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Mid-term evaluation of "Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality"



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“Securing Biodiversity Conservation
and Sustainable Use in
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AWP/B	Annual Work Plan and Budget
BAC	Biodiversity Advisory Committee
BCC	Biodiversity Conservation Committee
BD-SO	Biodiversity-Strategic Objective (GEF)
BGF	Bureau of Gardens and Forestry
BH	Budget Holder
CBPFA	China-GEF Biodiversity Partnership and Framework for Action
CC	Climate Change
CCC	Co-management Conservation Committee
CEO	Chief Executing Officer (GEF)
CNAO	China National Audit Office
CPS	Country Partnership Strategy (WB)
CRS	Community Relations Section
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CTA	Chief Technical Advisor
DG	Director General
DNRP	Division of Natural Resource Protection (GFB)
EA	Executing Agreement
NTE	Not to Exceed
EP	Executing Partner
EQ	Environmental Quality
FA	Focal Area (GEF)
FAD	Finance and Accounting Division (EDB)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FCC	Forest Consultative Committee
FiA	Fiduciary Assessment
FOM	Forest Assessment Management and Conservation Division (GEF/FAO)
FPMIS	Field Project Management Information System (GEF/FAO)
FSP	Full-size Project
GEBs	Global Environmental Benefits
GEF	Global Environment Facility
GEFSEC	GEF Secretariat
GFB	Gardening and Forestry Bureau (HSAC)
GIFDC	Guangxi Integrated Forestry Development Project (WB)
GIS	Geographic Information System
GCU	GEF Coordinating Unit
HNSR	Huangshan National Scenic Reserve
HSAC	Huangshan Administrative Committee
HTDC	Huangshan Tourism Development Corporation
IA	Implementing Agency
ICR	Implementation Completion Report
IEM	Integrated Ecosystem Management
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
KM	Knowledge Management
LOP	Life of Project
LTO	Lead Technical Officer

LTU	Lead Technical Unit
MBOF	Municipal Bureau of Finance
MBOFo	Municipal Bureau of Forestry
METT	Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
ME	Monitoring and Evaluation
MIS	Management Information System
MTE	Mid-term Evaluation
NBSAP	National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan
NCF	Non-commercial Forest
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NNR	National Nature Reserve
NR	Nature Reserve
NREG	Natural Resources and Environment Group (GEF/FAO)
NSR	National Scenic Reserve
OP	Operational Program
OR	Organizational Results
PA	Protected Areas
PBOF	Provincial Bureau of Finance
PBOFo	Provincial Bureau of Forestry
PDO	Project Development Objective
PIF	Project Identification Form (GEF)
PIInR	Project Implementation Report
PIR	Project Implementation Review
PM	Project Manager
PMO	Project Management Office
PNR	Project Nature Reserve
PPG	Project Preparation Grant (GEF)
PPR	Project Progress Report
PRC	People's Republic of China
ProDoc	Project Document
PSC	Project Steering Committee
GPO	GEF Portfolio Officer
PY	Project Year
RBM	Results Based Management
SGD	Sustainable Development Goals
SEIA	Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment
SFA	State Forest Agency
SO	Strategic Objective
SOA	State Oceans Agency
STAP	Scientific and Technical Advisory Panel (GEF)
TBD	To Be Determined
TCI	FAO Investment Centre Division
TCIB	Asia and the Pacific Service in TCI
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
TOR	Terms of Reference
USD	United States Dollar
WB	World Bank

Executive summary

1. The current project under evaluation, “Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality,” is a five-year project intended to “secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality.”
2. The project's specific objective is to “evaluate, adapt, and implement relevant best practices derived from the successful management of Huangshan National Scenic Reserve to strengthen and upgrade the existing municipal system of protected areas (PA).” This is to be achieved through adopting a tiered, sequential approach applied to different classes of Nature Reserves (NR) grouped to best benefit from project-supported activities in a cost-effective manner. Experiences and “lessons-learned” from other NRs in China that are relevant to the local circumstances in Huangshan will also be evaluated and adopted. The experiences derived from this approach will in turn be used as a basis to develop and finalize a biodiversity conservation ecotourism master plan (and model) for Huangshan Municipality's System of Protected Areas that is also relevant to other areas in China and abroad.
3. The expected outcomes¹ of the project are stated² as follows:
 - i. Creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity supported by a coherent policy, planning, and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality;
 - ii. An increase in average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves (67 496 ha) included in the municipal network of protected areas, improving the status of protected areas;
 - iii. An increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems;
 - iv. Evidence that lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating NRs.
4. This MTE is a requirement of the GEF and the FAO-GEF Coordination Unit (GCU) for project monitoring, management and reporting purposes. It is conducted for both the purposes of accountability and learning by GEF, GCU, and other participating institutions. This MTE documents important findings and lessons to guide the remaining phase of the project and will serve as an input to improve its implementation. Likewise, it presents strategic recommendations in order to ensure all the planned results of the project will be achieved if considered realistic in the context of the remaining period. The methods were mixed and participatory, involving Skype interviews, field visits, and stakeholder consultation at project sites and with implementing and executing partners.

¹ See the full project log frame in Annex 1

² Project Document (2015)

Main findings

Relevance

Political and “enabling environment” increasingly relevant

5. Due to the time that passes between formulation, inception (2011-2013), and actual implementation (2014–2019), the enabling context has shifted significantly, and the project themes have become even more relevant to national and international policy. This is especially pertinent in light of the recent national endorsement of the global agreements on SDGs, the Sendai global agreement on disaster risk reduction and management (Sendai 2015), and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. China’s ratification of the Nagoya Protocol and Access and Benefit sharing work demonstrate the national commitment to ecological civilization.
6. The enabling policy environment offers a unique window of opportunity to advocate for the innovative approaches and lessons learned that are being introduced, especially the concepts of PA zoning, sustainable livelihoods, co-management and the land trust, and the new regulation on access to benefit sharing.
7. On the other hand, the MTE is finding the log frame and its targets highly ambitious in terms of coverage (scope of work across seven areas: policy, institutional, monitoring system of key species for biodiversity, six co-management pilots, NR networking, knowledge management and capacity building, education and public awareness) and in expected policy outcomes. In addition, project targets are expressed as longer term transformative goals and might be better reformulated as making “contributions to policy.”
8. The national government has moved ahead on a number of fronts, including work on a National Park system. Such a conducive policy environment shifts focus of the project strategy to making contributions towards new national policy goals and showcasing biodiversity-friendly management practices, modelling Co-management Conservation Committee (CCC) learning pilots beyond the municipality and province. Inputs post MTE might align the project activities to the new policy environment. A key recommendation of this MTE is for the project team to hire a Chief Technical Advisor (CTA) familiar with GEF goals and strategies. The Chief Technical Advisor might consider an alignment exercise for work planning: policies, training, key pilot messages, and approaches to implementation.

GEF focal area strategies FAO corporate and country strategies.

9. The project is closely aligned to the FAO Country Programming Framework 2016–2020 and corporate strategies, food systems, and resilience. FAO country cooperation framework 2016–2020 outlines its current support as providing cutting-edge policy advice, and technical assistance on food security and safety, sustainable agricultural development, management of natural resources, and surveillance and control of transboundary animal and plant diseases. The four project outcomes and two objectives are congruent with the GEF Biodiversity strategies (GEF 5, 6), FAO and FAO-China Current Country Programming Framework (2016-2020).³ The project is also aligned with the current GEF 5 biodiversity

³ The timeframe of the CPF for China is set as from 2016 to 2020 in pace with both China’s 13th National Five-year Development Period and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2016-2020) in the country. The activities planned under this CPF have been commenced and on-going since the year 2016.

focal areas (BD 1 and BD 2). This project was implemented under GEF 5 and GEF 6, each of which have focal areas on biodiversity and respond to cross sectoral strategies for environmental results.

10. A changed political context requires a slight shift in strategies: the project needs updating based on the current policy environment, in particular, the implementation linkages to the National BSAP and Nagoya Protocol on ABS, and the National Park system.

Effectiveness

Expected Outcomes

The four project expected outcomes were assessed as follows:

Outcome 1. Creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity supported by a coherent policy, planning, and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality.

11. The policies and plans in components one and two of the project were developed during the first phase of the project in the absence of substantive funding and technical support from FAO. Indeed, the first disbursement of funds to the Executing Partner (USD 130,354) was done on 20 January 2015, while the second disbursement (USD 317,970) happened almost three years later, on 5 December 2017⁴. This delay was due to the renegotiation of the Execution Agreement and then, after the first allocation and renegotiation, because of a lack of adequate reporting from the EP. The planning and policy documents, a requirement of components one and two, were developed as a top-down process. It is not evident that the documents produced have been technically vetted by FAO and/or are relevant to the expected outcomes, i.e. sending messages of the inter-linkages and key cross sectoral approaches in policy. Additionally, the MTE determined that the drafting of these documents pre-dates the co-management or best practice identification and or scoping/environmental assessment work in components two, three, and four. These documents need alignment and integration of the learning from the project activities and from national and international conventions and priorities the country signed up for. The important interlinkages between biodiversity, climate change, sustainable development, the environment, and the agricultural and productive sectors can be explained more explicitly with regards to sustainable livelihoods and community participation for governance and ecosystem services in Huangshan as a best practice in the project.

Outcome 2. An increase in average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves (67 496 ha) included in the municipal network of protected areas improving the status of protected areas.

12. Largely, component two work (see Annex 1 report on results) involved drafting the municipal level biodiversity strategy and action plan (BSAP) (albeit more alignment is needed with CBD), conducting the monitoring and the co-management pilots and networking for learning by doing with 12 supported nature reserves. The work across NRs is progressing input by input but needs some program-level thinking: how to do it, scope,

⁴ EA Amendment N. 1 – signed by FAO 23 June 2017, EA Amendment N. 1 – signed by the Government 4 July 2017, Second transfer of funds to EP – (USD 317,970), 5 December 2017, and Third transfer of funds to EP (USD 300,000) 25 October 2018.

delineating good practice cases and documentation for sharing and learning. The project capacity building strategy for NRs is contingent on identifying what constitutes a best practice. This needs technical oversight as a priority and focus on ensuring these “best practice” results are communicated. These results should be communicated through the website that will be developed, together with learning/scaling outcomes, in order to achieve a wider distribution scale.

Outcome 3. An increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China’s forest ecosystems.

13. It is too early to definitively assess the final outcome based on information collected thus far. While some activities have begun including pilots and some training, e.g. first aid, no concrete training activities have been delivered yet. A master training plan was developed, but how it links to the overall project capacity building and learning through sharing objective is not clear. This project is a learning project. The work program involves first strengthening Huangshan National Nature Reserve for biodiversity friendly, sustainable livelihood ecosystem services practices and then sharing and scaling the learning first with twelve NRs and then others in tiers three and four. The implementation focus thus involved defining what the best practices are, then focus on documenting and disseminating them through an information management portal. The work on identifying best practice is a priority. GEF/FAO might work technically with the PO and project technical expertise to scope the best practices and to clearly define the boundaries and inputs needed to complete all four of the community co-management pilots.

Outcome 4. Evidence that lessons learned from the project are being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating NRs.

14. No concrete work has been started on these objectives. The project urgently needs knowledge management thinking, communications, monitoring and evaluation in order to plan and report on results and clarify the understanding of the network, and to scale objectives by spreading the learning to non-formal NRs (tier three and four) within the project timeframe. This is an area of work that can help accelerate implementation.

Other factors influencing results

Overly ambitious complex Technical Learning and Networking Strategy for Tiers Three and Four

15. While the design (strategies for implementation and work plans link to the log frame targets) was highly ambitious, an investment of USD 2.7 million was undertaken (the final amount was reduced from the original proposal of USD 4.4 million), covering indicators for six significant work areas,⁵ specifically 1. scientific monitoring of key species biodiversity,

⁵ Component 1: Policy, Planning & Institutional Arrangements

1. Policy Formulation
2. Policy Implementation Planning
3. Institutional Arrangements

Component 2: Improved NR Management Effectiveness & Networks

- 2.1 Improved Nature Reserve Management Effectiveness
- 2.2 Co-management and Sustainable Development
- 2.3 Nature Reserve Network

2. piloting of innovative co-management approaches in six natural reserves with communities, 3. action research for policy, 4. policy and management planning covering six NRs, including forestry and garden departments within the municipalities, 5. mainstreaming in the public work and education and economic sectors, and 6. design and implementation of an information sharing network with the rationale to scale up the learning to third and fourth tier.⁶
16. The MTE registers the demand by PM and stakeholders interviewed, including the GEF portfolio officer in the FAO country office, to streamline the log frame and reduce the complexity and scope of the project. In addition, a key evaluation finding is that capacity strengthening for tiers three and four are an expected outcome, yet the knowledge needs and gaps are not considered, and there is no evidence in the plan, to date, that knowledge and learning have been taken into account. In addition, conducive policy shifts are now an opportunity to direct the showcasing of the best practices and innovative approaches piloted by the project.
 17. The project had a fundamental problem with the new national execution modality introduced by FAO and with understanding of implementation support needs. The project required renegotiation of the EA and suffered a subsequent misunderstanding of the EA. The renegotiation delayed release of the second and third instalments of the GEF grant while the issue (funds retained for audit and evaluations) was being sorted out. In the absence of FAO country office and execution partner's full understanding of the national execution modality, an operational manual was finally drafted by Government and FAO for the Project Execution (drafted in June 2014 and finalized in February 2015 as the national project guidelines).
 18. The project management office (PMO) was unable to actively absorb the technical and managerial support inputs of FAO. This was reported as a communication issue between FAO technical and managerial officers and the execution agency and PM because, due to the delays in funding and loss of trust during the first phase of the project. FAO was providing reports and recommendations which were not viewed as useful by the PM. The current PMO needs support on scoping and communicating biodiversity friendly management practices, technical support on interlinkages in co-management pilots and

2.4 Creating Landscapes for Biodiversity Conservation

2.5 Applied Competitive Research in NRs

2.6 Studies and Monitoring of Ecosystem Health

Component 3: Capacity Building, Environmental Education and Public Awareness

3.1 Capacity Building

3.2 Environmental Education

3.3 Public Awareness

Component 4: Information Dissemination and Project ME

4.1 Information Dissemination

4.2 M & E

⁶ Actual indicators in document are: 8 municipal policies, Management/implementation plans for six NRs, 600 NR staff and 4000 villagers trained, six CCCs, 2 monitoring stations, 72 NR in the network, 10 species, 20 schools, 24 granted scientific research, 2 permanent biodiversity bodies, 80 kilometers of trails beautified with bill boards and signs, 1 integrated monitoring information system, 1 project website, 1 computer based portal.

KM and network learning strategies. Results to date reflect a tendency for a top-down policy making process, however they do not reflect the original intent to showcase management innovations and biodiversity friendly practices including participatory NR governance and co-management.

19. A key factor influencing the LTO, the GEF Portfolio officer and the FAO country office's ability to provide sufficient technical oversight was in part the ineffectiveness of the main oversight mechanism: the Steering Committee. While the SC has met three times, the function of the Steering Committee as the primary oversight mechanism, allowing partners' input into joint workplanning, and solving joint implementation issues, did not fully function. It needs to be made to function better.

Design

20. The MTE finds the design of the project content and scope technically complicated and over ambitious with six work areas and five community co-management pilots and diverse strategies toward change. This scope needs to be revisited, e.g. by considering reducing pilots, refining the ToC to enable more concentrated work on learning and on KM in order to document and showcase good practices for strengthening, scaling, and learning purposes in other tiers and beyond the province;
21. Activities and staff for knowledge management, a key aspect of the theory of change, while not built into the design, are a key to results. The capacity at the PMO to recognize the deficit and undertake smooth technical and monitoring implementation and technical approach to knowledge management (KM) (for results), including targeted communications, was weak. Indirect execution by FAO was based on some assumptions, including the fact that management support was in place. Finally, the PM carried out project implementation by utilizing co-financing funds, yet with little understanding and ability to report on the expected results, including co-management in certain thematic areas, such as wildlife, tourism agriculture, human rights, gender and community participation. This is evident from the consulting and project monitoring reports that stated the project management was weak on community involvement. The evaluation, however, identified that the issue was not lack of community involvement, but the inability of the PMO to realize results.
22. The project team has been actively implementing pilot work in two CCCs. Jiulongfeng CCC receives co-financing, including negotiation and intensive work with communities. Good practices are apparent including highly scalable innovation work with Alibaba Paradise Foundation and social enterprises on access and benefit sharing. Because the project was mostly implemented by financing and in absence of GEF grant and GEF/FAO oversight of implementation, the PMO did not report on many results arising from co-management pilot work with communities and/or women in particular (important project results-empowerment and access to benefits).

Efficiency

23. The results were affected by a number of compounding issues related to the execution agreement and delay in release of funding during implementation. These included changes to the execution agreement and the slow distribution of funding. The delay in implementation also negatively impacted the original project's theory of change strategy

which involved tier one and two learning 'policy by doing.' Also affected was the assumption that the pilot co-management demonstration pilots in six areas would inform the component one and two policy and planning work and the NR learning network, that would, in turn, influence tier three and four informal reserves practices and behaviours.

Other factors influencing results

24. Stakeholders interviewed were highly engaged, and there is an obvious political willingness to achieve results. This was evident in meetings and from co-financing leveraged and spent.

Gender

25. The project lacks a gender lens to the co-management pilots and implementation, a monitoring framework, and staff. Knowledge activities/training strategy/products (an expected result) need more attention post MTE. Project design requires that gender be considered in both design and implementation. Thus far, some women have benefited from the project to some extent, but there is much room for improvement. The MTE found that female villagers are being exposed to project-supported skill trainings. Evidence shows that around 650 villagers attended project-supported skill trainings in which one-third of the trainees were women. It is noted however that all these villagers were from tiers one and two. Two out of 15 rangers in Jiulongfeng PNR visited were educated women. This reality was reported as rare for the non-formal NRs. The project can focus on gender inclusion and include a focus on gender in the tiers three and four including the poor, remote, elderly and uneducated rural women farmers.

Conclusions

Conclusion 1. The national execution modality introduced by FAO was implemented in the absence of guidance and standard operating procedures and was not well understood by partners designing the project. This caused renegotiations of the Execution Agreement, delays in starting the activities and a breakdown in the relationship between FAO and the PM. The delays reportedly led to a loss of motivation in some demonstration project sites.

Conclusion 2. Project components one (policies) and two (capacity strengthening and community co-management) to a large extent without requesting solid FAO technical guidance and understanding of the ecosystem service's implementation approach and key messages for biodiversity mainstreaming and without fully absorbing the support provided.

Conclusion 3. The project is essentially a learning project in the sense that they are new concepts and innovative approaches and needs technical oversight on policies, best biodiversity practices, gender, learning, monitoring and education matters.

Conclusion 4. The work on the IT- network is not well understood. This area needs a strategy and must be an important aspect of the second half of implementation.

Conclusion 5. The invasive species and destructive practices have not been recently considered in pilot sites, showing need for technical oversight into activities.

Conclusion 6. The scheduling of activities by the PM on policy at the front end of the project negated the time for learning from implementation. Learning from project components two and three and four was not filtering into the activities of drafting and obtaining cross-sector

consensus. This needed more strategizing about the value added of FAO, leveraging best practice of integrated PAs management for sharing.

Conclusion 7. The results achieved at the MTE have been significant given the challenges with the release of funding and despite the staffing capacity at the PMO.

Recommendations

26. The recommendations from the MTE (see component specific recommendations in Appendix 1) include are:

Recommendation 1 (Design)

27. With regards to the co-management pilot projects, these should be reduced to three based on justification given and vetted in the meeting with the stakeholder and the visit to the pilots. The viability of the co-management sites are critical to showcase success and biodiversity-friendly practices. The scope of this endeavour was overambitious and the learning and adaptive management have determined that the three which have already started are the ones that should go forward. Focus should be on three pilot results, and on documenting and sharing for scaling good biodiversity management and other practices.
28. Because the project is running out of time and needs to be accelerated, it will be important to consolidate all the IT, learning and monitoring, knowledge sharing and networking activities as one work area such that there are results are contributing to the expected results on sustained learning. The MTE suggests the PMO immediately design and scale up the work on the knowledge NR networking, training and learning strategy—include a strategy for indirect strengthening of capacities of tiers three and four per the information management portal, schools and teacher training, the documenting and sharing of good practices and finally the development of web interface for data collection and a knowledge portal.

Recommendation 2 (Implementation)

29. Based on the delays in project implementation, the GEF/FAO/GOC in consultation with the Steering Committee should grant the project a no-cost extension for minimum of two years.
30. As the Steering Committee and technical committees are not fully functioning to enable substantive FAO oversight and communications and there has been no effective formal way for FAO to guide or provide technical support, a critical priority is to establish a functioning project Steering Committee to oversee and guide implementation including to ensure the project has full staffing and fully negotiated adapted work plans linked to the log frame. The PMO can also amalgamate the two biodiversity technical groups. Only one is needed and they serve a similar function.
31. In response to the issues flagged throughout this report concerning the lack of FAO technical oversight, the project must include a competent CTA to technically vet and accelerate the project implementation with an eye on the end results in two years. The CTA would: 1) conceptualize the work programme into the key areas discussed and consider larger strategic institutional contracts for implementation and 2) prioritize a review of technical implementation for good and negative practices i.e. invasive species, exclusion of

marginalized groups and communities. The CTA position might be cost shared by FAO and Government of China. This position should remain until the end of the project and be jointly monitored by and GOC and the FAO Representation in China. The position profile is a proven advisor with knowledge of the interlinkages to forestry, communities fisheries and agriculture and the ability to put forth the GEF and FAO value added and support and institutionalize the cross sectoral approaches. If this is not agreed to, then as a fundamental MTE condition for success this project should be stopped.

Recommendation 3 (Results and sustainability)

32. As flagged throughout the report, the project IT, monitoring system, network learning and sharing aspects are weak, and so a priority for technical assistance is: to scope an integrated monitoring system, undertake a knowledge and capacity needs assessment including the most relevant way to set up a NR network to meet project goals. The MTE discussed options for institutionalizing the network portal with the PM and implementing experts team and endorsed the option: to integrate three IT-based portals across components, namely, a computer-based NR network, an integrated monitoring system for Huangshan This would entail web monitoring for the species monitoring species and knowledge learning platform into the currently government public promotion project "Digital Huangshan" as a cost-effective measure to sustain GEF/ FAO program results.
33. Also, key would be the scoping of knowledge and learning needs of tiers three and four in consideration of the web design with functionality linked to the monitoring of fragile species work area. In relation to this problem, the PMO—with support of FAO—should take measures to network all NRs through the training plan. Additionally, the inclusive development of the learning network (knowledge needs and baseline study) should contribute to, and benefit from, the holistic Huangshan NR network planning and management in order not to scatter project work across components. In relation to the "learning" results, the PMO, supported by the LTO and CTA (TBH), should undertake a scoping of all biodiversity-friendly practices across the project area tiers one to four. They could review all management work and policies developed to ensure integration of key linkages and learning from cases. A technical workshop can be held. This needs some thinking around the linkages to FAOs value added including peoples (focus on women's) livelihoods, fisheries and forestry, and resilience approaches.
34. To ensure that the expected results on gender are properly captured and reported, it is recommended that the PMO (with support of FAO) undertake gender assessment. A gender specialist can be integrated to develop a plan for priority gender mainstreaming across the co management pilots, and other activities: by linking work to national priorities, including Eco-Compensation and Ecological Poverty Reduction with gender considerations that fit with local
35. In relation to the cross-cutting implementation gaps including capacity development, monitoring and communications, the PMO should hire a KM, communication and monitoring officer for the project. The PMO (supported by the FAO Representation in Beijing) should focus implementation and activities on visibility, documenting, sharing results-knowledge management and communicating. Since this project is even more relevant to the national priorities on biodiversity mainstreaming, the result can be shared to contribute to national policies on resilience and park priorities. The PMO can develop a communication and partnership strategy for scaling up learning including work with GEO

Park and developing and targeting a bimonthly newsletter for sharing at the national and provincial levels. This work also includes the need to document and share the research and biodiversity-friendly practices and co-management cases: research can be shared broadly in journals. Through a project information network, a public awareness and education strategy can be devolved with schools economized by using a training of trainers approach with teachers. More public information can be disseminated by making concrete partnership and linkages in the geo-centre and by partnering with other NR media and learning activities, i.e. communicating project messages on billboards and creating new exhibits in the 12 NRs. Project results could be prepared to be showcased at COP 22 in *two years' time*.

