

Conclusion Event for Coastal Wetland Conservation Blueprint Projects
Remarks by Henry M. Paulson, Jr.
October 19, 2015

The conclusion of the Coastal Wetland Conservation Blueprint project is an important milestone for conservation in China.

Over the past 20 months, six groups of experts and scientists have been working hard on this project. They have developed a comprehensive understanding of the current situation of the coastal wetlands in China by mapping the biodiversity and threats to these conservation targets. They then identified 180 priority conservation sites including 11 most important habitats for migratory birds. Based on the scientific analysis, they have produced a set of policy recommendations for the Chinese government.

Thanks to all partner institutions and experts who have contributed to the success of this project. My special thanks goes to academician Chen Yiyu and to Ma Guangren for their leadership. I am also grateful to my friend Niu Gengsheng for his generous financial support for this project.

Coastal wetlands are the source of abundant biodiversity and valuable ecological services, which support human livelihoods and contribute to our long-term prosperity— both economic and social. For example, coastal wetlands, such as mangrove forest, sea grass and intertidal mudflats can sink carbon and protect coastal communities from sea level rise and severe weather events due to the global warming. Therefore, conservation and restoration of coastal wetlands is a nature-based solution for climate change.

Given the importance of coastal wetlands to ecological and economic health, the findings of this project are very concerning: Coastal wetlands in China are the most threatened but least protected wetlands compared to other ecosystems in China.

In fact, China has lost more than 60% of its natural coastal wetlands to economic development since the 1950s, and the speed and scale of coastal wetland reclamation in the past 15 years is especially stunning. Due to this over-reclamation of coastal wetlands, we have already begun to see adverse socioeconomic and ecological consequences.

To meet the targets of China's "ecological civilization" efforts, and to support sustainable development, the Chinese government at all levels must place a high priority on protecting its natural capital. This can be achieved through conservation initiatives including the protection and restoration of coastal wetland ecosystems. I urge the Chinese government take immediate action to fill conservation gaps in the most important coastal wetlands, including the 12 critical habitats for migratory birds identified by the blueprint project.

As many of you know, I'm a lifelong conservationist. But I've also spent much of my life focused on economic and financial issues. In other words, I value economic growth and progress. But, I strongly believe that economic growth and nature conservation must go hand-in-hand.

I know that the coastal region of China is home to 40% of the country's population, and that its economy is very important: the region produces roughly 60% of national GDP. But China must play the "long game." For the long-term economic prosperity of the region and wellbeing of current and future generations of people who call this region home, it is time to re-think the economic development model of the past and take decisive actions toward a more sustainable economic transition. I suggest that conservation and restoration of the coastal wetland become an integral part of the economic development activities in the coastal region.

As global citizens, we share our world's limited and valuable natural resources. As such, we all have a responsibility to act as good environmental stewards. I also believe that the United States and China, the world's two largest economies, have complementary interests and shared responsibility to protect the ecological wealth of the planet including coastal wetlands.

These are critical, life-supporting habitats that sustain irreplaceable biodiversity, including millions of migratory water birds, along with many unique species of plants and other animals. The water birds that migrate across the Pacific Ocean are the ecological link between China and the United States.

In his recent state visit to the United State, President Xi Jinping called on the United States and China to expand areas of collaboration between our two countries. I am encouraged by his efforts to enhance the US-China relationship. I had the honor of co-hosting a roundtable discussion of US and Chinese CEOs during President Xi's stop in Seattle, and I was very pleased to see executives from 30 large US and Chinese companies discuss how our countries can work more closely together to enhance bilateral economic corporation.

I am committed to playing a similar role to enhance collaboration between our countries on conservation efforts, including the conservation and restoration of China's coastal wetlands.

This Blueprint project has produced a comprehensive technical report, a set of policy recommendations and a brochure for public education. I again offer my congratulations for the success of this important project. I look forward to continued work between the Paulson Institute and its partners to make meaningful progress on conservation and restoration of the coastal wetlands in China.