

Beijing environmental controversy dries up tourist site

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A public environmental controversy unprecedented for its scale and tolerance by Beijing officials has dried up the lakes at one of China's foremost tourist sites, threatening tourism and the local ecosystem. In response to an impact study prompted by a public hearing and months of unfettered media coverage, the State Environmental Protection Agency made the Yuanmingyuan Park, known overseas as the Old Summer Palace, remove some of the lake-bottom membranes that were designed to keep water from seeping out during drought periods but killed lake-bottom wildlife and stopped the flow of groundwater. The park removed the water this summer to reach the membranes. Tourists say they want the water back in the lakes and the removal of construction barriers put up to keep people away from lakebeds where work is taking place. "There's not much to see here," Guangzhou tourist Chen Zhiming said. "We didn't know about this. The tour guide just told us." Chen wants the lakes back to give the palace grounds the more stately appearance of the Forbidden City and other water-enhanced historical landmarks. Today, the once meter-deep lakes are bare mud with an assortment of stalks growing out of it. Some of the lakebeds are streaked with tire tracks of construction equipment and construction barriers block lakes along one side of the main north-south path through the park. A park official said the number of tour groups had declined over the summer, but that the park had no specific visitor data. She said the lakes would probably stay empty until the end of 2005. Visitors number about 2 million per year between Yuanmingyuan and the new, intact Summer Palace nearby. They pay 10 yuan (\$1.23) a head to get into the Yuanmingyuan lake area. The lack of water will not affect Beijing during the summer rainy season, but it could deplete groundwater if they remain empty into winter, said Li Hao, a volunteer with the Beijing-based Beijing Earth View Education & Research Center. The lack of water may also kill lake-bottom plants, she said. "But it won't have the impact of the membrane, because that way there was no water outlet," she said, adding the membrane had already done some irreversible damage. "(The water system) can't get back to normal. A lot of it is already destroyed." The State Environmental Protection Agency's early July removal order ended about half a year of controversy. In February, the Yuanmingyuan administration office spread plastic membranes on the lakebeds to prevent water loss in February, illegally bypassing a formal environmental impact evaluation, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. The membrane would have retained enough water to let the park expand its boating service. Criticism from experts, environmentalists and the general public -- some of it aired at a 120-person, public hearing broadcast live -- motivated the agency to suspend the project in April and call for an impact report. After a department of Tsinghua University wrote the report, the environmental agency ordered the removal of membranes in all but the largest lake, where removal could cause further damage. The park office must put clay in the large lake to create a new natural habitat. The 133 hectares of lake and land belong to a tract of mostly open space next to the ruins of the Qing Dynasty's summer palace that was burned in 1860 by French and British forces, then attacked again by Europeans in

1900. Park visitors, mostly from out of town or abroad, said they had heard about the lakebed controversy but not in detail. A Beijing foreign language student from Israel suggested planting flowers or grass until the lakes are refilled. A 20-year-old Beijing Forestry University student surnamed Xi said he understood the logic of using a membrane to stop seepage of Beijing's scarce water resources. But the dried-up lakes ruined his trip to the park one day in August. The controversy is unusual, said Ma Jun, a senior researcher with Sinosphere Corp., an environmental consulting firm in Beijing. The lakebed issue was not politically sensitive, he said, so authorities allowed the hearing and the media coverage as a "test." But the hearing process was cut short, he said. More sensitive projects such as Three Gorges Dam, which has also been questioned by the public, will go ahead without a similar struggle, Ma said. "(Still), in my mind this is an important issue. In China, in the environmental impact analysis process, there are many loopholes," he said. "It improved people's rights to know. People learned through this project. I give credit for that. But the hearing process was cut short because some people didn't like it."