36. In response to the need for better project reporting that imparts a better understanding of the project expected results to PMO staff, FAO Beijing host a results-based project management (RBM) training. It will be critical to ensure the RBM training is speaking to this project's key messages, good practices and interlinkages, amplifying the GEF and FAO value added in biodiversity work- resilience strategies, digital finance, and innovation in technology, such as Alibaba partnership, fisheries, forestry, sustainability, women, livelihoods, and education and farmers schools on conservation agriculture.

MTE ratings and achievements summary table⁷

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
A. STRATEGIC RELEVANCE		
A1. Alignment with GEF and FAO strategic priorities	HS	The project is aligned with the GEF and FAO strategic priorities, including biodiversity, agroforestry, and environmental resilience strategies, such as protected areas for clear water, etc.
A2. Relevance to national, regional, and global priorities	HS	This project was designed almost ten years ago but is increasingly relevant to the current national and international context. The strategies need to be reflected upon and better aligned with the latest changes in policies, i.e. climate change, DRR, SDGs, CBD, and National Park systems.
A3. Complementarity with existing interventions	HS	This project is now directly contributing towards the goal of a national park system in China. The work on quality and standards for NR management is closely aligned with a need to learn from experience and showcase how to do win-win, biodiversity-friendly, integrated PA management, making links to the Eco Redline drawing and zoning, Eco Compensation, livelihoods, rural forest, land-based production systems and economy.
A4. Overall strategic relevance	HS	Highly strategic. Huangshan NR is the forerunner for showcasing management in the natural reserve system in China. The work there can be a showcase of biodiversity PA friendly management. The biodiversity mainstreaming also requires communication and learning activities and work with people living in and around the park boundaries. The project is now leading and demonstrating integrated NRM, agroforestry, and tourism economy linkages. The concept of scaling up is a good practice, and Huangshan's scenic park is showcased as a flagship of good management practices.
B. EFFECTIVENESS		

⁷ See GEF rating scheme in Appendix 2

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
B1. Overall assessment of project results	S	<p>More can be done to guide implementation on documenting and communicating key messages, especially about the interlinkages the project needs to demonstrate and showcase. The team needs to be guided by a key GEF/FAO-supported communication strategy and guided on how to translate, at project site, what the important interlinkages are, win-win practices of good park management, local economies, and human livelihoods, such as water, protecting wildlife for tourism, environmentalism, agro rice production that reduces pressure on the environment, and changing destructive livelihood practices for the longer term benefits to national and international populations, i.e. carbon sequestration, clean air, and water resources.</p> <p>Greater project investment in documenting, monitoring, and reporting of environmental states should be stimulated, particularly in those areas with clear links to human welfare, e.g. air quality or water quality, cultural heritage derived from sustainable use of biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge.</p>
B1.1 Delivery of Outputs	S	<p>Hampered by project management deficits on two levels by government and a non-performing GEF portfolio officer during the first two years, a breakdown in trust and communication between the PM and FAO occurred, which fundamentally interrupted healthy implementation. In addition, this impacted the timely release of the GEF funds.</p>
B1.2 Progress toward outcomes ⁸ and project objectives	S	<p>23% of grant delivered. Government had progressed on implementation using co-financing. The project officially began in September 2014, so it is now four and a half years into implementation, while the total project duration is five years. An extension is required, together with an effective strategy for smart delivery (in terms of procurement - bigger institutional contracts).</p>
- Outcome 1	S	<p>The policies and plans under this outcome have all been developed, but because the second transfer of funds was delayed (due to lack of adequate reporting), there was a lack of technical support from the LTO. The policy documents involved a top-down process; however, in absence of technical oversight and or support, the MTE cannot state that they have been technically vetted and are relevant to the expected outcomes, i.e. interlinkages expressed fully. The MTE can report that since these were produced before the work on components two, three, and four was completed, there is a need for closer alignment with learning from the project activities. The important interlinkages need to be much more explicit on sustainable livelihoods and community participation for governance and ecosystem services.</p>
- Outcome 2	S	<p>This work involved drafting the municipal-level BSAP (albeit needing more alignment with CBD) and conducting the monitoring and the co-management pilots. This work is progressing but needs some rethinking at the MTE level in terms of scope, delineating good practice cases, and documentation for sharing and learning.</p> <p>The project learning strategy, including this component, is contingent on first identifying successes and defining what constitutes a best practice, including those for the co-management pilot. Technical oversight will be a priority as well as a strong focus on ensuring these “best practice” results are communicated and scaled.</p>
- Outcome 3	S	<p>Based on current information, it's too early to assess. No concrete training activities have been delivered yet. A master plan is being developed by the partnering NGO green Anhui, but it is not clear what</p>

⁸ Assessment and ratings by individual outcome may be undertaken if there is added value.

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
		the objective toward the overall project capacity building and learning through sharing is. This project was designed as a model learning project. The work on best practices identification is an absolute priority.
-Outcome 4	S	The project needs a monitoring and evaluation (ME) plan and also a clear understanding of the network and scaling objectives for scaling-up within the timeframe of project. To date there has been no concrete work on these goals, and therefore implementation needs to be accelerated urgently.
- Overall rating of progress toward achieving objectives/ outcomes	S	
B1.3 Likelihood of Impact	N/A	This is contingent on the project completing its management and zoning work, with full demonstration of co-management and scoping and scaling of best practices, including management.
C. EFFICIENCY		
C1. Efficiency ⁹	MU	The delay in implementation, due to the time it took to renegotiate the EA agreement, has impacted both effectiveness and efficiency. Delivery at 23% has been recorded after almost five-year implementation. Having a fully staffed PMO with a qualified CTA reporting to GOC and GEF/FAO is a precondition to implementation and a lesson learned.
D. SUSTAINABILITY OF PROJECT OUTCOMES		
D1. Overall likelihood of risks to sustainability	L	The risks to sustainability will decrease significantly if the recommended changes are made at the time of the MTE. The project badly needs technical implementation guidance and oversight for results across all outputs (strategies for implementing six areas). It also needs a knowledge management (KM) and results-based management (RBM) / ME lens for the rest of project implementation. In absence of a qualified chief technical advisor and a KM-Communication-ME advisor, and with a barely functioning Steering Committee, the project risks incorrect or unsustainable implementation.
D2. Financial risks	HL	Timely delivery. It is important to implement with bigger more strategic contracts. The co-financing mobilized is a good sign of Government ownership and commitment.
D3. Socio-political risks	HUL	The project is a pilot demonstration to show good examples of management approaches with ecosystem services and integrated NR management, including strong links between local economy, agriculture, biodiversity, tourism, and the case for co-management approaches. The demonstration sites visited by the MTE, including Jiulongfeng, are showing good practices, e.g. the "land trust" approach and zoning for PA co-management. The new Government priorities related to the Ecological Civilization—National Parks and BD conservation—demonstrate the Government is even more committed to continue project results.
D4. Institutional and governance risks	HL	The project is executed by the Bureau of Gardens and Forestry, the designated unit for project execution representing the Huangshan Administrative Committee. Forestry is based at the municipal level and, as such, is embodied by the assumption that the local municipality is capable of handling a complex project, learning strategy involving upscaling, policy learning, and capacity strengthening across 69 plus NRs

⁹ Includes cost efficiency and timeliness

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
		in the province. The municipal level may not have the capacity for project management and for policy-level influence across the entire provincial level NR system.
D5. Environmental risks	L	This project is being implemented through adaptive management, and there is a need to continually monitor risk at the pilot demonstration sites. The carrying capacity of the Huangshan NR for tourism and agricultural output is a concern and so are invasive species.
D6. Catalysis and replication	n/a	It is too early in implementation (per grant delivery) to judge whether this project's activities will be replicated as per its original change strategy. It was designed as a learning project including best biodiversity management practices for sharing and replication. Focus is first on strengthening capacity of Huangshan NR for biodiversity-friendly management work and then on policy guidance and training to another 11 NRs. The project aims to support and communicate about innovative practices, linkages including biodiversity, conservation, tourism, inland sustainable fisheries, economy, wildlife, and agriculture. It should support the mainstream biodiversity into current NR management practices through the municipal level implementation. The project is unlikely to be replicated unless it can demonstrate success. It should articulate and document the biodiversity-friendly NR management. The project is asking to build capacity. But to build capacity for what? Policy change? This intent is still unclear and seems not to be understood by partners as the end result. This project requires a capacity building strategy to answer these questions clearly. It is important to showcase at risk plant and animal protection, disaster risk reduction and invasive species eradication.
E. FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE		
E1. Project design and readiness ¹⁰	U	The design was highly ambitious and has a complex learning and knowledge sharing strategy. Even a GEF specialist, would require support for implementation strategies on how best (and most efficiently) to interpret and implement six key program areas, including public communication, social networking, and education network scale up for work procurement. A major factor affecting the implementation has been the missed opportunity at the project's launch. The GEF/FAO project inception meeting is a critical time for all partners to be present and give and receive direction on implementation. It is the time to validate the log frame since time has passed since its formulation and to give guidance on GEF/FAO requirements and how to start. This meeting is usually attended by qualified GEF/FAO and technical specialists who can guide on the log frame and describe the way forward by outlining the basic requirements, i.e. a fully staffed PMO. Earlier missed opportunities are lessons learned.
E2. Quality of project implementation	S	A GEF Agency, FAO had the problem of national execution modality that generated an EA that transferred all the funds from the GEF grant to the Executing Partner (EP). Despite the renegotiation of the EA, there were confusion and delays. Subsequently, the FAO country office provided managerial and operational support to the EP while the LTO provided technical support one annual visit and review/comments of reports and Skype). Another possible source of difficulty was the

¹⁰ Refers to factors affecting the project's ability to start as expected, such as the presence of sufficient capacity among executing partners at the project's launch.

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
		<p>complex and multi-layered institutional arrangements supporting implementation including many technical working groups and leading policy boards in addition to the one formal institution for decision making - the steering committee. These institutions need to be further rationalized and combined. The Steering Committee is the highest decision making board and it should be reconstituted and more systematic with good participation by FAO, higher level Chinese's decisions makers relevant to the GEF and cross sectoral inputs.</p>
E2.1 Project oversight (GEF/FAO, PSC, PTF, etc.)	S	<p>While there has been TA and PMO oversight provided by the LTO and GEF Portfolio Officer in the FAO country office as well as by the GCU (one consultant stayed in China for several months to address the problems with the EA), effective TA has been crippled by a breakdown in trust and communication and a non-functioning Steering Committee for FAO oversight. In addition, PMOs have been unable to carry out adaptive management and to express technical needs effectively.</p>
E3. Quality of project execution	US	<p>Projects need technical support for day-to-day implementation. The PMO is situated at the municipal level and is understaffed. While being situated at the municipal level is normally not a problem, the expectations for the project's policy level scale-up and PMO efforts are enormous, i.e. the municipality will disseminate policy lessons to a higher level and across all 68+ NRs. The project requires a technically qualified CTA, preferably one who speaks both languages (Chinese/Mandarin and English) and has a strong background in GEF PA project implementation.</p> <p>While the PMO is committed to implementing the project and has done its best despite delays in the grant, the project is not benefitting from FAO support .It was not absorbed by the PMU for 2 main reasons: 1) loss of trust in FAO; 2) limited number of staff (this is the main finding of MTE discussed in the body of this report - there is a need for stronger steering committee, repairing the breakdown in communication and trust between FAO China and the PM office). This project need a course correction on the lack of FAO /GEF Technical and managerial inputs.</p>
E3.1 Project management arrangements and delivery (PMO, financial management, etc.)	US	<p>The PMO has been doing a commendable job trying to implement the project without a solid understanding of implementation strategies, i.e. institutional contracts, and technical knowledge of the GEF concepts. The PMO has not fully staffed the project and is not fully functioning as a platform for results and delivery on all aspects of the conceptual design. There are gaps, including cross cutting work such as KM and a capacity development strategy for implementing technical oversight across all four components as well as strategy, monitoring, and KM. The CTA gap is most evident in component one: the institutional work and policies contribution. Plans now need to be revisited for biodiversity mainstreaming per a GEF-vetted approach. PMO must have a qualified GEF-competent CTA to oversee a fully staffed PMO with support to guide this project's implementation to results. In addition, the MTE noted the low level of execution at the municipal level might not be best for the expected policy learning goals, so a focal point for NRs at the provincial level could be included on the Steering Committee. This will set the project on the right path for more balanced implementation (across all four areas) and for scale-up lessons and good practices.</p>

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
E4. Co-financing	HS	This aspect of the project has been excellent and is indicative of the political will at the municipality (execution) to continue and take the project to successful completion.
E5. Project partnerships and stakeholder involvement	S	The PMO has established good cross-sectoral working level partnerships with other departments on the technical and leadership committees including between the department for nature reserves and water and municipal gardens and forests. The MTE found these to be the project's local policy learning mechanisms, but this might have a better chance at institutionalization if leadership and monitoring oversight are more formalized through more active day-to-day monitoring involvement and inclusion on the Steering Committee. The project has enlisted a number of consultants as subcontractors on many aspects of the expected results, but their inputs are found to be small and not impactful at the institutional level. Small contracts are time consuming to implement and not strategic or programmed in nature. If such contracts less than USD 20 000) continue, they need to be carefully monitored with oversight and guided for results. The MTE does not foresee that such implementation practice could possibly lead to results in two years with a granted project with no cost extensions (one outcome of this MTE).
E6. Communication and knowledge management	HU	This aspect of the project is not receiving the attention it requires. While some knowledge products have been produced, biodiversity studies and research, they can be better packaged for learning and shared. The project is essentially a learning initiative for policy development, networking, and best practice documentation and sharing.
E7. Overall quality of Monitoring and Evaluation (ME)	S	Project monitoring support is needed. While a FAO GEF portfolio officer in Beijing is currently doing a good job and trying to backstop monitoring solely from Beijing, the officer is struggling to provide inputs to headquarters, Beijing, and the regional office in Bangkok. Key barriers are discussed including, the lack of compliance by the EP to properly adhere to the report and enable the oversight mechanism (the PSC), which is currently not functioning. The EP is unwilling to staff the project with capable staff. The GEF portfolio officer in Beijing can continue to provide cross-GEF portfolio learning and training on aspects of monitoring, i.e. results-based management training, etc.
E7.1 ME Design	S	The ME design is robust in the original document.
E7.2 ME Plan Implementation (including financial and human resources)	S	The PIR's reports are not capturing the entirety of project level results. Many results of the activities the PM has implemented without the GEF grant are not reported. The project office manager is also not conversant or has had no substantive training on results reporting. As highlighted, delays in grant distribution caused the PIR to not report on activities implemented with co-financing. He had not been receiving support on this and was reporting the interesting activities and results in PIR reports. The PMO is not fully capable of reporting on results as per the project strategies on a day-to-day basis or guiding technical implementation. The MTE suggests results-based management training for GEF project managers. The notable gap is clearly on how to report results. Many results, i.e. community and poverty work, agricultural linkages, and female involvement, are underreported. Surprisingly, the project is showing results in demonstration sites despite complex GEF and FAO monitoring requirements and the capacity gap at the PMO for project management.
E8. Overall assessment of factors affecting performance	US	While many factors have negatively influenced implementation and delivery (discussed below), a few stand out: communication on technical

GEF criteria/sub criteria	Rating	Summary Comments
		support needs between GEF/FAO and project team, sufficiently staffed PMO, and the long delay during early implementation through which government began using its own financing. This is evident in the low delivery rate (23% after almost five years since project signing). However, the positive thing is that the PMO and GEF/FAO have learned, albeit the hard way, about indirect execution by FAO and about GEF requirements for project implementation and continue to express their commitment to work together for results. Despite delays and gaps in project management, many activities have progressed. A qualified CTA with competencies across the GEF results-based management, biodiversity, and PA approaches—who reports to both GEF/FAO and the PMO—will support the accelerated delivery and significantly move toward the results. Moreover, the project requires a staffing focus to deal with the cross-cutting components on KM, learning, and ME.
F. CROSS-CUTTING CONCERNS		
F1. Gender and other equity dimensions	S	While project strategies and actual implementation suggest a focus on targeting gender inequalities, poverty, and disadvantaged communities through its win-win demonstration projects, these boundaries have not been clearly defined, and results are underreported. The project pilots' co-management sites should be addressing and raising gender issues. The project needs a gender advisor to support and oversee the monitoring of these results and help mainstream gender into project activities, in particular at the demonstration sites. Whether or not the project carried out baseline assessment for tiers three and four knowledge needs is not evident.
F2. Human rights issues	S	Risks related to human rights issues need to be assessed during implementation by a competent GEF CTA.
F2. Environmental and social safeguards	S	
Overall project rating	S	The rating could move to highly satisfactory by December 2021 if the suggested changes are made at the time of the MTE. This project was designed as a model strengthening for best practice and scaling the learning through a networking project. It requires robust implementation with a focus on technically scoping scalable good practices, and later on, documenting and disseminating the learning through the knowledge network and information management portal. The project learning strategy is contingent on first experiencing successes and defining what constitutes a best practice, including for the co-management pilot successes. This requires making technical oversight a priority and focusing energetically on ensuring these "best practice" results are communicated and scaled. FAO should be able to support this exercise with its in-house technical expertise.

1 Introduction

1. This report is the mid-term evaluation of the project “Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality”, a five-year project intended to “secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality”. The project started in September 2014.
2. The project's specific objective is to “evaluate, adapt, and implement relevant best practices derived from the successful management of Huangshan National Scenic Reserve to strengthen and upgrade the existing municipal system of PAs.” This is to be achieved by adopting a tiered, sequential approach applied to different classes of Nature Reserves (NR) grouped to best benefit from project-supported activities in a cost-effective manner.
3. The expected outcomes¹¹ of the project are¹²:
 - i. Creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity supported by a coherent policy, planning, and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality;
 - ii. An increase in average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves (67 496 ha) included in the municipal network of protected areas, improving the status of protected areas;
 - iii. An increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China’s forest ecosystems;
 - iv. Evidence that lessons learned from the project are being distilled and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating NRs.

1.1 Purpose of the mid-term evaluation (MTE)

4. This MTE is a GEF requirement and is also requested by GCU for project monitoring, management and reporting purposes. It is being conducted for the purposes of both accountability and learning of GEF, GCU, FAO, and other participating institutions.
5. This MTE documents important lessons to guide the remaining phase of the project and will serve as an input to improve its implementation. Likewise, it will present strategic recommendations in order to ensure that all the planned results of the project will be achieved if considered realistic.

Intended users

6. The main audience and intended users of the MTE are:
 - i. The Huangshan Administrative Committee (Execution Partner), the Project Management Team, the Project Steering Committee Members, the GEF/FAO Country Office, members of the Project Task Force from GEF/FAO Headquarters and regional

¹¹ See the full project log frame in Annex 1

¹² Project Document (2015)

- offices who will use the findings and lessons identified in the MTE to continue and to improve the project's activities and to plan for sustainability of the results achieved;
- ii. Chinese counterparts and partners who will use the national inputs and conclusions for future planning;
 - iii. GEF who will use the findings to inform future strategic investment decisions in China;
 - iv. Other donors, organizations and institutions interested in supporting and/or implementing similar projects that could also benefit from the mid-term evaluation.

1.2 Scope and objective of the MTE

7. The MTE covers the project implementation period since its start in 2014 until March 2019, and analyses all the project components. It covers all the geographical areas where the project was implemented, although not all 12 direct and indirect intervention sites or project locations have been visited by the ET. The MTE considered the pre-conditions and arrangements in place that have contributed to, or hindered, the adequate implementation of the planned activities, including linkages and/or partnerships the project has with other major country initiatives.
8. The MTE followed the format of the GEF evaluation criteria. The GEF criteria that need to be assessed and rated are:
 - i. **Relevance:** alignment with regional, sub regional, and national environmental and development priorities, as well as GEF strategic priorities, FAO Strategic Objectives, higher goals, i.e. Sustainable Development Goals, when relevant, and consideration of complementarity with other existing interventions;
 - ii. **Effectiveness:** achievement of project outputs, progress towards project outcomes, and degree of attainment of project objectives and higher-level results, including assessment of the likelihood of longer-term impacts (e.g. using Review of Outcomes to impact analysis approach);
 - iii. **Efficiency:** cost-effectiveness of the project and timeliness of activities;
 - iv. **Sustainability:** socio-political, financial, institutional and governance, and environmental risks to sustainability and any evidence of replication or catalysis of project results;
 - v. **Factors affecting performance:** project design and readiness, quality of project management arrangements and execution (including assessment of risks), project oversight by FAO and partners, financial management, and co-financing; project partnerships and stakeholder involvement; communication and knowledge management and monitoring and evaluation (ME), including ME design, implementation, and budget;
 - vi. **Cross-cutting dimensions:** equity issues related to inclusion of vulnerable and indigenous groups, including gender analysis, human rights, and decent labour (as relevant), and consideration of environmental and social standards.

1.3 Methodology

9. The MTE fully adhered to the OECD DAC criteria and UNEG Norms and Standards and was in line with the GEF Coordination Unit MTE Guidance Document and annexes, which detail methodological guidelines and practices. The MTE adopted a consultative and transparent approach. Triangulation of evidence and information underpinned validation and analysis and support the conclusion and recommendations.
10. The final design and methods emerged from inception consultations between 4 and 6 March 2019¹³ among the project team, the MTE consultants, and key stakeholders about what is most appropriate and feasible to meet the MTE purpose and objectives and answer the MTE questions (see full list of MTE questions in Appendix 4).
11. The desk review identified that delivery was very low (23 percent), so this MTE took a forward-oriented approach to working constructively with the project management team and FAO to correct course, positively guide and have a substantive impact on the second half of the project implementation.
12. Team composition included an Independent International Consultant and a national expert. The evaluation was conducted between 14 February and 31 May, 2019. The field mission consultations with stakeholders were held in Beijing and Huangshan project site between 5 and 12 March, 2019.
13. The data collection and analysis was based on qualitative methods, including participatory approaches. This ensured that the perspectives of different categories of stakeholders were included. The MTE strived to gather evidence and information such that it would be credible, reliable, and useful. More specifically, methods have included:

Desk Review

- i. The MTE team reviewed relevant sources of information including documents prepared during the MTE preparation phase (February 2019), i.e. PIF, GEF and FAO Environmental & Social Safeguard Policy, the original Project Document, project reports including Annual Project Review/PPRs, project budget revisions, Project Inception Report, finalized GEF focal area Tracking Tools, Project Appraisal Committee meeting minutes, Financial and Administration guidelines used by Project Team, project operational guidelines, provided by the Project Team and GEF/FAO Office of Evaluation.
- ii. The local consultant supporting the MTE provided comments on the enabling environment, institutional arrangement, and policies. This contributed to a better understanding of how to frame the project according to the current national and provincial context. This context includes biodiversity-friendly NR management and mainstreaming as well as the incorporation of global good practice regarding PA management practices into policy in the project area.

¹³ MTE Consultants participated in inception workshop (March 4-6) in Beijing with key GEF/FAO stakeholders to clarify key evaluation stakeholders understanding of the objectives and methods of the MTE, and to finalize the MTE inception report thereafter

- iii. MTE reviewed the baseline GEF focal area biodiversity management Tracking Tool submitted to the GEF at CEO endorsement. The mid-term GEF Biodiversity Tracking Tool was completed (June 2018).

Semi-structured interviews

14. Semi-structured interviews (in-person and remote) with key stakeholders were conducted in Beijing and Huangshan city of Anhui province and in three project sites visited (see below). Main key stakeholders involved in or who were affected by the project design and/or implementation were interviewed in order to collect primary data to answer all evaluation questions. Building on the preliminary stakeholder information (taken from the project inception report and the TOR), the MTE consultants conducted a project stakeholder analysis. The stakeholders interviewed are listed in Appendix 5.

