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Hunt begins for world's most polluted places

Thu Feb 19, 2009 9:50am EST

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By Timothy Gardner



1 of 1 [Full Size](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters) - Researchers will fan out across more than 80 developing countries beginning this month to hunt out and assess many of the world's dirtiest industrial waste sites.

The New York-based nonprofit Blacksmith Institute is training the researchers from local semi-government agencies, universities and nonprofit groups in the countries to create a database of the sites called the Global Inventory Project.

"Blacksmith is doing what no other governmental organization, NGO or nonprofit has ever even attempted," said Jack Caravanos, a professor of environmental health at Hunter College of City University of New York.

Caravanos said the inventory is a "first step" to help governments and international organizations prioritize the clean up of waste sites that pose health threats to people including cancer risks to adults and learning disability risks to children. Asthma and other respiratory ailments are other problems millions of locals suffer at sites like abandoned metal mines in Africa and factories that made weapons or industrial chemicals in former Soviet Union states.

Concern about polluted places is growing as the world's population swells and people in developing countries like China and India buy more goods like cars and electronics, habits that were once mostly limited to rich places like the United States and Europe.

Blacksmith director Richard Fuller said the rich countries have mostly already cleaned up their contaminated places because they have strong anti-pollution laws. But in many industrializing countries, "the cost of life in the politician's mind is much lower what we are used to," he said.

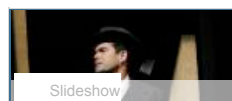
The European Commission and Green Cross Switzerland funded the inventory for the next 18 months with \$1.5 million, and the U.N. Industrial Development Organization has partnered with Blacksmith on a database that could list 1,200 to 2,000 sites.

Blacksmith has developed a nonconfrontational approach over the last several years. It attempts to encourage the companies that made the messes and the nearby communities to work together to clean up sites, instead of bogging down the process with lawsuits. A key to the technique has been Blacksmith's publishing of lists of the world's top polluted sites. In some cases that has pushed companies that were responsible for the mess to act.

"The companies get embarrassed and they say 'what can we do to get off the list?'" Caravanos said.

Some of the worst polluted sites involve lead battery recycling, which takes place in almost every urban center in developing countries, said Fuller.

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Blacksmith recently lead a \$200,000 clean up of a battery site in Haina in the Dominican Republic, in which much of the underlying soil was 35 percent lead, a pollutant that leads to severe learning disabilities in children.

Blacksmith hopes to establish a \$500 million Health and Pollution Fund to help clean up sites. Cleanup costs can range from \$10 million for sites that involve polluted rivers, to \$20,000 for cleaning up rusty containers of toxic chemicals that face the risk of exploding.

(Editing by David Wiessler)

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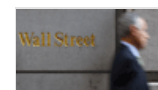
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