

China's pollution nightmare is now everyone's pollution nightmare

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China's pollution nightmare is now everyone's pollution nightmare
The environmental disaster springs largely from its emulation of the American way of life – so let's set a better example.
By Jacques Leslie
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The emergence of China as a dominant economic power is an epochal event, occasioning the most massive and rapid redistribution of the earth's resources in human history. The country has also become a ravenous consumer. Its appetite for raw materials drives up international commodity prices and shipping rates while its middle class, projected to jump to 700 million by 2020, is learning the gratifications of consumerism.

The catch is that China has become not just the world's manufacturer but its despoiler, on a scale as monumental as its economic expansion. A fourth of the country is now desert. More than three-fourths of its forests have disappeared. Each year, uncontrollable underground fires, sometimes triggered by lightning or mining accidents, consume 200 million tons of coal, contributing massively to global warming. A miasma of lead, mercury, sulfur dioxide, and other elements of coal-burning and car exhaust hovers over most Chinese cities.

Meanwhile, roughly 70 percent of the world's discarded computers and electronic equipment ends up in China, where it is scavenged for usable parts and then abandoned, polluting soil and groundwater with toxic metals. If unchecked, such devastation will not just put an abrupt end to China's economic growth, but, in concert with other environmentally heedless nations (in particular, the US, India, and Brazil), will cause mortal havoc in societies and ecosystems throughout the world.

The fallout

The process is already under way. Acid rain caused by China's sulfur-dioxide emissions severely damages forests and watersheds in Korea and Japan and impairs air quality in the US. Every major river system flowing out of China is threatened with one sort of cataclysm or

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another. The surge in untreated waste and agricultural runoff pouring into the Yellow and China Seas has caused frequent fish die-offs, and overfishing is endangering many ocean species.

The growing Chinese taste for furs and exotic foods and pets is devastating neighboring countries' populations of everything from gazelles to wolves, and turtles to parrots, while its appetite for shark fin soup is causing drastic declines in shark populations throughout the oceans. According to a study published in *Science* in March 2007, the absence of the oceans' top predators is causing a resurgence of skates and rays, which are in turn destroying scallop fisheries along America's Eastern Seaboard. Enthusiasm for traditional Chinese medicine is causing huge declines in populations of hundreds of animals – including tigers, pangolins, and sea horses. Seeking oil, timber, and other natural resources, China is building massive roads, bridges, and dams throughout Africa, often disregarding international environmental and social standards.

China has also depended on imports of illegally cut wood in becoming the world's wood workshop, supplying oblivious consumers in the US and Europe with furniture, flooring, and plywood. Chinese wood manufacturers have already consumed the natural forests of Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines, and at current rates will swallow the forests of Indonesia, Burma, Papua New Guinea, and the vast Russian Far East within two decades. Most of these forests are formally protected by law or regulation, but corruption and ineffectual enforcement have fostered a flourishing illegal trade.

China has probably already overtaken the US as the world's leading emitter of CO₂, and the country's ecosystems are displaying climate change's consequences: Arid northern China is drying out, the wet south is seeing more and more flooding, and, according to a June 2007 Greenpeace report, 80 percent of the Himalayan glaciers that feed Asia's mightiest rivers could disappear by 2035. Such a development would jeopardize hundreds of millions of people who depend on the rivers for their livelihood.

Nevertheless, China has maintained that the developed countries bear primary responsibility for global warming and must be the first to counter it. The argument has some merit: After all, the US alone is responsible for a quarter of the man-made greenhouse gases pumped into the earth's atmosphere over time, while China's cumulative contribution is still less than a third as much. And even today, China's per capita carbon-dioxide emissions are less than a fifth of America's. Yet China's refusal to curb emissions soon could single-handedly wipe out reductions made elsewhere, crippling the international effort.

All this is common knowledge among those who follow Chinese environmental trends. Still, the news has not shaken China out of its money-induced euphoria. One likely reason is that China's growth rate takes no account of the environmental devastation the boom has caused.

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In 2006, an official at China's State Council said environmental damage (everything from crop loss to the price of healthcare) cost 10 percent of its gross domestic product – all of the economy's celebrated growth. Vaclav Smil, a highly respected China scholar at the University of Manitoba, pegs both the environmental–damage rate and the growth rate closer to 7 percent, "so basically every year environmental damage wipes out the GDP growth," Mr. Smil says.

Who's to blame

Of course, what the Chinese are chiefly guilty of is emulating the American economic model. Since the 1980s, Chinese policymakers have gone on foreign–study missions to figure out how developed countries fostered economic growth. As Doug Ogden, former director of the Energy Foundation's China Sustainable Energy Program, puts it, "It's not surprising that the lessons the Chinese drew from their international experiences are often based on sprawl development, private automobile ownership, and highly energy–consumptive practices," since the economies they studied all possess those.

One of the Chinese officials' most fateful choices was to promote the automobile industry as a pillar of China's economy. The decision must have seemed obvious. After all, cars are the foundations of the American, Japanese, and South Korean economies, generating economic activity.

Now China's car industry is the world's third largest, but many of its cities are paralyzed by traffic, the inhabitants are choking on the fumes, and China's foreign policy increasingly revolves around courting outcast nations such as Sudan to obtain oil at premium prices. From an international perspective, the potential impact on climate change is worst of all. Motor vehicles now account for no more than 3 or 4 percent of China's greenhouse–gas emissions, but the industry is still nascent. According to one projection, the number of cars on Chinese roads will grow from 33 million to 130 million during the next 12 years.

What now?

The United States passed up the opportunity it had at the beginning of China's economic transformation to guide it toward sustainability, and the loss is already incalculable. But what is left is the one option that would have served Americans (and the world) best all along, which is to model environmental sanity.

Stop buying products made from illegally cut wood. Stop building coal–fired power plants. Instead of subsidizing oil companies, promote sustainable–energy technologies. Build effective mass–transit systems in every city. Make drastic cuts in greenhouse–gas emissions. Such acts would not just revive our capacity for moral suasion; given the breadth of the world's environmental crisis, they are prerequisites

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for self-preservation.

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