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China Issues First Conservation ‘Easement Certificate’ in Baishanzu National Park

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On April 10th, 2020, China issued the first “easement certificate” in Baishanzu National Park in Zhejiang Province, marking a milestone of several planned steps to enable collective land conservation throughout the country. On the local government-issued certificate, collective forest farmers in Longquan City, Zhejiang Province agreed to transfer the management rights of the forests to the management unit of the Baishanzu National Park, giving the national park managers the ability to conserve 307-mu (approximately 50 acres) of collective forestland in Guanpuyang Village within a proposed national park. While agreements for conservation easement-like relationships have been created previously (for example, Qianjiangyuan National Forest Park, Zhejiang Province, in 2018), this Zhejiang Province easement certificate is the first of its kind issued in China.

In China, an “easement certificate” is issued by a local real estate registration authority to certify a transfer of land management rights from collective forestland owners to a national park management unit after the parties have signed a contract. The issuing forest collective (the grantor) retains its ownership rights and grants an easement to the national park management unit. As the easement grantee, the park management unit gains the right to prohibit land reclamation, excavation, logging, poaching and other activities that damage the ecological integrity of the land.

The aim of an easement certificate is to simultaneously benefit forest farmers and achieve legal, standardized, and long-term land conservation on China’s extensive forestlands, many of which are owned by local forest collectives. In what was previously called the Baishanzu National Nature Reserve, collective forestland in Longquan accounted for about half of the overall planned and core area of the national park, involving 3,008 people in 3 townships and 14 villages.

As part of China’s ongoing national park system pilot, the newly created Qianjiangyuan-Baishanzu National Park consolidated several protected areas, such as Qianjiangyuan National Forest Park, Fengyangshan-Baishanzu National Nature Reserve and Gutianshan National Nature Reserve. The goal is to improve conservation effectiveness through unified stewardship of natural resources across China’s diverse ecosystems. Such effective practice will include the use of tools such as easement certificates that allow national park managers to partner with local stakeholders and civil society in broad-ranging conservation efforts.

Dr. Sabrina Wei, a law professor at Beijing Forestry University and a 2019-2020 visiting scholar at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, has advised the Lishui Forestry Bureau in Zhejiang Province with The Nature Conservancy China on easement reform. Particularly in southern China, where the percentage of collective forestland is greater than the percentage of state-owned forestland, the use of conservation easements may be a more suitable and sustainable tool to protect forestland of importance. Dr. Wei, together with conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy China, will continue to work with governments and collectives to advance collective land conservation in China through the use and improvement of conservation easements; signing land conservation-related agreements; tracking easement management and contract performance; carrying out capacity building and training; formulating monitoring and supervision standards; and conducting evaluations of pilot projects.

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