

China must lead by example to make the 2022 biodiversity talks succeed



LIFE | COMMENT 29 December 2021

By [Graham Lawton](#)



Yang Zheng/VCG via Getty Images

WHEN it comes to selecting venues for crunch talks on the future of the planet, the United Nations does a nice – if possibly unintentional – line in irony. Much was made of last year's decision to hold the [COP26 climate talks in the UK](#), which as the cradle of the industrial revolution is arguably also the birthplace of climate change. There are similar, more recent, historical ironies in the choice of Kunming, China, for [negotiations of global biodiversity targets](#). Kunming is the capital of Yunnan province, the [most likely evolutionary home of SARS-CoV-2](#), a virus that has been described as the first global blowback from the biodiversity crisis.

Location does matter. The expectation is that the host nation will set the tone, lead by example and cajole other nations into going the extra mile. China has been [criticised for a vacuum of leadership in the build-up to Kunming](#). It has a reputation as being part of the problem rather than part of the solution, with rampant infrastructure development, rising greenhouse gas emissions, poor air quality and an exploitative relationship with

nature. Its most famous animal, the giant panda, has long been a symbol of endangered species. Its second-most famous, the [Yangtze river dolphin](#), is almost certainly extinct. And it talks about creating an “ecological civilisation” while exporting its environmental problems on the back of its global belt and road project, say critics.

Although similar charges can be levelled at most Western countries, this is extremely discouraging because the talks in Kunming are crucial to the future of the natural world. They will aim to create a new agreement for the protection of biodiversity to replace the [2010 Aichi targets](#), which expired completely unfulfilled at the end of 2020. New targets were supposed to be negotiated early last year, but the talks were postponed due to covid-19. Right now, there are no targets, and the 2030 deadline to reverse the destruction of nature is looming.

There has been some progress. Preliminary talks in October produced a [draft agreement that conservation group WWF gave a cautious thumbs-up to](#). Omicron permitting, negotiations will reconvene in Kunming in April and May.

There is still room for a great leap forward. China actually has a positive story to tell. It is a biodiversity treasure trove, one of just 17 “[mega-biodiverse countries](#)” recognised by the United Nations Environment Programme. To qualify, a country must have very high levels of biological diversity including many species found nowhere else; the minimum entry requirement is 5000 endemic species of plant. Between them, the [17 mega-biodiverse countries are home to 70 per cent of global](#) biodiversity on just 10 per cent of the world’s land surface. China alone has 10 per cent of all plant species and 14 per cent of animal species.

“China is one of 17 mega-biodiverse countries. It has 10 per cent of all plant species and 14 per cent of animals”

Until recently, China’s protection of its biodiversity has been haphazard, a patchwork of more than 10,000 often poorly managed national and regional parks under various jurisdictions. But in 2017, [the government revealed plans to consolidate](#) much of this into a system of 10 national parks. In October 2021, it [announced that the first five of these were now a reality](#), covering 230,000 square kilometres and conserving nearly 30 per cent of the country’s key terrestrial species. That includes giant pandas, Siberian tigers and leopards and the world’s rarest ape, the [Hainan gibbon](#).

This is clearly an upgrade on what has gone before. According to [Guangyu Wang at the National Park Research Centre at the University of British Columbia in Canada](#), it represents a break from decades of policies prioritising economic growth over ecological health. It could also act as a model for other mega-biodiverse countries – notably Indonesia – to upgrade their own fragmented national park systems.

However, two of the five national parks “announced” in October already existed, and all

five cover just 2.5 per cent of China's land, whereas conservation biologists (and the draft agreement) say that at least 30 per cent must be protected globally. What's more, scientists says that protecting charismatic species and environments matters less than a joined-up approach to [protecting all of biodiversity](#).

In international negotiations, leadership matters. At COP26 in Glasgow, China kept a low profile until the latter stages when it announced a [surprise deal with the US – another mega-biodiverse](#) country – to work together on climate issues. If China can pull another panda out of the hat by inspiring the other mega-biodiverse countries to follow its lead, then the biosphere will probably be in better shape after Kunming than before it. Where there is life, there's hope.

Graham's week

What I'm reading

I haven't got a copy yet (Christmas is coming) but I really want to read How to Love Animals in a Human-Shaped World *by Henry Mance.*

What I'm watching

The Wheel of Time *on Amazon Prime Video. Epic escapism.*

What I'm working on

I'm fermenting a new batch of kimchi.

- This column appears monthly. Up next week: Annalee Newitz

More on these topics: [BIODIVERSITY](#)

Magazine issue 3367 , published 1 January 2022

