



Pictured: A cloud of coal pollution hangs over a cluster of power lines in China's northern region." Image by Adam Cohn, courtesy Flickr.

From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

Dear EarthTalk: Has China been making any progress reducing its output of global warming gases, and/or in tackling other environmental problems?

—Bill W., Saugus, MA

Decades of rapid-fire development and lack of government oversight has meant that China now faces some serious environmental challenges. According to research by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency, China surpassed the United States as the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases in 2006—and hasn't looked back. (While the Chinese emit some eight percent more carbon dioxide than their American counterparts, the U.S. still leads the world in greenhouse gas emissions per capita, due to its significantly smaller population size and higher standard of living.)

Beyond its contribution to global warming, China is also a world leader in other forms of pollution, given its huge population and its ambition to become the next international economic superpower. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), current levels of air pollution in China far exceed international environmental standards. A recent analysis found, for example, that the air in some four dozen Chinese cities contained as much as seven times as much particulate pollution—which can get lodged in human lungs and cause a wide range of health problems—as deemed safe by WHO.

But critics say blaming China for its rampant pollution is unfair, given all the manufacturing the world's developed countries outsource to Chinese companies. Qin Gang, China's foreign ministry spokesman, refers to China as the "world's factory" and says: "A lot of what you use, wear and eat is produced in China..." "On the one hand, you increase production in China; on the other hand you criticize China on the emission reduction issue." Yang Ailun of Greenpeace China agrees: "All the West has done is export a great slice of its carbon footprint to China and make China the world's factory."

Despite its efforts to go green, China still depends on coal—the dirtiest of all the fossil fuels—for some two-thirds of its energy needs. Chinese officials have strenuously opposed the binding limits on greenhouse gas emissions set by developing countries, arguing that already industrialized nations are to blame for most of the emissions already in the atmosphere.

There is progress afoot: Meetings between top Chinese and U.S. officials earlier this year led to the creation of a joint research center to address issues related to clean energy, with each country contributing \$15 million to pay for initial research efforts.

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