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# Tourism Potential of Agricultural Heritage Systems

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**ABSTRACT** *Traditional agricultural systems are threatened world-wide mainly due to the introduction of modern agricultural techniques and the emigration of farm labourers from remote rural villages. The objective of the programme 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems' (GIAHS), initiated by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations in 2002, is dynamic conservation of traditional agricultural systems. This article addresses the definition and content of agricultural heritage systems and discusses conservation options in the light of developing rural tourism. An explorative survey was conducted in Longxian village, situated in Zhejiang Province, southern China, focusing on the tourism potential of a typical Rice-Fish Agricultural System. The identification of heritage resources is a first step in the process of transforming an agricultural landscape into a cultural tourism landscape. However, the future of these landscapes is in the hands of a range of stakeholders and depends on their capacity to manage, in a sustainable way, tourism development strategies alongside conservation policies.*

**KEY WORDS:** Agricultural heritage systems, dynamic conservation, heritage tourism, Longxian Village, China

## Introduction

Traditional agricultural systems and the logics of their genesis are the foundation of modern ecological agriculture (Altieri 2004). They provide cultural values and ecological services to humankind and are the origin of a wide range of multifunctional landscapes. These now have a new vocation for recreation and amenity functions (Dramstad *et al.* 2001). As the largest developing country with thousands of years of agricultural history and more than 65 percent of the population living in villages, China is a country with typical agriculture practices and activities. However, many traditional agricultural systems are now under severe pressure from globalization

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and inadequate government intervention (Altieri 2004). The disappearance of long-standing agricultural heritage systems and their specific agricultural legacy means a loss for the future. The conservation of unique landscapes as a testimony of coherent environmental and cultural habitats can indeed open new perspectives.

Agricultural heritage, in many ways similar to industrial heritage, is a specific type of inheritance composed of the farmers' or workers' way of life, production and agricultural or industrial activities (Casanelles 1994). The value of these rural landscapes lies in the expression of a process of changing habitat and society. By creating greater awareness among the local people about their cultural roots, tourism can reinforce a process of cultural identity, building in territories and communities (Donert and Light 1996; Jansen-Verbeke 2009). This movement eventually opens up opportunities for the maintenance and preservation of heritage sites (Garrod and Fyall 2000; Milne and Ateljevic 2001). In fact, there are many recent examples of tourism actually supporting the conservation of heritage sites and artefacts (Alzue *et al.* 1998; Herbert 2001; McKercher *et al.* 2005). However, studies on the conservation of agricultural heritage in the perspective of tourism development are rare (Buckley *et al.* 2008) and frequently refer to traditional vineyards and wine tourism (Hall *et al.* 2000).

The first need is to define the concept of agricultural heritage systems (AHS) and their content at a global and national (China) scale, prior to the assessment of tourism potential and the expected impact of conservation policies. An explorative study was carried out in the Rice-Fish Agricultural System (RFAS) of Longxian village, Zhejiang Province, southern China. This was based on a programme known as the 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems' (GIAHS), initiated in 2002 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. The key objective of the programme is the conservation of traditional agricultural systems in a dynamic way.

## **Agricultural Heritage Systems (AHS)**

### *Definition and Content*

The concept of heritage is very much European in its origins and closely linked with the notion of inheritance and present values given to artefacts, sites and stories of the past (Prentice 1993; Nuryanti 1996). The debate about definitions of heritage, the dilemmas and paradoxes, is very lively and controversial and is characterized by a spectrum of interests and approaches (Ashworth 2008). The link with history is obvious, and even more so the current trend to valorize the past through a diversity of tangible expressions and intangible experiences. Values can be passed on from one generation to another (Hardy 1988; Prentice 1993) or newly created, as is very much the case now in tourism and leisure landscapes (Jansen-Verbeke 2009). Interpretation of history is seen as a privilege of present inhabitants who can choose and select

