

COMMENTARY

Cheap Chinese goods also come with an environmental price

When Mr. and Mrs. Shopper are saving money on cheap Made-in-China products that have resulted in the shuttering of thousands of American businesses and the loss of millions of jobs, it likely doesn't cross their minds that their purchases are also helping foster large-scale environmental degradation. Consider:

- China is mining and burning coal at a rate unequalled since the 19th century, in the process creating toxic clouds that drift globally (often as far as the U.S. west coast). Pollution from coal-fired plants is reported to be so bad in some Chinese cities that vehicle headlights are needed at noonday. One-third of the urban population breathes polluted air (with an estimated 400,000 premature deaths each year).

- China has been ranked the world's largest contributor to deforestation, not only within its borders, but world-wide — sucking in nearly five of every 10 hardwood logs from threatened rain forests, chiefly to supply industries that have displaced many U.S. factories.

- Acid rain from China's mushrooming industrial growth falls on more than a third of the country; seven of its biggest rivers are horribly polluted; some 25 percent of the people have no clean drinking water; overgrazing of grasslands and over-cultivation of croplands has caused widespread desertification.

- Five of the 10 worst air-polluted cities in the world are in China; one-third of the country's urban population breathes polluted air; its refrigerator industry, the world's largest, dumps CFC gases into the air, contributing to the greenhouse effect, helping to melt glaciers worldwide.

And on and on it goes, adding up to what has been termed "one of the greatest environmental threats the

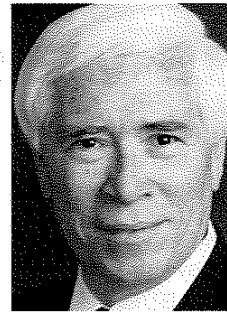
earth has ever faced." Yet, China Youth Daily reported a survey showing 90 percent of the country's mayors and local worker groups oppose any environmental protection efforts that might slow the economy.

One cannot but note the irony in the scorn heaped on President Bush for adamantly refusing to commit the U.S. to the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, when China, which gets a pass on curbing emissions, is on the fast track to surpass the U.S. as the world's No. 1 generator of greenhouse gases (its emissions are increasing at the highest rate of any country in the world).

Elizabeth C. Economy, C.V. Starr senior fellow and director of Asia studies for the Council on Foreign Relations, said in a 2004 statement to the House International Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific that "China's economic miracle over the past two decades has produced an environmental disaster."

While China has propelled millions of its citizens out of poverty, she said, "this economic development, coupled with a weak enforcement apparatus for environmental protection, has also resulted in a range of devastating consequences for the environment."

These environmental problems "present both a challenge and an opportunity for the U.S.," Economy said. Engaging in China's development issues can offer the U.S. opportunity to advance not only environmental protection measures, but political priorities, human rights concerns, and greater access of U.S. goods to the Chinese market.



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DELTA FARM PRESS

A Prism Business Media Publication

www.DeltaFarmPress.com

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