Field Visits

15. Additionally, the MTE consultants prepared and conducted field missions to Beijing and NR project sites, including visits with communities. Field visits involved getting a representative sample (two criteria—one good performing natural reserve and one poorly performing). In fact, the MTE visited four out of six four-pilot teams (tiers one and two) for focus groups and observation and consultations with linked communities. In total, the MTE visited four project sites: Huangshan NSR, Jiulongfeng PNR, Tianhushan PNR and Monkey Valley. There is one established CCC in Jiulongfeng and another planned for Monkey Valley.

Community consultations

16. The objective was to meet with the communities and participating pilot (co management sites) stakeholders. Present at focus group meetings were representatives of the co-management sites, NGOs partners, business representatives and government agencies. These sites were selected as to get a view of what has worked well, and not so well. In addition to focus groups with stakeholders, observation and individual face-to-face interviews were carried out. Interviews were supported by checklists and/or interview protocols developed by the ET during the inception phase¹⁴.

¹⁴ Community pilot sites include visiting two enterprises:

- Five Star Paradise Eco Agriculture Development Co. Ltd. "social enterprise" with following economic activities, and under supervision of the Green Anhui NGO in Jiulongfeng CCC, to support livelihood of local villages.
 - homestay hostel
 - source/market local eco product, e.g. reputable traditional tea brands (Houkui, Maofeng), Rice and shrimp (lobster) mixture cultivating fields (2000 mu, approx. 134 ha.), mountain spring water, wild bee honey, etc.
 - provisioning of small credit guarantee funds to villagers

income generated will be used to refund Jiulongfeng CCC pilot in:

- 15 fully equipped rangers in Jiulongfeng PNR
- 45 infrared cameras installed for biodiversity monitoring and routine ranging
- nature education for school children
- team building retreat for corporate staff

TOC workshop

17. A workshop was held on 11 March 2019, to validate the project’s theory of change (TOC) with project management and provincial and municipal stakeholders. The TOC exercise also considered the multiple linkages between the project objectives, outputs, and outcomes to the national goals and support of the evaluation process. A second workshop was held at the end of the field mission on 18 March in Beijing to share initial findings and conclusions with the Project Coordination Unit (the GEF Operational Focal point—Ministry of Finance, did not attend the workshop).

1.4 Limitations

18. Among the inherent constraints was a Chinese language barrier for international consultants (especially problematic for reading technical reports), low quality reports by project teams, intensive workload, and intensive travel and logistics. These constraints have been overcome through picking and choosing methods such as decisions about representation for assessing activities across all 12 sites and tiers. The project MTE was fully supported including language support and monitored by a field-based team that assisted with the evaluation.

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- a government approved enterprise in Tianhushan PNR is specialized in growing tea shrubs of traditional species in the shade of tall broad-leaf trees, which is proven to be a good way to conserve genetic resources of mother and ancient species.

2 Description of the project

19. The project "*Securing Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use in Huangshan Municipality*" is a five-year project. It officially started in September 2014 and is scheduled to end in September 2019.

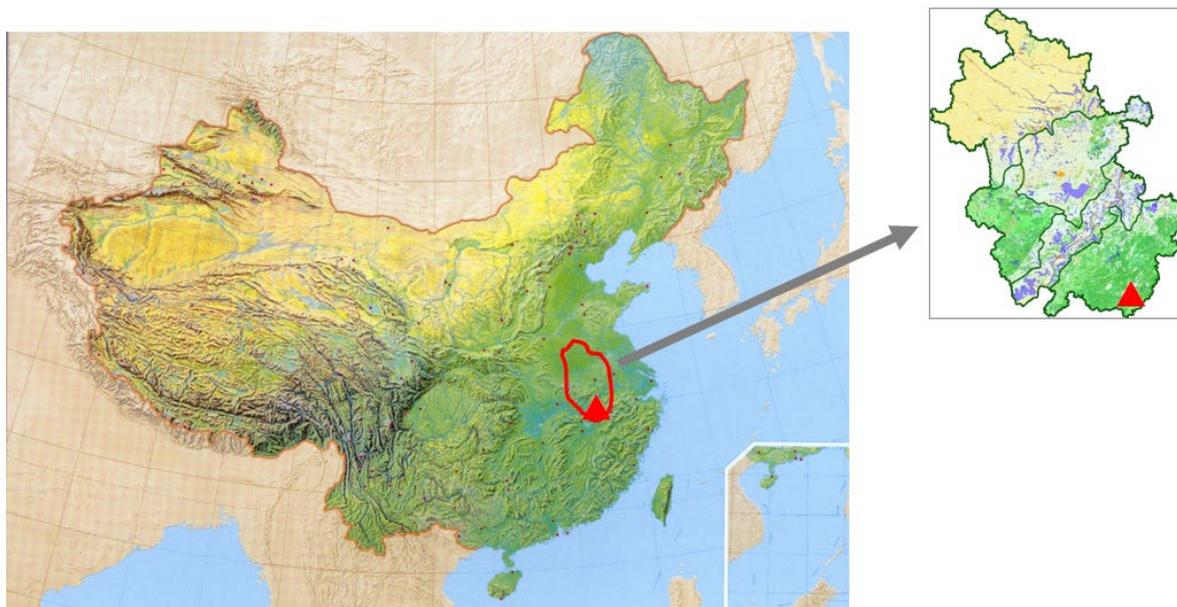
Box 1: Basic project information

- A. GEF Project ID Number: 4526
- B. Recipient country: China
- C. Implementing Agency: GEF/FAO
- D. Executing Agency: Huangshan Administrative Committee (HSAC)
- E. GEF Focal Area: Biodiversity
- F. GEF Objectives: BD-1.1 (improved management effectiveness of existing and new protected areas) and BD-2.2 (Measures to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity incorporated in policy and regulatory frameworks)
- G. FAO Strategy/operational program: SO2 (Make agriculture, forestry and fisheries more productive and sustainable)
- H. PIF approved: 9 November 2011
- I. Date of CEO endorsement: 12 February 2014
- J. Date of PPRC endorsement: 31 March 2014
- K. Date of project start (EOD): 17 September 2014
- L. Execution Agreement signed: 17 September 2014
- M. Execution Agreement amended: 23 June 2017
- N. Initial date of project completion (original NTE): March 2019
- O. Revised project implementation end date: 16 September 2019
- P. Date of Mid-Term Evaluation: March 2019

Context

20. The project area consists of Huangshan Municipality, located in Eastern China's Anhui Province and covering some 9 807 km² in area, with a total population of 1.5 million. The landscape is dominated by a number of mountain ranges of which the Huangshan, Baijishan, and West Tianmushan are the most important in terms of globally significant biodiversity.

Map 1: China, Anhui Province and Huangshan municipality



Note: Enlarged area shows Anhui Province, with red triangle indicating Huangshan Municipality

Source: Project document

21. Huangshan's broad range of forest habitats support a rich variety of flora and fauna estimated to include over 1 800 species of higher plants and 456 species of vertebrates accounting for 7 percent of the total known plant and animal species found in China. Many of these are considered to be rare or endangered in China. In 2009, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) designated Huangshan Municipality as one of 32 areas to be considered as priorities for biodiversity conservation in China (35 if three marine areas are counted).
22. One of the criteria used to base this classification was the application of an "irreplaceability" index that demonstrated that the Municipality had the highest value possible in Eastern China and that these mountains represented the only biodiversity "hot spot" in this region of China.¹⁵ Situated in Huangshan Municipality, Huangshan was designated a national scenic reserve (NSR) due to its world-renowned geological formations and visual landscapes. It receives on average over two million visitors a year and its entrance fees are estimated to generate USD 75 million annually.

Threats to biodiversity conservation

23. The main categories of threats to China's biodiversity are¹⁶:
 - i. overgrazing of grasslands;
 - ii. loss of wetlands;

¹⁵ "Irreplaceability" is measured as a continuum of values between 0 and 1, where sites with values of 1 are essential for achieving more than one biodiversity target and are therefore irreplaceable. As the site has an increasing number of potential replacements, it becomes more replaceable and the values decrease from 1. Hence, sites with rarer biodiversity features have higher irreplaceability values than sites with more common features. See CBPF and Action for more detail.

¹⁶ China Biodiversity Partnership and Framework for Action (CBPFA) 2007–2017

- iii. commercial and illegal logging of forests;
 - iv. construction and mining/resource exploitation;
 - v. urban expansion;
 - vi. monoculture;
 - vii. invasive alien species;
 - viii. climate change.
24. Despite the government and public commitment to and support for environmental protection in Huangshan Municipality, there is growing evidence that biodiversity conservation objectives are not being fully achieved through the existing NR system. Many NRs face significant challenges in working cooperatively with adjacent communities and/or communities located inside the reserves themselves. In addition to the threats outlined above, Huangshan's PA faces another threat to biodiversity and to effective PA management: the potential adverse impacts associated with increasing numbers of visitors to the municipality's nature reserves together with the absence of policies, plans, and capacity to manage this new use of NRs.
25. The main constraint identified in the ProDoc was the lack of human capacity in the conservation of biodiversity at all levels comprising the municipal NR system. Even in the HNSR itself, which in many respects meets international standards in terms of planning and management as a scenic reserve, there is little capacity with respect to managing biodiversity. The management effectiveness of other Huangshan NRs suffers from these constraints along with other constraints such as the absence of community outreach programs and poor to non-existent visitor facilities.
26. The situation was noted as being exacerbated further by lack of coordination and collaboration between and among many of the relevant mainline government agencies of which the most important are the Bureau of Forestry (responsible for natural forest reserves and protected areas) and the Bureau of Construction (responsible for national scenic reserves).

Project components and beneficiaries

27. The goal of the project is to *"secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality."* The project's specific objective is to *"evaluate, adapt and implement relevant best practices derived from the successful management of Huangshan National Scenic Reserve to strengthen and upgrade the existing municipal system of PAs."*
28. The project objective would be achieved through adopting a tiered, sequential approach applied to different classes of Nature Reserves (NR) grouped to best benefit from project supported activities in a cost-effective manner. Experiences and lessons learned from other NRs in China relevant to the local circumstances in Huangshan would also be evaluated and adopted where appropriate. The experiences derived from this approach would in turn be used as a basis to develop and finalize a biodiversity conservation ecotourism master plan (and model) for Huangshan Municipality's System of Protected Areas relevant to other areas in China and abroad.

29. The expected outcomes¹⁷ of the project are:
- i. Creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity supported by a coherent policy, planning, and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality (biodiversity conservation identified and incorporated as a priority in the Huangshan Municipal 13th Five-Year Social and Economic Development Plan);
 - ii. An increase in average management efficiency in 12 project supported nature reserves included in the municipal network of protected areas improving the status of protected areas (the average management efficiency score in BD Tracking Tool (TT) increased from 50 to 65 an improvement in key biodiversity species indicators);
 - iii. An increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems (biodiversity modules mainstreamed in ten primary and ten secondary school curricula, biodiversity considerations incorporated in six economic sector development plans, and visits in five project supported NRs increased to 80 000); and
 - iv. Evidence that lessons learned from the project are being distilled and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating NRs (five non-project supported NRs adopt one or more of the new approaches generated by the project).
30. Global environmental benefits (GEB) to be achieved through the project include:
- i. Direct strengthening of management effectiveness of 12 national and provincial reserves to better conserve biodiversity of global significance that in aggregate represent 67 496 ha (including 35 586 ha for tier one and two reserves and an additional six national and provincial reserves in tier three covering 31 909 ha) through participation in the creation of an NR network encompassing tiers one to three;
 - ii. Indirect strengthening and support of 35 504 ha of 60 county level reserves (tier four) through participation in training and capacity development (all four tiers);
 - iii. Biological diversity conservation objectives and practices mainstreamed into a total of 50 414 hectares of productive forest and agriculture land through the: (a) establishment of a biologically friendly landscape measuring an estimated 3 800 ha in size connecting Mt Wuxishan (Wuxishan PNR) and Jiulongfeng Peak (Jiulongfeng NNR) with the HNSR; and (b) improving the sustainability of an estimated 46 614 ha of agricultural lands through project-supported efforts to "main-stream" biodiversity considerations in policies and regulation in this priority sector.
 - iv. Globally significant biological diversity will also be conserved and maintained through the project's efforts.
31. To achieve the project objectives and expected outcomes, the project has been structured in four components and various subcomponents as presented in Box 2 below.

¹⁷ See the full project loglogframelog frame in Annex 1

Box 2: Components and subcomponents of the project

Component 1: Policy, Planning and Institutional Arrangements

Policy Formulation
Policy Implementation Planning
Institutional Arrangements

Component 2: Improved NR Management Effectiveness and Networks

2.1 Improved Nature Reserve Management Effectiveness
2.2 Co-management and Sustainable Development
2.3 Nature Reserve Network
2.4 Creating Landscapes for Biodiversity Conservation
2.5 Applied Competitive Research in NRs
2.6 Studies and Monitoring of Ecosystem Health

Component 3: Capacity Building, Environmental Education and Public Awareness

3.1 Capacity Building
3.2 Environmental Education
3.3 Public Awareness

Component 4: Information Dissemination and Project ME

4.1 Information Dissemination
4.2 ME

32. According to the project document, the main beneficiaries of the project are the following:
- i. the NR staff in the 12 reserves receiving direct support under the project (see table 1 below);
 - ii. local and municipal government stakeholders;
 - iii. Non-Governmental Organizations;
 - iv. communities living in proximity to the project-supported NRs, including an estimated 7 664 individuals representing 2 467 households living in five administrative villages on the fringes of the NRs, are expected to benefit directly from the project;
 - v. the broader municipality and visitors benefiting from conservation education and public awareness activities supported by the project.

Table 1: Project-supported Nature Reserves

	Nature Reserve	Size (ha)	Significant Biodiversity
Tier 1			
1	Huangshan NSR	16 060	World natural and cultural heritage site, natural forest, excellent forest ecosystem.
Tier 2			
2	Qingliangfeng NNR (in Anhui)	7 811	Great natural forest, good forest ecosystem. (Subtropical evergreen broadleaf forest, rare and endangered plants, and animals)
3	Jiulongfeng PNR	2 720	Good natural forest, excellent forest ecosystem. Features 80% of natural broadleaves forest (ecological NCF).
4	Wuxishan PNR	4 050	Good natural forest and excellent forest ecosystems.
5	Tianhushan County NR	2 174	Good natural forest and forest ecosystem, high mountain wetlands.
6	Lingnan PNR	2 771	Most significant subtropical vegetation area in the southern Anhui province. Good natural forest and excellent forest ecosystem.
Tier 3			
7	Shilishan PNR	1 937	Good natural forest and excellent forest ecosystem.
8	Gunjiujiang NNR	6 713	Described as best remaining forest ecosystem at this latitude in the world as well as China.
9	Zhawan PNR	1 600	Good natural forest and excellent forest ecosystem.
10	Tianhu PNR	4 499	Well preserved forest vegetation and ecological system; few human impacts.
11	Huashan NSR	6 120	National scenic reserve featuring underground man-made grottoes dating back to 1,700 hundred years ago with surface land covered by planted trees and forests.
12	Qiyunshan NSR	11 040	National Geological Park; national level scenic research and forest park, red-sand stone landscapes.

Source: Project Document

2.1 Co-financing and partnerships

33. At formulation, the main project partners and respective co-financing amounts of the USD 13.12 million project were:
 - i. GEF (USD 2.61 million)
 - ii. Huangshan Administrative Committee (USD 5.47 million)
 - iii. Yixian County Bureau of Forestry (USD 0.09 million)
 - iv. Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance (USD 3.9 million)
 - v. Huangshan Tourism Development Company (USD 0.37 million)
 - vi. Local Village Producer's Councils (USD 0.44 million)
 - vii. GEF/FAO (USD 0.24 million)
34. These figures were updated by the MTE and are provided in Table 3 under section 3.5.5 - Financial management and co-financing.

35. The main partnerships of this project included the following:
- i. The Huangshan National Scenic Reserve (HNSR), managed by the Huangshan Scenic Area Administrative Committee (HSAC). At the time of project formulation, the reserve did not feature a biodiversity conservation strategy nor a list of biodiversity conservation priorities and had no staff with expertise in biodiversity conservation. The reserve operated as an island on its own with no mechanism or system in place for cooperating with other reserves in Huangshan Municipality.
 - ii. Anhui Provincial Bureau of Forestry and the Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance have earmarked over USD 3.9 million to improve the infrastructure of the reserve, to procure needed equipment, and to prepare and implement reserve management and operational plans.
 - iii. Local communities' co-management¹⁸ contribution aimed to establish co-management mechanisms enabling local communities to make an active contribution to the management of the NRs.
 - iv. Huangshan Tourism Development Company (HTDC): the objective of the proposed GEF investment is to enable the HTDC to become a full partner in building an effective network of NRs that benefits tourism while enhancing biodiversity conservation.
 - v. Yixian County Bureau of Forestry: the co-financing aimed at the improvement of the management system of the Wuxishan provincial nature reserve, especially regarding timber production management and prevention of illegal logging.

2.2 Project stakeholders and their role

36. The project document and inception meeting (note: no GEF/FAO-GEF technical expert was present) validating the implementation report of GEF-Huangshan Project (January 2015) lists the following stakeholders with their roles and responsibilities in relation to the project:
- i. **FAO**. As the GEF executing agency, FAO manages and disburses funds from GEF in accordance with the rules and procedures of GEF and of FAO, oversees project implementation in accordance with the project document, provides technical guidance, reports to the GEF Secretariat through the annual PIR on project progress, and provides financial reports to the GEF Trustee.
 - ii. **Ministry of Finance** (MOF) is the GEF Operational Focal point in China. In this capacity, MOF is responsible for: monitoring and review of the annual PIR Reports and

¹⁸ In addition, central to this projects strategy but found not well defined by the ProDoc is the idea of best practice demonstration of co-management. It is the context of this project defined as a partnership arrangement between government and the local community of resource users, and in some cases also connected with agents such as NGOs, research institutions, private sector companies, and other resource stakeholders. The aim is to share the responsibility and authority for management of resources within the NRs in a sustainable manner with positive impacts on biodiversity as well as on the socioeconomic opportunities for the population dependent on the NR resources. To enhance the social sustainability of the co-management approach to natural resources the rights-based approach to resources dependent community's claim for recognition in local and provincial policy and service provision and for legal protections. At the same time the model will support legitimate livelihood actions based on rights to access forest and other NR resources within established areas under an ecosystem management approach. This approach will be further established during the project implementation linking responsibilities with protected rights for men as well as women.

organization of post project impact and evaluation studies (national evaluation of project) which will be shared with all project partners.

- iii. **Anhui Provincial Bureau of Finance (PBOF)** is the recipient of the GEF grant from FAO on behalf of the Chinese Government. PBOF's specific responsibilities are transfer of funds to HSAC as the Executing Partner, monitor and review of financial reports and their submission to GEF/FAO accompanied by work plan, budget, and funds transfer requests for the subsequent reporting period, as well as management of a special grant account.
- iv. **Huangshan Administrative Committee (HSAC)** is the project's Executing Partner (EP), and uses its own financial management, output and outcome monitoring and procurement systems, and procedures adjusted to FAO Rules and GEF minimum fiduciary standards. Further, HSAC prepares and submits annual work plans and budgets, Six-Months Project Progress Reports and all documentation needed for the preparation of the annual PIR of the FAO Representation in China.
- v. **Bureau of Garden and Forests (BGF)** represents HSAC as **project Executing Partner (EP)** and is the designated unit for project execution. The BGF is the focal point for all formal exchanges and collaboration with international agencies. The Bureau is responsible for: planning and monitoring of the technical aspects of the project, chairing the Project Steering Committee (PSC) and annual review meetings, developing and reviewing work plans, procuring goods and services on the basis of transparency and competition, and coordinating FAO financing with that of other sources. Therefore, BGF has established a Project Management Office (PMO) responsible for operation and project execution. The Director General of the GFB is nominated as the PMO director.
- vi. **Project Leading Group (PLG)**. The PLG is headed by the mayor of Huangshan Municipal Government. The PLG consists of Secretary General of the Huangshan Municipal Government, DG of Huangshan Municipal Development and Reform Committee, DG of Huangshan Municipal Forestry Bureau, DDG of HM Finance Bureau (MBOF), DG of Finance and Development Bureau, and DG of BGF. The specific responsibilities of the PLG are overall policy formulation, facilitation of cooperation between HSAC and the participating provincial and municipal bureaus in support of the project, and conflict resolution.
- vii. **Project Steering Committee (PSC)**. The PSC is chaired by the Director General of BGF, and its specific responsibilities are review and approval of the Project's AWP/B, review and approval of semi-annual progress and financial reports, facilitating collaboration between the project and other GEF-supported projects, and liaising with other project relevant units in the HSAC/BGF. Composition includes MOF, PBOF, MBOF, HSAC, HTDC, Yixian County Bureau of Forestry, Green Anhui, FAO, and an elected member representing the five participating villages on a rotating basis.
- viii. **Biodiversity Advisory Committee (BAC)** is a technical body created to support the project. The main tasks of the BAC are to provide: technical advice, technical evaluation of project progress, and evaluation of the project objectives and outcomes.
- ix. **Project Management Office (PMO)** ensures the coordination and execution of the project through the timely and efficient implementation of annual work plans. It coordinates the work and closely follows the implementation of project activities, handles day-to-day project issues and requirements, coordinates project interventions with other ongoing activities, ensures a high degree of national and local inter-

institutional collaboration, monitors project progress, and ensures the timely delivery of inputs and outputs. The PMO is responsible for implementing the project's ME plan, managing its monitoring system and communication program, elaborating semi-annual Project Progress and financial reports, and assisting in the preparation of the annual PIR and mid-term and final evaluations of the project.

- x. **Paradise Foundation**¹⁹: The foundation honours cooperation and expands its conservation projects globally in regions of high conservation value. It attaches great importance to local conservation and management capacity building, helping to explore sustainable fund-raising models and promote environmental-friendly products. Outdoor activities are organized for the public, especially for young people, and volunteer jobs are provided. In this way, the foundation aims to encourage more people to lead a healthy lifestyle that embodies the wisdom of "from nature, back to nature" and fulfil our vision of "preserving more green mountains and clear waters for future generations". One of its goals is to establish a link between protected areas and the public, so that more people can experience, and better understand the nature reserves, support their construction, and participate in their protection. For example, with Alibaba, the project is using the Ant Forest, a product on Alibaba's Alipay platform, which helps users record their low-carbon footprint to grow a virtual tree on their mobile phone.²⁰
- xi. **Green Anhui NGO** is Anhui Province's only grassroots environmental organization. Since its founding on 24 September 2003, Green Anhui has established three offices in the province. Currently it employs ten environmental experts as well as a core group of approximately 100 volunteers. Green Anhui is also affiliated with and supports 52 student environmental organizations throughout the province. Green Anhui has received two awards: Ford's 2004 Conservation and Environmental Grant as well as the Society of Environment and Ecology's (SEE) 2005 Ecological Conservation Prize.