how to use this to their advantage. However, this view on the process of ‘creating heritage’ does not take into account crucial factors such as visitor experiences and their evaluation of cultural artefacts, nor the impact of the range of stakeholders, who are directly or indirectly involved in the process of valorization of the ‘local’ past (Poria and Ashworth 2009). History can be defined as the past as recorded by historians according to their interpretations and values, whereas heritage refers to the present social value system and its interpretations of the past (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). Hence, not all relics of the past are perceived as heritage, only those elements and objects that present societies appreciate as their inheritance (Hall and McArthur 1998; Graham 2000). One of the earliest references to agricultural heritage is found in Prentice’s (1993) work. He included a wide range of elements and activities, such as farmhouses and farming activities, dairies, agricultural museums, vineyards and wine production, fishing, etc.

In fact, in countries like China, with a long agricultural tradition, studies about agricultural heritage have been reported much earlier. In the 1940–1950 period, a group was established to study agricultural heritage in China, mainly relying on ancient books about agriculture and the history of agricultural development (Li and Wang 2003). Shi (1981) later argued that agricultural heritage is a comprehensive concept that includes tangible assets, such as traditional agricultural tools, but also intangible ones, such as technological skills and agricultural folklore, books and narratives related to agricultural production, practices and way of life. In 2002, the GIAHS project was launched with the objective of contributing to the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, knowledge of systems and food, livelihood assurance and culture. In this context, agricultural heritage systems were defined as ‘remarkable land use systems and landscapes which are rich in globally significant biological diversity evolving from the co-adaptation of a community with its environment and its needs and aspirations for sustainable development’ (FAO 2008). The project is innovative as it represents a fascinating story of people’s ability and ingenuity to adjust and adapt to the consequences of a changing physical and material environment and yet sustain a genuine commitment to conservation with respect for the natural patrimony (Altieri and Koohafkan 2007).

### *Examples of Agricultural Heritage Systems*

There are many examples of AHS world-wide and particularly in densely populated sites in remote regions or in areas where the population faces complex challenges of innovative land-use management practices (Altieri and Koohafkan 2007). During the preparation stage of the GIAHS project, six pilot countries with a number of sites were defined, representing five traditional agricultural systems with diverse agro-biodiversity, wildlife, cultural practices and threats. Nowadays, more than 100 traditional agricultural systems are listed world-wide, including the traditional Maasai Pastoral Rangeland and Management in Kenya and northern Tanzania, West

African Sahelian Floodplain Recession Agriculture in Mali, Lemon Gardens in southern Italy, Mobile Pastoral Systems in Romania, Little Colorado River Watershed in Arizona, USA (FAO 2008).

As shown in Table 1, China is endowed with a number of traditional agricultural systems and is currently developing a national network for their conservation. At least 10 GIAHS indicated in the FAO programme and 20 nationally important systems are registered, including rice-fish – duck system, rice terrace systems, dry-land irrigation systems and dyke-pond systems (Min *et al.* 2009).

## **Conservation of Agricultural Heritage Systems**

### *Why Conserve AHS?*

An agricultural heritage system is based on local ‘inherited’ knowledge and practical experiences, an ingenious system that reflects the evolution of human settlement in harmony with nature, an outstanding illustration of agricultural biodiversity and, at the same time, a resilient ecosystem. In all, it constitutes a valuable cultural inheritance in terms of sustained provision of multiple goods and services, food and livelihood security and quality of life. Having been created by ancient agricultural civilizations, some heritage systems are rooted in important biotopes of endemic flora and animal species, the conservation of which is of great global value (Altieri and Koohafkan 2007).

In fact, the conservation of AHS is a multi-functional project that involves the various added values of cultural landscapes (including rural settlements), of heritage sites and landscape biodiversity, with opportunities for livelihood, food and recreation (OECD 2001). The political role of AHS is extremely important in confirming or reinforcing the local identity of communities. The economic objectives are most crucial, aiming to establish favourable conditions for the local residents to produce agricultural goods and to sustain and eventually benefit from their intangible heritage (skills and knowledge, traditions and folklore). The ecological mission of AHS consists of protecting the farmland, conserving biodiversity and sustaining the system. In addition the AHS project performs an educational task for presenting traditional life and farming activities to urban dwellers by inviting them to actively participate in the process of agricultural production. More recently, the focus has been laid on the cultural role of AHS by placing emphasis on the development of opportunities for local communities to commercialize their heritage among visitors and tourists, through, for instance, a visitor centre or museum, handicrafts inspired by local culture for the souvenir business, etc. Last but not least, the scientific function of AHS constitutes a new and challenging research topic for the study of AHS conservation in the perspective of local development.

