

Jiangdong village in Yunnan province has made protection of the ginkgo trees, especially the old ones, a priority. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

GINKGO PARADISE

A once poor and secluded village in Yunnan has been transformed by ecotourism

By LIU XIANGRUI

liuxiangrui@chinadaily.com.cn

Jiangdong village, surrounded by more than 30,000 ginkgo trees, including several dozen more than 500 years old, turns golden-toned toward the end of every year.

The beautiful scenery attracts thousands of tourists to the village, which is 40 kilometers from Tengchong, in western Yunnan province.

Seen from afar, the village looks like a vast ginkgo forest.

The villagers' homes, built in traditional style and enclosed by low, black walls built with local lava rocks, are scattered along narrow lanes.

Tall ginkgo trees cover the courtyards, with their yellow leaves lying on the ground and on rooftops in autumn.

In the old days, every newlywed couple in the village would plant a ginkgo tree, a species known for extremely slow growth, in their courtyard or field. The tree was expected to bear fruit when the couple got old, so they would be able to support themselves by selling the nuts.

Ginkgo trees that can bear nuts are customarily handed down as family assets in the village.

In recent years, the village has seen a tremendous transformation thanks to the development of ecotourism based on the trees.

The village used to be secluded and poor, but its beauty was discovered by some professional photographers.

To boost tourism, the local govern-



ment launched a project in 2008 to enhance the village environment and infrastructure so that it could host visitors. Before that, the villagers lacked a proper water supply, electrical power and roads.

Separately, the local government also encouraged residents to open restaurants and inns to accommodate tourists and provided funding to help them upgrade their homes.

Yang Zhuying, 52, was among the earliest in the village to open an agritainment venture — a rural restaurant and inn. She started the business in 2008 and manages it with her husband. Their children also help during the busiest season,

when they can receive as many as 200 diners per day.

Yang's family of five earns about 140,000 yuan (\$20,350) from the business annually.

"The venture has become the main income source for our family," says Yang, who also sells local specialties, such as ginkgo nuts, to visiting tourists.

According to Yang, she and her husband used to depend mainly on agriculture, such as growing tobacco, as well as on part-time jobs. But each of them could earn little more than 10,000 yuan per year.

Also, Yang says, in the beginning the only economic benefit from the ginkgos were the nuts, which local residents collected to sell to vendors. The nuts produced in the area are popular for their special glutinous taste, which is believed to be the result of local soil conditions.

But as tourism boomed in recent years, residents have developed more products from the nuts. Now, chicken stewed with ginkgo nuts is a famous culinary specialty.

The nuts have also been made into snacks, and the ginkgo flower, which once was discarded, is now sold at more than 200 yuan per kilogram. Even ginkgo leaves are made into decorative hats and sold to tourists.

Zheng Siyin, 74, looks after a stall near her home in the village and earns more than 100 yuan a day during peak season by selling ginkgo nuts and other items. Her family has six ginkgo trees, one of them nearly 500 years old.

She collected more than 200 kilo-

grams of ginkgo nuts last year, with each kilogram yielding about 50 yuan.

"I am old and cannot do farming anymore. But I can still earn a little bit to help my children, thanks to the stall," she says, adding that the price of the local ginkgo nuts has gone up too, thanks to demand from tourists.

Meanwhile, both of her sons are running an agritainment business, she said.

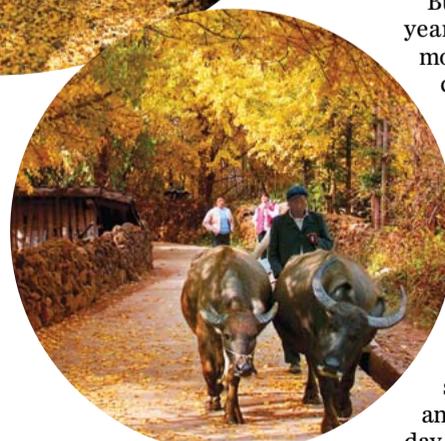
According to Huang Chaojin, the director of the local community committee, more than 150 agritainment businesses have been started in the village, and many residents have opened shops selling specialties near their homes.

In 2017, total revenue generated by tourism in the village came to 60 million yuan, and the average income of the villagers was 12,000 yuan — a lot higher than in surrounding areas, Huang says, noting that "ecotourism has greatly enhanced the lives of the villagers".

In 2010, 2,500 of the village's 4,000 residents were living below the poverty line. By December 2018, the number had been reduced to 105.

While seeking further development of tourism, the village has made protection of the ginkgo trees, especially the old ones, a priority.

"Now all the residents are grateful for the benefits brought by the trees. And they avoid harming the older trees when they renovate or rebuild their houses," Huang says. "The harmonious coexistence of man and his environment, including the trees and wildlife, is now a village consensus."



The harmonious coexistence of man and his environment, including the trees and wildlife, is now a village consensus.