

A former finance officer has made it his responsibility to conserve the environment of Xisha Islands. **Liu Zhihua** reports in Beijing.



Chen Xu is excited that the Xisha Islands are now part of a new city called Sansha in the southernmost province of Hainan. "Because that means it is now possible to raise the issue of environmental protection of the islands with the local government and to get their support," says the 44-year-old finance officer-turned-environmentalist. "I love the sea and the islands, and will do my best to protect them." He says he found his calling after a chance visit to Yongxing Island and Zhaoshu Island of Xisha Islands, in 2007. He says it was the most beautiful place he has ever seen. The natural environment took his breath away and he decided to move there.

"The water is so clear. I was told it's even clearer than the Maldives," Chen says. "Apart from a few fishermen, Zhaoshu Island is tranquil, with charming beaches, trees, birds and sky. I felt peace immediately."

Chen visited the islands at the lowest point in his life. Although he was doing well as a senior client representative of a securities company in Sichuan's provincial capital Chengdu, he was bored and depressed.

He earned at least 500,000 yuan (\$78,000) a year and traveled a lot, both within China and abroad. But he was not happy.

"I used to feel depressed every Monday, as I headed to the office. I felt stuck in a routine life and wanted to find a way out," Chen says.

The islands provided the answer. With the help of locals, Chen built a 20-square-meter wooden hut on Zhaoshu Island.

Like the other huts on the 190,000-square-meter island, the hut was minimally furnished. Even so, Chen says, life was "as sweet as in paradise."

He woke up without an alarm clock and spent his day fishing,

diving and cooking his catch. At night, he went to bed lulled by nature's music — the sounds of waves, birds, animals, insects and trees.

He has taken many photos of reefs, corals, fish and conches, among others.

To share his newfound happiness, Chen once posted a photo of himself holding a branch of coral on his micro blog. He was surprised when a friend in Australia commented that what he did was detrimental to the environment and that if he were in Australia, he would have been punished by law.

"I was shocked. I didn't want to be a bad guy. After that incident, I became more aware of the environment."

Chen began noticing that fishermen from nearby islands were threatening Zhaoshu Island's surroundings.

The fishermen usually come to the island shortly after Spring Festival in February, and leave before the typhoon season, which begins in August.

"When they are on Zhaoshu Island, they fell trees to make firewood, and as time passes, the trees reduce in number and this causes a drop in the bird population.



(Top) Chen Xu goes fishing in the sea surrounding the Xisha Islands. (Above) Chen holds a mackerel he caught by trolling in Xisha waters.

"The fishermen also bring with them cats to catch mice on the island. The number of cats have multiplied, and when they can't find enough mice, the hungry wildcats start attacking the birds," Chen explains.

"I was no longer living in paradise. Instead, I began seeing environmental problems and felt a strong urge to solve them," Chen adds.

He says one feels more connected to nature on an island

because of proximity and therefore, the desire to protect it. But in cities, where one is surrounded by the concrete jungle, the connection with nature is remote.

Chen started talking to fisher-

men trying to convince them to fish less, or at least fish farther from the shore.

He achieved some success with some fishermen adopting trolling. But there were many who won't listen.

Realizing that he could not achieve much alone, he left the island and moved to Haikou, Hainan's provincial capital in August 2011.

In the meantime, he takes every chance to lobby with the relevant authorities. The establishment of Sansha city, Chen says, has provided a possible avenue.

He says he has started calling on the new city authorities, to show them his research conclusions, and persuade them to take effective measures to protect the sea and islands from being overexploited.

Li Ming, an official of the Education, Culture and Public Health Bureau of the newly established Sansha City government, has come to know Chen because of his appeal for the protection of the islands.

"Environmental protection will be a focus of our policy for the islands. In fact, we have already started making plans," Li says.

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what's new

Golden Rooster honors microfilms

The 21st Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival, known as the mainland's Academy Awards, will launch a microfilm competition section for the first time in its 20-year history.

The festival will start in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province on Sept 26 and last four days.

The section will honor the 10 best microfilms, 10 best microfilms by college students, and three people who have contributed to the development of microfilms, among other awards.

Applicants should mail their microfilms of between 2 and 30 minutes to the organizing committee before Aug 30.