Despite the ambitious mission statement, the actual conservation process of AHS has proved to be problematic, mainly because of the low production efficiency and

**Table 1.** Some of the AHS pilot projects in China

System	Province	Content
Rice-Fish Agriculture system	Zhejiang	<p>Long history, over 2,000 years.</p> <p>Ecological symbiosis exists in the traditional rice-fish agricultural system. The high quality foods of fish and rice are helpful in maintaining farmers' nutrient and living standards.</p> <p>Various fish and culture.</p> <p>Long history, over 1,000 years in the Dong Nationality areas.</p> <p>Main function: Ecological symbiosis exists in the rice-fish-duck system, in which duck plays a more important role even than fish.</p> <p>Multi-products from the system are of great help to local people.</p> <p>Various minority cultures and agriculture products.</p> <p>Long history, over 3,000 years in the Yangtze River watershed.</p> <p>Main function: the utilization and alteration of sloping land; water and land loss decrease and food security.</p> <p>Important significance for today: wide spread of experience and knowledge to Japan, south-east Asia, south Asia, etc.</p> <p>An anthropogenic ecosystem with specific interaction of the land and water resources.</p> <p>Main function: rational utilization of water, land, plants and animals; material recycling, more employees; reduced flood risk; helpful for the irrigation of the rice field and the conservation of the environment.</p> <p>Effective water and land maintenance measure.</p> <p>Main function: hold off the sand, maintain the water and sand, make farmland in the silt land, increase the production of food.</p> <p>History: over 400 years.</p>
Rice-Fish-duck system	Guizhou	
The rice terrace system	Yunnan, Guangxi	
The dyke pond system	Zhejiang, Guangdong (Shunde, Nanhai)	
Yudiba (Silt Dam) System	Shanxi, Shaanxi	

Kaner well (Qanat) system (Tulufan)	Xinjiang	<p>Long history: from the Han dynasty in Guanzhong Plain. Excellent irrigation system.</p> <p>Main function: The water flows underground and decreases the evaporation and sand; irrigates the land without assisting power.</p>
Duijiangyan irrigation system	Sichuan	<p>Irrigation project.</p> <p>Main function: the water is separated automatically and the project can exclude the sand of the river, control the volume of the water, then eliminate floods.</p>
Zhengguo Dyke system (Jingyang)	Shaanxi	<p>The longest irrigating channel in ancient China, over 300 km.</p>
Shishatan system	Qinghai, Gansu	<p>Takes advantage of the relief to build the auto-irrigation system.</p> <p>Water saving art in an arid area.</p> <p>Main function: store water and preserve the moisture of the soil; improve the water use ratio; increase the temperature of the land; decrease the accumulation of salt; avoid salinization of the soil; maintain water and land; keep fertilizer in the soil; restrain grass and alleviate disease and insects on the plant.</p> <p>Improve production: over 30–50% more than in other land.</p>

the rather strict constraints on extensive exploitation of local resources (Daugstad *et al.* 2006). The issue of matching policies for AHS conservation and strategies for local economic development is indeed a high priority for various AHS. Hence, research-based insights and empirical field studies could offer most valuable support and insights for managing transformations.

#### *What Should be Conserved?*

Considerable attention has been afforded to heritage conservation ever since the adoption of the 'Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage' (1972) and this has generated a growing body of studies from different disciplines (Xu 2005). Most studies have concentrated on urban heritage (Chang *et al.* 1996), but recently the role of agriculture in the preservation of cultural heritage has become an issue of international concern. Rural areas and agricultural heritage are currently also addressed as research topics (Daugstad *et al.* 2006; Ramakrishnan 2007; Jansen-Verbeke *et al.* 2008).

