

Payments to rural communities offer a new opportunity to restore China's native forests

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Patches of reforested land alongside farms in Sichuan Province, China. Reforestation in China often uses single species rather than the range of species found in the original native forests. Credit: Fangyuan Hua

Despite massive efforts at reforestation, China's native forests continue to be displaced by plantations. A new study by researchers from the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), Kunming Institute of Botany (KIB), Princeton University, and Sun Yat-sen University argues that rural communities could help reverse this trend if they were given incentives to protect and restore native forests on their own land.

"Land collectively owned by [rural communities](#) accounts for 60% of China's [forest](#) land and the vast majority of China's newly-established forest cover" said Fangyuan Hua, a Newton International Fellow at the University of Cambridge and lead author of the study. "However, existing forest policies largely neglect collectively-owned lands and provide no mechanism for restoring [native forests](#) on them".

Partly as a result, even as China's total forest cover has increased over the past 20 years, it has continued to lose native forests. The authors of the new study, published today in *Conservation Letters*, say that this has had negative impacts for both biodiversity and ecosystem health. The researchers argue that properly designed compensation schemes could incentivize the protection and restoration of native forests on collective land.

"China already operates forest compensation schemes - that is, policies which pay farmers to protect and restore forests" said Jianchu Xu of ICRAF and KIB, and a co-author of the study. "However, these programmes need to directly assess the ecological services provided by native forests, such as biodiversity conservation or soil and water retention - and pay farmers accordingly".



Bamboo forest in Sichuan Province, China. Reforestation in China often uses single species rather than the range of species found in the original native forests. Credit: Fangyuan Hua

According to the authors, one major issue with China's current compensation schemes is that their implementation typically relies on the simple metric of [forest cover](#) and ignores biodiversity. Restoration efforts therefore often establish areas of simple or monoculture tree cover, rather than taking on the more challenging task of restoring diverse native forest.

The new research identifies a major new policy proposal called the

Mechanism of Compensation for Ecological Protection (MCEP) as a potential opportunity for reform. The MCEP is intended to be an umbrella policy for ecosystem protection in China. While it currently suffers from many of the same flaws as its predecessors, it is still under development and could be amended to promote native forest recovery.

"The MCEP offers a chance for the Chinese government to establish effective, socially just [compensation](#) standards for native forest restoration" said Hua. "Rural communities would receive badly-needed income, while benefits such as improved soil health, greater biodiversity and reduced erosion would benefit society as a whole. China should not let this opportunity slip away".



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