An awards ceremony will be held on Sept 27 in Shaoxing.

Epic picture of rural life to hit screens



People Mountain People Sea, a film that won the Silver Lion at 2011's Venice International Film Festival, will hit mainland theaters on Aug 3.

The film follows the journey of Lao Tie, in rural China, as he tries to find the killer of his younger brother. The journey turns out to be more important than the result and unfolds a gloomy picture of contemporary China's grassroots life.

Director Cai Shangjun works with veteran actor Chen Jianbin, who often plays ancient emperors. Chen this time breaks his stereotype to play the poor farmer protagonist.

Violin prodigy, age 12, releases album

Hong Kong's Sophia Chan, 12, has released her first album, titled *The Violin Angel*, on the Poloarts label. It records her performance at Festival de Musica de Santa Catarina, with the festival orchestra under the baton of Alex Klein in Brazil, in January 2011.

The record features Edouard Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*, Chinese composer He Fang's violin concerto *Jasmine Flower* and other pieces.

Chan started to play the violin at 4 and quickly displayed her tremendous talent on many TV shows. Now she studies with the world's top violinist, Shmuel Ashkenazi, and Michael Ma, professor of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts.

Dalian to host a digital fair

The first China-Japan-Korea Digital Culture Fair, Asia's largest digital culture industries event, will be held in Dalian, Liaoning province, from Sept 27-29.

By bringing together mainstream organizations from the three countries, the fair aims to build a trading platform of digital culture, and further integrate marketing of Asia's digital culture industries.

The fair, co-organized by China Digital Culture Group and the Zhongshan district government of Dalian, has invited more than 100 enterprises and related organizations from China, Japan and South Korea.

Besides awards for excellent productions and providing a forum for the digital culture industry, a series of themed events will allow participants to experience digital science.

Enterprising villagers lure visitors with cormorants

By **HUO YAN** in Yangshuo, Guangxi
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Huang Yuechuang and Huang Yueming are hard to miss.

Tourists to Yuye, a village in Yangshuo along the scenic Lijiang River in Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, usually hear their voices first.

Shouting "pictures, pictures" continuously, the brothers try to attract visitors to take photos with their two cormorants perched on their shoulders. Each photo costs 2 yuan (30 cents).

But, the brothers did not do this all their lives.

Huang Yuechuang, 76, and his brother Huang Yueming, 56, used to be fishermen. Huang Yuechuang says back in their heyday, the

cormorants used to be their loyal fish catchers.

"We were able to fish more than enough each day with the help of our cormorants," he says. "They are part of our family."

The brothers still own their fishing boats, which now function only as their home and not as a tool to catch fishes.

"We used to lure fish by lighting up the traditional lanterns around our boats, when the sun goes down. It is called lantern fishing," says Huang Yuechuang. "The lanterns are more beautiful than the stars at night," he adds.

But the fishermen in Yuye have stopped doing this because they claim there are no more fish.

"Since the dam was constructed downstream on the Lijiang River to

build hydropower station, we've lost our source of income," says village head, Huang Gaolian.

"Although the government has added fish upstream, as soon as the gate of the hydropower station opens, those fish are flushed downstream. To make matters worse, some fishermen use electric shock methods to fish."

Because of the depleting fish population, many of the younger villagers have moved to cities in search of a better life. Only older folks, like Huang Yuechuang and his brother, are staying behind to try to make a living from tourism.

It's a trial and error venture. The cormorants are not cheap to maintain. They feed on fish only and because there are no more fish in the river, the villagers buy them from

the market.

"We spend about 5 yuan to feed each cormorant every day," Huang Yuechuang says, adding that on good days, he makes about 50 yuan from photo taking. Some days, he goes home empty handed.

Village head Huang Gaolian says he has been scratching his head to try to find an alternative source of income for the fishermen.

"Since tourists are interested in seeing the traditional way of life here such as fishing with cormorants and lantern fishing, developing tourism seems to be the only way out for them now," Huang Gaolian says.

"At least, they can still keep their cormorants," he adds.

Wen Wen in Beijing contributed to the story.



Because there are less fish, tourism has become an alternative source of income for former fishermen like Huang Yuechuang.

HUO YAN / CHINA DAILY