



Chief Conservation Officer Huidong Wang, China Healthy Rivers Team Lead Yang Bo, and Regional Lead Marianne Shaw complete an interested parties empathy activity.

Collaborative Currents: How Cross-Team Efforts Shape the Next Wave of Healthy Rivers Strategy in China

Successful Multi-Team Collaboration Develops Strategy to Restore the Health of Asia's Longest River

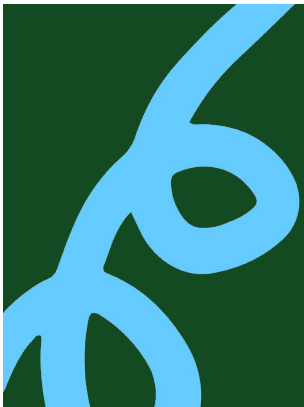
TEAM + STRATEGY: China Healthy Rivers

COLLABORATIVE TEAM PARTNERS AND ROLES:

- The China Healthy Rivers Team led by Yang Bo
- The Agility Lab, Alexia Preston, Sarah Ngo, Camilla Zanzanaini, and Becky Reed
- China Science Team, including Jin Tong, Luo Yongmei, Wang Longzhu, and Peng Yunyue
- MEL Leadership, Rhita Simorangkir
- Strategy and Planning Leadership, Wang Yue
- Regional Systems and Operations, Marianne Shaw

As Asia's longest river, the Yangtze River in China represents a vital resource, providing more than one-third of the nation's water. Stretching 6,300 kilometers across 11 provinces, the waterway is inseparable from the country's economic development. Rapid infrastructure development in the expansive Yangtze River basin has had significant environmental costs. Hydropower dams have severely disrupted the river's flow, and 40% of China's wastewater is dumped in the river, seriously degrading the river's ecological health, biodiversity, and the country's water supply. The country is also working to save the river, and some initiatives, such as the fishing ban, are underway.

The Nature Conservancy's China Healthy Rivers Team is working at the heart of this complex issue alongside numerous partners. The team is leading groundbreaking efforts to demonstrate how to balance development and conservation along the Yangtze River, starting with a healthy river pilot case in the Chishuihe, a major tributary of the upper Yangtze. By introducing and localizing international best practices, the team is working to restore the river's ecological health and mitigate the impacts of future growth in the basin. "We really hope that in the future, the river is free flowing and the fish come back, the freshwater biodiversity is restored, and the people along the river can benefit from the environment and the ecology," China Healthy Rivers Team Lead Bo Yang says.



“We think that conservation and development in China — we not call it ‘green development’ — are really linked together, and can result in durable protection of the river.”

— Yang Bo, China Healthy Rivers Team Lead

In the summer of 2024, several TNC teams collaborated to support the Healthy Rivers team in updating its strategy. This far-reaching effort included refreshing the team's Theory of Change (ToC), developing its Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plan, creating a path to report near-term progress in the HUB, and laying the foundation for the work for years to come. In this article, we hear from the many voices and teams who helped bring this collaboration to life and shape the resulting strategy to save the Yangtze River.

Focused Period on Cross-Team Strategy Drives Accelerated and Aligned Progress on Impact Goals

As part of its effort to measurably improve river ecosystem health, the team seeks to work closely with key sectors and partners to improve the management and governance for 1,000 kilometers of healthy rivers by 2030. Recognizing that saving the river requires collective action, the team is focused on developing proven strategies for working with partners that can be replicated throughout the Yangtze River Basin.

"It seems like people all agree on the significance of this river basin and people understand all of the challenges and the stress it is facing, but it's super complex and super complicated," Strategy and Planning Director Wang Yue says. "And it's unclear to people what strategies we have to really have a role in addressing this very complex system across this very large river basin."



The China Healthy Rivers Team completed a logic review as part of its refreshed TOC.

