

Environmental Case Study

Environment Protection in China: The Burden Is Heavy and the Road is Long



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One-Fifth of the population of the world live in China. China is the biggest developing country in the world. China also has a higher biodiversity and is the most abundant World Natural and Cultural Heritage country, so Chinese environmental protection is very important to the globe. China is facing the crucial period of developing the economy and protecting the environment. At present in China, the top officials have understood the importance of protecting the environment for Chinese sustainable development in the new century and have attached great importance to environmental protection. This is a good opportunity to carry out the basic national policy and protecting the ecological environment. Nevertheless, there are more difficulties in doing this in China than in the U.S. These reasons are as follow:

First of all, the level of the Chinese economy and technology is not very high. Developing the economy is a task of primary importance to the local government. They can't put more money into environmental protection. In some regions, the common people have to harm the environment in order to live. For example in the southwest of China, the resources of plants and animals are quite abundant. The area of the northwest is about one half of China and it's the source of the main rivers, including the Yellow River, the Yangtze River, and the Lancang River. The government should pay much attention to both areas. Furthermore, the northwest of China is a very ecologically sensitive area. The key ecological issues are drought and the shortage of sufficient water, and the ecosystem is very fragile in that vast area. A developing economy needs not only money but also more resources-and these bring pollution; so there are conflicts with the environment to some degree. However, the level of the economy and technology in this region is relatively low. The funds put into the environmental protection are so limited. The local government has a dilemma and has to make a choice between economic development and environmental protection. Especially currently, the national strategy of developing the western area challenges the ecological environment. If we lack scientific process in the decision-making policy and enough evaluation of the ecological environment, we will take great risks.

Secondly, the environmental consciousness of our common people is not very strong. Although the Chinese government has already done many educational programs on environmental protection, many persons are restricted by their level of scientific and cultural awareness, and are affected by the traditional concepts. For example, those who live on a mountain rely on the mountain; those living near the water rely on the water. People make use of local resources more and more, without taking steps to recover them and protect the environment promptly.

Third, the government should improve the laws for environmental protection. On the one hand, the government should perfect the current law. On the other hand, the government should reform the current systems in many aspects. That is to say, the government should govern the country according to the law and enforce the law strictly.

The three aspects that I have mentioned above are tightly connected and affect each other. These will determine the present and future of the environmental protection of China. But how do we solve the three problems that I have mentioned? I have some suggestions.

First, the development of the economy and technology is a relatively long process. We should try our best to improve it. We should do our utmost to keep the balance of economic development and environmental management. We should increase investment in environmental protection and ecological construction. Meanwhile, we need help from developed countries and we need to import advanced technology and management.

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Second, it is our responsibility to improve everyone's environmental sense. It is also the most important task of the Center for Environmental Education of Capital Normal University (CNU). If we want to improve the environmental sense of the whole nation, we should first improve the environmental sense of all educators, because it is they who are in charge of educating several hundred millions of young people in China.

Third, reforming the system and improving the law also are a long process. We shall push this process forward. We know that in the system of China, the leaders and policy designers play an important role in protecting the environment. At the same time, with reform, the common people have more and more chances to give their advice to the government.

The environmental issue is very complex. It concerns nature and human society, and it is restricted by natural and economic conditions. Especially, the environment is affected by people's economic activities and people's thoughts and behaviors. That we may acquire good results, it is quite necessary to consider the complexity of environmental issues and local conditions when we take environmental protection measures and carry out environmental education.

There is a typical case in point that shows the difficulty of protecting the environment. You know, there was a story published in the newspaper *Chinese Youth* on October 13, 1998. That year a strong flood took place along the Yangtze River of China. The title of the article was "How can some poor university students financially support their university study?" There was a law department student from a poor mountain area. There were three brothers in his family and all of them were at school. He had to cut the trees in order to pay the fee when he was in high school, and after he entered the university he also had to do this on vacation. But there weren't any trees on the mountain. On one vacation, on his way home, the flood stopped him in the county city for eight days. When he got home, his father had passed away. He passed away the day before the son came home during the flood. Of course the student knew that it was wrong to cut the trees and that his behavior damaged the ecological environment. Just these behaviors caused the flood and took much human life. It is true that he knew the "law of the forest," but why did he still do that? We are sure that there are three reasons. One aspect is economic, because he needed money to pay the fee. Another aspect is lack of an environmental sense. The third is that the "law of the forest" wasn't carried out strictly in that area.

To sum up, it is these three aspects that have caused the ineffective protection of the Chinese ecological environment in recent years after the basic national policy of protecting the ecological environment was published by the Chinese government more than ten years ago.

Today the Chinese government has deeply understood the importance of protecting the environment to provide Chinese sustainable development in the new century and has attached great importance to environmental protection. In the past two years the Chinese government has taken a series of great and firm measures to protect the ecological environment. These measures include: (1) From 1998, there has been complete prohibition to log all natural forests on the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers. (2) In 1999, "it began to replant in western regions by turning crop fields on mountain slopes back to forests and grass, especially in the area of the upper and middle reaches of the Yangtze and Yellow River." (3) On August 21, 2000, China's largest reserve, at the headwaters of three major rivers, was set up at 4,000 meters above sea level in Qinghai Province. The reserve covers 318,000 square kilometers and is called the Sanjiangyuan Reserve. It makes the area of nature reserve in China reach ten percent of the land. (4) In 2000, a program to tackle water and soil erosion, one of China's most serious environmental problems, was launched by the Ministry of Water Resources. The plan has three

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phases and will continue for fifty years. (5) Concerning the strategy of developing the western area of China, both state and provinces emphasize again and again putting environmental protection and ecological construction as the first concern. (6) There are investments in controlling pollution. Curbing of air and water pollution has progressed in varying degrees in all provinces.

The results of the fifth national survey on forest resources from 1994 to the end of 1998 indicated that the current forest area has increased by 1.43 percent. The forest area is now 158.941 million hectares and the forest coverage rate is 16.55 percent. The number of the national first-class protected endangered species, including crested ibis, Giant pandas, golden monkey, white-lipped deer, Asian elephant, and takin, has risen steadily in the main reserves in recent years due to the recovery of forests.

On this World Environment Day, Premier Zhu Rongji made the television remark, "Global efforts are urged to protect the environment." Zhu said: "Ecological destruction and environmental pollution has posed a serious threat to the subsistence and development of mankind, and solving environmental problems has become an important mission that cannot afford any delay. People of all nations should join hands to protect the earth-our common homeland."

About China's environmental problems, Zhu said: "We must remember that the country's environmental pollution still remains rather serious and ecological deterioration has not yet been brought under control." For the future Zhu said: "China will face greater pressures and challenges in environmental protection as it marches towards the third-stage of its modernization drive." He emphasized, "We must earnestly implement our sustainable development strategy and put greater effort into environmental science and technology and increase investment for conserving water and soil. In addition, the country will work towards curbing environmental pollution, and improving the country's ecological environment by planting more trees and grass."

Finally, I want to emphasize that as far as Chinese environmental protection is concerned, the burden is heavy and the road is long. We shall do our utmost to raise the environmental sense of the whole nation and improve the current ecological environment. I'm glad to say that in China, people's environmental sense is improving more and more. The work of environmental protection has made great progress in recent years. China's future must be more brilliant. Chinese will do more and more to contribute to the peace and development of the world.

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