

GLOBAL VIEWS

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Of critical importance

The 15th Five-Year Plan will be a key blueprint to enable the country to achieve its dual carbon goals

On an inspection tour of a rural river in Hunan province in 2022, several years after China implemented the lifetime accountability measures for eco-environmental damages for local officials, making them directly responsible for any ecological misgovernance committed on their watch, a prefecture Party secretary responsible for the river pointed with pride at the good work and exclaimed, “The countryside is red and green!”

Is there anything more pleasing to the heart and mind than hearing that from a local official? China has upgraded the lifetime accountability system, from a single-point approach to system-wide governance, expanding responsibility content from post-event accountability to full-cycle management, forming a closed-loop responsibility system.

China began to systematically plan its national environmental strategies following the landmark United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. This conference, inspiring “China’s Agenda 21: White Paper on China’s Population, Environment and Development in the 21st Century” (1994), is now regarded as a visionary shift in development philosophy, bearing its first fruits in the 10th Five-Year Plan (2001-05), which clearly established sustainable development as a national strategy. Major steps forward came with the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-10), which set binding targets to reduce energy consumption per unit of GDP by about 20 percent and total major pollutant emissions by 10 percent.

This brings us to the new era. The 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-15) was designated as the first “green development plan”, proposing a systematic green development strategy and expanding associated ecological indicators. It was during this period, China saw the lifetime accountability measures implemented for eco-environmental damages and a corner turned in major cities, including Beijing and Shanghai, which had experienced air pollution peaks in 2013. Thereafter, in the 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-20), green develop-



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ment became a primary theme. In other words, the plan specifically included the goal of “overall improvement in ecological and environmental quality”, and moved to integrate green values with all aspects of economic and social development. This set the stage for the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) and its task of promoting the comprehensive green transformation of economic and social development, formulating an action plan for peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and advancing the battle against pollution.

Reviewing some of the key green achievements that previous plans have helped produce through the years, it is clear why they have been described as helping produce a systematic and comprehensive carbon reduction top-level design and policy system.

China has established the world’s largest and fastest-growing renewable energy system. It has become the global leader in electric vehicles, batteries and charging networks.

As of September, non-fossil energy accounted for over 60 percent of China’s total installed power generation capacity, while its production of solar and wind energy systems has lowered global costs by 60 percent and 80 percent respectively. Meanwhile, 52 projects advancing integrated land-water-grassland restoration have protected or restored more than 120 million *mu* (8 million hectares).

According to a report on last year’s environmental protection efforts submitted to China’s top

lawmakers for deliberation in April, China reported steady progress in air quality in 2024, as the proportion of days with good air quality reached 87.2 percent, up 1.7 percentage points from the previous year, while the proportion of heavily polluted days fell by 0.7 percentage points to 0.9 percent. All the environmental quality improvement targets for 2024 were met, surpassing the scheduled progress outlined in the 14th Five-Year Plan. And public eco-satisfaction reached 91.24 percent, surpassing 90 percent for the fourth year running.

Over this same period, China also committed to the dual carbon goals of peaking carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060, which are being supported by the establishment of the world’s largest carbon market in 2021. Given the special attention to climate change concerns for the Global South, China has provided more than \$24.5 billion in climate funding for other developing countries since 2016. Global green cooperation efforts have been further enhanced by the green Belt and Road tech list, including 417 sustainable technologies shared with countries around the world.

In September, China announced its new 2035 Nationally Determined Contributions: “China will, by 2035, reduce economy-wide net greenhouse gas emissions by 7 percent to 10 percent from peak levels, striving to do better ...” This marks a major strategic shift, China’s first absolute emissions reduction target covering the entire economy and including all greenhouse gases, not just carbon dioxide. It’s estimated that achieving these targets will require cutting over 10 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent.

Furthermore, China aims to increase the share of non-fossil fuels in total energy consumption to more than 30 percent by 2035, expanding the installed capacity of wind and solar power to be about 3.6 billion kilowatts, over six times the 2020 level. These are a few of the key targets, intended to produce a climate-adaptive society by 2035, one that is capable of climate resilience, including preventing disasters associated with growing incidences of extreme weather, as well as sustaining economic development and national rejuvenation.

The 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) will take decisive steps toward realizing key green targets, including those highlighted by the NDCs. Indeed, the Communist Party of China Central Committee’s recently unveiled recommendations for formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan emphasize implementing a dual-control system for both carbon emissions intensity and total volume, deepening energy-saving and carbon-reduction renovations, and promoting the green and low-carbon transformation of the energy system. Already, China is steadily working to expand its national carbon emissions trading market, which currently covers the power, steel, cement and aluminum smelting sectors. The goal is to gradually include more high-emissions industries and to transition from intensity-based control to a total emissions cap. As for building a climate-adaptive society, 31 provincial-level regions have developed their own action plans, with 39 cities piloting climate adaptation measures.

China continues to take greater steps toward building a community with a shared future for humanity, ensuring the grass is greener all the way down to the grassroots. And other countries should work with China to build a green future.

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JIN DING / CHINA DAILY

ZHANG LI

Variety safeguards

China has signaled that it will intensify its biodiversity protection efforts over the coming five years

China’s vigorous ecological policies, formulated for years have provided a solid guarantee for the country’s protection of biodiversity. Now comes the new, crucial phase of development to balance quantitative with qualitative advantages —

measurable and verifiable ecosystem health, functional integrity, and species recovery results — and to focus on the strategy, priority

and governance modernization spelled out at the fourth plenary session of the 20th Communist Party of China Central Committee.