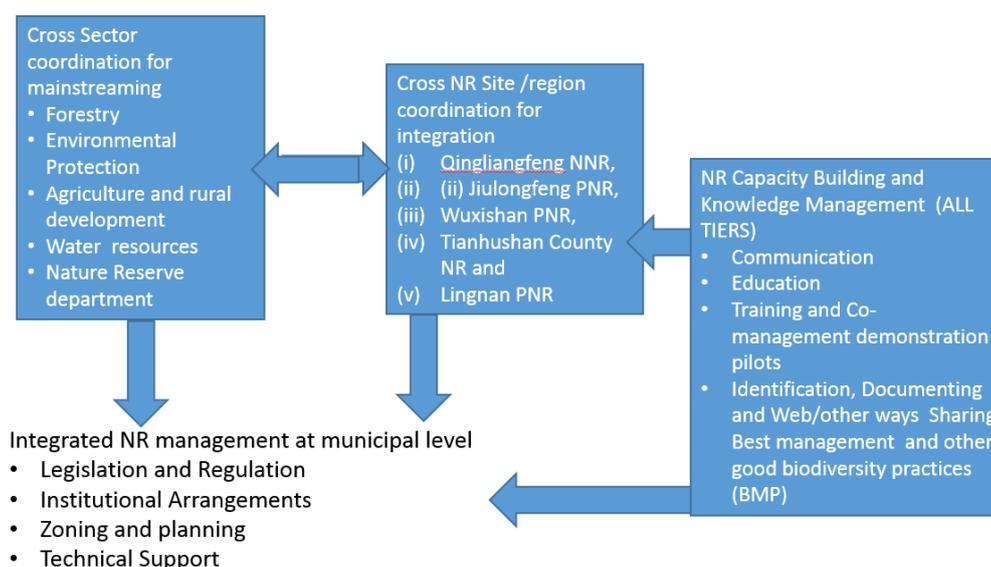
2.3 Theory of change

- 37. An observation of the MTE was the absence of a theory of change but detailed logic and strategy written in the project document. The MTE reconstructed the ToC below.

¹⁹ <http://www.pfi.org.cn/en/board/>

²⁰ <https://pandaily.com/ant-forest-to-invest-79m-over-next-5-years-to-plant-500m-trees/>

Figure 1: Theory of change - Huangshan GEF/FAO 049



Source: Evaluation team

Box 1. Mainstreaming biodiversity and cross-sector coordination for municipal level legal planning, monitoring program, and institutional development with municipal level integration of Forestry, Ecology and Environmental, Agricultural and Rural Development, and Water Resources.

Box 2. Promoting by learning and doing cross-NRs/sites coordination and capacity development to 12 NRs. Five receive direct strengthening (training), including support through a monitoring programme and the upgrading of project NR sites, hands on technical support for win-win PA co-management models (shared governance) working with nature reserve communities.

Box 3. Public and formal education for sustained transformation in mindset, including thorough demonstration of good management practices, biodiversity-friendly NR management practices, and work with Geoparks, NR education facilities, teachers, schools, and curricula.

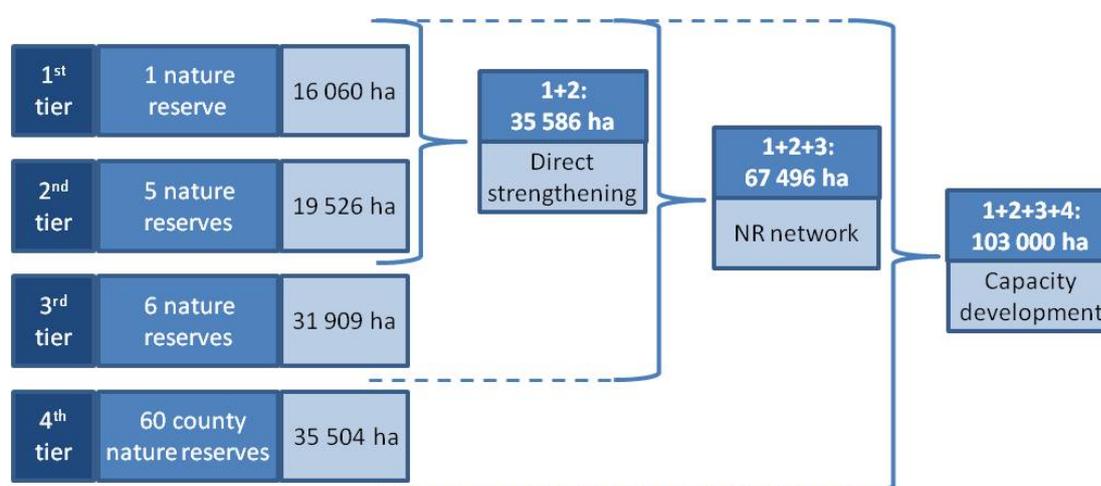
Box 4. KM and scale-up of the learning components and project content through a website, public awareness, documentation, communication, and a networking strategy. This can extend to the scoping of threats and practices and provide some training for tiers three and four.

38. All four boxes are integrated pathways to longer-term sustained capacities and transformed mindsets including integrated planning and thinking about individuals' relationships with natural resources management.
39. The strategy underlying the project concept is outlined in the project document. The goal of the project was "to secure the effective conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality." The project's specific objective was "to evaluate, adapt, and implement relevant best practices derived from the successful management of Huangshan National Scenic Reserve (HNSR) to strengthen and upgrade the existing municipal system of PAs."
40. Progress towards meeting this goal would be achieved through supporting the implementation of three mutually reinforcing technical components plus a crosscutting component. The project components address: (i) Policy, Planning and Institutional Arrangements, (ii) Improved NR Management Effectiveness and Networks, (iii) Capacity

Building, Environmental Education and Public Awareness, and (iv) Information Dissemination and Project Monitoring and Evaluation.

41. To meet the project objective and in light of the large number of existing NRs and significant differences in capacity, the project has been designed using a tiered approach (Figure A below), beginning with HNSR in tier one, and five reserves in tier two. These reserves are expected to be strengthened through the introduction of new concepts in planning and management, including promoting greater participation of local communities living in or adjacent to the reserve. Tier three is comprised of an additional six reserves that will participate in the creation of a reserve network and ecological health monitoring activities. Tier four includes 60 county level nature reserves that will participate in project-supported capacity development activities.

Figure 2: Overview of tiered system of activities



Source: Project document

42. Supported by an enabling policy framework that will build on the project's initial experiences and lessons learned, it is expected there will be good potential in the mid- to long term for replication and scaling up to other NRs in the municipality. The experiences derived from this approach were used as a basis to develop and finalize a biodiversity conservation ecotourism master plan (and model) for Huangshan Municipality's System of PAs. A series of publications based on best practices achieved during implementation, peer to peer site visits, and a web page would be used to ensure wide dissemination of project products to *other PAs in China*.
43. Central to the strategy, but not well defined by the ProDoc, is what constitutes best practices and demonstration of community co-management. In this context, best practices should be defined as a partnership arrangement between government and the local community of resource users (in some cases they are also connected with agents such as NGOs, research institutions, private sector companies, and other resource stakeholders).
44. The aim of CCCs is to *share the responsibility and authority for management of resources within the NRs in a sustainable manner with positive impacts on biodiversity as well as on the socioeconomic opportunities for the population dependent on the NR resources*. In order to enhance the social sustainability of the co-management approach to NRs, it promotes a rights-based approach to resources dependent community's claim for recognition in local

and provincial policy and service provision and for legal protections. At the same time the model should support legitimate livelihood actions based on rights to access forest and other NR resources within established areas under an ecosystem management approach. This approach was supposed to be further established during the project implementation linking responsibilities with protected rights for men as well as women.

3 Mid-term Evaluation findings

3.1. Relevance - MTE Question 1

Are the four project outcomes and objectives congruent with the GEF Biodiversity/strategies (GEF 5), China environmental priorities, FAO and the FAO China Country Programming Framework, and beneficiaries?

Has there been any change in the relevance of the project since its design, such as new national policies, plans, or programs that affect the relevance of the project's objectives and goals? If so, are there any changes that need to be made to the project to make it more relevant?

Finding 1. The project is highly relevant in the current national and international political operating context. The four project outcomes and objectives are congruent with the GEF Biodiversity strategies (GEF 5, 6, 7), FAO and the FAO-China Country Programming Framework (2016-2020).²¹

45. GEF/FAO country cooperation framework 2016–2020 outlines its current support as providing cutting-edge policy advice, and technical assistance on food security and safety, sustainable agricultural development, management of natural resources, and surveillance and control of transboundary animal and plant diseases.
46. GEF 5 and 6 have focal areas on biodiversity that respond to cross-sectoral strategies for environmental results.

Finding 2. A changed political context requires a slight shift in strategies: the project requires an update based on the current policy environment, in particular, the implementation linkages to the National BSAP and Nagoya Protocol on ABS, and the National Park system.

47. The new national development planning context includes framing by leadership on ecological civilization, the Biodiversity Convention and newly ratified Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing, the SDGs, and new national initiatives on a National Parks system, all part of China's environmental policy.
48. This relevance has changed since project conception. Project implementation began about ten months later than expected. The expected starting date in the ProDoc is November 2013 and the EA was signed in September 2014. Implementation began four years after formulation, and by then the project design and operating context had changed.
49. The *enabling environment*—including national and provincial laws, institutional and political context for biodiversity protection, and national parks system—has become *increasingly relevant*. This is especially pertinent with the recent national endorsement of the global agreements on SDGs, agreement to the ABS and the Nagoya Protocol, the Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction (Sendai 2015), and the global treaty on plant genetics resources. The current enabling policy environment offers a unique window of opportunity to advocate for the innovative approaches and lessons learned being

²¹ The timeframe of the CPF for China is set as from 2016 to 2020 in pace with both China's 13th National Five-year Development Period and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (2016-2020) in the country. The activities planned under this CPF have been commenced and on-going since the year 2016.

introduced, in particular, the concepts of PA zoning, sustainable livelihoods, co-management and the land trust, and the new regulation on access to benefit sharing.

3.2. Effectiveness - MTE Question 2

To what extent has the project contributed to the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan municipality?

Finding 3. The project is steadily moving toward the creation of an integrated approach to biodiversity-friendly NR management supported by a coherent policy, planning and institutional framework in Huangshan Municipality. However, there are many factors impacting the quality of results to date including design, implementation approach, and critically, the lack of GEF/FAO day-to-day qualified technical assistance (Chief Technical Advisor).

50. Many results have been achieved. See the assessment and presentation in Appendix 3 (progress towards the results matrix).
51. This question on an integrated approach to forest biodiversity conservation and management involves a critique of the work carried out, cutting across all components, but in particular, a critique of the planning and policy work outputs under components one and two. This work would be framed by a local Biodiversity Action Plan BSAP under component two, a draft master plan on Forest Tourism, and plans and policies for five nature reserves—documents that have been developed *on paper*.
52. The MTE identified the following issues pertaining to these expected results. First, the PMO implemented the policy and planning work with government co-financing and in absence of FAO technical support, specifically the biodiversity-friendly PA's integrated management approaches. FAO should further strengthen the technical support: the MTE also would like to clarify the role of different parties for technical support. As stated in the project document, the EP *"is responsible for the technical implementation of project activities"*. The CTA, together with other national consultants, should be on the front line of providing comprehensive technical support. FAO as the GEF agency, should *"provide technical guidance to ensure that appropriate technical quality is applied to all activities concerned conservation, restoration and NR networking"*. FAO has both a technical supervision but also value-added role as a United Nations organization with expertise in conservation agriculture, resilience, food system, community development, forest ecosystem and fisheries management.
53. Second, the strategy for the planning and policy work cuts across all components and should be informed by the co-management pilots and good practices to constitute a learning pilot. The MTE has determined that all the plans were developed prior to the scoping of best management practices, the co-management pilots, and learning work in components two, three, and four. Additionally, these formulations did not adequately draw on project results across components, e.g. scientific research, biodiversity flagship species data monitoring, and CCCs, started eight months ago. The policy and plans formulations point to references outside the project. These should be aligned with the project research, and with lessons and cases from the co-management pilots.

54. Third, improvements are necessary to better link policy and planning work to the national standard and policies, i.e. BSAP. Finally, the plans and guidance produced need to be quality checked for clarity, including important interrelationships and linkages. For instance, the management plan is more an implementation plan while the guidance plan is a management plan (“Implementation Plan for Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve Conservation Management,” vs. the “Strategic Plan for Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Sustainable Management”).
55. The project director and manager should hire as soon as possible, a qualified Chief Technical Advisor. The latter must have PA and biodiversity background with expertise in forestry, fisheries, and social interlinkages. These would guide the best practice identification and implementation strategies to oversee the technical implementation. In particular, they would oversee policies, the demonstration sites, capacity building and learning plan for scale up e.g. through knowledge networking.

To what extent has the project contributed to an increase in management efficiency in the 12 NRs and improved the status of these PAs?

Finding 4. To date the project has had limited impact on the contribution to an increase in management efficiency in the 12 NRs and improvement in the status of these PAs—mainly due to factors limiting balanced implementation and understanding of the capacity building approach, including the concept of knowledge and learning network.

56. Component two outputs (see table in Appendix 3) focused on the increase in average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves (67 496 ha) included in the municipal network of PAs and in the improvement of their status. The work programme under component two was found to be broad in scope, encompassing a biodiversity monitoring system, five community co-management pilots in six NRs, capacity building and training for 12 NRs, information management network building, and capacity strengthening and planning.
57. A major MTE finding was a lack of a sufficient baseline for the learning and knowledge management aspects across the four tiers. While the project focus was on building capacity of NRs in 12 tier one and two, six of the tier three NRs account for nearly 25 percent of the territory of Huangshan municipality, and 60 small, fragmented, and existing-in-name-only NRs in tier four account for 30 percent. Since a baseline is key for planning a network building learning strategy, the targeting (disadvantage, remote, unstructured, and rural) of the project is slightly off base.
58. At least one or two pilots selected from tiers three and four (rural and disadvantaged NRs) could have been better supported with a streamlined management plan. Tier three and four NRs could have been selectively supported for ecosystem monitoring, data collection, and submission or part of scientific research or other project contributing activities, instead of only for training as is the current plan. This aspect of the project has received no attention from project management.
59. The MTE suggests a technical review including a basic scoping of knowledge and capacity needs for the scale up network strategy: indirect strengthening of tiers three and four per the information management portal. The MTE suggests that the knowledge and learning needs of tiers three and four be assessed and prioritized for web design.

Planning, management and capacity strengthening “by doing”

60. The MTE reviewed the BD Tracking Tool (TT) results and found the average management efficiency in 12 project-supported nature reserves in the municipal network of protected areas is reported to have increased by 10 percent. The TT score for management efficiency of NRs has increased by 5 percent to 55 percent (PIR 2018): a good result in theory. The MTE, however, is sceptical about the quality of these figures since capacity building work has been uneven and not thoroughly reported or evidence-based in reports (see question concerning component three below).
61. The Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Tourism was developed under the leadership of the Huangshan Municipal Tourism Committee. The Bureau of Gardens and Forestry developed the 13th five-year plan, promising to fully take into account biodiversity conservation. The tier one Huangshan National Scenic Reserve Biodiversity Strategy and Action plan (BISAPBSAP) and five tier two NR management plans have been formulated with support of government co-financing.
62. The MTE finds that these plans have indeed been completed, with meetings convened and cross-departmental cooperation recorded. The Nanjing Environmental Science Institute was contracted to develop the BSAP. The MTE noted, however, that this document and all five NR management plans are not aligned to the standards or structure of the national BSAP. Normally, such formulations might receive guidance from Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) on standards, planning, structure, and process. Currently, principles, criteria, and indicators differ substantially from national BISAP. This has called into question the viability of the municipal planning carried out for future implementation.
63. In addition, the ongoing co-management of pilots was not referenced as good practice in the BSAP and/or drafts of the six NR management plans produced. Based on consultations with the PMO and review of technical monitoring reports, FAO technical assistance was not absorbed. This was related to lack of communication between PMO and FAO. Thus, the demand for FAO assistance was not effectively communicated by the PMO. One would expect that on the best biodiversity practices identification and in the development of the pilot co-management site process FAO technical assistance would be present. Project management at the municipal level has been implementing these activities with government co-financing and with limited absorption of FAO technical support. This begs the question of the utility and value-added of FAO in this project.
64. Component two requires direct capacity strengthening of tier three (six NRs) and indirect support of tier four (60 NRs) to make such results possible. The project management implementation strategy on NR capacity building has been limited as per a read of the PIR, PPR reporting on the 12 capacity building results.
65. As a learning and best practice sharing project, one would expect to see a capacity building strategy for bringing all 12 NRs up to speed. Such systematic training work is not visible so far (evidence demonstrated that, to date, only some 40 NR staff received trainings and public awareness and training - none are from tiers three and four).
66. More can be done to improve the NR network and encourage them to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from Huangshan NR network planning and management, ensuring that project work is not scattered across components.

67. Streamlining the project component areas to four and bringing together all the training and learning, sharing outputs (networking and IT, best biodiversity friendly practice scoping and sharing, training plan) under one work area is recommended (see reconstructed theory of change). The implementers can ensure linking these strategies for results to the pilot demonstration work and conduct a good baseline analysis on capacity and learning knowledge sharing needs of all tiers (3 and 4 included) and strategy for scaling up best biodiversity management practices.
68. For example, knowledge products can be discerned from the co management sites and arising from the research grants. This content might be better packaged and leveraged for learning and policy guidance purposes. In addition, the PMO has set up the policy and cross-sectoral mechanisms including the biodiversity technical committee and the leadership group. Insofar as these mechanisms are working, it is evident that the project has built capacity through implementation and contributed to a broad understanding of biodiversity mainstreaming and planning among stakeholders.

Co-Management Demonstration

69. Project management has begun to establish demonstration pilots in two community co-management CCC sites (Jiulongfeng PNR and Wuxishan PNR) with boundaries and contracts. Overall, the project pilot demonstrates impressive results and linkages/innovation. The project's original strategy, however, stated that six NRs would receive direct capacity building strengthening support, including the development of community co-management models as pilots to showcase innovations and community participation.
70. During the MTE visit to the PMO, the project manager requested a reduction from six to three co-management demonstration pilots; however, evidence showed that actions were already taken with FAO's consent on downsizing according to the Oracle Budget spreadsheets.
71. MTE concurs with his justification as two original sites are no longer viable due to the delay in the transfer of the GEF grant and a subsequent loss in motivation from partnering communities. This is additionally affected by more stringent environmental policies since the project began. The work agenda is too ambitious to implement six co-management pilot activities across five NR sites in the given five-year time frame.
72. Recent changes in context due to project-led studies about co-management implementation and changes in the nature reserve boundaries make implementation more viable in three of the original sites.
73. Reducing the number of CCCs from six to three would need to be brought through the formal channels for approvals (Steering Committee PSC, LTO and Budget Holder, FAO/GCU). The PM has also requested the addition of one more relevant sites (see below Monkey Forest).
74. Central to the project strategy but not well defined by the ProDoc or implemented, is what constitutes best practice demonstration of community co-management. In fact, the CCC is defined as a partnership arrangement between government and the local community of resource users, often including agents such as NGOs, research institutions, private sector companies, and other resource stakeholders.

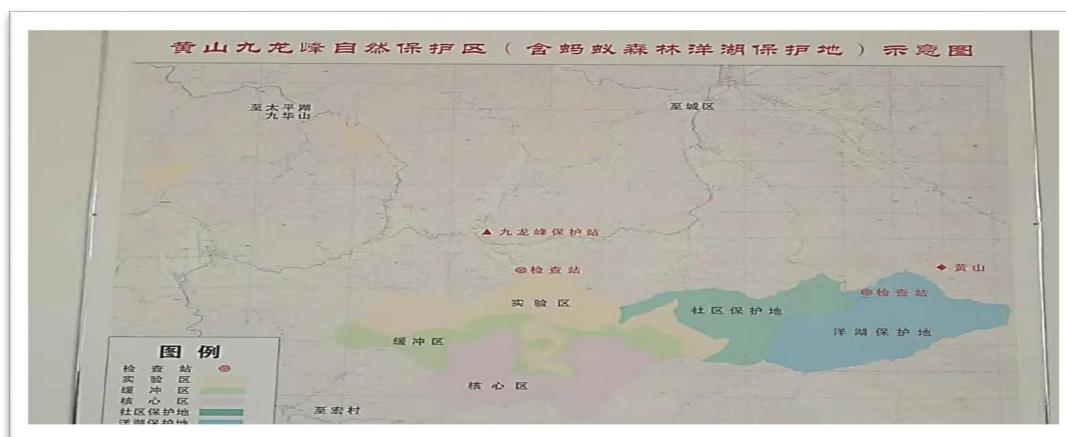
75. The aim of CCCs is to share the responsibility and authority for management of resources within the NRs in a sustainable manner with positive impacts on biodiversity as well as on the local fisheries, forestry and socioeconomic opportunities for the population dependent on the NR resources. To enhance the social sustainability of the co-management approach to natural resources, a rights-based approach is taken to enhance resources-dependent communities' claim for recognition in local and provincial policy, service provision, and legal protection. At the same time, the model should *support legitimate livelihood actions based on rights to access forest and other NR resources within established areas under an ecosystem management approach*. This approach was to be further established during the project implementation linking responsibilities with protected rights for men and women.
76. The team visited the following sites and made the following observations:

Jiulongfeng Nature Reserve NR

77. Huangshan-Jiulongfeng indicators for protection (2 000 ha) have been met. Jiulongfeng NR features government supervision, NGO management, social enterprise support, and public participation. It is a successful private public partnership (PPP) showcasing the new nature reserve connectivity between Jiulongfeng and Huangshan (a project indicator). Currently, the reserve is classified into zones: Core and Buffer, Experimental, Collective Ownership, Community Reserve, and Yangzhou Reserve (Ant Forest) (see photo of new zoning below). In addition, the number of rangers has increased to 15—rangers who receive training and are on the NGO's payroll. The main NGO collaborator with the NR is Paradise Foundation, a subsidiary of Alibaba Company, a local NGO Green Anhui. It is well resourced and has installed 45 infrared cameras for biodiversity monitoring and routine ranging with GEF grant support. It also has worked with the local community to develop community livelihood support, a homestay hostel, and a contract/negotiated agreements with the social enterprise Five Star Paradise Eco-Agriculture Development Co. Ltd.
78. The MTE noted the lack of visibility of the GEF and FAO logos on these endeavours and the need for the project to provide small financial inputs into the quality of the packaging and marketing. The MTE learned that the PMO was unsure of how much to invest in the pilots in terms of infrastructure. The participating NGO has built a nature education program for school children and a team building retreat for corporate staff. The MTE also visited the social enterprise to source/market the local co-product and provide small credit guarantee funds. Products are reputable traditional tea brands (Hookup, Mao Feng), rice and shrimp mixture for cultivating fields (2 000 mu, or approx. 1.34 ha), mountain spring water, and honey from the natural wild bee. However, the MTE finds that the project is not financing the small things that might help improve marketing, such as packaging and marketing support for villagers, especially with the private sector social enterprises. To date there is no visibility plan for these co-management partnerships.
79. The pilots need a plan with contracts and codification. The NGO-Alibaba technology "*application*" for prompting tree planting and the work on access and benefit-sharing with local social enterprise partnerships are good practices for GEF and FAO to showcase globally.
80. On a discouraging note, however, in Jiulongfeng, the MTE paid a visit to a local farmer on a welfare plot and found that the project was supporting an invasive species, the lobster,

with rice cultivation. This poses a risk if support is continued. This should be technically reviewed by FAO fisheries technical experts.

Figure 3: New PA zoning introduced - innovation intended by project - good practice



Source: Evaluation team

Tianhushan NR

81. Most trees are broad leaf in Tianhushan NR. An enterprise approved by the government is managing under-forest economy to grow mainly Huangshan traditional tea (Maofeng) and raise chickens and goats that eat grass on a small scale. A road had been built that allows small buses to go up to the mountain top, where there are several traditional trails which may facilitate nature education and hiker/campers. Now the road needs prolongation, the trails need renovation and signs, and the number of rangers needs to increase (there are currently ten). The gear, which the PMO plans to use to support e-tourism, needs improvement. Tianhushan NR Management Plan had been developed with project support in which ecotourism is key.

Wild Monkey

82. Over the past decade, there has been conflict between villagers and wild monkeys. Based on a 2012 survey, there were 24 herds of wild monkeys, and the number has continued to rise. Wild Monkey Valley is adjacent to a human settlement, and villagers' lives have been severely affected with no compensation from the government's forestry department. There are many reported cases (over 60 in the past half year) of monkeys hurting tourists visiting a private company—a company that had already been shut down at the time of the MTE visit.
83. A new CCC pilot has been proposed by the PM to resolve the wildlife conflict situation on the border of the NR and to explore a sustainable way to develop small-scale ecotourism to support community livelihood, scientific research on monkey species, and international exchanges. These exchanges could focus on topics such as human-animal conflict resolution and a nature education program for school children to enhance their exposure to nature and animals. The MTE believes this is a viable showcase project and agrees with the PM on the changes. It will be important to bring in technical assistance on wildlife management and parks borders.