According to the definition of GIAHS, an entire AHS should be considered an integrated object of conservation. Therefore, the elements of the system need to be defined clearly: land-use system, landscapes, biodiversity and endemic flora and fauna resources. Moreover, cultural diversity should be recognized in terms of traditional knowledge about agriculture and local technologies. Agricultural communities are currently in a process of transformation, in a progressively changing environment that now includes the 'new' role of their territorial heritage.

#### *How do we Conserve AHS?*

It can be assumed that many agricultural heritage systems contain economic opportunities for the local communities, one of which could be heritage tourism (Drost 1996; Thorsell and Sigaty 1998). When conditions for tourism development are favourable, this can generate economic impulses for the communities, greater awareness of natural and cultural resources and stronger motivation to remain in the area. This new trend to stay within the home region could also ensure the labour capacity needed to maintain agricultural production. However, negative impacts of tourism should also be anticipated. A strong and visionary management organization is absolutely necessary in order to avoid physical damage to the heritage site and the landscape, and to counter the risks of unbalancing social and cultural cohesion in the community.

The compatibility of heritage conservation with strategies for tourism development has been studied widely and documented through numerous world-wide case studies (Balcar and Pearce 1996; Poria *et al.* 2001; McKercher *et al.* 2005; Miguel 2007). From these studies it could, in fact, be concluded that tourism might not be the optimal mode for conservation and development of AHS sites and, in any case, the process certainly requires appropriate management. The studies reveal that three key issues need



to be addressed in the conservation of AHS in conjunction with tourism development: (1) selection of those AHS resources that can be transformed into attractive products for tourism; (2) assessment of the tourism potential of the site, taking into account the market position of the place and trends in the domestic and international markets; (3) identification of AHS stakeholders and their role in tourism development.

### **Conservation of the Rice-Fish Agricultural System (RFAS) in Longxian Village**

#### *The Study Area*

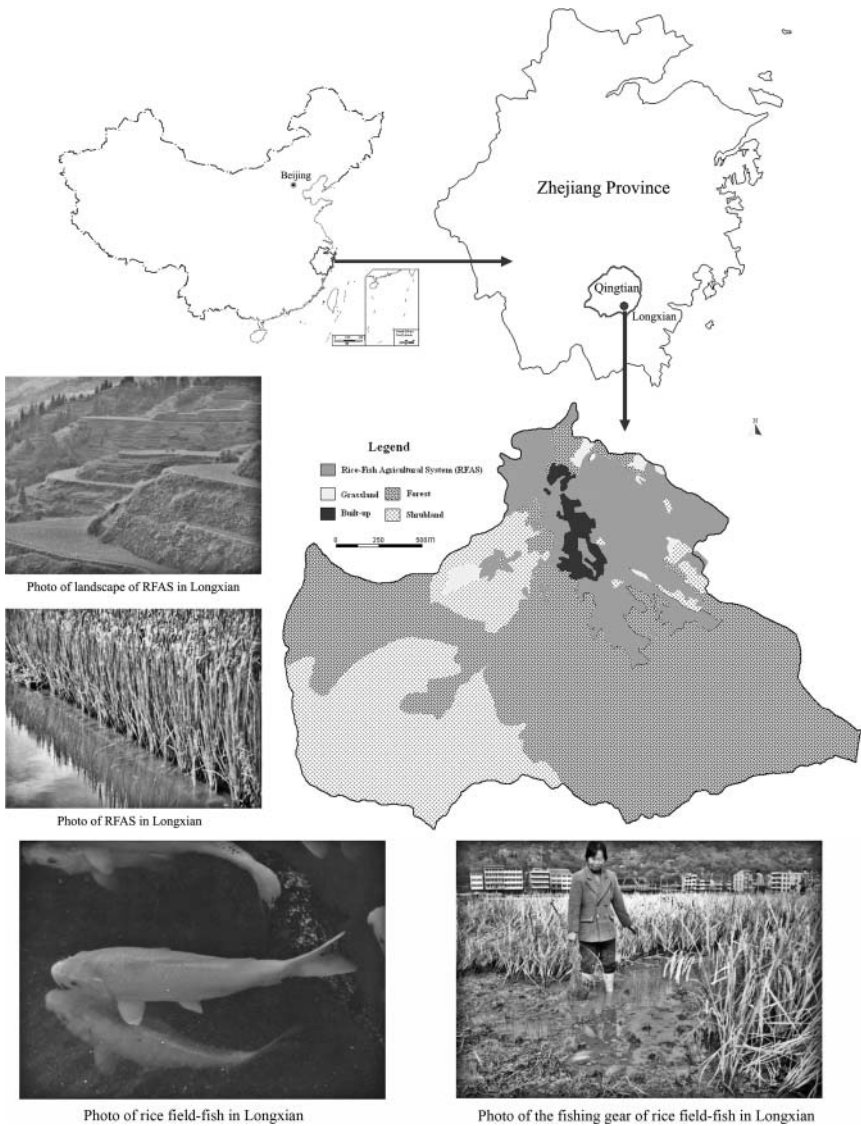
Longxian is a traditional RFAS village, located in Qingtian County, Zhejiang Province (southern China), selected as a case study in the GIAHS project. RFAS has a long history in Longxian; the annals of Qingtian County compiled during the Hongwu Period of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1398) record that ‘Rice Field-fish (a kind of carp) is red, black or varicoloured and is cultivated in rice fields and its ponds’. The RFAS in Longxian village demonstrates an ingenious approach to generating ecological, economic and social benefits through encouraging essential ecological functions (e.g. fish provide fertilizer for rice, regulate micro-climatic conditions, soften the soil, keep water in motion, and eat larvae and weeds in the flooded fields; rice provides shade and food for fish). Figure 1 shows the rice field-fish and field-fish fishing gear.

