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[HOME](#) » [NEWS](#) » [ENVIRONMENT](#)



ENVIRONMENT

Chinese billionaire Wenliang Wang has agreed to donate money for long-delayed restoration of dying mangroves



Credit: Dorothy Edwards

Rilin Group adviser Jack Shi of Beijing, China, left, and Coastal Resources Group President Robin Lewis of Salt Springs, Fla. talk while visiting the site for the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project between

Marco Island and Goodland on Friday, Jan. 8, 2016. Rilin Group is funding up to \$5 million for Coastal Resources Group to complete the restoration project. (Dorothy Edwards/Staff)

By [Eric Staats](#) of the *Naples Daily News*

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[TOP](#)



Credit: Dorothy Edwards

The site for the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project between Marco Island and Goodland on Friday, Jan. 8, 2016. (Dorothy Edwards/Staff)



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Coastal Resources Group President Robin Lewis of Salt Springs, Fla. addresses the group during a visit to the site for the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project on Friday, Jan. 8, 2016. (Dorothy Edwards/Staff)



Credit: Dorothy Edwards

Coastal Resources Group President Robin Lewis of Salt Springs, Fla., right, addresses the group during a visit to the site for the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project on Friday, Jan. 8, 2016. (Dorothy Edwards/Staff)



Credit: Dorothy Edwards

Lisa Fish of Las Vegas, left, and Kevin Cunniff of Coconut Creek, Fla. talk together while visiting the site for the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project on Friday, Jan. 8, 2016. (Dorothy Edwards/Staff)

Exclusive

Wenliang Wang has never seen the leafless dead mangroves that poke into the sky over a flooded mud flat between Goodland and Marco Island.

But the Chinese billionaire wants to restore them anyway.

Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve is counting on as much as \$5 million from Wang's international conglomerate Rilin Industrial Group to restore the 225-acre black mangrove forest along San Marco Road and then apply the same fix to die-offs around the world.

Wang's advisers, who visited the site last week, say it's just what he does: "He has no motive other than the environment," said Ted Venners, chairman of China Green, a Las Vegas-based company that brought the Rookery Bay project to Wang.

For project manager Robin Lewis, Wang's involvement means the restoration is getting money that it has been lacking for years.

"It was like a blessing from heaven to have someone interested in our project," said Lewis, president of Coastal Resources Group.

The die-off about a mile west of Goodland has been decades in the making, scientists say. The construction of San Marco Road, also known as State Road 92, in 1938 cut off tidal flow that feeds the mangroves from Fruit Farm Creek. Mangroves depend on that flow to survive — Lewis calls it their heartbeat. When Hurricane Andrew came through in 1992, rains flooded the forest. By 1995, the die-off was apparent.

"Water can get in but it can't get out," Lewis said. "Left alone this problem just gets worse and worse and worse."

Lewis' solution is simple. He plans to install new culverts under San Marco Road and, where needed, dig barely perceptible channels to help water get into the forest. Instead of water standing for months, drowning the mangroves, water will flow in and out.

"It's just what the forest should be doing," said Kevin Cunniff, research coordinator at Rookery Bay.

Frustrated by a lack of funding, Lewis undertook a first phase of the restoration with volunteers, donations and a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Lewis showed off the results, a greening patch of formerly dead mangroves, last week to Wang's advisers.

"It just shows what Mother Nature can do if given the opportunity," Lewis said.

Still, there are doubts about the restoration project from those who say the only way to restore a dead mangrove forest is to replant it with seedlings. That method, which still is more common, also fails more than it succeeds.

Lewis calls his approach Ecological Mangrove Restoration, or EMR, and it is the new spin and the fact that the project has all its permits and is ready to go that got the attention of Wang's advisers.

Wang has undertaken similar projects before, raising similar questions about his motives. He has spent millions to protect one of the largest wetlands in China in Dandong, across the Yalu River from North Korea, and where Wang owns a strategic port. He also is working to stop deforestation of the Amazon in Brazil, where Wang trades soybeans.

In 2013, the secretive Wang made headlines when he pledged \$2 million to the Clinton Foundation, raising questions about his motives and about the foundation's ties to foreign governments.

Last year, The New York Times reported that Wang — Forbes lists his net worth at \$1.05 billion and ranks him 288th on China's richest list — was the money behind a shell corporation that bought three condos in the Time Warner building in New York City for \$25.6 million.

Rilin adviser Jack Shi's phone rang as he walked along the side of San Marco Road looking at the dead mangroves and talking over the project.

"That was Wang," Shi said.

About Eric Staats

Eric is a senior writer and weekend editor. He joined the Naples Daily News in 1989 and has covered business, real estate and City Hall and has worked as an assistant city editor. He currently writes about environmental issues in Southwest Florida.

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