84. Even though the MTE did not have a chance to visit to Wuxishan PNR, it noted the following:

Wuxishan NR

85. There is no NGO involved in Wuxishan CCC; rather, it is governed by the Forest Bureau which entered into formal agreement with local villages to establish a governance committee on behalf of both collective and state interests in conservation and sustainable use of natural resources to support local livelihoods. Connectivity of Huangshan-Jiulongfeng-Wuxishan reaches the 3 800 ha required by the ProDoc indicators to showcase an eco-corridor. As mentioned above, the Huangshan-Jiulongfeng portion of the corridor has already been completed, but the number of villagers (over 2 000) in three villages administrated by two counties in Wuxishan NR makes it difficult to further expand connectivity.
86. To date, it has not yet been decided how the project should resolve this difficulty because Wuxishan is an important demonstration site with indicators related to both CCC and reserve boundary, and thus carries weight. The MTE believes this site needs urgent technical assistance.

Tianhushan NR

87. There are mostly broad leaf trees in Tianhushan NR. An enterprise approved by the government is managing under-forest economy to grow mainly Huangshan traditional tea (Mao Feng) and raise chickens and goats that eat grass on a small scale. The Tianhushan NR Management Plan—in which ecotourism is key—was developed with project support. If Tianhushan is selected as pilot, the project can support the CCC to make sure that the benefits are shared with local communities situated outside these areas.

Monitoring system for flagship species that may need added protection

88. The project includes developing a baseline and monitoring system for key species (see log frame review in Appendix 3, component two indicators). This work has been advancing but is not reported very thoroughly in progress reports. For instance, while it was in progress, the MTE found that the work on demonstration and setting up a monitoring system activity for key endangered species was missing both a full plan and a sustainability strategy for post-project biodiversity monitoring. This is still a question at the MTE and requires the oversight of a FAO technical specialist.

To what extent has the project contributed to an increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems?

Finding 5. The project has led to increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems (however, not nearly enough by the date of the MTE or nor in a systemic way as was expected in the results and strategies).

89. The outputs corresponding to component three correspond to this question. Work from this component should result in an increase in institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems.
90. The MTE learned, in total, that the project unit had implemented 15 community trainings for 650 villagers. First-aid and fire prevention training was given to NR staff. A training master plan had been developed through the Paradise Foundation-supported NGO Green Anhui. While the project has moved on training and the master plan, it is unlikely that it has a systematic approach and considers training needs across all expected learning outcomes. The training plan has been subcontracted to Green Anhui, an NGO represented on the project leadership committee and a partner working on co-management in Jiulongfeng.
91. While the project has begun to strengthen capacity, mostly through learning by doing (developing policies with other sectors and co-management sites) and through ad hoc training workshops, it needs evidence of capacity development. In addition, it requires a rationale for targeting all stakeholders towards the outcome goals, including those for influencing sustainability and implementation of biodiversity policies and regulations. This necessitates more of a program approach to implementation, including overseeing cross-cutting work on advocacy and policy work to move the outputs toward transformative results, like mindset change.
92. The MTE noted that innovative co-management approaches also serve as good content for the upcoming training and scoping, and documentation of good practices (not yet done). Scoping of good management and other biodiversity friendly practices will require some thinking about the linkages to FAO's value added to fisheries and forestry, in terms of resilience approaches. This should be addressed urgently with the assistance of the LTO.
93. The learning needs for tier three and four beneficiaries are not yet well defined. This includes tier three and four needs for alternative practices, social economic development, biodiversity conservation, conservation agriculture, and sustainable forestry, which have yet to be surveyed and/or communicated.

Are lessons learned from the project being distilled and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating NRs?

Finding 6. The lessons from this project are not ready to be scaled. More intensive work is needed to delineate all the co-management sites, document those cases and biodiversity-friendly practices, and create web online infrastructure for sharing across NRs.

Finding 7. Knowledge management is missing – a core area of PMO competency.

94. This question refers to component four and the cross-cutting element of knowledge management and learning scaling of all components with the evidence that lessons learned are being distilled and replicated elsewhere in the nonparticipating NRs. This work has not advanced systematically as a core area of the project work or as a result in and of itself. There is an output on best practice identification to be completed, but the MTE finds this has not been attempted. The project lacks a conceptual understanding of knowledge management to underscore this work and bring it together across components. If the project were designed better for interpretation of the log frame, there might be a whole

component called knowledge management and learning, covering scoping, pilots, education (in a broad sense), as well as a knowledge sharing website.

95. The original project strategy (ProDoc) was carried out through indirect execution to build capacity through a four-tier approach with direct tightening for tiers one and two and building an information network and an information sharing network for tiers three and four. It contained many assumptions around capacity building, results reporting, learning through networking, and information management.
96. What constitutes a best practice in this context (biodiversity friendly PA management, ecosystem services, community participation, and biodiversity-friendly food and tourism production, conservation agriculture, forest ecosystems) is an important technical question. This component also requires work on knowledge management and network development linked to component two and four results, communication, documentation, and sharing results for learning purposes, i.e. through the information and informal NR network.
97. Theoretically, according to the ToC, the project should first define and scope good practices, support biodiversity-friendly nature reserve management practices, and mainstream biodiversity, and then document and share. The project sustainability strategy is linked as the results of advocacy for policy changes, including building messages about ecosystem services (which are grouped into four broad categories: provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural) and transforming community participation into policy, a main objective. The project could have leveraged a robust knowledge sharing and communication strategy around these linkages, guided by criteria around the full spectrum of conservation, ecosystem services, livelihoods, economy, DRR, agriculture, and forestry and environment.
98. An example of a good practice might be how the Huangshan NNR dealt with the nematode, which has been identified as a major longstanding threat in the project area. The government's way of dealing with it is a notable good practice not only at the national level, but also globally.
99. The MTE finds that with respect to the reporting on results, the project requires monitoring, communication and knowledge dissemination, management staff, and a strategy that underpins the information management work area's expected results.
100. The project information software is planned and might be informed by a user needs survey. The information dissemination and networking strategy is not moving yet. However, based on conditions observed at the PMO, it might be considered as a work area that goes beyond a web page and portal to enable action for monitoring key baseline indicators and to influence scaling up learning and sharing good practices that target all stakeholders in the national park and nature reserve systems. A knowledge management advisor can be made responsible for documentation of case practices, scoping best practices, monitoring and scoping user needs, portal and interface development, knowledge networking sharing and dissemination strategy, and relevant capacity building inputs, such as content sharing.

Are there any unintended results?

101. Yes. The project has had a surprisingly good partnership with the private sector company (Alibaba, through the Paradise Foundation) in Jiulongfeng pilot site. This unique PPP needs to be case studied and documented, and eventually showcased globally.

Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress toward and eventual achievement of effective conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality?

Finding 8. The greatest barrier to project results at the MTE is the lack of qualified GEF-competent CTA support and a full project management team in place to support implementation. The GEF grant is only 20 percent delivered, and so time is a barrier to results.

102. This is discussed below and in the recommendations section.

3.3. Efficiency - MTE Question 3

To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently and cost-effectively, and to what extent has management been able to adapt to any changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation?

Finding 9. The efficiency results were negatively affected by a number of compounding issues relating to the early interpretation of the execution agreement, delay during implementation and inadequate staffing.

103. These included changes to the execution agreement and the slow distribution of funding during the beginning of the project. There is a very low delivery (23 percent) and less than six months left in the timeline after nearly five years of implementation. The MTE found that the new FAO Representative in China addressed and solved the EA issue together with the support of the GEF coordination unit: in fact, the FLO spent several months in China to renegotiate the EA of this project as well as another five EAs. FAO Representation in China provided management training and support to the PMO.
104. However, the delays in implementation impacted the original project context and theory of change strategy around tier one and two learning “policy by doing”. It also affected the assumption that the co-management demonstration pilots in six areas might inform components one and two, policy and planning work. And it also affected the assumption that the nature reserve learning network (an important outcome expected by the project) would be able to adequately influence tier three and four informal reserves.
105. After the start of the project, it was implemented mostly by government co-financing due to the early renegotiation of the execution agreement. During that period, FAO inputs were few and oversight was minimal. However, there have been policy, monitoring, co-management, education and sharing results despite the long delay in operationalizing funding and FAO technical assistance in a meaningful way.
106. In the sorely understaffed PMO, with staff of two, the project assistant is handling all the administrative work, monitoring/reporting, and guiding overarching implementation management of the consultants. The small PMO team has been working in absence of a clear understanding of how to implement across components towards outcome level results and reporting. Nonetheless, it has demonstrated some results, including undertaking joint planning and work on co-management sites with communities—since

community level results were found to be underreported: policies, guidebooks, some training, surveys, and plans.

Have the specific features related to OPIM modality been taken into consideration during project preparation (e.g. recruitment and procurement procedures of the EP)? How efficient was the contracting and procurement process during the first half of the project (involvement of BH, LTO)?

107. No, this was the problem with indirect execution by FAO in the absence of corporate guidance, or OPIM modality which has clear SOPs and guidance. The partners entered into an agreement bound by the terms of the EA. Indirect execution was not fully understood. The newer FAO OPIM execution modality²² was not operational. OPIM now has standard operating procedures that inform the implementation and terms of implementation, including project management staff, CTA, etc.
108. This projects agreement was drawn up in the absence of full understanding of the terms and guidance of how to implement indirectly, including the need for financing for FAO to provide technical inputs, management support, evaluation and audit. The delays resulted in many problems in terms of relationships and trust and also timing of the grant transfers and delivery: the most significant problem to implementation being the absence of a qualified Chief Technical Advisor. The support provided by the Lead Technical Officer based in the FAO regional office in Bangkok is limited, with one or two missions per year, review of periodic reports, including the PIR.

To what extent has the project built on existing agreements, initiatives, data sources, synergies, complementarities with other projects and partnerships, etc., and avoided duplication of similar activities of other groups?

109. This project's design was informed by several GEF projects in China. It also had a good baseline assessment of the NR and the PAs system situation at the time. It was implemented by the municipality with the idea to build on the good practice of the Huangshan NNR management as a good practice for Nature Reserve Management and to augment it with biodiversity-friendly practices to share with others.

Is the project cost-effective? Does the cost/time versus outputs/outcomes equation compare to that of similar projects?

Finding 10. The early financial oversight and agreement problems have been corrected, and the project is now on track to catch up. Smooth implementation, however, is contingent on good communication between PMO and GEF Portfolio Officers in the FAO China country office and the LTO, project management support, streamlining of inputs, and a reflection on relevance of and reduction in scope, e.g. fewer pilot co-management sites.

3.4. Sustainability - MTE Question 4

What is the likelihood that the project results will continue to be useful or will remain after the end of the project? What will be the likely institutional arrangement for sustaining the project results after

²² The national execution modality is common in China. For example, WB and UNDP, whose projects cover about 70 percent of GEF funds in China, both apply national execution modality. OPIM is an internal quality control system in FAO, which is much more complicated than the management system of other GEF agencies, such as UNDP and WB. For the already delayed projects, it is urgent to simplify the process of management.

the end of the project? What are the key risks that may affect the sustainability of the project results and benefits (consider financial, socio-economic, institutional and governance, and environmental risks)?

Finding 11. The project is not ready to assess sustainability.

110. The project has been a forerunner, implemented under indirect execution by FAO, and in the absence of sufficient guidance and standard operating procedures. Now, OPIM modality clearly guides the indirect execution arrangements. Per OPIM, indirect execution must be underscored by robust country partner capacity assessment, and establish clear protocols on project management and monitoring risks, including financial audits and frequent (or not) spot checks depending on risk level.
111. The project does not have an exit strategy. There is not enough thinking about its sustainability and institutional mechanisms, particularly with regard to information management, the monitoring system, and the scale-up learning from project for policy actions.
112. An issue flagged during the MTE was the home for an intersectoral web page and portal. A decision needs to be made about institutionalization. For this, the MTE discussed and endorsed three options: to integrate three IT-based portals across components, namely, a computer-based NR Network for Huangshan and an integrated monitoring system and project website, into the currently government public promotion project "Digital Huangshan" to be cost-effective and sustain FAO-GEF portfolio results in China.

Did the OPIM modality contribute to increase national, regional, and sub regional ownership to support better sustainability of results? And to strengthen capacities of regional, sub regional, and/or national entities?

113. No, as discussed above. OPIM is a modality of implementation and, therefore, has clear operational guidelines and standard operating procedures. This project was started before OPIM modality was rolled out corporately. The project was drawn up locally in the absence of corporate guidance as indirect implementation. OPIM SOPs and knowledge are best utilized during design and then translated into a local operational manual for guiding the implementation. This still needs interpretation and support in understanding the terms during implementation. The project had to renegotiate the terms of the EA several times. The situation was compounded by relevance, motivation, and issues of trust among partners.

3.5. Factors affecting performance - MTE Question 5

3.5.2. Project design and formulation

Is the project design appropriate for delivering the expected outcomes? Is the logic coherent and clear? To what extent are the project's objectives and components clear, practical, and feasible within the timeframe?

Finding 12: The project design was overambitious and complicated to interpret. It requires streamlining, consolidation of the knowledge networking/learning work outputs (under a KM and learning component) and reduction in scope

Relevance, Log Frame, Strategy, and Targets

114. The project management is doing an honourable job of following the project logic in order to meet the expected results targets in the original plan (also see the section on PMO below). The project document, while complete, lacked an outline of strategies to guide the complex implementation, which has many pathways.
115. The project has six work areas to be guided simultaneously in order to be effective as a learning and sharing project. The project strategy makes heavy assumptions around the ability to build capacity and to scale up the lessons learned strategy.
116. Additionally, for planning and monitoring, the strategy is missing intermediate states. Although it has six areas of intervention, including a scientific baseline and monitoring system, the project log frame and its corresponding strategy do not have a theory of change for the strategy outlined, especially for capacity building and a learning approach in tiers three and four. The municipality's ability to lead on project management depends on showing the win-wins. This includes staffing and complex strategies of how to build capacity for biodiversity-friendly planning and scaling up of the learning to impact on a further 61 informal NRs through network sharing of good NR biodiversity management practices and dissemination of knowledge about the co-management demonstrations.

Theory of change reconstructed

117. The log frame needed some rescaling and reshuffling of activities to streamline the work pathways toward learning and mindset-type transformative changes. The ambitious design linked to the original log frame targets is unnecessarily complex in multi-dimensional technicality (biodiversity, PA management systems, agriculture, education, and capacity building) for the municipality. For instance, it was originally designed as a 4 million plus investment reduced to a USD 2.7 million investment for indicators built for six work areas.²³

²³ Component 1: Policy, Planning & Institutional Arrangements

4. Policy Formulation
5. Policy Implementation Planning
6. Institutional Arrangements

Component 2: Improved NR Management Effectiveness & Networks

- 2.1 Improved Nature Reserve Management Effectiveness
- 2.2 Co-management and Sustainable Development
- 2.3 Nature Reserve Network
- 2.4 Creating Landscapes for Biodiversity Conservation
- 2.5 Applied Competitive Research in NRs
- 2.6 Studies and Monitoring of Ecosystem Health

Component 3: Capacity Building, Environmental Education and Public Awareness

- 3.1 Capacity Building
- 3.2 Environmental Education
- 3.3 Public Awareness

Component 4: Information Dissemination and Project ME

- 4.1 Information Dissemination
- 4.2 M & E

1. scientific monitoring program of key species, 2. piloting innovative approaches for six co-management demonstrations, 3. developing an ambitious action research programme for policy (the MTE noted that this is very useful content as there are knowledge products for sharing with nothing being currently done), 4. policy and management planning covering six national reserves, including the forestry and garden department within the municipality, 5. mainstreaming in public works and the education sector, and 6. design and implementation of an information network to be used to document and scale up the learning and to guide the tier four local management activities, including those of tiers three and four.²⁴
118. The MTE also finds that in the baseline learning strategy, the tier three and four knowledge needs were not scoped and studied, and there are no evident plans to support their knowledge and learning needs, which constitute one-third of the potentially destructive practices.
119. Per strategy and complement, some activities were mixed up across the boxes, and this complicated the implementation and execution. The MTE reconstructed the ToC and/or pathways with four interlinked boxes, moving toward a longer-term expected outcome of mindset change (see ToC section above). These pathways would require cross-cutting elements, such as capacity development, knowledge management, and learning and partnerships for implementation.

Co-management Pilots

120. Some of the demonstration co-management site targets are no longer relevant due to a changed policy environment, such as the national park system and delays in implementation (see commentary on co-management sites).
121. This project was overambitious, including its six pilots and CCCs, 12 core direct target CB areas, ambitious research agenda, and strategy for influencing a further 61 through network sharing of good NR biodiversity management practices and subsequent dissemination of knowledge. The learning strategy for tiers three and four was weakly defined in original documents. Moreover, the evaluation finds incorrect assumptions and lack of a baseline for network-based learning strategy for tier four.

3.5.3. Project management and work planning

To what extent did the Huangshan Administrative Committee effectively discharge its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project? What have been the main challenges in relation to the management and administration of the project, and what changes are needed to improve delivery in the second half of the project?

Does the EP provide quality financial reports, PPRs, and PIRs and present calls for funds in a timely manner?

²⁴ Actual indicators in document are: 8 municipal policies, Management/implementation plans for 6 NRs, 600 NR staff and 4000 villagers trained, 6 CCCs, 12 monitoring stations, 72 NR in the network, 10 species, 20 schools, 24 granted scientific research, 2 permanent biodiversity bodies, 80 km trails beautified with bill boards and signs, 1 integrated monitoring information system, 1 project website, 1 computer based portal... ..

Finding 13. The PM and EP have been discharging the roles and responsibilities as much as can be expected in the absence of clear guidance and direction from FAO for implementation and misinterpretation of the EA around staffing and CTA. The current project staffing does not have the ability to build capacity.

122. The project document states that the PMO should ensure the coordination and execution of the project through the timely and efficient implementation of annual work plans. It should coordinate work and follow the implementation of project activities, handle day-to-day project issues and requirements, coordinate project interventions with other ongoing activities, and ensure a high degree of national and local inter-institutional collaboration, monitor project progress, and ensure the timely delivery of inputs and outputs. It is responsible for implementing the project's ME plan, managing its monitoring system and communication programme, elaborating semi-annual project progress and financial reports, and assisting in the preparation of the annual PIR and mid-term and final project evaluations.
123. The MTE met with the Project Director, also the Director of the Bureau of Forestry and gardening, one of 16 subordinated work units under the Huangshan National Scenic Reserve Administration Committee (HSAC). He has established a working team with a full-time PO, who carries out most of the support work for implementation and monitoring. In essence, this is a project team of two. There are also a number of sub-contracted experts and the arrangement is working well. The MTE met with the experts (see below).
124. The MTE team read the work plans and the monitoring reports, including PPRs, PIRs, and call for funds. These processes are being supported by the Project Director and the GEF Portfolio Officer at the FAO Representation in Beijing. They are vetted by FAO-LTO in Bangkok. This is fine, but it was indicated that this has been a learning process for the PO. The report on results is challenging, with much back and forth to get the wording right. This also explains the delays between the first transfer of funds and the second transfer according to reports by stakeholders.
125. The current GEF portfolio officer at the FAO Representation in Beijing does not have the funds to make frequent visits to support the project assistant. As a result, support is provided mainly via the WeChat app and email.
126. A few key gaps stood out. While the project team is convening the cross-sectoral input for mainstreaming and good practices from the municipal level Forestry Department—and planning to host intersectoral technical meetings on environmental issues—key sectors, including agricultural and education, can be more involved in the ownership and the monitoring implementation and oversight. The representation on the Steering and Biodiversity committees should be covering important institutional linkages for biodiversity mainstreaming and action, including the project's cross-sector learning. Also, the project is hosting two separate forums, one on biodiversity policy and another on biodiversity mainstreaming technical work. This is cumbersome, and these two technical forums might be merged.
127. The local CTA is competent on issue of forestry but does not have the profile for the GEF technical requirements and managing strategies across all components, e.g. ecosystem services, FAO conservation agriculture, and education learning strategies. This is a gap.

PMO structure includes a leading group (output 1.1.4) formed by representatives from related government sectors and responsible for the coordination with other project sites.

128. The cross-cutting project work is not getting enough attention. Overarching gender, capacity development, knowledge management, partnership and/or sustainability strategies and plans are inherent in the achievement of cross-component expected results. The strategies need an inclusive implementation process and supportive staff, including technical oversight, strong communication and knowledge management, and a more programmed approach toward implementation across all components to reach the longer-term expected learning outcomes. Capacity building and knowledge management, learning strategies, and basic understanding of results-based project management are included. The PMO is lacking an experienced national ME consultant, a communication officer, and a provincial level CTA with GEF experience.
129. The strategies and implementation need technical oversight and day-to-day implementation support. In addition, miscommunication has been reported between the GEF Portfolio Officer at the FAO Representation in Beijing and the PMO on the oversight and implementation strategies. The MTE noted the lack of capability for monitoring and reporting for results as indicative of the poor quality of reporting. A criticism in PIR/PPR monitoring reports was that project management was weak on communicating community involvement. The issue was actually communication itself and the need for training of the PMO. The project team has been implementing much of the work with co-financing which was not financed by the GEF grant funds as there were delays in the transfer due to the previously mentioned problems with the EA revision and the reporting. The progress made thanks to the co-financing was not reported as progress towards results. The PMO recognizes that it needs to improve communications, monitoring, and reporting on results. This issue was flagged and is recognized by the PMO as a priority.
130. There is urgent need for a day-to day chief technical advisor with competencies for GEF and FAO vetted approaches and monitoring, and cross-component implementation strategies and implementing toward outcome level results, including keeping projects relevant to relevant national and international commitments and adapting work programs through adaptive management (SC), i.e. CBD and technical oversight of all work toward results across the entire project architecture. The CTA should report to both the GEF Portfolio Officer at the FAO Representation in Beijing and the PM. The MTE finds cross-departmental involvement facilitated, but the strategy still lacks visibility as a key project result and an example of institutional sustainability. The MTE met with the project experts and verified that these inputs were of quality and the linkage between the project and the institutions was good.

3.5.4. Project implementation and execution

Has the project been implemented according to specifications in the project document, and are the log frame and OPIM agreement useful as management tools?

Finding 13. The Project Steering Committee (PSC), a key feature of project oversight, is still informal and ad-hoc. The leadership board performs the policy and work planning oversight function but in the absence of FAO involvement.

Finding 14. The PSC does not convene regularly and when it does, the conversations are not competent presentations on what is happening, and decision actions are not being taken up.²⁵ Normally, it is in this venue that partners make joint decisions on project implementation. This situation needs to be revisited for streamlining and improved for general decision-making, technical decision-making, and policy development.

131. While a project Steering Committee has been informally established and has met three times to guide the project implementation, the MTE learned it is not a strong decision-making venue for FAO and or higher GOC oversight on what is happening at project level. The PSC, the tool for oversight accountability, adaptive management, and decision-making is not fully operative. As the highest level oversight mechanism for all parties involved in the project agreement, the PSC, it is the place to get updated on implementation and decision-making.
132. An expert Advisory Committee has been established to evaluate the candidates as national consultants. Reportedly, the members communicate with each other regularly through meetings, letters, emails, or telephone calls.
133. The MTE was not successful in accessing the Steering Committee meeting notes from the PO. The GEF Portfolio Officer in FAO Representation and the FAO Representative in Beijing also reported not being meaningfully involved in these meetings. At times they were not invited to be present physically. This serious movement away from what is stated in the original project document is a risk for the project at the MTE. In this case, project oversight has been insufficient for fiduciary and technical oversight and decision-making.

Finding 15. The project has been undeniably impacted by a lack of understanding of indirect execution modality (not OPIM- OPIM had not yet been rolled out when project was designed) and the requirement for implementation, including the PMO, must have a qualified staff in place.

