



The worst drought in 70 years made Poyang Lake, the largest fresh-water lake in China, look more like a river now. — CFP

## THE SHRINKING GREAT LAKE: So what's your 'water footprint?'

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**Zhou Lei**  
Anthropologist

**Lu Feiran**

**W**hen anthropologist Zhou Lei returned to his hometown of Yongxiu in Jiangxi Province, he was stunned to see what had happened to his cherished Poyang Lake.

“I never realized that the lake was so big until I saw the vast parched land spread out in front of me,” he said. “It was like the Gobi Desert. The scene was horrible to view.”

The beautiful lake of his childhood is suffering from the worst drought in 70 years, though there have been some heavy rains. But one deluge can't rectify the situation.

Poyang, the largest freshwater body in China, is typically a seasonal lake. Its water area fluctuates from about 500 square kilometers — a bit smaller than the area of Jinshan District in Shanghai — in winter, to more than 4,000 square kilometers, or about two-thirds of the city's area, in summer.

Lack of rain is not the only culprit. The lake is a key flood outlet for the Yangtze River during rainy summers. Sand dredging, a mainstay of the local economy for the past two decades, has made it harder for authorities to control the summertime flows and has reduced winter water levels.

The lake is not only vital to agriculture and eco-system maintenance in Jiangxi and surrounding provinces, but it is also a major overwintering ground for migratory birds.

July and August are usually the wet season of the lake; the dry season doesn't arrive until October or November.

However, this year, the lake began to dry up in summer. By the end of August, the water area of the lake had shrunk by 69 percent. Now it's down nearly 90 percent.

“The lake has practically become a river,” Zhou said.

Zhou is president of the World Water Source Summit Academic Committee and has long

researched the relationship between rivers, lakes and humans. He returned to Jiangxi to study how the drought affected people and the environment, and to try to figure out how the lake's fortunes took such a turn for the worse.

“Local farmers told me that there's been no meaningful rainfall since July,” Zhou said. “Drizzle is far from enough to nourish the lake and provide adequate irrigation.”

Rice production was directly affected by the drought.

According to Wang Nenggeng, deputy director of the Poyang County Emergency Management Bureau, normal irrigation failed beyond repair.