

Forestation efforts seen as examples for others

China has found workable solutions to desertification, as shown by successful projects like Saihanba National Forest Park, which is important for China and the rest of the world, according to the UN's top environmental protection expert.

Since 1962, when workers started planting trees, the forest coverage in Saihanba National Forest Park, 150 kilometers from Beijing in Hebei province, has soared from 12 percent to 80 percent, according to National Development and Reform Commission data from 2016.

Saihanba, the largest manmade forest in the world, forms a natural barrier against sandstorms that protects the health of millions in the capital and nearby regions.

"The transformation of Saihanba is the result of more than 55 years of hard work by several generations of experts. ... That is a triumph of patience and determination," Erik Solheim, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, said in an interview. He has personally witnessed the successful outcome of efforts similar to Saihanba's recently in the Kubuqi Desert of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region.

The total area of greenery in the desert, the seventh-largest in China, has expanded by more than 6,000 square kilometers in the past three decades, according to data from the regional government.

"It's a case of getting the science right, and being able to think big and take that vision forward with determined leadership," Solheim said, explaining that the patience to think long-term also is necessary, which has been proved in the 55-year effort at the Saihanba Forest Farm.

"Desertification is not just a major problem for China. Nations like Iran and Iraq face similar problems, as do countries in the Sahel region of Africa, and even parts of the United States. In areas of the Middle East, desertification is also a huge public health issue. We know that this kind of environmental degradation also drives instability and conflict."

In addition to the efforts in Saihanba and the Kubuqi Desert, China has taken comprehensive measures to reduce desertification over decades, shrinking its total desert area at a rate of 2,400 sq km a year, Vice-Premier Ma Kai said at a July forum.

Solheim said in promoting the greening process, governments need to set up clear goals and a necessary framework, so private sector companies, NGOs and local communities can nurture the innovative technologies and business opportunities.

"In the successful stories of Saihanba and the Kubuqi Desert, they are really

just well-rounded business plans, and they show long-term economic benefits can outweigh the costs of the huge amount of work required," he said.

Saihanba Forest Farm has developed in a sustainable way, with economic growth relying on tourism, tree seeding, wind power generation and logging—with the green sectors bringing in 100 million yuan (\$15.1 million) last year, outweighing the revenue from past logging operations, data from the National Development and Reform Commission show.

"The success of projects like Saihanba and Kubuqi can form a component of China's drive to build an ecological civilization and to take that message around the world, for example as part of the Belt and Road Initiative," he said.