

# Z WEEKLY

Li Ruxue (first from right), Zhao Sifan (second from right), and fellow volunteers and staff from the Shan Shui Conservation Center (SSCC) explore the breathtaking scenery of Metog county in the Xizang autonomous region. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



## Living with nature in Metog

Community-led conservation projects in the Xizang autonomous region are helping villagers preserve forests, share Monba culture, and benefit from sustainable tourism.

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In January, Wang Zijie began her journey along a winding mountain road from Nyingchi city to Metog county in Southwest China's Xizang autonomous region.

Outside the car window, the landscape shifted dramatically. Bare winter hills gave way to dense fir forests. Farther along, banana trees appeared, and a warm, humid breeze drifted in, making it feel as if she had stepped into a tropical paradise.

"The altitude drop from Nyingchi to Metog is enormous. Traveling this road feels like passing through all four seasons in a single day," said Wang, 22, a plant protection student at Guizhou University. "It's surreal — like something out of an animated film."

Wang traveled to Gelin village in Metog to join the mural-painting volunteer program of the Shan Shui Conservation Center (SSCC).

Founded in 2007, SSCC is dedicated to biodiversity protection and habitat conservation. In 2022, with support from the China Green Carbon Foundation and the CICC Charity Foundation, the organization established a permanent station in Metog, working closely with local communities to explore sustainable ways for humans and wildlife to coexist.

From Jan 6 to Feb 9, Wang and fellow participants brightened the village, painting murals on viewing platforms, guesthouses, and the walls of villagers' homes, based on requests from the community. Their artwork celebrated the region's rich flora and fauna, and showcased its unique ecosystem.

Her largest mural explored the theme of "habitat." It shows a fallen tree opening onto a forest scene, with Mount Namjagbarwa, Nyingchi's highest peak, in the distance and native wildlife hidden throughout. It also features a 76.8-meter Bhutan pine, a local landmark, and a takin peeking from the forest, based on a photo taken by SSCC staff.

"Mount Namjagbarwa is famously elusive, especially in summer when clouds often hide it," Wang said. "By painting it on the wall, we give visitors a chance to experience the mountain, even when the real view is out of sight."

This mural was just one part of SSCC's efforts. Jiang Nan, 31, the head of the Metog station, said that their work spans four key areas: scientific research, habitat restoration, community-based environmental education, and public outreach.

"Since arriving in Metog in 2024, what has given me the greatest sense of achievement is seeing villagers becoming more environmentally aware while also improving their livelihoods," Jiang said.

SSCC has helped the Gelin community develop eco-tourism routes centered on the Bhutan pine, training residents to become guides.

"Over the past year, the project has brought about 150,000 yuan (\$21,982) to



**Above:** Volunteers and staff from SSCC gather for a group photo by the Yarlung Zangbo River. **Lower left and right:** Murals depicting Metog's ecosystem, created by Wang Zijie and other volunteers. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

the village, with each household receiving around 5,000 yuan," Jiang added. She also noted that many enthusiasts from across China — particularly birdwatchers and flower lovers — hire guides, providing additional income.

"No outside tour planner can match local residents' knowledge of and love for their own land," Jiang said. "We hope communities play a leading role in both conservation and sustainable development."

### Heritage takes root

The success of Gelin's eco-tourism model has inspired similar initiatives across Metog.

In November 2024, with support from the SF Foundation, a charitable organization affiliated with SF Express, SSCC select-

ed Hezha village — located west of the Yarlung Zangbo River — as a new pilot site.

"There's a viewing platform near the village where visitors can take in the famous horseshoe-shaped bend of the river," said Li Ruxue, 31, a staff member at the Metog station.

Before launching the project, Li and colleagues spent about six months conducting socio-economic surveys. They then mapped out four potential nature trails.

This January, they brought in volunteers from diverse backgrounds to further develop these routes — documenting local stories, traditional skills, and ecological knowledge, while also compiling a practical guidebook for visitors.

Among the volunteers was Zhao Sifan, 35, from Shanghai. A community market-

ing professional and avid birdwatcher, Zhao was drawn to Metog's extraordinary environment.

"Metog is a birdwatcher's paradise," he said. "You can see more bird species on a single visit here than in many other regions combined." As he explained, situated south of the Himalayas, the altitude drops from nearly 8,000 meters at Mount Namjagbarwa to just a few hundred meters in the Yarlung Zangbo River Valley, creating a remarkable diversity of habitats.

From Jan 24 to 31, Zhao joined six other participants in their 20s to 40s, with backgrounds in anthropology, design, and environmental education.

One of Zhao's most memorable experiences was exploring a path that descended into the river valley. Along the way, they

spotted redstarts and cormorants, discovered otter droppings on riverside rocks, and were thrilled to see a falcon appear overhead.

"Birdwatching is always unpredictable, but this short trail offered so many highlights," Zhao said. "It's shaping up to be a very promising nature route."

The team also faced challenges. The Monba people, Hezha's main ethnic group, have no writing system for their language and have passed down knowledge orally. When villagers shared plant names in their native tongue, participants often struggled to identify them in Mandarin.

"They told us about a plant called 'bujiladu,' said to have detoxifying properties," Zhao recalled. "We kept trying to figure out what it was, but never managed to identify it."

Despite these challenges, the volunteers learned about many valuable local traditions. For instance, the Monba burn oak leaves before traveling, using the smoke to bless visitors and ensure a safe journey.

Their findings are being recorded in a guidebook now under development, featuring hand-drawn illustrations inspired by local attire, customs, and wildlife.

"I was delighted to see a drawing of a Monba figure in traditional dress, with a beautiful nuthatch perched on the hat — a bird I regretted missing during my stay," Zhao said.

Based on this fieldwork, Li and the team plan to launch a nature education program, "A Day with the Monba People," offering hands-on experiences in bamboo archery, farming, cooking, and hiking. They also aim to train more local guides, with a particular focus on encouraging women in the village to participate and benefit from tourism.

"We hope Monba traditions, less widely known than those of other ethnic groups, can reach a wider audience," Li said.

During her time in Gelin, Wang observed how the Monba changed the way they relate to the mountains. Once reliant on hunting for survival in the harsh terrain, they have now become forest guides, leading visitors through the forests in a sustainable way.

"They are discovering new ways to live in harmony with the mountains their ancestors depended on," she said.

"People and wildlife can coexist. Environmental protection works best when communities are actively involved," Wang added, highlighting SSCC's philosophy of "community empowerment."

Li emphasized the importance of equipping residents with both the skills and motivation to safeguard the environment. In Metog, villagers are trained to collect wildlife data from infrared cameras, patrol forests to remove traps, and work as eco-guides.

"The places we live in aren't just for people — they belong to plants and animals too," Zhao added. "Sustainable development is only possible when we create an environment that works for all."