Rice fields (60 ha) account for 13% of the Longxian village territory (about 461 ha) (Figure 1). It is a typical emigration village with 188 farm households registered in local government statistics. However, the field survey collected information only on 90 households; the others had either migrated to other countries, such as Italy and Spain, or to Chinese cities, such as Qingtian County, Lishui City and Wenzhou City. Farming is no longer the main source of income, since many residents rely on financial support from relatives living abroad. To some extent, this explains why the traditional RFAS was well conserved. Nevertheless, this also constitutes a threat for the future of the traditional rice fields, as the number of farmers in the village is rapidly declining.

#### *An Explorative Field Survey*

In order to explore local conditions for conservation and tourism development in depth, a field survey was conducted in Longxian village in 2006. This included the collection of secondary data on households and tourist surveys, interviews with key persons and focus group meetings.

The field survey in Longxian revealed insights on the type of tourism activities that could be developed based on the presence of the traditional agricultural site. Assessing the capacity of a site to attract visitors, while maintaining the landscape in as authentic a state as possible, is always a major challenge for local planners and managers. Therefore, in this case, the site was studied extensively in local documents, such as the agricultural statistics yearbook, government reports and project studies.



**Figure 1.** Location of Longxian village and of the RFAS.

This helped to establish relevant data on natural and social resources, on agricultural production, but also on the regional planning and management of RFAS. Useful information about tourism in Longxian village was provided by researchers from Zhejiang University.

The field study also included a survey with the main objective of identifying the different attitudes of visitors with respect to heritage conservation and tourism. The survey sample included 260 valid questionnaires; the questionnaire included three categories of questions: (i) information about the RFAS as a tourist destination; (ii) the place of origin of the tourists; and (iii) their main motives for making the visit.

In addition, a household survey among the village residents revealed significant insights into their attitudes and expectations. The respondents were selected in consultation with village leaders, and included a variety of households in terms of education, income and household size. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the head of each household (usually the male, who has the power to decide on the labour division among the family members). A combination of open and closed questions covered a range of issues in four topics: (i) their understanding of RFAS as heritage; (ii) the attitude of locals towards heritage tourism; (iii) the main arguments; and (iv) their role in RFAS conservation and tourism development.

