News digest

The big environmental stories in the Chinese media (25 June-1 July)

World's second-largest hydropower dam starts operating

On Monday, two generation units of the Baihetan mega-dam went into operation, the government has announced.

Once fully operational in 2022, the dam on the Jinsha River, a tributary of the Yangtze will have a generating capacity of 16GW, behind only the Three Gorges dam (22.5GW).

China's official broadcaster CCTV said the power will save about 19 million tonnes of standard coal and reduce over 51 million tonnes of CO2 emissions per year.

Building massive hydropower dams is seen as key to meeting China's 2060 carbon neutrality goal. China has planned 27 cascade hydropower dams on the Jinsha, with a total capacity of four times the Three Gorges. One these are built, the river will become the country's largest hydropower base.

The Jinsha flows from the Tibetan plateau to Sichuan province for 2,300 kilometres. It's one of China's most critical biodiversity hotspots, home to hundreds of native fish species. Environmental and social concerns over hydropower on the Jinsha have been raised over many years though they have died down more recently.

Baihetan's environmental impact assessment report was approved by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment in 2015. Construction took four years.

A study published last year found that since a few dams went into operation in the watershed, fish species in the lower reaches fell from 141 in the 1980s to 78

during 2008-2011. The EIA report says indigenous fish species, which prefer fast currents, are likely to keep decreasing and even go extinct. The state-owned Three Gorges Cooperation, which runs four mega-dams in the Jinsha River, including Baihetan, has committed to releasing millions of fingerlings into the river and establishing a fund to protect the region's biodiversity.

Read China Dialogue's recent report on how basin-wide governance of the Yangtze could help protect species at risk from dams.