

HARNESSING THE POWER OF INFORMATION TO REVERSE RIVER POLLUTION

by
Ma Jun
China

Water pollution is the most serious environmental issue facing China. It has a huge impact on people's health and economic development. That is why we have begun to build this database. To protect water resources, we need to encourage public participation and strengthen law enforcement. In some places, local governments and officials are protecting polluting factories and companies. The public needs to take part in water monitoring and management if the situation is to improve. The first step to get the involvement of the public is to inform them.

China is facing a water crisis that includes water shortages, water pollution and a deterioration in water quality. 400 out of 600 cities in China are facing water shortages to varying degrees, including 30 out of the 32 largest cities. In the north, due to the drying up of the surface water, the underground water has been over-extracted. The situation is not sustainable. Though the south has abundant water, there is a lack of clean water due to serious water pollution. Even water-abundant deltas like the Yangtze and the Pearl River suffer from water shortages. Water pollution and shortages are negatively intertwined. Water pollution can not be diluted for lack of clean water; and yet more emissions of pollutants into the water damage the already limited amount of clean water. Now water pollution has started to affect people's health. We have some figures to demonstrate that discharges of waste water have increased continually over the past five years. 70% of the rivers we have monitored have been polluted at various levels; 90% of the shallow aquifer in urban underground water has been polluted. According to statistics, 300 million peasants' drinking water is not safe; water quality in one fifth of the main cities is not up to standard. Discharges of toxic and harmful chemicals into the sea are absorbed by marine organisms, and as a result our health is affected through the food chain.

China has passed several laws on information disclosure in the past few years. Our figures mostly come from government agencies such as environmental protection agencies, and we also use information from other sources such as water conservation agencies, sea monitoring and construction agencies. Some information is from the media, particularly in relation to the 2500 companies that have been named. The figures will be updated regularly. Some localities issue annual reports while others have half-yearly reports. We will renew the figures accordingly. As per figures on sources of pollution, we will keep them up to date and fill in any information that will be reported by media.

Though a lot of the figures collected on our website have been publicised by government agencies, they are scattering around in various places and not easily accessible to people. We collated and put them together in order to present a clear and comprehensive picture to the public.

There are 2,500 offending companies named on our website. I hope those companies we have named will view this in a positive way. Of course, we are not an anti-business organisation. But

I think that in a healthy market environment, companies should carry out their social and environmental responsibilities. If they take their corporate social responsibilities seriously, they will be able to gain understanding and trust from the communities in which they operate.

But the premise is that companies should feel some force of pressure from the public. Up to now, companies haven't felt much pressure from the public regarding their environmental performance. A lot of them still believe they can just close their doors and shut their ears to concerns from the public. This is convenient, cost-saving and trouble-free. But the situation is changing, as the public's concern for the environment grows, I hope those companies with vision would take the initiative to communicate with the communities in which they operate. I hope we can get to the position where, one day, companies will explain to the public what toxic and harmful chemicals they use in their operations, and what measures are being taken to combat their harmful effects, as well as the necessary preparations to minimise damage if an incident occurs.

We notice that in the west, if companies are serious about their social responsibility, they will enjoy an increase in the value of their brand name. I hope Chinese companies will gradually learn this trick. Most of the companies listed are Chinese owned, however, there is no lack of multi-national companies too. I feel some regret that these MNCs appear in this list, as they seem to have a good record internationally in terms of environmental issues. I hope they would take the lead, and stop discharging levels of pollutants that exceed statutory limits. Shanghai has publicised a comprehensive list of offending companies, with over 1000 names, among which over 200 have something to do with water pollution. Over a dozen MNCs are included in the list, such as DuPont, several Japanese companies including Panasonic and KFC restaurants.

Chinese environment laws stipulate legal sanctions against offending companies. Water issues present a dichotomy between development and environmental protection. The central government has adjusted some of its strategies and policies, but at a local level, officials still place too great an emphasis on economic development. As a result, local government officials offer protection to some so-called pillar industries - those companies that generate revenue for local economy. Such protection makes it difficult for the local environmental watchdogs and local courts to punish offending companies. So some local businesses are able to get away with their bad behaviour, and yet the people who are affected by the pollution have a very weak voice.

