective forestland in Guanpuyang Village within a proposed national park and provides income to collective landowners.

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