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To outsiders, it seemed that for many years protecting biodiversity was not at the top of the Chinese government's agenda. Has that changed now?

It has been changing continuously. Compared with such environmental issues as water pollution and air pollution, biodiversity seems quite distant from daily life. However, thanks to the joint efforts of scientists, government officials and social participants, awareness of the need to protect biodiversity has greatly increased. Moreover, the biodiversity issue was recently mentioned in several national and provincial programmes. However, more patience, attention and effort from the whole society are needed to push this issue higher up the national agenda.

As a member of the task force drafting biodiversity legislation in China, could you explain the main changes that you are planning to introduce?

At present, much legislative work is under consideration, such as Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) legislation and bio-safety legislation. There are obstacles on the way, but the Chinese government is actively planning to make changes.

A few years ago there was news that Guizhou province in South China would take some legal steps to protect indigenous knowledge and to prevent 'biopiracy'. The draft 'Guizhou Provincial Regulation on Traditional Knowledge Protection' was being talked about? Can you describe the main measures that were taken? Are there any lessons to share from the experience?

The pilot project in Guizhou was suspended for a time but now it has been resumed. As the first province to introduce legal measures to protect indigenous knowledge, Guizhou has set an example, and it will certainly promote protection work in other areas rich in indigenous knowledge. In addition, we are jointly conducting a project with Third World Network (TWN), which is investigating indigenous knowledge in Guizhou. We will share the research results with organisations and researchers interested in this issue.

Could you share your assessment of the new amendments in patent law vis-à-vis genetic resources? Are they intended to bring China into fuller compliance with the World Trade Organisation (WTO)?

Article 5 and Article 26 of the new WTO Patent Law require disclosure of the sources and origin of genetic resources. It has positive effects on protecting genetic resources and promoting bio-safety.

China's proposal to amend Article 27.3(b) is a good demonstration of China's efforts to implement WTO regulations. In addition, China will seek to balance and coordinate ABS demands to ensure further compliance with the WTO.

Could you explain China's new National Intellectual Property Strategy, which was announced in 2008, and its impact on biodiversity?

The new strategy entails greater efforts to protect the intellectual properties of genetic resources and traditional knowledge. It will certainly promote biodiversity protection and ABS legislation in China.

As a scientist, do you believe that research in China is changing as a result of the new IPR changes?

There is no obvious change yet since the new patent strategy won't come into effect until 1 October 2009. At this stage, scientists are trying to familiarise themselves with the new strategy. I am sure that in the future the new strategy will positively enhance awareness of the need to protect genetic resources and traditional knowledge.

What are your views about genetically modified organisms (GMOs)? Do they have a role to play in China's agriculture?

In general, we believe that GMOs have a positive role to play in China's agriculture. The government is investing to gain the benefits of GM insect-resistant and disease-resistant new varieties. However, there are many uncertainties and technical problems as well. It is difficult to make predictions.

On the one hand, China is aware of the wealth of its biological resources and traditional knowledge. On the other hand, it is authorising GMOs, even though they are creating serious problems of contamination in many countries in the world. Isn't there a contradiction?

There is no great contradiction. The government has not seen persuasive evidence of GMO contamination. GM cotton is widely planted in China, but cotton is not a native plant. Rice, however, is native to China, and for this reason we are worried about the risk of contaminating wild rice. This is why for a long time we have refused to approve the commercialisation of GM rice.

As a member of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Expert Group on Traditional Knowledge Associated with Genetic Resources, how to you see the global ABS regime developing?

It is not well developed. I doubt whether agreement on an international regime can be reached by 2010.

A karst basin (flat limestone valley) in Libo county, Guizhou, China

Photo: Karstdata