We cooperate with other environmental organizations and we combine the map with figures on our website, so it is visually easy to find the location of polluting sources and relevant figures and information. We need to investigate and then locate the polluting sources on the map. Pollution sources are spread all over china, so we need to work with local environmental organisations. Now we started to work with Green Home, an environmental NGO in Beijing in investigating sources of water pollution. According to some information revealed by Beijing government, we traced them to the suburbs of Beijing. Some companies and factories located in a industry park haven't installed water treatment facilities, or some simply do not comply with the discharge rules. After our field trip, we then put this information onto our digital map. I hope people not only use digital map to locate where to eat and where to have fun, they will also use it to understand who is polluting our rivers.

China faces a huge water problem. Giving an order can't solve it by a single person, neither can it be achieved by one man's efforts. It needs consensus from the whole society. Only if the whole society are mobilized that this problem can be resolved. We put this information together for the convenient reference and usage by the public, so they can refer to some figures in their efforts to monitor pollution. We went to give a speech at a journalists' salon the other day. We were told by the audience about their individual action plans, some are in the initial stages, and some are in the implementation stages. We need to collate more information and employ technologies to consolidate the public efforts, and to explore solutions to the water problem.

Supplying a greener industry

Globalisation has powered economic growth in developing countries such as China. Global logistics, low domestic production costs, and strong consumer demand have let the country develop strong export-based manufacturing, making the country the workshop of the world. It fuels growth and helps pull millions out of poverty.

However, this massive export-oriented industry, along with the expansion of production to meet rising domestic demand, has taken a toll on the environment. While cheap products are exported to western countries, the waste is dumped mostly in China's backyard, contaminating its air, water, soil and seas. At present, about 60% of its fresh water is contaminated, and about half its major cities do not meet the country's modest air-quality standards.

As the public and some media started linking the black rivers with globalised sourcing, some multinational companies decided to integrate environmental standards into their sourcing policy, similar to their strategy to address labour issues a decade ago. But in the absence of a strong regulatory framework, along with the bewildering number and tiers of suppliers to track - and the technical complexity of pollution control - achieving responsible environmental supply chain management remains difficult, even at the basic legal compliance level.

But a solution, which is still much unnoticed, is emerging as environmental transparency expands in China. As part of the government's initiative to strengthen environmental enforcement, legal and policy measures have been established since 2003 to facilitate public participation. Evolving policy, alongside the increased capacity of environmental NGOs in China, and corporations' aspiration to achieve sustainability, have set the stage for broad public-private collaboration to tackle its pollution.

Capitalising on increased public disclosure of pollution monitoring data, in 2006, our organisation, the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), launched the China Water Pollution Map, through which the public can access thousands of environmental quality and infraction records released by various government agencies.

When people have access to these records, it puts extra pressure on companies on the list. Many chose to come to the IPE to explain what has gone wrong and how they are trying to fix it. We then input their statements, along with follow-up government monitoring data they chose to provide, side by side with the original records of violations so that people could have updated view of their performance. Companies also have the chance to remove their names from the list by going through an independent third party auditing process under the supervision of local NGOs. So far more than 20 such audits have been conducted. However, most of these

companies are multinationals and they represent just a tiny proportion of thousands of violators. In order to expand the effect of transparency on those who are not sensitive to public attention, corporate users need to check their suppliers. We have developed a database of over 40,000 records of specific citations of companies violating emission standards and other environmental rules in China, from 2004 onward. Now companies such as GE, Wal-Mart, Nike and Esquel are using it to monitor the environmental compliance records of their suppliers.

While some responsible companies move quickly to use the new tool, it is no surprise for us to meet with resistance from those who don't seem to be ready to recognize that there might be major gaps in their management. For example, one of the world's leading outdoor footwear and accessories manufacturers based in America rejected our suggestion delivered through an American NGO for it just to check by itself the compliance status of its suppliers through the database. If it did, however, it might instantly find on the air pollution database one supplier listed by local governmental agencies as violators in five consecutive years and another one with three years of non compliance records in water pollution. China, like many developing countries, is facing a serious environmental challenge. If major companies sourcing in developing countries care only about price and quality, local suppliers will be lured to cut corners on environmental standards to win contracts. Such market practice is destructive as it will lead to a globalised "race down to the bottom".

However, the social progress made in China makes it possible for responsible firms to increase their environmental transparency and collaborate with multiple stakeholders, including the government, suppliers and NGOs, to green their supply chain in a more effective and efficient way. Greening the globalised manufacturing and sourcing will be the single biggest help multinationals could make to the tough pollution control in China and other developing countries.