China: Heilongjiang government establishes 1.85 million ha of new protected areas in the home of tigers and leopards

SUMMARY
Since 2002, the Heilongjiang provincial government has established 24 new protected areas (PAs) with a total area of 1.85 million ha.

In addition to the newly established protected areas, the Heilongjiang provincial government has committed to creating a further one million ha of PAs by 2010, bringing the province’s total PA coverage to 6.4 million ha. Protected areas will then total 191, and occupy 14% of the total area of the province. Twenty-five PAs will be on the national level, seventy on the provincial level and the rest at county level. Altogether, these actions will protect 90% of the province’s key species.

Over the past few years, the Heilongjiang provincial government has earnestly pursued the overall goal of creating a viable, representative and well-managed PA network with a wide variety of supportive actions.

The Heilongjiang government has also actively worked with WWF to promote forest certification in the province. In January of 2005, Youhao Forestry Bureau in Heilongjiang Province became China’s first state-owned forest to be certified under the FSC scheme. Its total forest area is 240,000 ha.

These achievements and future commitments demonstrate major progress in the implementation of one of China’s six major national forest protection programmes — the Wildlife Conservation and Nature Reserve Development programme. These actions also reflect the government’s commitment to conserve Heilongjiang’s rich natural biodiversity.

WWF, the global conservation organization, recognizes this important commitment as a Gift to the Earth (GttE), WWF’s recognition of globally significant conservation achievements — an example of environmental leadership and an inspiration to others.

BACKGROUND
Heilongjiang province is located in the heart of the Amur/Heilong ecoregion, which is considered one of WWF’s top global priority areas with high biodiversity representation. The province takes its name from the Heilong River, which runs across the region, and is one of the three largest free-flowing rivers still remaining in the world. The region is rich in terms of wildlife species, with some 2000 species of wild plants and 476 animal species. The area’s most best known endangered species are the Siberian tiger, yew tree and red-crowned crane.

These key species and their habitats are threatened by wetland conversion, commercial logging, forest fires, over-fishing, pollution and dam construction in the region. This type of unsustainable economic development and use of natural resources has had a strong negative impact on the ecosystem.
Rapidly worsening environmental conditions have raised urgent concern on both the international and local levels. In recent years, the Chinese government launched the Natural Forest Protection Programme and the Wildlife Conservation and Nature Reserve Development Programme, and the Heilongjiang provincial government passed legislation banning the conversion of wetlands in 1999, further contributing to regional conservation.

In July 2002, WWF China initiated its ‘Integrated Forest Conservation’ programme in the Amur/Heilong ecoregion. The project is based on the systematic conservation planning and identification of HCVFs in state-owned forest areas in Northeast China and Inner Mongolia. The project supports the implementation of two of China’s national conservation programmes — the Wild Fauna and Flora Conservation Programme and the Protected Areas (PAs) Development Programme.

WWF’s project aims to develop methodology to assess the management effectiveness of existing PAs in Heilongjiang province, and to assist China’s State Forestry Administration (SFA) in planning and promoting the establishment and/or enlargement of PAs so as to formulate a PA network system to enhance ecological representation and management effectiveness. WWF supported the creation of three PAs — Dajiahe, Taipinggou and Dongning Erduan in Heilongjiang Province — as demonstration sites.

THE CONSERVATION BENEFITS

Heilongjiang province, in northeast China bordering Russia, is home to one of the most distinctive temperate forests in the world. The area is one of the best and last examples of temperate broadleaf and mixed forests in eastern Asia. The region is a critical area for the conservation of endangered species including yew trees (Taxus), Siberian tigers (Panthera tigris altaica), and leopards (Panthera pardus orientalis), as well as musk deer (Moschus moschiferus), brown bears (Ursos arctos), Asiatic black bears (Ursos tibethanus) and rare bird species such as the Siberian and red-crowned cranes (Grus leucogeranus and Grus japonensis, respectively).

No doubt, the establishment of these new PAs is a very important step in conserving the Amur/Heilong Basin ecoregion’s rich biodiversity. It will play an essential role in ensuring the long-term conservation of this region. In addition, it will encourage and set an example for future conservation work in neighbouring countries — Russia and Mongolia — which together with China would contribute to the conservation of the whole region.

The Gift to the Earth is WWF’s recognition of a globally significant conservation achievement, which addresses WWF’s conservation priorities in globally significant natural areas by:

- Advancing conservation of biodiversity, especially forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems, or enhancing the prospects for survival of threatened species.
- Addressing global threats posed by climate change, toxic chemicals and unsustainable use of resources such as timber, freshwater and fisheries.

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