

Background

- China's economic explosion has created an ecological implosion, threatening human health, industrial production, and crops. In 2007, the World Bank reported that of the world's 20 most-polluted cities, 16 are in China. Pan Yue, the vice minister of environmental protection, stated in 2006 that experts believe that 70 percent of China's 2 million annual deaths from cancer are pollution related.
- An unreleased 2007 World Bank report estimated that 750,000 Chinese die prematurely each year due to air pollution. A major source of air pollution in urban areas is linked to growing wealth. Car sales in 2007 rose 22 percent over 2006, and SUV sales rose by 50 percent.
- Some 90 percent of rivers running through China's cities are polluted; 62 percent of surface water is unsuitable for fishing, and 26 percent cannot be used for any purpose.
- Official Chinese estimates peg the economic cost of pollution at 10 percent of GDP in 1995.
- Land degradation and deforestation are exacerbating floods and desertification, as well as endangering the country's rich biodiversity.
- Progress has been made, however. In 2007, China's chemical oxygen demand (COD) and sulfur dioxide emissions were 3.14 percent and 4.66 percent lower than 2006 levels, respectively. In 2007, China also saw a 3.27 percent drop in energy consumption for each 10,000 yuan of GDP year-on-year.

CHINA'S RISING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

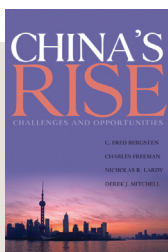
- Organized protests driven largely by environmental issues in China's major cities are a growing and worrisome trend for the authorities. Environment- and pollution-related protests have increased nearly 30 percent per year since 2000.
- A 2007 "comfort" survey among mostly urban residents, conducted under the National Bureau of Statistics, found that the environment was the "most unsatisfactory aspect of Chinese life" for the third year in a row.
- In the summer of 2007, thousands of residents of Xiamen in Fujian province participated in a "walk" through the city's center to protest the construction of a large chemical plant nearby. In response to continued public opposition, in March 2008 the city government decided to relocate the plan. A Communist Party official commenting on the decision remarked that "the public are right to express their concerns."
- In March 2008, dozens of homeowners in suburban Shanghai formed a human chain as part of a protest against the extension of the magnetic levitation train line, or maglev, which would connect the city's two airports. Protestors were concerned about possible radiation as well as impact on property values. The Shanghai government later announced that the extension of the rail line would be postponed.
- Throughout the past year homeowners in the coastal town of Rushu in Shandong province have protested the building of a nuclear power plant near what is regarded as one of China's most beautiful beaches. The plant's construction has been delayed pending an environmental impact assessment by the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

Current Situation

- In addition to rapid economic growth, the high investment rate, and the underpricing of energy, China's environmental problems are exacerbated by local government protectionism, insufficient government transparency, weak and understaffed environmental enforcement agencies, and a pervasive lack of mechanisms for informing and involving the public in environmental protection issues.
- Recognizing this, the Chinese government has passed numerous laws and regulations on resource protection and pollution control, as well as welcomed environmental assistance from bilateral and multilateral aid agencies and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). With international assistance, China's environmental legislation has moved from a focus on command-and-control regulation to more progressive market incentive laws. However, experts estimate that only 10 percent of environmental laws and regulations are actually enforced at the local level.
- Energy shortages and growing air pollution have led the government to prioritize increased energy efficiency, use of renewable energy, and diversified energy sources. The Eleventh Five-Year Program calls for improving energy efficiency by 20 percent by 2010. These are extremely ambitious goals demanding considerably greater investment and incentives, as well as better enforcement of existing and future energy efficiency codes.
- International assistance is a major catalyst for the expansion of Chinese environmental NGOs. However, in other cases, environmental activists have felt pressure from local officials who tend to crack down on activism perceived as threatening economic development.
- The understaffed and underfunded State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) was upgraded to the ministerial level in March 2008 though it remains to be seen whether it will have the power to operate free from government interference at the local level, where local authorities appoint Environmental Protection Bureau officials on whom Beijing relies to enforce edicts.

Implications

- As Chinese environmentalist Ma Jun has noted, time is not on China's side. There is a narrow window for China's leaders to aggressively control the serious environmental threats facing the country.
- This is one area in which the United States and China can cooperate actively. In the past 20 years, many international organizations have worked with Chinese authorities to develop new environmental policies, regulations, and pilot projects. Besides multilateral organizations (China is the largest recipient of World Bank loans and grants for environmental work), bilateral aid and international NGOs have been very active in their "green" assistance to China.



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