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Looking for Messes That Are Easy to Fix

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

ENVIRONMENTAL threats often have an overwhelming sweep that can paralyze people eager to help. When considering toxic waste in Asia, fouled water in Africa, radioactive landscapes in Russia, where do you start?

In the face of such vast issues, Richard Fuller, a successful recycling and energy-use consultant to American companies, decided a few years ago to start small, very small. He sought grants and diverted some assets of his business, Great Forest, into creating the Blacksmith Institute, a vest-pocket nonprofit that scours the world's toxic spots for clearly defined and fixable pollution problems.

Mr. Fuller says he is unapologetic about looking for the simpler kinds of challenges, mainly because there are so many, and because many hide in plain sight with no one doing anything to clean them up.

There is the slaughterhouse in downtown Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, which is the source of 80 percent of the waste rendering the Msimbazi River nearby toxic and infectious. There are the sprawling dumps in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where infectious hospital waste mingles with trash that is scavenged by flocks of poor children.

Then there is Kabwe, a city of 250,000 that grew up around a century-old lead smelter and is so contaminated that many neighborhoods would qualify many times over as Superfund sites, if they were located in Illinois instead of Zambia.

Although the smelter closed in 1994, residents still excavate the dusty earth by hand to get at residual seams of the neurotoxic metal. Some schoolyards contain mineable concentrations. Thousands of people have blood-lead levels many times higher than the American limit.

IT was pressure from Blacksmith that prompted the Zambian government to agree to include Kabwe in a list of mining sites it plans to clean up under a pending \$40- to \$50-million loan from the World Bank, officials of the bank said.

Initially, the cleanup was focused on the opposite side of the country, in a copper-mining region. Kabwe's problems had been identified, but government officials had tried to play down the dangers for years, reports by the Blacksmith Institute said.

The institute's involvement as an independent force brought the issue of including Kabwe on the list to a close, said Yves Andre Prékost, senior environment specialist in the bank's Africa region environment group.

"The bank is not in a position to take an issue and bring it to public attention," he said. "The fact that Blacksmith identified the issue and started doing things about it comforted us, and allowed us to tell the government you can't run away from this one."

Mr. Prékost said that Blacksmith had shown a knack for identifying local partners who can pinpoint pollution problems and devise possible solutions. Blacksmith can also raise money and channel it where

it can do the most good, he said.

Mr. Fuller appears to be determined not to waste money, Mr. Pr閐ost said. "In Kabwe, there was some consultant offering his services for something like \$300 a day," he said, and Mr. Fuller said, "get lost."

The annual budget for Blacksmith's projects has grown to about \$400,000, an amount that pales beside the budgets of groups like the Nature Conservancy or the National Wildlife Federation. Mr. Fuller, a youthful 42-year-old Australian, operates Great Forest and Blacksmith out of a 29th-floor office on Park Avenue in New York (www.blacksmithinstitute.org).

The other full-time employee is Sara Kate Gillingham, who until recently was writing grants for urban agriculture projects in places like Yonkers, and now spends her time inspecting toxic dumps in Maputo, Mozambique.

The group's small size has led to remarkable agility, as are Mr. Fuller's entrepreneurial instincts, said Frances Beinecke, who advised Mr. Fuller when he was establishing his group and is the executive director of the Natural Resources Defense Council, the influential American environmental organization.

"We'd have to have a multiyear plan and figure out how to have a long-term impact," Ms. Beinecke said. "He finds a sewage problem or a lead problem somewhere and cobbles together resources from here and there, and in developing countries it makes a big difference."

Ms. Beinecke also noted that Mr. Fuller's focus was on toxic pollution even though most American conservation groups, when working overseas, stress saving species or ecosystems.

Usually, Blacksmith finds ways to support a particular official in a local government agency that is responsible for cleanups but lacks the ability to get the job done.

SOMETIMES, the support is as basic as a retainer of \$200 a month for local contacts who act as coordinators for pollution surveys or other projects. In many countries, this can easily be enough to double someone's income, Mr. Fuller said.

In places like Cambodia, where the government has not yet mandated environmental laws, Mr. Fuller and his staff ?one full-time development expert, several part-timers and volunteers ?draft legislation.

Last year, the group conducted the first thorough survey of Phnom Penh hospitals and clinics to determine what they do with their hazardous waste. Blacksmith is now working with government officials to outline legislation to control the flow.

In places where there is little hope of working effectively with a government, Blacksmith finds a local nonprofit group or helps to establish one, often a person with a telephone and a computer.

In Dar es Salaam, the contact is a collection of environmental engineering school graduates who found the unfiltered streams of blood and offal flowing from the slaughterhouse into the Msimbazi River.

These are not green activists waving placards, Mr. Fuller said. They have a specific design, right down to the size of the necessary pipes, he added. Plans are under way for a \$70,000 loan to build a treatment plant for the slaughterhouse, Mr. Fuller said.

As more of Blacksmith's projects move from planning to concrete cleanups, Mr. Pr閐ost said, it is becoming evident that the group's technique could be applied widely.

What is also clear, Mr. Fuller said, is that many hot spots remain. His next destination is Siberia, where towns near former factories that generated plutonium during the cold war were contaminated with traces

of radioactive materials.

He will be heading there next month to assess the situation. So far, Mr. Fuller said, he has always solved these seemingly intractable problems.

"You get a punch list of things that need to happen some place until we can tick it off and say its pollution problems are solved," he said, adding that the goal is to "be reasonably sure kids can be born without the risk of getting really sick or dying young."