134. The FAO GEF-Huangshan Project was officially launched in Huangshan City. The project has been implemented according to the project document by output (not programmatic approach), and without full staffing and a consideration for the 'value added' learning and best biodiversity management practice sharing type results that cut across all components and outputs.
135. The project began implementation with an inception meeting on 23 October 2014 with FAO and execution stakeholders. As mentioned, the early activities, planning and policies under components one and two, were primarily implemented with co-financing. This means based on the PIR report and the reporting, the biodiversity-friendly practices intended to influence the planning were not recorded in reports. The project management at municipal level was informed by the GEF Portfolio Officer at the FAO Representation in Beijing that GEF funds could not reimburse costs retroactively.

To what extent did the OPIM implementation and execution modalities facilitate or hamper project execution and contribution to the project objectives?

Finding 16. The project was implemented by indirect execution by FAO in the absence of any corporate guidance or experience. FAO OPIM (corporate guidance) was not rolled out with

²⁵ Steering Committee discussions with all stakeholders.

guidance or standard operating procedure. The lack of understanding interrupted the execution of the project and subsequent interpretation of the rule of implementation including the rule on staffing and technical inputs and oversight.

136. The EA between FAO and China went through three cumbersome revisions since the start of the project. This process interrupted implementation. Delays created confusion and a loss of trust and communication between the PM and the GEF/FAO office in Beijing. The EP should follow the EA, the ProDoc, and the Project Implementation Manual. The EA process also led to cumbersome procedures for simple revisions. The logistical distance, with the support officer and the GEF Portfolio Officer in FAO Representation based in Beijing, was also part of the challenge. In addition to the comprehensive trainings at the beginning stage, the PMO staff have been invited to trainings organized by other PMOs.
137. The project implementation strategy was negatively influenced by renegotiation of EAs and the delay in implementation and starting the slow release of GEF project financing. The *EA was signed in September 2014, and the first instalment was not made until January 2015*. In July 2016, the PMO had only USD 32 235 remaining in the bank account. Project implementation slowed. The second instalment was finally made in December 2017, *after a gap of one and a half years*. Reports were that it was difficult to accelerate the project, which had nearly come to a halt.
138. FAO Representation in Beijing has a GEF portfolio support team. In total, this project was delayed for a total of two years due to delayed release of funds. This delay justifies a no-cost project extension of up to two years, as mentioned numerous times.
139. Project management units had proceeded with government financing to deliver most of component one: policy, planning, institutional arrangements and some training. The situation negatively impacted the mainstreaming strategy since the plans were supposed to include ongoing work in component two and community inputs (especially through learning emerging from the co-management pilots with the communities). This can be corrected with a workshop before the end of project to review the plans and policies with technical inputs and fresh learning directly from the pilots.

3.5.5. Financial management and co-financing

What have been the challenges related to the financial management of the project and to what extent has the pledged co-financing been delivered?

Finding 17: The delivery was negatively impacted by the delay at the start of implementation with FAO support and the inadequate interpretation of the execution agreement at the design stage. Cost effectiveness was impacted by the absence of oversight for technical results.

140. Twenty-three percent delivery at the date of the MTE and after four and half years of implementation since signing is very low. The project was delayed due to the aforementioned changing of the original execution agreement requirement for revision. This project is only now picking up momentum and garnering interest. The *PM has requested an extension of two years* due to the delay in release of GEF funds. Co-financing has been healthy (for example, see PIR).

Table 2: Co-financing table in USD (prepared by MTE team)

Source of Co-finance	Cash Contributions (USD)			In-kind Contributions (USD)		Executed to date	Comments on shared activities
	Budget original (at time of approval by GEF)	Budget latest revision	Executed to date	Budget original (at time of approval by GEF)	Budget latest revision		
HSAC	4 620 512	4 620 512	4 338 943	853 100	853 100		Biological observation of sample plots. Sector Plan for Biodiversity Conservation in Huangshan NP, a ten-year investigation and monitoring project of terrestrial vertebrates
Huangshan Municipal Bureau of Finance	3 900 000	3 900 000	2 073 555				The first period of Qinliang NNR construction
Yixian County Bureau of Forestry				88 200	88 200	238 594	Management room and ecotourism
Huangshan Tourism Development Company	372 000	372 000	241 994				Wisdom of Huangshan City Project Construction
Village Producer's Councils				436 500	436 500	119 546	Community Training in Huangshan District
GEF/FAO				237 900	237 900	177 689	
Others: The Paradise Foundation			838 520				Construction related to Jiulongfeng PA increased by about USD 290 000 in the current period
Total	8 892 512	8 892 512	7 493 012	1 615 700	1 615 700	535 829	

3.5.6. FAO comparative/value added

To what extent has FAO delivered on project identification, concept preparation, appraisal, preparation, approval and start-up, and oversight and supervision? Does GEF/FAO review/approve reports and arrange for the transfer of funds in a timely manner?

Finding 18. FAO technical and managerial inputs have been of limited value due to a breakdown in communication between the PM and the GEF Portfolio Officer in FAO Representation and bottlenecks linked to adequate design, including the interpretation of staffing and oversight mechanism role—the steering committee.

141. These were supervision missions undertaken by the FLO, OPIM colleagues, LTO, FAOR in China reported at the MTE: 1. 26–27 March 2015, trainings for the partner, Olga Abramova, Rikke Olivera, Egle Deangelis, Dai Weidong, Han Yan, Jiang Han, and Liu Xuemin; 2. January 2017 Patrick Durst (refer to BTOR) and Dai Weidong; and 3. 19–23 March 2018, Vincent Martin, Thomas Hofer, Kentaro Aoki, and Zhao Wei (refer to BTOR). As for the assurance activities, the MTE learned there had been a spot check in June 2016 and an audit in April 2018.
142. FAO technical inputs are not integrated nor interpreted. Stakeholder interviews at project site reported the implementing agency inputs as not adding much value. While FAO (LTO, FAO Representation in Beijing and GCU) has been offering technical and managerial inputs, they were not being followed up with nor taken into consideration in planning. To date, they have been of limited value. Based on consultations, a desk review of meeting notes, and an aide memoire from the supervision mission last year, FAO provided managerial suggestions, e.g. to recruit a national ME expert, to carry out training needs assessment, and to avoid underreporting activities and progress. However, *the PMO did not follow the agreed upon action plan.*
143. There was an assumption in the design that the execution agency and the PMO had the capacity to implement a strategic level capacity building project (piloting and scaling biodiversity-friendly practices) and there was sufficient understanding of how to implement the technical work and the project learning strategies. The MTE, however, found that communication *bottlenecks emerged leading to a breakdown in trust between the PMO and the GEF Portfolio Officer in FAO Representation, the LTO and the GCU.* Technical support and the day-to-day relationship require a trusting, hands on approach to be effective. One way to deal with this problem is to co-hire a CTA and competent guidance for implementation and articulation of the major strategies.

3.5.7. Partnerships and stakeholder engagement

Have other actors, such as civil society, indigenous populations, or private sector, been sufficiently involved in project design and implementation, and what has been the effect of their involvement/non-involvement on project results? What are the strengths and challenges of the project's partnerships?

Finding 19. The project is actively creating partnerships with and between technology companies, government departments, civil society, NGOs, and social enterprises.

144. According to MTE consultations with NGOs, Green Anhui,²⁶ a local NGO, was involved in the project design during the drafting of the ProDoc and has become a strong member of the Project Leading Group. Green Anhui is a local NGO partner jointly working with

²⁶ Green Anhui is Anhui Province's only grassroots environmental organization. Since its founding on September 24, 2003, Green Anhui has established three offices in the province: one in Hefei, one in Bengbu and one in Wuhu. Currently it employs 10 environmental experts as well as a core group of approximately 100 volunteers. Green Anhui is also affiliated with and supports 52 student environmental organizations throughout the province. According to its website and consults, it has five programs: water conservation and protection, environmental education, environmental health, conservation of local ecosystems, and public awareness campaigns, since its founding, Green Anhui has achieved international recognition for its powerful impacts on Anhui's environment and society. Green Anhui has received two awards: Ford's 2004 Conservation and Environmental Grant as well as Society of Environment and Ecology's (SEE) 2005 Ecological Conservation Prize.

Alibaba's Paradise Foundation on the CCC pilot in Jiulongfeng PNR where it is demonstrating an excellent practice for showcasing. The NGO is engaged in the leadership group, and has a strong technical implementing partnership for work on showcasing biodiversity-friendly practices concerning NR zoning and demarcation with buffer. The Green Anhui NGO is competently staffed with technical capabilities on sustainable forestry, environmental protection, and education. The MTE found that through this project the partnership is promoting an innovative app with the Alibaba Paradise Foundation to enable online shoppers reforest and protect genetically rare trees species in project areas. A high percentage of the Paradise Foundation support to the NGOs staff is comprised of women forest rangers. These Paradise rangers are providing training in the project area. The MTE believes that both the partnership and app are remarkably good practices, i.e. women rangers, NGO work and the ant forest app that might be promoted and scaled globally in partnership with FAO's work on digital finance.

145. The MTE interviewed a local social enterprise involved in a co-management site, also supervised by the Green Anhui NGO to carry out economic activities in support of community livelihoods. Though not an intentional part of project design, it could be a positive element if communicated and if it works toward project goals. However, the MTE is uncertain as it is an activity that requires technical input.
146. In addition, a tourism company, Tuma, affiliated with the HSAC, was designated early on, in the project design stage, to use the activity deliverable that originated from establishing an Integrated Huangshan NR network monitoring information system as an integral composition of Smart Huangshan, a government-funded digital portal to provide online information to public.
147. Project design stipulated that NGOs participate in project design and implementation, and enterprises when necessary. The NGO work and the work with the social enterprises to deliver project results and showcase biodiversity-friendly practices was significant. This is showcased in the CCC pilot in Jiulongfeng PNR, Tianhushan PNR, and Wild Monkey Valley (see case on Green Anhui and Paradise Foundation described below).
148. MTE also took note of the project work with the social enterprise and private sector links. These good practices need to be delineated and fully documented to showcase them as mean of implementation of the Nagoya Protocol and ABS in China. These practices could showcasing the access and sharing of benefits with the indigenous populations. Key themes include adding value to natural resources and protecting genetic and traditional knowledge associated with natural resources.
149. The MTE notes a challenge: villages (women) and NR management (staff) in tiers three and four are core to the Huangshan NR network and are underrepresented, neither benefitting from nor contributing to project results. This is views as a project risk.

3.5.8. Communication and knowledge management

How effective has the project been in consolidating, communicating, and promoting its key messages and results to partners, stakeholders, and a general audience? How can this be improved?

Finding 20. The results reporting, especially for reporting linkages of project support to communities and livelihood, invasive species, conservation and human cohabitation, and biodiversity-friendly management, needs work.

150. The project has no concept of how consolidating, communicating, and promoting its key messages and results relate to the expected outcomes. While the number of billboards, 571, was a high priority and a costly endeavour (USD 2 000 for each billboard, along over 80 km of trails in Huangshan NSR), the work on billboards and communication needs to be linked to other expected results in a more systematic way. Currently, this is a NR procurement exercise.
151. The project content primarily expresses work on advancing biodiversity knowledge in the NRs, but it is supposed to be communicating much more than that. Moreover, communication of the linkages needs to be much more visible through the communications, education materials, and expression of the work going on at co-management sites.
152. Knowledge management and communication are key features of the overarching implementation to learning strategy. This was not recognized, but the staff in the project management unit should be supporting the cross-cutting expected results.

3.5.9. ME design

Is the ME plan practical and sufficient? (ME implementation) Does the ME system operate as per the ME plan? Has information been gathered in a systematic manner? To what extent has information generated by the ME system during project implementation been used to adapt and improve project planning and execution, achieve outcomes, and ensure sustainability?

Finding 21. The project monitoring is done as per the project document and EA agreement. However, there is a lack of understanding of what results should be reported. The PMO needs training and understanding on what they are and how to report on their results (results-based project management training is an option).

153. There are different aspects of the ME: the ME plan as indicated in the ProDoc as well as an ME system to monitor specific project indicators.
154. Regarding the project monitoring framework in the ProDoc, the MTE finds the log frame and its targets highly ambitious in terms of coverage (scope of work over six areas: policy, institutional, monitoring system of key species for biodiversity, six co-management pilots, NR networking, knowledge management and capacity building, education and public awareness) and in expected policy outcomes. In addition, project targets are longer term transformative goals and might be better reformulated as making "contributions to policy". The national government has moved ahead on a number of fronts, including ratification of the Nagoya Protocol on access and benefit sharing 2018, Agenda 2030, the SDGs, and the work on a National Park system. In addition, there is an agreement on wildlife and species protections.
155. The log frame and project document is used as a monitoring tool and has smart indicators. One criticism was that the document was presented in English and this was an early barrier to start up implementation. The project results and log frame critic is outlined in the section

on effectiveness. The ME system might have been designed at the onset with explicit accompanying articulation of a variety of implementation pathways or strategies to support the ambitious knowledge sharing and learning results expected, especially with tiers three and four.

3.6. Cross-cutting dimensions - MTE Question 6

*To what extent were gender considerations accounted for in designing and implementing the project?
To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?*

Finding 22. The project lacked implementation and reporting focus on cross cutting areas including Gender, Environmental Safeguards.

156. While this is an environmental mainstreaming project, a major concern was to do no harm by introducing invasive species or propagating unfriendly practices. This requires technical oversight and needs to be addressed as discussed above.
157. A requirement of the project design is that gender be considered in both design and implementation. So far, some women have benefited from the project to some extent, but there is great room for improvement. The MTE found that female villagers are being exposed to project-supported skill trainings. The numbers have been promised, but the full tally has not yet been received by the MTE.
158. Evidence shows that around 650 villagers attended 15 project-supported skill trainings in which *one-third of the trainees were women*. It is noted that all these villagers were from tiers one and two. With regard to the CCC pilot implementation, two out of 15 rangers in Jiulongfeng PNR are educated women. This was reported as rare for the non-formal NRs. The project might be better targeted with focus on tiers three and four, including poor, remote, elderly and uneducated rural farmer women.
159. The MTE recommends this be addressed with a proper gender assessment for women. A gender specialist needs to be put into this project to develop a plan for priority mainstreaming across the co-management pilot and the training and linked to the national priorities, including Eco-Compensation and Ecological Poverty Reduction with gender considerations that fit with local contexts.
160. GEF/FAO's specialized areas include food systems and sustainable agricultural production, processing, and other agro under-forest economies that help women to sustain family livelihoods. Emerging aspects of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Nagoya Protocol—minority ethnic groups, traditional knowledge, access of genetic resources, and equitable benefit sharing, etc.—would benefit local women in livelihood securing efforts.
161. Together with the above, more aspects referring to the emerged environmental and social concerns can help address or implement processes and dynamics propelled by the regime of ecological civilization. These include Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP), Eco Conservation Redline, National Park pilot and legislation, Natural Resource and Asset Balance Sheet, and Ecological Auditing, etc.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

162. This section sets out a summary of the MTE findings, and presents the conclusions from these findings.
163. The project was managed and has been implemented as best as it could have given the circumstances and the number of unfortunate issues compounding early implementation and project management norms. The political will for successful implementation is there. Communication has been the barrier between the PM and the FAO Representation in China and the LTO.
164. As mentioned, FAO implements the project by indirect execution. The EA was thus designed with false assumptions and, most significantly, with insufficient project staff to be able to build capacity, i.e. for GEF monitoring and results reporting.
165. The GEF/FAO support provided its value-added technical assistance and oversight, with more strategic partnering for implementation. However, in practice the government proceeded with execution in the absence of the GEF fund, and FAO technical guidance. It proceeded with a top-down approach to the policy development aspect of implementation, components one (policy development) and component two (NR policy and management guidance).
166. FAO's indirect approach to implementation led to issues with scheduling and technical oversight since the basic idea was to start the implementation and to build the policies and guidance through "doing", for example, biodiversity best practice scoping/scaling, co-management demonstration and zoning, building the information management system, and learning and sharing with all NRs, including tiers three and four as things moved along. This strategy was to then share the best practice and learning with tiers three and four through the information sharing portal and network.
167. The biodiversity best practices of piloting, identification and mainstreaming, and planning, for example, aimed to foster a greater appreciation of ecosystem services and to bring communities to participate in benefit sharing for the alternatives, such as hotels and more sustainable farming practices. In reality, the project has been implemented with a more top-down approach to policy and planning, in cases restricting inclusion of demonstration communities by the implementation of stricter municipal environmental policies. Therefore, the concept of community co-management committees did not become possible in some of the original communities targeted due to new environmental restrictions.
168. Even so, the MTE finds that, despite bottlenecks to project implementation, much has been learned on many fronts.

Conclusion 1. The indirect execution by FAO was implemented in the absence of guidance and standard operating procedures and was not well understood by partners designing the project. This caused renegotiations, delays and a breakdown in the relationship between FAO and the PM. The delays led to a loss of motivation in some demonstration project sites which would continue post delay.

Conclusion 2. Project components one (polices) and two (capacity strengthening and community co-management) to a large extent without requesting solid FAO technical guidance and understanding of the ecosystem service's implementation approach and key messages for biodiversity mainstreaming and without fully absorbing the support provided.

169. This led to the requirements for implementing the projects not being clearly communicated, i.e. basic element like ensuring that sufficient capacity to implement was in place and having a full staff, including a competent CTA to guide implementation.
170. Key messages for biodiversity mainstreaming include food systems, forestry, fisheries, livelihoods, and inclusivity with communities in the NR governance models, ecosystem services, and community participation.
171. The LTO technical support and project support and the GEF officer at the FAO Representation in China were not being absorbed and/or reacted to.

Conclusion 3. The project is essentially a learning project in the sense that they are new concepts and innovative approaches and needs technical oversight on policies, best biodiversity practices, gender, learning, monitoring and education matters

172. Recruitment of a qualified provincial level CTA with GEF experience is the key factor for future project implementation. Staff and consultancies also need to incorporate gender, communications, knowledge networking/learning, e-management strategies and monitoring, and evaluation, including results-based management and how to report on expected results.

Conclusion 4. The work on the IT- network is not well understood. This area needs a strategy and must be an important aspect of the second half of implementation.

173. The full extent to which the work on networking and infrastructure should support other results as a means to achieve the major project expected results (like scaling the learning of best practices from the project within a project) was not convincing to the MTE.

Conclusion 5. The invasive species and destructive practices have not been recently considered in pilot sites, showing need for technical oversight into activities.

174. For example, the project is considering the inclusion of spiny lobster in fresh water rice cultivation, however, this has not been studied as a potential threatening invasive species.

Conclusion 6. The scheduling of activities by the PM on policy at the front end of the project negated the time for learning from implementation. Learning from project components two and three and four was not filtering into the activities of drafting and obtaining cross-sector consensus. This needed more strategizing about the value added of FAO, leveraging best practice of integrated PAs management for sharing.

175. This is not the intent of this project. The project strategy is written to promote NR learning by improving upon existing good management practices as seen in Haungshan NR with its biodiversity mainstreaming including management policies and billboards on biodiversity messages, fire proofing, dealing with invasive species, etc. The project strategy also aims to expose other biodiversity-friendly practices in the entire area by introducing co-management in demonstration sites that are showcasing important interlinkages between peoples' livelihoods, fisheries, and forestry.

Conclusion 7. The results achieved at the MTE have been significant given the challenges with the release of funding and despite the staffing capacity at the PMO.

176. These include the full agreement on the three project pilot co-management sites, the basic of future monitoring system for endangered species, a healthy production of action-based research for advocacy and action, some infrastructure such as billboards and monitoring equipment at project sites, and a cadre of experts providing support to implementation.
177. Despite communication having broken down between the project management unit at municipality and FAO China, LTO and GCU, the PMO did its best to interpret the project document.

4.2 Recommendations

178. The following recommendations are directed to GEF and FAO at different levels and departments, the PMO, project partners, and other relevant stakeholders (especially those directly involved in project execution) on specific actions to be taken by identified individuals/position holders to resolve concrete problems affecting project execution and enhance the delivery, eventual impact, and sustainability of project results. More suggested actions by project component are provided in Appendix 1.

Recommendation 1 (Design)

179. With regards to the co-management pilot projects, these should be reduced to three based on justification given and vetted in the meeting with the stakeholder and the visit to the pilots. The viability of the co-management sites are critical to showcase success and biodiversity-friendly practices. The scope of this endeavour was overambitious and the learning and adaptive management have determined that the three which have already started are the ones that should go forward. Focus should be on three pilot results, and on documenting and sharing for scaling good biodiversity management and other practices.
180. Because the project is running out of time and needs to be accelerated, it will be important to consolidate all the IT, learning and monitoring, knowledge sharing and networking activities as one work area such that there are results are contributing to the expected results on sustained learning. The MTE suggests the PMO immediately design and scale up the work on the knowledge NR networking, training and learning strategy—include a strategy for indirect strengthening of capacities of tiers three and four per the information management portal, schools and teacher training, the documenting and sharing of good practices and finally the development of web interface for data collection and a knowledge portal.

Recommendation 2 (Implementation)

181. Based on the delays in project implementation, the GEF/FAO/GOC in consultation with the Steering Committee should grant the project a no-cost extension for minimum of two years.
182. As the Steering Committee and technical committees are not fully functioning to enable substantive GEF/FAO oversight and communications and there has been no effective formal way for GEF/FAO to guide or provide technical support, a critical priority is to establish a functioning project Steering Committee to oversee and guide implementation

including to ensure the project has full staffing and fully negotiated adapted work plans linked to the log frame. The PMO can also amalgamate the two biodiversity technical groups. Only one is needed and they serve a similar function.

183. In response to the issues flagged throughout this report concerning the lack of FAO/GEF technical oversight, the project must include a competent CTA to technically vet and accelerate the project implementation with an eye on the end results in two years. The CTA would: 1) conceptualize the work programme into the key areas discussed and consider larger strategic institutional contracts for implementation and 2) prioritize a review of technical implementation for good and negative practices i.e. invasive species, exclusion of marginalized groups and communities. The CTA position might be cost shared by GEF/FAO (use some of the funds recovered for FAO Technical Assistance) and (GOC-provide half of funds). This position should remain until the end of the project and be jointly monitored by and GOC and the FAO Representation in China. The position profile is a proven GEF advisor with knowledge of the interlinkages to forestry, communities fisheries and agriculture and the ability to put forth the GEF/FAO value added and support and institutionalize the cross sectoral approaches. If this is not agreed to, then as a fundamental MTE condition for success this project should be stopped.

Recommendation 3 (Results and sustainability)

184. As flagged throughout the report, the project IT, monitoring system, network learning and sharing aspects are weak, and so a priority for technical assistance is: to scope an integrated monitoring system, undertake a knowledge and capacity needs assessment including the most relevant way to set up a NR network to meet project goals. The MTE discussed options for institutionalizing the network portal with the PM and implementing experts team and endorsed the option: to integrate three IT-based portals across components, namely, a computer-based NR network, an integrated monitoring system for Huangshan This would entail web monitoring for the species monitoring species and knowledge learning platform into the currently government public promotion project "Digital Huangshan" as a cost-effective measure to sustain GEF/ FAO program results.
185. Also, key would be the scoping of knowledge and learning needs of tiers three and four in consideration of the web design with functionality linked to the monitoring of fragile species work area. In relation to this problem, the PMO—with support of FAO—should take measures to network all NRs through the training plan. Additionally, the inclusive development of the learning network (knowledge needs and baseline study) should contribute to, and benefit from, the holistic Huangshan NR network planning and management in order not to scatter project work across components. In relation to the "learning" results, the PMO, supported by the LTO and CTA (TBH), should undertake a scoping of all biodiversity-friendly practices across the project area tiers one to four. They could review all management work and policies developed to ensure integration of key linkages and learning from cases. A technical workshop can be held. This needs some thinking around the linkages to FAOs value added including peoples (focus on women's) livelihoods, fisheries and forestry, and resilience approaches.
186. To ensure that the expected results on gender are properly captured and reported, it is recommended that the PMO (with support of FAO) undertake gender assessment. A gender specialist can be integrated to develop a plan for priority gender mainstreaming across the co management pilots, and other activities: by linking work to national priorities,

including Eco-Compensation and Ecological Poverty Reduction with gender considerations that fit with local

187. In relation to the cross-cutting implementation gaps including capacity development, monitoring and communications, the PMO should hire a KM, communication and monitoring officer for the project. The PMO (supported by the FAO Representation in Beijing) should focus implementation and activities on visibility, documenting, sharing results-knowledge management and communicating. Since this project is now relevant to the national priorities on biodiversity mainstreaming, the result can be shared to contribute to national policies on resilience and park priorities. The PMO can develop a communication and partnership strategy for scaling up learning including work with GEO Park and developing and targeting a bimonthly newsletter for sharing at the national and provincial levels. This work also includes the need to document and share the research and biodiversity-friendly practices and co-management cases: research can be shared broadly in journals. Through a project information network, a public awareness and education strategy can be devolved with schools economized by using a training of trainers approach with teachers. More public information can be disseminated by making concrete partnership and linkages in the geo-centre and by partnering with other NR media and learning activities, i.e. communicating project messages on billboards and creating new exhibits in the 12 NRs. Project results could be prepared to be showcased at COP 22 in *two years' time*.
188. In response to the need for better project reporting that imparts a better understanding of the project expected results to PMO staff, GEF/FAO Beijing host a results-based project management training. It will be critical to ensure the RBM training is speaking to this project's key messages, good practices and interlinkages, amplifying the GEF/FAO value added in biodiversity work- resilience strategies, digital finance, and innovation in technology, such as Alibaba partnership, fisheries, forestry, sustainability, women, livelihoods, and education and farmers schools on conservation agriculture.