Over the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25) period, biodiversity has been one of the priorities of China’s development blueprint. The plan’s emphasis on building an “ecological civilization” integrates species protection, ecosystem restoration and sustainable development across sectors.

Among the most important steps taken during the past five years were the publication of the White Paper on Biodiversity Conservation in China, the gradual establishment of a comprehensive national park system and the formal delineation of ecological red-line areas, which cover a substantial share of the country’s territory. Also, more than 30 environmental laws and regulations have been promulgated or amended, thus achieving reinforced regulation and building an institutional foundation for biodiversity governance and environmental protection at various levels.

Importantly, the recently concluded fourth plenary session emphasized high-quality development, people’s well-being, innovation, ecological security shields and green development. This signals the expectation that biodiversity protection must now be situated within the broader push for a modernized, high-quality socioeconomic system in China.

Scientific evidence and research show substantial, significant expansion and systematic optimization of protected areas and conservation zones throughout this critical period. The newly designated and established national park system now effectively connects key habitats and essential ecosystems for iconic and endangered species including the giant panda, Amur tiger, Asian elephant and snow leopard, helping mitigate habitat fragmentation and ecological disconnection across multiple provinces and regional boundaries.

Scientific studies and field investigations confirm that ecological connectivity — the establishment and maintenance of corridors connecting mountains, forests, wetlands and river basins — has substantially improved both habitat quality and species resilience across diverse landscapes. However, while protected land exceeded 18 percent of the nation’s land areas by

the end of 2021, experts increasingly emphasize that future success must be evaluated primarily by tangible biodiversity outcomes — including measurable species recovery rates, the preservation and enhancement of genetic diversity within populations, and the overall functionality and health of ecosystems — rather than merely by the total acreage or geographical extent of protected areas alone.

The government’s commitment to dual carbon targets — peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060 — has spurred integrated nature-based solutions. Restoration projects in the Yangtze River and Yellow River basins, for instance, combine carbon sequestration, water regulation and species richness. Provinces such as Yunnan, Hainan and Zhejiang have launched “ecological civilization pilot zones” linking biodiversity management with tourism, carbon trading and sustainable agriculture. At the same time, biodiversity finance is gaining momentum. Several provinces are testing eco-compensation and biodiversity-credit schemes, aligning local conservation with green-finance mechanisms.

With the 20th CPC Central Committee having approved the Recommendations for Formulating the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) at the fourth plenary session, biodiversity conservation must now be fully embedded within that planning horizon — advancing from frameworks to outcome-oriented integration with national development.

The public advocacy for the environment has never been larger or more thriving than it is now. Natural science curricula, volunteer programs and comprehensive school biology education have been widely growing and prevalent across both urban and rural areas. Such grassroots campaigns and local movements are cultivating and solidifying the general public opinion and social consensus that protection of nature and biodiversity is not just the duty of the government but the shared responsibility and social commitment of everyone in society.

The challenges and priorities for the next five years are: First, China should focus on quality, not only coverage. The next five-year plan should include measurable biodiversity indicators — population trends, ecological connectivity and ecosystem health — to ensure tangible outcomes, aligning with the plenary session’s call for people-centered, high-quality development.

Second, biodiversity must be integrated into land-use, industrial policy and high-quality development. Infrastructure, agriculture and urban-expansion projects must undergo biodiversity-risk screening, and adopt “no-net-loss” and ecological compensation principles. As the Central Committee emphasized modernizing the industrial

system and promoting innovation, biodiversity must be integrated into these pathways.

Third, ecological restoration and network connectivity should be accelerated. Large-scale, science-based restoration is needed in degraded grasslands, wetlands and river systems, with strong monitoring and community participation.

Fourth, China must expand marine and freshwater conservation. Coastal and inland aquatic ecosystems face critical threats. The next planning cycle must explicitly elevate marine and freshwater biodiversity to the same status as terrestrial systems.

Fifth, biodiversity finance and market mechanisms must be mobilized. Green bonds, biodiversity funds and payment for ecosystem services programs should be integrated, and biodiversity credits should be internalized into environmental, social and governance criteria.

Last but not least, data infrastructure and monitoring should be strengthened, and adaptive governance and transparency should be enhanced. Reporting via national biodiversity monitoring platforms should be made through the real-time integration of remote sensing, artificial intelligence and local citizen data, enabling the real-time revision of policy. Greater transparency and participation support the plenary’s call to innovate and modernize governance and people-centered development.

Given the national policy, legislation and institutional foundation of biodiversity conservation being well-established at different levels of governance, China has a great chance to lead implementation through scientific monitoring, continuous resource mobilization and further international collaboration to realize notable conservation achievements.

By expanding and innovating its green finance mechanisms and deepening community engagement initiatives, China can not only achieve its own ecological security and biodiversity conservation goals, but also play a pivotal role in setting both the national and international biodiversity agenda, thereby turning high-level commitments into concrete, measurable reality for the benefit of both people and planet.

The next five years will mark a fundamental and strategic shift from a focus on quantitative metrics to an emphasis on qualitative outcomes — moving beyond the simple expansion of broad geographical coverage to achieving measurable, scientifically verifiable ecological recovery and the restoration of ecosystem health.

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