



PHIL SHARP

A Not-So Innocent Abroad

Nothing really prepares you for your first trip to China. I flew into Beijing on a Sunday afternoon, and that night, 300,000 tons of the Gobi Desert descended on the city streets. Although sandstorms occur every spring, this one was unusually intense, with more than a quarter of an inch of brown dust covering everything.

The storm dramatically brought home for me both the power of nature and the difficulty we have in coping when the resulting problems grow exponentially in scale. While thousands of people wielding push brooms and driving water trucks that sprayed the streets cleaned up Beijing the next day, the plume from that sandstorm blew into Korea and Japan, and most likely reached the West Coast of the United States. Without question, international and cross-boundary environmental problems are going to become all the more important in years ahead.

I went to China at the request of Bo Cutter, an RFF Board member, to confer with Chinese officials and industry representatives on energy policy. Having read many reports and watched plenty of documentaries, I was well aware that China was undergoing rapid economic growth and that environmental problems were mounting. But what struck me was the incredible consumerism that has taken hold there. In the streets, you see thousands and thousands of cars where once bicycles dominated.

I was just as struck by how open officials were about the problems they see in the country, in terms of both the environment as well as the economic inequalities that are exacerbated by rapid growth. While I was there, the government announced very publicly its own failure to meet its environmental goals. It certainly would be nice to see more U.S. leaders willing to be honest about the status of things in our own country! Make no mistake—our system is radically more open than theirs. But we should acknowledge that the Chinese can have frank, serious, and broad-based discussions about policy. However, their candor only goes so far: I got a taste of the government's power when a CNN International broadcast on protests in America over Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit was censored.

It is readily apparent that the United States—and indeed, the world—has much at stake in the extraordinary changes going on in China and elsewhere in the developing world as the pressure on global resources intensifies.



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