5 Lessons learned

189. Originally designed as a USD 4.4 million investment, the final agreed grant was for half that amount but the scope and strategy remained the same. This is a strong lesson learned: design with budget in mind.
190. As demonstrated by the learning based on the project's EA, the cross-cutting areas of project management are important for up front investments under indirect execution modality, including capacity development strategy, partnership strategy, knowledge management and communication strategy, and technical oversight for outcome level results.
191. As learned, having sound operational procedures in place in advance of project implementation will avoid implementation bottlenecks and preserve good relationships; building trust supports project implementation. Related to this, during the project design stage is when it is time to negotiate the costs and the needs for GEF/FAO technical assistance including costs and approaches for monitoring and implementation support.
192. Having a knowledge needs assessment is essential to the learning and sharing project work involving a new network concept. This is especially important for informing the CB and KM strategy for NRs which are falling under different jurisdictions.
193. As learned, having strong input of expert GEF guidance at start up and especially during the inception meeting is a critical activity to establish the monitoring framework, the GEF procedures, expectations and rules, vet the project document logical framework, and guide the modalities of project implementation, such as for staffing and implementation guidance.
194. The project needed a cross cutting area, including a strong communication of the FAO value added. This means the articulation of the cross-cutting linkages that might have been expressed in this pilot and communicated throughout, as well as support work programming. The lesson learned is that the communication strategy must be defined early in project design and to also communicate these linkages to clearly show the value added of FAO in the implementation. Biodiversity-friendly practices in this project include fisheries, forestry, education and agricultural linkages which are critical for implementation towards results on mainstreaming.

Appendix 1. Suggested actions by project component

Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation
<p>Component 1</p> <p>One result is aimed for eight policies and two institutions established at municipal level.</p> <p>Major achievement: By MTE, three policies and three implementation guidance already drafted/reviewed, institutional rearrangement for BCC (Project Leading Group with city mayor as leader) and Biodiversity Advisory Commission-BAC (comprised of seven cross-sectoral experts) established.</p> <p>Main finding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAO not involved nor GEF funds used; • BCC (Leading Group) and BAC in place to efficiently get policy and guidance going, but they will not remain after the project; • formulation inadequately drawn on inner-project results across components, e.g. scientific research, data monitoring and CCC, e.g. Jiulongfeng CCC started eight months ago; • three policies downscaled to management or implementation plans, neither hard-core policy nor law, nor pertinent to economic sectors; • Confusing: polices look like “implementation plan” while guidance looks like management plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Implementation Plan for Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve Conservation Management VS. Strategic Plan for Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Sustainable Management; ➤ Implementation Guidance on Huangshan Municipal Alien Species Management and Prevention & Control VS. Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Forest Tourism completed by Huangshan Municipal Tourism Commission. <p>Attention:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) 2 more policies are required by the ProDoc based on emerging biodiversity issues 2) relevance of policies to municipal needs in harmonizing biodiversity conservation with growth of economic sectors 3) effectiveness of policies uplifted to higher level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ FAO to help PMO identify emerging biodiversity issues based on municipal needs and gaps, for making two new policies; ➤ FAO to provide oversight in improving <i>consistency</i> and <i>relevance</i> where applicable, through revision of the six policies formulated, drawing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project results from across components, especially on CCC • FAOs established/studies on food and ecosystem services in productive economic sectors, e.g. eco-agriculture • Access and equitable benefit sharing of genetic resource to benefit indigenous peoples and protection of traditional knowledge, as aligned to Nagoya Protocol of CBD, Cartagena Protocol on align species, too; ➤ FAO to support PMO improving <i>effectiveness and sustainability</i> of policies through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lobbying legislative framework (i.e. “Yunnan Province biodiversity Conservation Regulation,” “Hunan Province Alien Species management Regulation”), and municipal standards approved as provincial normative, • linking to the shifting national priorities and activities: National Park system, <i>Ecological Conservation Redline</i>, “natural resources and asset balance sheet,” “Eco Compensation,” “ecological poverty alleviation,” “ecological audit (of government work performance), and international dynamics, e.g. CBD implementation, CBD COP 15 in Beijing, etc., • identifying opportunities and partnership with other municipalities of similar contexts, to replicate “sustainable Huangshan NR network management modality”, • Optimizing the current structure of Project Leading Group and BAC and including focal point from superior level, e.g. provincial /national forestry department, to broaden the outlook and vision of the committees.

Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation
<p>Component 2</p> <p>C2 results are mainly aimed at the nature reserve level, such as management planning, monitoring survey of indicative and original species (ten total), CCC demonstration practices, monitoring station establishment, plot work and applied research, etc.</p> <p>Major achievement: To date, six management plans drafted, including Huangshan National Scenic Reserve Biodiversity Strategy and Action plan (BSAP), management plans for 5 provincial nature reserves (Jiulongfeng, Tianhushan, Wuxishan, Qingliangfeng, and Lingnan) in tier two</p> <p>Main findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAO not involved in the drafting of these six plans; • Tiers one and two well served, but tier three marginalized and tier four intentionally made redundant in the current Huangshan NR network while tier three and four account for 55% of all territory; • good practices and results, e.g. CCC, monitoring of ten species, scientific studies, etc. not seen referenced when drafting six NR management plans; • formulation of Huangshan BSAP was contracted to Nanjing Environmental Science Institute (a good showcase of cross-departmental cooperation), but drafting of five NR management plans not consistent with BSAP structure; • Good practices seen in Jiulongfeng CCC: PPP, ant forest carbon sequestration, rice-Chinese lobster cultivation, homestay, tea and eco products by social enterprise, Tianhushan mixture under-forest economy, ranger practice, management of human-animal conflict of Monkey Valley, need documentation, production of knowledge and success stories and showcasing. <p>Attention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requirement of ProDoc (Paragraph 82):“12 Monitoring stations established in the project-supported 12 NRs incl. tier three” is difficult. • Computer-based NR Network for Huangshan has not started. <p>➤ original planning of connecting three NRs Huangshan-Jiulongfeng-Wuxishan toward formation of an eco-corridor amounting to 3 800 ha is now facing a challenge arising from connectivity with Wuxishan which might provoke migration of around 2 000 villagers traditionally living inside the PNR.FAO is to provide oversight of the six drafted NR management plans to strengthen the consistency and relevance, by drawing on project results and applying the</p>	<p>➤ Originally designed as a USD 4.4 million investment, the final agreed grant was for half that amount but the scope and strategy remained the same: this is a strong lesson learned. Reduce scope of pilots to three and scale back on key areas of annual programming with key results in mind. Implement smartly with strategies and procurement that will support end results.</p>

Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation
<p>same principle, structure and indicator, so implementation effectiveness is improved;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ FAO is to support PMO formulate a long-term Strategy and Roadmap to better use project resources and make tier three (six NRs) and tier four (60 small fragmented NRs) participate, contribute and benefit; ➤ PMO is to track record on changes in awareness, capability and attitudinal behaviour of NR staff, before and a period of time after implementing the plans, any institutional re-arrangement in NR management, as well as good practices to be documented; ➤ PMO is to track changes in income of villagers (4 000) involved in CCC demonstration, as well as shifts of production activity and livelihood pattern; ➤ FAO is to support PMO in adaptive management to integrate three IT-based portals across components, namely, computer-based NR Network for Huangshan, integrated monitoring system and project website, into the currently government public promotion project "Digital Huangshan" so as to be cost-effectively and sustain GEF/ FAO program results; ➤ FAO applies its international expertise in sustainable livelihood, such as eco-tourism, eco agriculture, natural capital, etc. to local contexts that entails challenges and risks arising from migration and resettlement, ethnic group and community rights, social safeguards, etc. 	
Component 3	
<p>C3 is mainly for raising awareness and building capacity of a wide range of target groups, incl. NR staff, community dweller, school students, government official and tourist.</p> <p>Major achievement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • master training plan developed, • 15 community trainings (650 villagers, one-third women) and 1 NR staff (40) training on first aid carried out, • 571 bill boards set up in Huangshan NSR, co-financed, • populous science book: "Huangshan Biodiversity, "for tourist and "Huangshan Biodiversity Manual" for public drafted, • Biodiversity conservation incorporated into the working plans of tourism management sector and gardening department <p>Main Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainings not involve those from tier three and four, neither NR staff nor villagers, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ FAO is to support PMO develop a long-term Training Strategy, based on which, review the current Master Training Plan to improve its relevance with needs of various target groups, and effectiveness of implementation, e.g. involving those from tiers three and four, ➤ Geo-Park is to provide many in-house resources for training development and implementation, which is strongly encouraged, ➤ FAO is to review the training to ensure they draw on and keep abreast with updated international references, such as CBD, SDG, etc., ➤ PMO is to track changes in awareness and capability of selected target groups, ➤ FAO is to support PMO adapt related indicators to school...

Appendix 1. Suggested actions by project component

Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • much lagging behind of indicator requirements concerning school curricular, reading material (reader) and module integrating biodiversity, • there lacks a long-term Training Strategy that guides drafting of training syllabus and execution of training activities, • Master training plan drafted by Green Anhui was not based on a neatly designed training needs assessment. <p>Attention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work related to school education is much behind schedule, • 40 NR staff having been trained to date, falling short of requiring “600 NR staff, 280 government officials, and 120 community leaders trained,” • Billboards along 8 km trails need renovation and upgrading with GEF/FAO logos appearing. 	
<p>Component 4</p> <p>C4 is mainly aimed for identification, documentation, showcasing and replication of good practices from tiers one and two to tiers three and four.</p> <p>Major achievement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project ME and periodical reporting is in place and work to serve the documentation purpose. • There are so far 11 expert contracted by the Project. • Experts are providing support to the PMO and training workshops irregularly at times. <p>Main Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good practices not well identified, documented in a story telling or case studying fashion, • Best practices replicated to tiers three and four not yet started, • There are fewer institutional service contracts than individual expert contract. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ FAO is to co-hire an officer responsible for ME, communication and knowledge management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If applicable, the ME officer also serves as CTA who is preferentially from a superior level to the PMO, providing overall guidance to implementation, • CTA should also be the focal point at the Leading Group and the PSC too, so as to maintain good communication with FAO and get FAO inside the project, • Nevertheless, CTA shouldn't cause repulse or negative lay-off of current PMO staff, therefore FAO must discuss with PSC carefully
<p>Overall</p> <p>The project is six working areas entailing over 30 indicators some of which are difficult to achieve in tangible terms, such as number of trainee, infrastructure of monitoring station, school, IT based information portal, etc. some others have effectiveness issues, e.g. policies, guidance, management plan and training work plan.</p>	<p>See 14), 15), 16) and 17).</p>

Rationale for recommendation	Recommendation
<p>Adaptive management to reduce workload required by certain indicators need to be done and effectiveness and sustainability be improved if FAO "gets inside" after the MTE.</p> <p>As observed, there has communication between FAO and PO, not PM, thus not effective. FAO can't substitute the PM but have to have someone inside the project.</p>	

Appendix 2. GEF rating scheme

Overall Outcome ratings

MTEs should use mid-term targets as given in the project’s log frame to assess delivery of outcomes. If no mid-term indicator targets are available then the MTE should base outcome ratings on assessment of delivery of results to date, work plans.

Rating	Description
Highly Satisfactory (HS)	“Level of outcomes achieved clearly exceeds expectations and/or there were no short comings.”
Satisfactory (S)	“Level of outcomes achieved was as expected and/or there were no or minor short comings.”
Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	“Level of outcomes achieved more or less as expected and/or there were moderate short comings.”
Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	“Level of outcomes achieved somewhat lower than expected and/or there were significant shortcomings.”
Unsatisfactory (U)	“Level of outcomes achieved substantially lower than expected and/or there were major short comings.”
Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	“Only a negligible level of outcomes achieved and/or there were severe short comings.”
Unable to Assess (UA)	The available information does not allow an assessment of the level of outcome achievements.

Factors affecting performance (assess each element separately, ME is treated differently – see below)

Rating	Description
Highly Satisfactory (HS)	There were no shortcomings and quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management exceeded expectations.
Satisfactory (S)	There were no or minor shortcomings and quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management meets expectations.
Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	There were some shortcomings and quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management more or less meets expectations.
Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	There were significant shortcomings and quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management somewhat lower than expected.
Unsatisfactory (U)	There were major shortcomings and quality of implementation substantially lower than expected.
Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	There were severe shortcomings in quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management.
Unable to Assess (UA)	The available information does not allow an assessment of the quality of design and readiness/project implementation/project execution/co-financing/partnerships and stakeholder involvement/communication and knowledge management.

Monitoring and Evaluation Design or Implementation Ratings (Overall ME design, Design and Implementation assessed separately)

Rating	Description
Highly Satisfactory (HS)	There were no shortcomings and quality of ME design or ME implementation exceeded expectations.
Satisfactory (S)	There were no or minor shortcomings and quality of ME design or ME implementation meets expectations.
Moderately Satisfactory (MS)	There were some shortcomings and quality of ME design or ME implementation more or less meets expectations.
Moderately Unsatisfactory (MU)	There were significant shortcomings and quality of ME design or ME implementation somewhat lower than expected.
Unsatisfactory (U)	There were major shortcomings and quality of ME design or ME implementation substantially lower than expected.
Highly Unsatisfactory (HU)	There were severe shortcomings in ME design or ME implementation .
Unable to Assess (UA)	The available information does not allow an assessment of the quality of ME design or ME implementation

Sustainability

Rating	Description
Likely (L)	There is little or no risk to sustainability.
Moderately Likely (ML)	There are moderate risks to sustainability.
Moderately Unlikely (MU)	There are significant risks to sustainability.
Unlikely (U)	There are severe risks to sustainability.
Unable to Assess (UA)	Unable to assess the expected incidence and magnitude of risks to sustainability.

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
Objective: To secure effective conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality.								
Component 1: Policy, Planning & Institutional Arrangements.	Indicator1: Number of large-scale economic development plans that identify biodiversity as a priority.	Biodiversity not described as a planning priority in Municipal 12th Five Year Social and Economic Development Plan.		50%. Outline of 13th five-year plan and sector agencies consulted.	Biodiversity conservation identified as a priority in the Municipal 13th five-year Social and Economic Development Plan.	100% Biodiversity conservation has already been well integrated into "13th Five Year Development Plan for Huangshan National Scenic Reserve" which also depicted the GEF/FAO-GEF 049 Program. Biodiversity conservation is already integrated into "13th Five Year Development Plan for Huangshan Municipality".	S	27
Output 1.1.1	Indicator 2: Three major policies	No policies at city level	1. TORs for national	3 draft policies	Target: 3 major policies	100%	S	28

²⁷ Biodiversity and ecological conservation are being paid attention to by governments of all levels, especially under the current circumstances that the Central Government is pushing forward "construction of Ecological Civilization". Huangshan Municipality has been designated "Ecological City" and "Water Source" and therefore performance of municipal government is evaluated by provisioning of eco-system services rather than GDP. Against this background, the indicator is already achieved.

²⁸ These municipal policies need GEF/FAO-supported oversight to identify effectiveness and necessity for future policy revision since MTR Team finds out:

- ① formulations did not adequately draw on inner-project results across components, e.g. scientific research, data monitoring and CCC, for instance, Jiulongfeng CCC was started 8 months ago;
 - ② 3 policies seemingly downsized to management or implementation plans, neither hard-core policy nor law, and nor pertinent to economic sectors;
 - ③ Confusing: Major polices look like "implementation plan" while guidance looks like management plan
- *Implementation Plan for Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve Conservation Management VS. Strategic Plan for Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Sustainable Management;*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	adopted for: (i) biodiversity conservation (ii) establishment of a municipal NR system and (iii) management of alien species in Huangshan municipality.		consultants prepared. 2. National consultants recruited. 3. Studies and workshops on baseline conditions in nature reserves conducted. 4. Meeting minutes of various types of consultations prepared.			3 municipal policies formulated/ reviewed: Guideline on Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Conservation Management; Implementation Plan for Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve Conservation Management; Implementation Guidance on Huangshan Municipal Alien Species Management and Prevention & Control.		
Output 1.1.2	Indicator 3: Two draft policies addressing specific biodiversity conservation issues.	0		50%, Preparation of TOR and contracting of	Target: 2 draft policies.	0 It is planned to start in 2019. PMO is not able to identify pending policy issues and gaps and thus seeks support from GEF/FAO.	MS	29

➤ *Implementation Guidance on Huangshan Municipal Alien Species Management and Prevention & Control VS. Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Forest Tourism completed by Huangshan Municipal Tourism Commission*

④ Hard to determine effectiveness of these policies, but they need to strive for law or "provincial standard"

²⁹ It is for GEF/FAO to intervene and provide support such as identify relevant issues that take into account linking local gaps (based on policy needs assessment) to national dynamics (e.g. National Park Legislation, Eco Conservation Redline, Ecological Poverty Reduction, Valuation of Ecosystem Services, etc.) and GEF/FAO's mandatory mission (e.g. agricultural production and food processing), and international priorities (e.g. Access & Benefit Sharing and traditional knowledge as by Nagoya Protocol, CBD). Again, it is reiterated that these municipal policies should put emphasis on productive economic industrial planning that has locally original genetic and species resources, e.g. tea, rice farming mixing with shrimp breeding, bamboo, black pig factory farming, etc.

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
				qualifying institutions.				
Output 1.1.3	Indicator 4: Three long-term plans to guide the implementation of the two project supported policies (i and ii of Output 1.1.1) and a municipal forest ecotourism master plan developed and under initial implementation project outputs.	0	Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Forest Tourism drafted.	3 draft plans.	Target: 3 long-term plans.	100% Strategic Plan for Huangshan Municipal Biodiversity Sustainable Management; Master Plan for Huangshan Municipal Forest Tourism completed by Huangshan Municipal Tourism Commission, will be reviewed; Investigation, Assessment and Recommendation for Current Status of Huangshan Municipal Nature Reserve.	S	30
Output 1.1.4	Indicator 5: A permanent Biodiversity Conservation Committee (BCC-policy) functioning with regular meetings.	0	1. TORs for the committee defined. 2. Committee members selected and the committee established.	BCC established.	Target: 1 policy committee.	100% Leading Group (city mayor as group leader and officials of relevant bureaus are members) established.	S	31

³⁰ These three documents are required to be implementation guidance aligned to the three municipal major policies; however, they are found to be hardly consistent- GEF/FAO should provide oversight on the consistency and effectiveness of these three documents in support of corresponding three major policies, and try to update them as necessary by drawing on project results.

³¹ Equivalent to BCC, the Leading Group was established- a triumph of PMO because the mayor of Huangshan City is the group leader. A government official document endorsed the Leading Group as shown to MTR.

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
Output 1.1.5	Indicator6: A permanent Biodiversity Advisory Committee (technical) functioning and providing technical support to the BCC.	0	1.Committee by laws Formulated. 2.Government approval obtained. 3. Research activities designed/ organized. 4.Monitoring, supervising conducted and reporting made.	BAC established.	Target: 1 technical committee.	100% BAC comprised of 7 members across sectors established in support of Project Leading Group.	S	32
Component 2: Management Effectiveness and Networks Outcome 2.1a	Indicator 7: BD TT score for management efficiency of NRs.	Average management efficiency in 12 project supported NRs, BD O1 TT is 50.		Increased by 10%.	Average management efficiency in 12 project supported NRs increased by 22 BD O1 TT is 65.	100% Evidences shows that TT score for management efficiency of NRS has increased by 10%.	S	33
Outcome 2.1b	Indicator 8: Improvement in species:	Amphibian found in 1 000 meter transects in streams located in proximity		Amphibian found in 1 000 meter transects in streams located	Target:(amphibian) found in 1,000 meter transects in streams located in	100% Respective surveys on 4 animal species are under way in parallel and will last a total of three	S	34

³² It is imperative that the BAC should include someone from higher level than Huangshan city and across department- GEF/FAO should facilitate it as MTR found out the expertise of the BAC is limited to the locality.

³³ MTE finds out the TT score is fishy in a way that it is clear six NRs from Tier 3 is marginalized by the network while Huangshan NSR (where PMO operates) is overwhelmingly dominant, and thus suggests TT performed by third party or under strict instruction.

³⁴ These indicators concerning population of species is very promising to be over-fulfilled as measures taken inside these selected NRs are found to be enforced effectively as they are core in the Huangshan NR network, according to the feedback from the expert on the interview with the MTE.

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	<p>i) Population numbers of Paa spinosa (amphibian).</p> <p>ii) Number of bamboo species in Qingliangfeng NR.</p> <p>iii) Numbers of Chinese Yew (Taxus spp.) in 6 project supported NRs (tier one and tier two project supported NRs).</p> <p>iv) Populations of four plant indicator species (Rhododendron maculiferum, Enkianthus chiensis, Baeothryon subcapitatum and Carex brevicuspis) in proximity to tourism visitation</p>	<p>to villages in 6 project supported reserves is 17.</p> <p>Forty bamboo species found in Qingliangfeng NR.</p> <p>Baseline and targets to be established in 1st semester of project implementation.</p> <p>Baseline and targets to be established in 1st semester of project implementation).</p>		<p>in proximity to villages in 6 project NR is 21.</p> <p>Forty bamboo species.</p> <p>Same as baseline.</p> <p>Same as baseline.</p>	<p>proximity to villages in 6 project supported reserves is 26.</p> <p>Target: No change. Forty species recorded at end of project.</p> <p>Target: Population of Yew to be maintained over life of project.</p> <p>Target: Population of four species to be maintained over life of project.</p>	<p>years. Meanwhile, surveys to monitor indicative species (each for animal and plant) has also started. Results of these surveys show that population of Paa spinosa found in 1 000 meter transects reached 22, while bamboo species remain at 40, Chinese Yew and of four plant (Rhododendron maculiferum, Enkianthus chiensis, Baeothryon subcapitatum and Carex brevicuspis) are NOT on the decrease.</p>		

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	Infrastructure in 4 project supported reserves (Huangshan NSR, Jiulongfeng PNR, Tianhushan PNR and Lingnan PNR).							
Output 2.1.1	Indicator9: Sector plan promoting the integration of biodiversity conservation as management objective integrated into Huangshan NSR master management plan developed and under initial implementation.	Master plan exists but it does not reflect biodiversity conservation as a management objective.	1.TORs prepared 2.Services of qualified institution secured 3.Studies and workshops conducted.			100% Huangshan National Nature Reserve Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan (BSAP) formulated by the Contractor: China Environmental Planning Institute, Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE).	S	35
Output 2.1.2	Indicator10: Management plans (2) and framework plans (3) for the remaining 5 project.				Target: 2 management plans and 3 framework plans.	90% Management Plan for Qingliangfeng National Nature Reserve; Management Plan for Wuxishan Provincial Nature Reserve.	S	36

³⁵ It is satisfactory that trans-departmental cooperation was achieved in this regard, China Environmental Planning Institute, Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE) was contracted.