The team set a goal to update its ToC and develop its MEL plan as part of its annual review. The group started by reflecting on the program to date, discussing learnings, and identifying what they wanted to take forward into the ToC update. The team then came together on-site to discuss the ToC, work out specific needs around its policy logic chain, and bridge the ToC work into the development of the MEL plan.

“Camilla [Zanzanaini], the facilitator, was able to ask the right questions and guide you through the thinking process so that you could actually map out all the important parts step by step,” says Marianne Shaw, AP Director of Conservation Systems & Project Management. “Sometimes we just all have it in our heads, but don’t know how to write it out.”

Alexia Preston, Agility Lab Lead for Asia Pacific, emphasized the team’s commitment to strengthening its strategy. “I think there are three important pieces that this team committed to: reflecting on progress to date, developing early measures of success that enable adaptive management, and taking the team’s work from its Theory of Change directly into its MEL plan,” Preston says.

For the team’s MEL plan development, Conservation Information and Strategy Senior Manager Yongmei Luo and Asia Pacific MEL Lead Rhita Simorangkir offered support and coaching along the way. With the good foundation provided by the ToC, the Healthy Rivers Team, and the Science Team formed a group of five people to start developing the MEL plan. Luo said the team reviewed the ToC, started discussing how to measure IRs and outcomes, and with Simorangkir’s advice, started thinking about which outputs are leading the IRs. After several discussions and incremental refinements, the team developed specific metrics and data sources, timelines, and owners for the project’s outcomes, IRs, and outputs.

“Throughout the process, the team members’ clear consensus on the ToC made the discussions very effective, and Rhita’s off-site facilitation was important as her questions and suggestions guided us in the right direction of thinking,” Luo says. “In addition, the science team’s experience in biodiversity monitoring was very helpful in developing the data collection methodology for the MEL.”

Luo says that in the subsequent process of developing a work plan and budget for the near term based on the MEL, the team realized that some necessary outputs had been omitted in the previous discussion and then added them to the MEL plan.

Simorangkir says that the China Freshwater team showed a strong commitment to revamping and crystalizing its strategy into a tangible ToC and MEL plan.

“It was an intensive process with a lot of hard and thoughtful decision making along the way,” Simorangkir says. “I am incredibly honored to support this team and excited to see the plan got implemented.”

With the team’s work in hand, Shaw looked to best represent the progress against the updated strategy and the MEL plan in the HUB. The process considered both early intermediate results to help with adaptive management and the core longer-term intermediate results.

A Resilient Future for China’s Yangtze River

Yang says the facilitated time for collective reflection and strategizing helped the team clearly identify its goals, set metrics and indicators, and determine steps for scaling up — all while linking the many complex pieces involved. She says the team enjoyed the process and that the refreshed ToC clarified the team’s strategy which is essential not only for the team and its collaborators, but also key as the team prepares proposals and grows the project moving forward. “We really refreshed [all these components], making it simple for the media, our internal teams, collaborators, and other people to all get a clear understanding about what’s next for China Healthy Rivers,” Yang says.

Wang says because the process was a collective effort that involved multiple teams, including members of the China Healthy Rivers Team, the China program’s Science Team, and the Regional Team, it has also helped create a consistent understanding regarding the team’s work within TNC.

“The Agility Lab facilitators are more like a third eye to these conservation strategies,” Wang says. “I think through this process of gathering people from multiple teams they can improve the narrative-building for the strategy to make it clear to everyone.”

As part of its work to develop and model partnerships, the team is engaging with environmental flow training, dam removal consultation, national river restoration policy, and mechanisms for OECM. Yang says the partnerships and collaborations are a long-term effort, not something “built in a day.” She says the team expects the pilot to provide a good model that can be shared with others along the Yangtze River, so the management improvements underway on the Chishuihe tributary can be replicated elsewhere on the river. For Yang, having a clear strategy in place means the team is set up for the future it is working to build.

“The next team doesn’t need to struggle about what to do and how to do it — that is already there. The partnerships are there, the goals are there, the strategies are there, and the pathway is very clear.”



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