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Regional Commentary

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Editorial | Three Gorges Dam

China's ecological nightmare

It's one of the biggest projects ever undertaken by human beings. And one of the dumbest.

What China does about Three Gorges Dam - and its potentially catastrophic effects - will be a drama the rest of the world should watch, especially the United States.

Three Gorges Dam is a colossal haunch of concrete thrown across the river Yangtze, which supplies about 35 percent of China's freshwater resources. The dam was finished last year. It is creating a reservoir that, when complete, will stretch more than 400 miles and submerge more than 244 square miles of land.

It will also be an ecological disaster.

For one thing, it is flooding a region long sacred to the Chinese (comprising Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling Gorges), soul of its greatest art and poetry. For another, the Yangtze, a dump for about 14 billion tons of waste each year, is one messed-up river. A report in April said about one tenth of its 3,900-plus miles were critically polluted, many of them irreversibly; the new reservoir is already contaminated with sewage, pesticides and other filth.

Even the head Three Gorges builder is now warning of disaster. Wang Xiaofeng told a conference last week of erosion, foolish development, pollution and landslides (which in turn increase pollution). "We cannot win passing economic prosperity at the cost of the environment," he was quoted as saying.

This country needs to watch what China does next. Why? Because while ours and other Western nations (so far) have kept our ecological crises somewhat at arm's length, China's pollution crisis is right here, right now. China is home to some of the most polluted places in the world, including two of the 10 worst, according to a recent report by the Blacksmith Institute, a New York-based agency devoted to solving pollution problems in the developing world.

China needs hydroelectric power, which is why its leaders, starting with Sun Yat-sen in 1919, have long dreamed of such a monster dam. And its people cry for ever more water: Two-thirds of its cities have less than they need. The crushing problem is that so much of the country's water is foul. Aquifers for 90 percent of China's cities are polluted. China's "tainted food" problem (implicated in killer pet food exported to the United States) is actually a tainted water problem, with rice, wheat and other crops concentrating poisons from the environment.

And from the coal town of Linfen, where about three million people choke on coal dust daily, to Tianying, where 140,000 people may be affected by lead-based poisoning, signs of social unrest are beginning to arise, joining constant protests from the country's fuming cities. These protests are not driven by vague feel-good sentiments about "the ecology" but are revolts against the outrage of living in a dirty world.

China's leaders may realize they can't ignore the situation any longer. Zhou Shengxian, head of China's equivalent of our Environmental Protection Agency, reported 51,000 ecological protests in 2005 alone, including a march by 30,000 to 40,000 villagers who swarmed over 13 chemical plants in Zhejiang Province. The environment is now a security issue.

Wang called for steps now to head off worse problems. The massive question, more massive than any dam, is: What are they going to do? Yes, this is still a totalitarian state, yet law enforcement is often lax and corruption endemic and culturally inwoven. By definition, China's environmental and population crises are bigger than anyone else's. So now what?

U.S. leaders long have said this country can't sign global-warming accords because it couldn't meet the targets, which would hurt business too much. China is way beyond such talk. Everyone hopes we never get where China is - but if we are ever to learn how to fix what's broken (if, at this stage, it can be fixed at all), we need to keep our eyes on China.



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