³⁶ MTR Team found out:

- 5 Tier2 NR management plans were formulated with different features, not consistent with Tier 1 Huangshan National Scenic Reserve Biodiversity Strategy and Action plan (BSAP) , in a BSAP structure
- CCC experience and other project best practices not seen referenced when drafting the 6 NR management plans, nor GEF/FAO involved
- Not much experience drawn or lessons learnt as documented by the 5 NR Management Plans were applied to support Component 1:Policy development- missing links between municipal policies and NR plans

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	supported NRs developed and under initial implementation.					Management Plan Lingnan Provincial Nature Reserve (reviewed/released by county government) Tianhushan Nature Reserve Eco Tourism Plan Up-gradation Plan for Jiulongfeng Provincial Nature Reserve (to be reviewed)		
Output 2.1.3	Indicator11: a. Six local community co-management committees (CCCs) to assist NR staff in conserving local biodiversity resources. b. Number of people benefitting from sustainable production activities in target villages.	No CCC exists.	TORs for consultants being formulated.	6CCCs. 1500 villagers benefitting from sustainable production activities.	Target: 6 CCCs. 4,000 people.	70% 4 CCC established- 3 CCCs have been combined into the Jiulongfeng CCC; 1 CCC has been established in Wuxishan. PMO argued to decrease 6 CCCs to 5. "Paradise" (a renowned Chinese NGO) is working with a community based NGO Green Anhui and a social enterprise in Jiulongfeng NR and together carried out many activities, including ranger team expansion, pushing forward connectivity and formation of ecological corridor between Huangshan and Jiulongfeng, eco agricultural food production and marketing in support of local communities livelihoods, nature education, home-stay hostel, corporate volunteerism, etc. 15 training workshops have been	MU	37

³⁷ The CCC established in Jiulongfeng NR is very impressive and so far successful, however, this single showcase falls short of the requirement of "six" project supported CCCs. The PMO argued to downsize it to three CCC pilots

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
						conducted by now, around 650 villagers (one third women) were trained to improve their skills in farming and cultivation. A brief factsheet is attached. Wild Monkey Valley is planning for another CCC.		
Output 2.1.4	Indicator 12: Computer-based NR Network for Huangshan NRs.	No such network.		100%	Target: 1 network	0 Not yet carried out.	MU	38
Output 2.1.5	Indicator 13: 3,800 ha of landscape supporting Biodiversity Conservation by insuring forest ecosystem connectivity between three NRs.	No biodiversity friendly landscapes connecting NRs exist in Huangshan Municipality.		100% ;County level decree announcing change in land use.	Target: 1 corridor (3,800 ha).	50% Connectivity covering about 2000 ha achieved. With Jiulongfeng nature reserve having been planned and classified as Core, buffer, experimental, community collective conservation area, Alibaba Ant Forest area, the Corridor between Jiulongfeng and Huangshan NNR has actually been built in connectivity accounting for 2000 hectares in landscape, while villager already live outside and their livelihood being supported by the CCC, social enterprise and Paradise	MS	39

³⁸ PMO is not sure which work unit is to host the portal (web) due to unclear jurisdiction and responsibility division of forest department with ecologic bureau- GEF/FAO needs to intervene.

³⁹ Around 2000 villagers in Wuxishan PNR need resettlement if Jiulongfeng-Huangshan-Wuxishan Eco corridor is all connected, which will fulfill the indicator requiring total connectivity amounting to 3800 ha.

Alibaba's PPP program on carbon sequestration (Ant Forest) is demonstrated in the Jiulongfeng CCC pilot, which makes the project feature "PPP", a good practice identified.

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
						NGO with Alibaba's PPP program on carbon sequestration (Ant Forest); Further connectivity to Wuxishan will fulfill the indicator. However, 2000 villagers in Wuxishan needs resettlement. This has remained a huge difficulty for PMO.		
Output 2.1.6	Indicator 14: Competitive applied research grant program to support science-based management decision-making in project supported NRs.	Ad hoc research with little relevance to better management decision-making for biodiversity conservation.	1.Biodiversity Advisory Committee consulted on research priorities and grant mechanism. 2.Research activities to support biodiversity conservation and NR management selected.	8 research grants.	Target: 24 small research grants.	100% Investigation and Risk Assessment of Alien Species in Huangshan Municipality reviewed; Survey of 8 species is in progress for three consecutive years till 2020, conducted by Ecology Faculty of Huangshan Academy; Survey on Stony Frog and Chinese Yew is in progress for three years till 2020, by Ecology Faculty of Huangshan Academy; 5 new research subjects already identified by PMO: watershed management farming culture evolution tea resources survey ancient and precious tree; Human-monkey conflict.	S	40

⁴⁰ Budget of 270 thousand USD is available for 24 granted researches which need to provide reference to policies and NR management, and publication on scientific journals. MTR founds out that PMO has "packed" some research with indicator 8: species monitoring. GEF/FAO might need to discuss the relevance and validity with PMO.

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
Output 2.1.7	Indicator 15: 12 Monitoring stations established in the project-supported 12 NRs incl. tier three“(ProDoc Paragraph 82).	6 Ecological Monitoring Stations already in place in Huangshan NSR.		100% Construction of monitoring station completed and equipment deployed and operationalized.	Target: 12 monitoring stations in 12 NRs.	70% There are monitoring stations with staff and facilities in all 12 NRs, but might need further improvement. 7 monitoring stations (6 at Huangshan NSR, 1 at Jiulongfeng PNR) in 2 NRs meet national standards already in place and operationalized.	S	41
	Indicator 16: Integrated monitoring program among project supported NRs operating and baseline established.	Only ad hoc, species specific monitoring done on a time limit basis.		100% Construction of monitoring station completed and equipment deployed and operationalized.	Target: 1 integrated monitoring program.	100% five major activities deployed and in progress: one big plot, two middle plot and 10 small plots already established in Huangshan NNR by Nanjing Environmental Science Institute, MEE in collaboration with Nanjing Forest University; Ecosystem monitoring of terrestrial vertebrates in Huangshan NSR, jointly by Nanjing Environmental Science Institute, MEE and Anhui University 40 infrared cameras set up in Jiulongfeng nature reserve conducted by provincial forest dept.	S	42

⁴¹ 7 monitoring stations in 2 out of 12 NRs are in place, which fall short of 12 stations in 12 NRs as required by the ProDoc. MTR Team shares with PMO’s concern that establishing monitoring stations meeting national standard e.g. infrastructure, equipment, staffing, etc. would consume the project resources, therefore, an establishing approach based on “project standard” to equip rangers of 10 NRs (including four Tier-2 NRs and six Tier-3 NRs) with necessary monitoring equipment and successive trainings is suggested as an alternative- the “station” indicator needs adaptive management.

⁴² Cross sectoral cooperation is achieved, with Nanjing Environmental Science Institute, Nanjing Forestry University and Anhui University

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
						Biological monitoring in Jiulongfeng PNR conducted by provincial forest dept. infrared camera monitoring for wild life conducted by info department.		
Component 3: Capacity Building, Enviro.Edu & Public Awareness Output 3.1.1	Indicator 17: A master training plan.				Target: 1 Master Training Plan.	100% Master training plan with syllabus is completed by NGOs Paradise and Green Anhui, to be reviewed.	S	43
Output 3.1.2	Indicator 18: 600 NR staff, 280 government official and 120 community leaders trained.	No systematic training exists.		300 NR staff. 140 government officials. 60 community leaders.	Target: Training of 600 NR staff, 280 govt. officials and 120 community leaders.	15% 40 NR staff accepted the first-aid training in May,2018; 650 villagers (one third women but number of community leader uncounted) and 40 NR employees from tiers one and two respectively participated in 15 community-based skill trainings on farming/breeding and vocational first-aid.	MS	44
Output 3.2.1	Indicator 19: Project public education plan.	No plan.			Target: 1 public education plan.	100% First draft of populous science book: "Huangshan Biodiversity" with tourist as target audience and "Huangshan Biodiversity Manual" for public have been completed, to be reviewed.	S	45

⁴³ GEF/FAO might need to take part in the review and provide its international expertise and insights

⁴⁴ It is found out that these trainings have not involve participants from Tier 3 and 4, neither villagers nor NR staff

⁴⁵ GEF/FAO might need to review them

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
Output 3.2.2	Indicator 20: Biodiversity-based curricula in pilot primary (1) and secondary (1) schools.	Curricula don't currently exist.	built in nearby communities in West DTNR.	1 primary and 1 secondary school curricula.	Target :1 primary and 1 secondary school curricula.	0	MU	46
Output 3.2.3	Indicator 21: Annual primary and secondary school readers compiling biodiversity related material for Huangshan school system.	School readers don't currently exist.		2 primary and 2 secondary school readers.	Target: 2 primary and 2 secondary school reader.	15%. The subcontract for developing the readers has been signed.	MU	47
	Indicator 22: 10 primary and 10secondary schools "mainstream" pilot supported biodiversity modules in their respective curricula.	0	Day, Bird week, and Bird Watching Festival were organized in the four NR.	0	10 primary and 10 secondary mainstream pilot supported biodiversity modules.	0 Not net carried out. PMO proposed to reduce the numbers to 1 primary school and 1 secondary school.	MU	48
Output 3.3.1	Indicator 23: "World class" biodiversity interpretation centre in Huangshan	1,200 mt2 biodiversity interpretative infrastructure exists		interpretation plan, equipment, training and interpretative staff.	Target: 1 centre incl. interpretation plan, equipment, training and interpretative staff.	60% Geopark at the gate of Huangshan NSR can serve as the Centre in which there are already biodiversity related	MS	49

⁴⁶ PMO confirmed that there is representative from the Municipal Bureau of Education on the Project Leading Group

⁴⁷ MTE finds out that the three main indicators regarding school are overlapping and confusing

⁴⁸ PMO argues it is too many, MTE suggests that Training of Trainer applied to selected school teachers as a start

⁴⁹ GEF/FAO might need to ensure their quality to meet international standards and try to draw on existing resources already established in Huangshan NSR, such as Geopark Museum and their resources

Appendix 3. Progress towards Results Matrix (achievement of outcomes against mid-term targets)*

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	National Scenic Reserve.	but with no content.				educational & communicational materials; biodiversity interpretation; "Marvellous Huangshan, Beautiful Homeland" developed, to be reviewed.		
Output 3.3.2	Indicator 24: 80 km of trails in HNSR posted with biodiversity conservation interpretive materials.	80 km of trails exist but with technically outdated and degraded interpretive materials.		80 km of trails posted with updated signage.	Target: 80 km of trails posted with updated signage in support of biodiversity info trails in HNSR posted with biodiversity conservation interpretive materials.	100% 571 bill boards have been set up in Huangshan NSR, with co-financing amounting to 7 million RMB, however, GEF/FAO and GEF logos are NOT included.	S	50
Outcome 3.2: Number of economic sector development plans that mainstream biodiversity	Indicator 25: Number of economic sector development plans that mainstream biodiversity.	0 Mainline agency sector plans don't presently reflect biodiversity considerations.		2 sectors incorporate biodiversity considerations in their respective 5 year, 13th year plans.	Target: 2 sectors incorporate biodiversity considerations in their respective 5 year, 13th year plans.	100% Completed. Biodiversity conservation has been incorporated into the working plans of tourism management sector and gardening department.	S	51
Outcome 3.3: Number of visits to Huangshan NRs	Indicator 26: Number of Visit paid to 5	8 000 visits to 5 project supported Huangshan NRs		0	Visitation increases to 80 000 visits to 5 project supported	0 Data uncollected, estimated by PMO very attainable.	MU	52

⁵⁰ Due to OPIM procedures, GEF funds did not arrive in time to pay for bill boards which was mainly covered by co-financing. However, some of them now need renovation and upgrading, e.g. inscription of logos of GEF/FAO which demands GEF fund

⁵¹ MTE argues that economic sectors should be productive industries based on local and traditional livelihood, such as tea, bamboo, agricultural and under-forest production, with preferentially genetic resources study

⁵² Tianhushan PNR and Wild Monkey Valley where MTE Team visited revealed there is still potential to attract tourists to other NRs other than Huangshan NSR, PMO indicated the indicator is not difficult to attain.

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	project.supported Huangshan NRs.				NRs 8 0000 (excluding Huangshan NSR).			
Component 4: Information Dissemination and ME (Outcome 4.1)	Indicator 27: Number of tier three and four NRs adopting new approaches generated by the project.	Tier three and four NRs have no CCCs, co- management plans and/or participation in network.		0	Target: Five tier three and/or tier four NRs adopt one or more of new approaches generated by the project during life of project.	0 MTE Team helped PMO have identified several best practices and approaches that need documentation and up-scaling.	MU	53
Output 4.1.1	Indicator 28: Project webpage.	No webpage currently exists.		1 Project webpage.	Target: 1 Project webpage.	0 Not yet carried out. The Chinese government has decreased the number of official websites. The website of HSAC has merged into the website of the municipality. It is not likely that the project website could be established.	MU	54
Output 4.1.2	Indicator 29: Publication of project-related "best-practices" in	No "best-practices" exist at present.		0	Target: 5 "best practice" publications.	0 Not documented, however, MTE Team helped PMO to have identified: Jiulongfeng CCC and PPP Rice-Chinese lobster cultivation;	MS	55

⁵³ There are good practices identified by MTE team though they are not documented. However, it is found out that 6 Tier-3 NRs are marginalized and 60 Tier-4 small fragmented under-managed NRs redundant to the Project as intended by the PMO, which poses a risk. A bundle of measure to mitigate risks has been proposed by the MTR report to cost-effectively involve peripheral NRs.

⁵⁴ PMO is not certain where to host the website since jurisdiction on biodiversity is not clear so far, however, it is suggested that the project newsletter circulating by email as an alternative

⁵⁵ PMO needs instruction on how to identify the significance of the activities carried out by telling the success stories, to do so they need to be exposed to national and international priorities and policy development, therefore, it is suggested that GEF/FAO's efforts to arrange inter-project workshops for capacity building and exchanges should be strengthened

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	biodiversity conservation.					Homestay, tea and eco products by social enterprise; Tianhushan PNR under-forest economy, government approved enterprise operation; Tianhushan ranger practices on monitoring species; Monkey valley; Wolf life conflict; Tourism attraction; Scientific research; Nature education for school students.		
Output 4.1.3	Indicator 30: Peer-to peer consultative workshops for NR staff.	No peer-to-peer approaches used.		2 peer-to-peer consultative workshops for NR staff.	Target: 5 peer-to-peer consultative workshops for NR staff.	100% Experts involved into NR staff training and there are regular consultative meetings with PMO, as required in TORs for the expert contract- There are so far 11 expert contracts.	S	56
Output 4.1.4	Indicator 31: Project monitoring system providing six-monthly reports on progress in achieving project outputs and outcomes.			1 system and 6 progress reports.	Target: 1 system and 10 progress reports.	100%	S	57
Output 4.1.5	Indicator 32:	No evaluations exist at present.		1 evaluation report.	Target: 2 evaluation reports.	100%	S	

⁵⁶ There is only one NR staff training carried out and it was on first aid medical assistance, it is recommended that subcontracted consultants should provide technical trainings to improve staff theoretical understanding and vocational skills as it is a common practice of TOR drafting

⁵⁷ Quality of reports submitted by PMO needs improvement. MTE argues for a full-time officer responsible for integrated ME, knowledge production and communication to be recruited asap.

Project Strategy	Indicator	Baseline Level	Level in 1st PIR (reported by PMO)	Midterm Target	End-of- project Target	Mid-term Level & Assessment	Rating	Justification
	Mid-term and final evaluations carried out and reports disseminated.							

Appendix 4. List of MTE questions

<p>1.Relevance (rating required)</p>	<p>1.1 Are the 4 project outcomes and objectives congruent with the GEF Biodiversity / strategies (GEF 5), China environment priorities, GEF/FAO China Country Programming Framework and beneficiaries? 1.2 Has there been any change in the relevance of the project since its design, such as new national policies, plans or programs that affect the relevance of the project objectives and goals? If so, are there any changes that need to be made to the project to make it more relevant?</p>
<p>2. Effectiveness Achievement of project results (rating required)</p>	<p>2.1 (outcome 1) To what extent has the project contributed to <i>the creation of an integrated approach to the conservation and management of forest biodiversity in Huangshan municipality?</i> 2.2 (outcome 2) To what extent has the project contributed to <i>an increase in management efficiency in the 12 nature reserves and improved the status of these protected areas?</i> 2.3 (outcome 3) To what extent has the project contributed to an <i>increased institutional capacity and public and political support for the conservation of biodiversity in China's forest ecosystems?</i> 2.4 (outcome 4) Are lessons learned from the project being taken up and replicated elsewhere in the non-participating nature reserves? 2.5 Are there any unintended results? 2.6 (Likelihood of impact) Are there any barriers or other risks that may prevent future progress towards and the eventual achievement of <i>effective conservation and sustainable use of the biodiversity in the mountainous forest ecosystems of Huangshan Municipality?</i></p>
<p>3.Efficiency (rating required)</p>	<p>3.1 To what extent has the project been implemented efficiently, cost-effectively, and management been able to adapt to any changing conditions to improve the efficiency of project implementation? <i>Have the specific features related to OPIM modality been taken into consideration during project preparation (e.g. recruitment and procurement procedures of the EP, etc.)</i> <i>Sub questions: How efficient was the contracting and procurement process during the first half of the project (involvement of BH, LTO)?</i> 3.2 To what extent has the project built on existing agreements, initiatives, data sources, synergies, complementarities with other projects and partnerships, etc., and avoid duplication of similar activities of other groups? 3.3 Is the project cost-effective? How does the project cost/time versus output/outcomes equation compare to that of similar projects?</p>
<p>4.Sustainability (rating required)</p>	<p>4.1 (Sustainability) What is the likelihood that the project results will continue to be useful or will remain after the end of the project? What will be the likely institutional arrangement for sustaining the Project Results after the end of the project? What are the key risks that may affect the sustainability of the project results and benefits (consider financial, socio-economic, institutional and governance, and environmental)? <i>Did the OPIM modality contribute to ensure major ownership and sustainability of the project results?</i> <i>Did the OPIM modality contribute to increase national, sub regional and sub regional ownership to support better sustainability of results? And to strengthen capacities of regional, sub regional and/or national entities?</i></p>
<p>5.Factors affecting progress (rating required)</p>	<p>5.1 (Project design) Is the project design appropriate for delivering the expected outcomes? Is the logic coherent and clear? To what extent are the project's objectives and components, clear, practical and feasible within the timeframe? 5.2 (Project management) To what extent did the Huangshan Administrative Committee effectively discharge its role and responsibilities related to the management and administration of the project? What have been the main challenges in relation to the management and administration of the project and what changes are needed to improve delivery in the second half of the project?</p>

	<p><i>Sub questions:</i> <i>Does the EP provide quality financial reports, PPRs and PIRs and present calls for funds in a timely manner?</i> <i>Does GEF/FAO review/approve reports and arrange for funds transfer in a timely manner?</i></p> <p><i>(Project implementation and execution) To what extent did the OPIM implementation and execution modalities facilitate or hampered project execution and contribution to the project objectives?</i></p> <p>5.3 (Financial management and Co-financing) What have been the challenges related to the financial management of the project and to what extent has the pledged co-financing been delivered?</p> <p>5.4 (Project oversight, implementation role) To what extent has GEF/FAO delivered on project identification, concept preparation, appraisal, preparation, approval and start-up, oversight and supervision? <i>Does GEF/FAO review/approve reports and arrange for funds transfer in a timely manner?</i></p> <p>5.5 (Partnerships and stakeholder engagement) Have other actors, such as civil society, indigenous population or private sector, been sufficiently involved in project design and implementation, and what has been the effect of their involvement/non-involvement on the project results? What are strengths and challenges of the project's partnerships?</p> <p>5.6 (Communication and knowledge management) How effective has the project been in consolidating, communicating and promoting its key messages and results to partners, stakeholders and a general audience? How can this be improved?</p> <p>5.7 (ME design) Is the ME plan practical and sufficient?</p> <p>5.8 (ME implementation) Does the ME system operate as per the ME plan? Has information been gathered in a systematic manner? To what extent has information generated by the ME system during project implementation been used to adapt and improve project planning and execution, achievement of outcomes and ensure sustainability?</p>
<p>6. Cross-cutting dimensions</p>	<p>6.1 (Gender and minority groups) To what extent were gender considerations taken into account in designing and implementing the project?</p> <p>6.2 (Environmental and social safeguards) To what extent were environmental and social concerns taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the project?</p>

Appendix 5. List of people interviewed and MTE schedule at project sites

6 March 2019.

Mr Huang Liqun, PM of the office.

Mr Jiang Jianhuang, CTA.

Mr Guo ke, assistant to PM.

Mr Ding Yngzhong, accountant of the office.

Mr Yang Xinhua, Director of PMO and Garden and Forestry bureau

Ms Wu Liuping, finance staff of Project

7 March 2019, site visit to Huangshan

MTE team and Guo ke (PMO).

8 March 2019, site visit to Jiulongfeng

Ms Chen Runze (Geopark office of Huangshan)

Mr Zhou Xiang (NGO, Green Anhui, Paradise Foundation)

Mr Cao Xinhua (director of Jiulongfeng NR), Mr Chen Xiaocun (deputy director)

Mr Cao (the five-star company)

Mr Du Minghui (the five-star company)

Ms Li Qi (ranger of Jiulongfeng NR, staff of NGO)

Ms Chen Sheng (a Lobster farming lady) and a homestay lady (Villi)

9 March, 2019, work with the national consultants

Lv Shunqing (Ecosystem monitoring consultant)

Chen Jun (NR Planning Consultant)

Qian Yangping (Ecosystem monitoring consultant)

Wu Jun (Ecosystem monitoring consultant)

10 March, 2019. Visit site to Tian Hushan(County NR)

Mr Wu Qide (deputy director of Tian Hushan NR)

Mr Zhou (manager of the tea company)

Mr Zong (ranger of NR)

MTE met with local experts 8 March, during a visit to Jiulongfeng PNR, during which they:

- Discussed with management of Jiulongfeng PNR composed of a mixture of original forestry bureau staff and new NGO members;
- Played video by the management of Jiulongfeng PNR;
- Showcased CCC pilot by NGO of Paradise and Green Anhui as undertaking three major responsibilities: community livelihood, nature education, and ecosystem monitoring;
- Met with two women rangers;
- Visited social enterprise;
- Visited the homestay hostel;
- Visited the buffer zone of Jiulongfeng PNR; and
- Visited the mixed production of shrimp and rice.

A meeting on 9 March with four main project experts at the PMO office, included:

- Mr Qian, Environmental Protection Office, Bureau of Forest and Gardening, HSAC, mainly responsible for supporting the formulation of Huangshan National Nature Reserve Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan and implementing the BSAP and monitoring information system for Huangshan NSR;
- Mr Cheng, Nature Reserve Management Department, Huangshan Municipal Government, formulating Management Plans for five PNRs in tier two;
- Professor Lv., Ecology Faculty of Huangshan Academy, who surveyed eight species in progress for three years until 2020, surveyed Stony Frog and Chinese Yew in progress for three years until 2020, and carried out project supported scientific applied research with regard to species monitoring; and
- Mr Wu, Resource Conservation Department, Bureau of Forest and Gardening, HSAC pilot.

On 10 March, MTE visited Tianhushan PNR and took part in the following:

- Discussion with NR managers;
- Review of maps and discussion with Tianhushan PNR management;
- Observation of uphill road renovation in need of project funding to promote nature education and hiking and camping tourism;
- Observation of cultivation of original tea under the broad-leaf trees;
- Heard about traditional knowledge of farming and processing tea;
- Observation of wild mother species in the mountains and conservation of genetic resources; and
- Observation of ranger practices on monitoring endangered species taking photos of snakes.

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