Information on 50 households was collected, a sample representing 56 percent of the total number of households in Longxian village. One particular household characteristic was assumed to be relevant to the results of this field survey – the degree of financial dependency on family members abroad. Three categories were defined: (i) households without members abroad; (ii) households with less than 50 percent of their members abroad; (iii) households with 50 percent or more of their members abroad.

#### *Transformation of Heritage Resources into Tourism Products*

The tourism potential of a heritage site depends on a number of factors (Jansen-Verbeke and McKercher 2010), one of which is the possibility to develop attractive tourism products, based on a strategic transformation of tangible and/or intangible heritage assets (FAO 2008; Min *et al.* 2009).

The RFAS in Longxian can be classified as both a natural and a cultural landscape. Transformation mechanisms depend on distinct characteristics of the system's elements; the physical landscape includes mountains, rivers, rice fields and a varied vegetation, fish in the rice fields and other fauna in the habitat. Albeit not unique in China, this creates an attractive setting for sightseeing, sports (e.g. fishing, walking, etc.) and nature-orientated visits, for educational and leisure purposes. The heritage assets of the cultural landscape are both tangible and intangible: some examples are traditional architecture, the agricultural life style, the dialect and folklore, knowledge about the fishery, skills in fish-drying processes, a lantern fish festival, etc.

There are various types of tourism products and activities that can be developed, such as sightseeing, home stays, exploration for scientific and other interests, unique experiences and souvenirs and local arts and crafts.

*The Tourism Potential of RFAS*

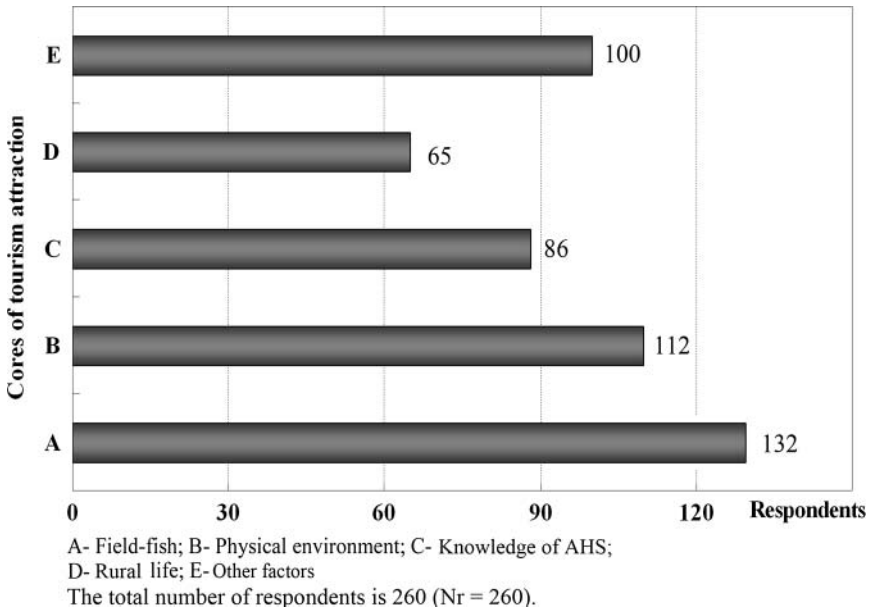
Tourism has developed rapidly in Longxian village since it was selected as a GIAHS pilot site in 2005. Due to the stimulating effect of a 'heritage image', the number of tourists in the destination increased from 2,000 in 2004 to over 10,000 in 2006. The village is still at an initial and explorative stage of tourism development, without a systematic tourism planning or a performing tourism administration to date and totally lacking competent tour agencies and tour guides, signposting and interpretation boards for tourists. There were only three hotels in 2006; one was owned privately, while the others belonged to the village collective organization.

