

## China develops drink from water hyacinth

A local company in Hubei Province, central China has reportedly developed new drink that uses water hyacinth – an aquatic weed that clogs waterways – as raw material. The company has also developed technology to extract nutrients from the aquatic plant, and is planning to produce additives for foodstuff, feed, health care products and medicine. This plan is being hailed by environmentalists, who see it as a profitable way of solving a series of ecological problems caused by water hyacinth.

Water hyacinth – which is rich in protein, amino acids, carotene and microelements – was imported from Venezuela into southern China in the 1950s to feed pigs. The plant, which yields more than 300 tonnes per hectare, helped pig raisers overcome difficulties caused by grain shortages. However, with the growth in grain production in the last two decades, few farmers now bother to harvest the plant. As a result, water hyacinth is growing rapidly and clogging slow-flowing streams in inland rivers and lakes.

Although water hyacinth causes several ecological problems, it “contributes a lot in purifying polluted water,” says Mr. Liu Shixin, a water hyacinth expert from Hubei Academy of Agricultural Science. Under proper conditions, a hectare of water hyacinth can absorb all the nitrogen and phosphorus exhaled by 800 people in one day. It is a low-cost, energy-saving and efficient way to purify polluted water, says Liu. The problem, however, is that it costs a lot to dredge up the water plant and that the gathered plants have to be handled as refuse, thus causing new pollution. Liu and his colleagues spent ten years and finally found solutions to the re-utilization of water hyacinth. According to their research results, the plant can be turned into high-protein forage when fermented; organic and inorganic fertilizers can be produced based on the rich nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium contents in the plant; and food, medicine and feed additives can be made with nutrition elements extracted from it. (Website: <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn>)