**Developing birdwatching as a sustainable programme in China**

The cool fresh breeze touched our skin despite the warm sunlight as we deplaned at the Baoshan Yunrui Airport. With excitement and enthusiasm we set off to our destination for a week of learning.

When we reached Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve (GNNR), we were welcomed by a rush of gorgeous sounds: birds chirping, a murmuring stream, and the low hum of cicadas. GNNR covers more than 4,000 square kilometers, and is home to more than 200 species of wild animals, 525 species of birds, and 49 species of fish. The immense biodiversity of the reserve is matched only by its astonishing landscape and natural beauty.

The next morning, we set out down a birding trail that starts in the village and runs deep into the forest, and that was part of some important historical trails like the Silk Road. We peered through binoculars to identify the many species which filled the air with song. The first sighting was that of a Yunnan Fulvetta, a small grey-headed bird, foraging in a berry tree, surrounded by its fellows. The trail was dotted with die-hard ornithologists, enthusiastic birdwatchers, and younger people enjoying their time in nature.

Birdwatching in China is experiencing a paradigm shift from localized birdwatching to becoming part of a global tourist market. Unfortunately not much attention has been given to understand the impacts of tourism on bird populations and their habitat. There is a need to establish interlinkages between birdwatching ecotourism, environmental conservation and economic co-benefits. These need to be location specific, as the needs of one geographic terrain and the birds that inhabit them, will not be the same as that of others.

In 2009 an innovative approach to birdwatching emerged in China, in which enthusiasts gathered around ponds that were specially curated and managed by locals. Early reports are promising. In Hanlong, which is located Baihualing, pond bird watching accounts for 70% of the household income of participating families, according to a study conducted by ICIMOD & Southwest Forestry University (SWFU) in 2017.

This approach presents an option where birdwatching tourism is developed in such a way to integrate local socio-economic and ecological benefits. Locals have developed the bird watching interest into a small business, erecting bird hides near ponds where people can pay a small fee to watch and take photos. Social networking services like QQ, WeChat and bird-themed “BBS forums” have become the main channels for the local tourism service providers to market and communicate with their customers to schedule services ahead of time.