



27 February 2014



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Is China Really on Track for a Forested Future?

Stian Reklev & Kathy Chen

China is on track to meet its 2020 target for expanding the nation's forests to cover 23 per cent of its landmass to combat climate change and soil erosion, the State Forestry Administration said on Tuesday.

But some observers are critical of the massive reforestation, saying China is focusing on plantation forestry and ignoring the restoration of natural forests, which are still being lost.

Since 2008, China has planted 13 million hectares (130,000 square kms) of new forests, roughly the size of Montenegro, taking total forest coverage to 208 million hectares (two million sq kms) or just over 21 per cent of its landmass.

"We have completed 60 per cent of our task to meet the target for forest coverage and aim at 23 per cent (of the landmass) by 2020," Zhao Shucong, the director of the SFA, told reporters in Beijing.

China launched its reforestation program in 1998, after devastating flooding of the Yangtze river was blamed on the loss of trees, which previously had acted as flood barriers.

Large-scale deforestation in northern China has contributed to loss of topsoil, causing huge storms that sometimes carry sand and dust as far as eastern Canada.

By regrowing its forests quickly, they now help conserve 581 billion cubic metres of water each year, while storing 8.4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent that otherwise would be released into the atmosphere, according to the SFA.

Reforestation has also contributed to the growth in China's domestic timber industry.

But some experts question the sustainability of China's forestry program, arguing it focuses almost exclusively on plantation forestry and ignores restoration of natural forests.

"The SFA only looks at forested land, but they forget the full picture," Xu Jianchu, a professor at the Kunming Institute of Botany, Chinese Academy of Sciences, told Reuters.

He said most of the new forested land was low-quality, and pointed out that while new trees are planted rapidly, data shows that forest loss in many areas of China is increasing

Local authorities often choose to plant non-native species such as fruit trees and rubber in order to maximise economic benefits, instead of opting for trees naturally suited to local areas.

In arid and semi-arid regions, this has often worsened soil erosion and water scarcity instead of solving it, adding to food production problems.



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"They should also look at agriculture, and treat the ecosystem as a whole," said Xu.

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Richard P. Vlosky, Ph.D.
Director Louisiana Forest Products Development Center
Crosby Land & Resources Endowed Professor of Forest Sector Business Development
Room 227, School of Renewable Natural Resources
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
Phone (office): (225) 578-4527
Fax: (225) 578-4251
Mobile Phone: (225) 223-1931