The results of the tourist survey confirm the tourism potential of Longxian village, despite the absence of travel agencies and administrative institutions to brand the place as a destination for heritage tourism. The results of the survey indicate that 61 percent of the tourists obtain information about AHS from family and friends, 12 percent from TV and radio broadcasting, 11 percent via the Internet, 1.5 percent from travel agents and 15 percent from other sources.

There is an optimistic estimation of the target market for this type of heritage tourism; according to the tourist and household surveys, there are three types of markets for Longxian village, based mainly on the criterion of travel distance: (i) an international market, principally composed of villagers' overseas relatives and their international friends; (ii) the domestic market, especially visitors from large cities, such as Shanghai, Hangzhou and Ningbo; (iii) the local market, mainly Qingtian county and the adjacent medium-sized cities and towns. More investment in international marketing strategies is required to attract small, special interest tour groups.

In 2006, most visitors in Longxian stayed only for half a day in the village. They came from the adjacent areas: 84 percent of the visitors were from Zhejiang province and 16 percent from other provinces, 43 percent from Qingtian County and 29 percent from Lishui and Wenzhou district, which is about a one-hour drive from Longxian.

The diversity of the local tourist opportunity spectrum is a strong asset for the destination. According to more than half of the survey respondents the 'field-fish' connotation is a strong icon and appreciated as a most attractive factor. This differs from previous research results, when the core attraction for agricultural heritage tourism was the system itself and characterized by a high awareness of their own heritage (Poria *et al.* 2001). The attractive physical environment is highly valued by 43 percent of the respondents (Figure 2). Improving his/her knowledge of AHS was mentioned as a visit motive by 33 percent of the respondents, although, in fact, most tourists were not aware that the destination is classified as an agricultural heritage site. Clearly landscape sightseeing, enjoying a vacation, relaxing and fish tasting are the main motives and activities.



**Figure 2.** Factors attracting tourists to the agricultural heritage site.

*Households’ Attitudes toward RFAS Conservation and Tourism*

Conservation of the rice field landscape implies that residents, especially farmers, maintain the traditional RFAS and their way of life. The most crucial factor is that the benefits are sufficient for them to earn a livelihood. The farmers are the creators and operators of the rice fields and, as such, one of the most important factors in achieving the goal of sustainable tourism (Altieri 2004). The attitude of households with regard to the conservation of the traditional rice fields in Longxian village shows that those highly connected with family members abroad display more knowledge of RFAS and more awareness of its value as a heritage site than the other households, indicating RFAS could create “bequest and existence demand” for some of the villagers. This means the importance of the “agricultural heritage is there”, even though it could not bring profits for the farmers at the present, some of them can still feel the value and importance of inheriting it, especially for some farmers who have more connections with the heritage (Herbert 2001; Timothy and Boyd 2003). In the words of one of the residents: ‘My relatives abroad telephoned me to ask me to conserve our family’s rice-fish field because it is heritage now, and it may bring us a lot of benefits’.

This is contradictory to the responses of households that are much less, or not at all, connected with family members abroad. They are in favour of more expansion,

assuming that a highly productive mono RFAS could raise their income and improve their living standards. The highest level of awareness about RFAS conservation was, of course, found in the first group, although other residents expressed equal concern about conservation.

Regarding the residents' perception of their role in tourism development, some interesting expectations were identified: 62.5 percent of the interviewed households would like to produce and sell products to tourists (e.g. dried field-fish); 50 percent want to host tourists in their homes; 42.5 percent wish to act as tour guides, 32.5 percent would like to be involved in tourism entertainment activities, and 27.5 percent would be interested in employment in the future traditional rice-fish agricultural museum.

## **Discussion**

### *Identification of Stakeholders of the Rice-Fish Agricultural System (RFAS)*

The identification of stakeholders and their actual role in RFAS conservation and tourism development was most difficult, mainly because of the interaction and exchange that occurs between different groups in this relatively small community. As a rule, negotiation meetings and multi-level seminars are the main modes to define the stakeholders, while researchers and experts from different disciplines can be involved in the local development process as consultants.

