

China's Environmental Crisis Catalyzes New Democracy Movement

<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5149>

by Jianqiang Liu on June 19, 2007

China's worsening environmental crisis is catalyzing a growing environmental movement in which the public is resisting special interest groups and opposing the government's environmentally "unfriendly" behaviors. More significantly, this movement represents a push toward greater democracy in the country, with the public fighting for its civil rights through protecting the environment.

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Although citizens, NGOs, and journalists suffering from China's deteriorating environment did not set out to turn their environmental efforts into a democracy movement, they have found more democratic space in the "green" realm. They are able to write articles, hold open forums, launch grassroots groups, and educate the public, influencing the behaviors of both the government and special interests. Rather than ideology, they have paid more attention to protecting individual environmental rights—breathing fresh air, drinking clean water, protecting the homeland, and conserving nature. Citizens also have more political space in the environmental arena because the government is undertaking parallel efforts to improve the environment.

The major culprit behind China's environmental destruction is the collusion between local governments and large companies that profit from developing projects that often have negative impacts on the environment. But the rising environmental movement has enabled the public to resist these projects, which are typically controlled by government officials and agencies.

Last October, China's former water resources minister, Wang Shucheng, criticized industry plans to construct 13 continuous hydroelectric dams on the [Nu River](#) in Yunnan Province, calling it "an exploitative development." This marked the first time that a high-level official openly commented on the controversial hydropower project, signaling a change in the attitude of the Chinese government.

Environmental NGOs, journalists, and a handful of open-minded officials have been fighting the Nu River project for nearly three years. In August 2003, they launched a nationwide protest campaign after learning that Huadian Power Company planned to build a string of large dams on the river. They argued the project would destroy the local environment and force tens of thousands of minority residents from their homelands, while only benefiting the energy companies. The campaign spread its information through newspapers and the Internet rather than marches or large protests, but the huge public and media pressure successfully forced former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to halt the project in February 2004.

For nearly two-and-a-half years following this decision, the local government of Yunnan and hydropower companies tried to attack back and reinstate the project. Based on former water minister Wang's recent comment, however, it appears that NGOs, the media, and disadvantaged residents have—at least temporarily—won the battle.

Another anti-dam campaign is occurring on the Jinsha River, which like the Nu River is located in the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan World Heritage site. Huaneng Energy Group had planned to build a hydropower station at [Tiger Leaping Gorge](#), on the upper reaches of the Yangtze, which would destroy the rich local cultural diversity and biodiversity, cause environmental disasters, and displace some 100,000 minority residents. Local residents began protesting against the project with the help of NGOs and the media, and in March 2006 some 10,000 residents gathered to oppose the project, eventually forcing the government to halt construction.

In earlier years, it would have been difficult to imagine that the Chinese public could resist the government's decision on large projects like this. When the government proposed building the [Three Gorges Dam](#) in the 1980s, most Chinese were still used to following the government's will, particularly in the wake of the [Cultural Revolution](#). Only a few social elites and scholars expressed disagreement with the Three Gorges project, and were put under political pressure rather than receiving support from the public. The massive dam project, now well under way, has so far displaced some 1 million residents and caused significant environmental problems.

The environmental movement has forced China to depart from the “Three Gorges Dam era.” Today, the public has more power to fight against special interest groups, hinder government decisions, and even change interest patterns while protecting their rights. The Chinese have chosen environment protection as a more moderate but complicated way of approaching democracy.

China's current environmental protection movement differs from that of the past in part because of the emergence of a large number of NGOs and grassroots organizations. But it also differs because environmental protection is no longer just an environmental issue, but a political experiment, according to Pan Yue, vice president of China's State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), who is well-known for his outspoken views. “Environmental issues are political issues,” he noted in a recent interview.

Once an advisor to central government reform efforts, Pan has tirelessly promoted democracy and the rule of law in China. He hopes legislation will serve to regulate the behaviors of big companies and local governments as well as give disadvantaged groups the right to speak out.

Pan finally got his chance in March 2005, when an ecologist reported that Beijing Yuanmingyuan Park was lining a local lakebed with a layer of plastic to prevent water seepage—a move that could destroy the park's ecosystem. Pan immediately suspended the project following widespread media exposure and decided to hold a public hearing—the first of its kind in China's environmental realm.

The hearing, which was open and transparent, represented a milestone in both environmental protection and regulation, according to Li Xun, director of the China Study Center at Tsinghua University. Unlike previous official hearings, which had been controlled by the host government to prevent inconsistencies in voice, the Yuanmingyuan public hearing allowed for representation from different stakeholders and engaged the public in government decisions.

In China, a large number of decisions relating to public benefits are still made without public participation. Many mega-sized plans and projects with significant impact on the environment are launched in the “black box,” while the benefits to the public, who lack access to both information and ways to express their opinions, are eroded by these large interest groups.

Democracy, rule of law, and public participation are all keys to changing this situation—and the environmental arena is the best place to practice them. Because environmental protection has less political sensitivity, it can more easily lead to social consensus and win-win agreements. Scientists, journalists, NGOs, and SEPA, led by Pan, are now actively fighting interest groups through greater transparency and public hearings. Because SEPA is not an especially powerful government agency, it must rely on public participation to turn environmental issues democratic.

The environmental movement in China, after entering the 21st century, is one of the most exciting landmarks in the country’s development. The movement is reducing the risks from China’s worsening environment, while also bringing more democratic rights to citizens.

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