

When desert gives way to greenery

Sand control project in Inner Mongolia not only creates a better environment but also provides jobs and higher incomes as vegetation returns

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Life in a desert is the polar opposite of depictions in movies and photographs where groups of merchants swathed in white robes sit on the backs of camels and sway gracefully back and forth across golden sand dunes.

In most instances, living in a desert means a constant struggle against hunger and poverty, maybe for an entire lifetime. However, in one small village in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region in North China, the people of the desert have refused to accept this fate. In the past 40 years they have achieved a mission impossible — “greening” the desert to make it habitable for generations to come.

Li Hua is village head of Udon Qaidam in Ejin Horo Banner, Ordos. The 55-year-old has never forgotten how tough life was during his childhood on the edge of the Maowusu Desert. In the 1970s, nearly all of the village land — 1,130 hectares — was covered by sand. Just 8 percent was green and suitable for cultivation.

The residents found it difficult to develop any form of agriculture, so their staple foodstuffs were powdered corn and sweet potatoes. No one in Udon Qaidam ate cucumbers or cabbages until the early 1990s.

In the 1970s, strong winds hit the village frequently. “Most of the cottages were about 3 meters high. Sometimes, after a windy night, we couldn’t even open the door because it was blocked by the sand outside,” Li said.

“It was hard to feed a family, not to mention earn any money. I have a younger sister and a brother, and they wore clothes passed down from me. None of us had shoes.”

More than half the village’s residents gradually moved to other places, but Li’s father — Li Mingliang — insisted on staying. “My father was the head of the village. He said that if we all left, the only area of vegetation would rapidly disappear,” Li Hua recalled.

In the 1970s, Li Mingliang led a

tree-growing drive among the villagers, using a national policy that provided subsidies for areas planted with trees. By 1984, 24 percent of the land had been reclaimed from the desert and was green with vegetation.

In 2000, the villagers elected Li Hua to succeed his father as village head. He immediately started using innovative measures to expand the area of greenery and raise people’s incomes.

“Used rationally, trees and other desert plants can also be turned into sustainable resources,” he said. In recent years, he has continued to expand the area of greenery and has brought in a number of companies that process the plants into raw materials for furniture and other items.

In 2005, Li Hua launched a pilot project to plant 0.6 hectares of Mongolian Scots pine trees. By 2012, the trees, which had grown to 3 meters, were sold for 200 yuan each. The sale generated 1 million yuan, a sum the villagers found hard to comprehend.

Between 2000 and 2008, the annual per capita income in the village was 1,300 yuan. By last year, the figure had soared to 13,000 yuan (\$1,960), and the forest covered 75 percent of the land, while grass covered 95 percent.

Li Hua has a bigger plan for next year; he wants to consolidate each family’s land rights and attract companies to use it further. The villagers will become shareholders in, and workers for, the companies.

“I have a mission to make our people believe that every single effort made on the land will earn a payback. I will help them to understand that farming can also lead to a prosperous life,” he said.

The work in Udon Qaidam is a microcosm of China’s long battle against desertification, which is often referred to as “cancer of the earth”.

Now, the battle is becoming a challenge for many countries and regions across the globe.

In 1994, the General Assembly of the UN adopted the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.



The Kubuqi Desert in Ordos, in North China’s Inner Mongolia autonomous region, is rapidly becoming covered with trees.

PHOTOS BY ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY



Baskets made from salix are popular with tourists from overseas.

As a signatory, China has been active in the implementation of its obligations and has adopted a series of measures to prevent and control desertification.

On Sept 16, at the end of the 13th Session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention to Combat Desertification, held in Ordos, China was recognized as a model in the fight against desertification.

According to statistics from the State Forestry Administration’s latest national survey, the area of desertified land fell by 12,120 square kilometers between 2009 and 2014, while the area of sandy land shrank by 9,902 sq km during the same period.

The administration’s data also show that the number of people living below the poverty line in 12 northern provinces and regions, including Inner Mongolia, has fallen to 13.42 million, from 47.11 million in 2012.

According to Liu Dongsheng, the administration’s deputy director, between the 1970s and the 1990s, the area of desertified land in China grew by 10,400 sq km every year.

However, during the past decade, it has shrunk by 2,424 sq km every year. “It is a historic change from ‘people giving way to sand’ to ‘sand giving way to greenery,’” he said.

In most areas of Inner Mongolia, sand control now not only produces green land and a better environment for local people, but also brings more job opportunities and higher incomes.

In the past 40 years, about 560 hectares of Mongolian Scots pine have been planted in the XiaoHoro Operating Area on the northeastern edge of the Maowusu Desert. In 2000, the local people developed a seedling industry based on the pine. By last year, more than 216 million saplings were grown in the area, generating income of 10,000 yuan for every family.

In recent years, salix, a type of willow that is grown in the desert, has attracted growing investment. Providing it is pruned every four years, the plant, which is composed of rich, tough fibers, has the ability to survive for many decades. Without pruning, it dies gradually.

People in Ejin Horo Banner have

explored comprehensive use of the plant. The branches are the main area of interest. They are subjected to a range of procedures, including peeling, rolling and drying, and then compacted to produce tough construction materials.

The development of salix processing has gone through three stages, according to Li Yi, general manager of Inner Mongolia Tsinghua Salix Industry Engineer Technology, a company that focuses on processing the plant into high value-added commercial products.

In the company’s early years, salix branches were used to make craft items, such as small baskets. However, since the 1990s, the plant has mainly been used to make furniture, such as closets, beds, tables and bookcases.

“However, the profit margin is still very narrow, within 3 to 5 percent,” Li Yi said. In 2007, the company developed a method of processing salix to produce high-density wood for use in construction. The wood is also waterproof, anti-corrosion and flame retardant, so instead of just being used to make furniture, it can be utilized as a structural material for buildings.

In October last year, construction began on the company’s first production line for the new form of salix, and the first products went on the market in June. About 600 new jobs will be created in the coming months, and the new industry is expected to generate 25 million yuan a year.

During the conference in Ordos, a large number of overseas visitors watched demonstrations of the “special wood” and discussed future cooperation with Li Yi.

“The new technology is now under intellectual property protection. We have a big dream, which is not going to stop at sand control, but will improve the lives of local people through the restoration of the ecological environment,” he said.