In this case study, local farmers should be considered the main stakeholders in the conservation of RFAS through tourism development, although it is apparent that not all farmers are motivated to be involved in conservation and tourism. As mentioned before, being linked to family members abroad plays a relevant role in their attitude towards heritage conservation and tourism. However, a sample of 50 households is insufficient to reach general conclusions on this factor, but it certainly is at least indicative.

### *Dynamic Conservation of RFAS through Tourism*

The objective of the GIAHS programme is the dynamic conservation and adaptive management of traditional agricultural systems. According to Altieri and Koohafkan (2008), dynamic conservation of GIAHS is an important innovative approach. Clearly a conservation process can neither freeze landscapes nor people's way of living, but rather should take into account ecological evolution in fauna and flora, climate changes and, above all, the changes induced by social and cultural dynamics in a post-agrarian – even post-industrial – society. The concept of dynamic conservation takes into consideration the impact of global changes, while fully respecting

local people's livelihood. This integrated management approach is based on a holistic vision of the sustainability of agriculture, ecology and social traditions (Dela Cruz and Koohafkan 2009). Heritage tourism can be developed in traditional agricultural landscapes and contribute, in a positive way, to site development and the livelihood of local communities. This dynamic conservation approach is currently promoted in China (Min *et al.* 2009) and also by the FAO (Altieri and Koohafkan 2008).

The results of the explorative field study in Longxian confirm that the village gained popularity through its status as a GIAHS pilot project. However, to date more interest has been shown in the village's attractive rural setting for leisure travel and activities rather than in the story of the traditional rice-fish agricultural system.

### **The Future of Agricultural Heritage Systems**

There is a growing world-wide interest in the conservation of agricultural systems, despite the fact that traditional agricultural landscapes are no longer efficient as production areas for the livelihood of farmers. Conservation of these landscapes and their traditional coherent production system and rural habitat can be achieved only through new ways of 'valorization', new uses and new meanings.

Revalorization of the past and the characteristics of traditional habitats is a global movement, according to some, in reaction to a world becoming hot, flat and crowded (Friedman 2008). The growing awareness in China of the value of agricultural heritage systems could be a reaction to the huge wave of urbanization in twenty-first-century China. Perhaps this is an indication of an emerging process of growing concern about environmental quality that could be a new and strong incentive to conserve typical rural landscapes of the past. The discovery of a free market economy can be yet another impulse to look for new 'business' opportunities, using the resources at hand – in this case an agricultural landscape and its habitat. The range of economic opportunities in this type of setting is limited and the perspective of some tourism development is indeed inviting. The niche market of cultural heritage and nostalgic tourism seems to be an attractive alternative.

However, this new perspective of additional economic activities in the community needs to be balanced against issues of carrying capacity, vulnerability of the site itself and accessibility, on the one hand and, on the other, a highly competitive market in which this destination would need to be branded.

AHS has recently attracted widespread attention through the programme for dynamic conservation of 'Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems' initiated by the FAO in 2002. In the hope of increasing concern about the conservation of traditional landscapes and habitats, many new programmes and initiatives were launched

by international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academic research teams and occasionally by local agents, in the region or in the sector.

## Conclusion

The objective of this article is to contribute some insights on the concept of AHS and its potentials for heritage tourism in the specific context of the development of rural tourism in China.

Our case study in Longxian village (southern China) focused on the expectations and attitudes of the local community regarding the commoditization process of their agricultural resources. The influence of migrated family members on the mindset of the farmers proved to be important, as it created greater awareness of the value of heritage for the future and increased understanding of tourism potential. The potential to develop sustainable and small-scale tourism in this type of destination in rural China is realistic, although development plans need to take into account not only the limited capacity of the sites in terms of visitor numbers, but also the restrictions that must be imposed to safeguard the 'traditional' cohesion of the system.

The challenges of combining conservation policies with dynamic development models are complex. The inclusion of local residents (farmers) and tourists in the site and situation analysis in Longxian village is a first step towards responsible planning of the 'local' transformation process. Knowledge building on the heritage values of agricultural landscapes in China and their market value for tourism development has commenced only recently . . . there is still a long way to go.

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