

World News from GlobalPost

China grows thirstier

By Daniel Enking

BEIJING, China — Tang Huizhong has watched the water levels in the local river drop over the last 10 years until barely enough remains for fish to make their way upstream.

"The water level is much lower than it used to be. They will be lucky to catch any fish," said Tang, pointing to men fishing in a canal. "Look, there is not even enough water for the dam to function."

Next to air pollution, water scarcity looms as one of China's largest environmental disasters. Beijing consumes more water annually than its water resources combined, according to the Chinese Statistical Yearbook 2007. Without intervention, the city will face a massive shortage.

Born in Shanghai, Tang had moved with his family to Beijing in 1951, when he was 2 and has witnessed the explosive development and growth in the city since then. About 10 years ago, he noticed water receding while hiking in the mountains near his home.

"Before, whenever there was heavy rain, the water would flow down the mountain in large streams. But now, the earth is so dry that the water is immediately soaked up," Tang explained. "When I first moved here, the water in the rivers was deep enough for people to swim in, but now, in some places it is all gone. This is a huge change."

Scientific data collected over the past decade support Tang's observations. Yearly water flows into the Yellow River, the largest river in northern China, decreased from 40 billion to 25 billion cubic meters between the early 1980s and 1990s, according to RAND economist Charles Wolf in his 2003 book, "Fault Lines in China's Economic Terrain." RAND is a non-profit research and development institution headquartered in the U.S.

Tang worked at Beijing's Capital Iron and Steel Co. in 1983, when a mill dominated the small village of Moshikou. With the steel company came large apartment complexes and shopping centers, quickly swallowing the small village, and burdening resources, like water.

"In the 1950s, there were 40 natural wells in the village," he said. "Now, all the wells have dried up except for one. The price of supplying our homes with water has also risen dramatically."

While Tang attended college in the late 1970s and learned mechanical engineering, he did not study global issues and was not encouraged to learn about politics. He learned English in college, but has lost most of it after 30 years. Only by digging for news and

information has he come to understand national and international issues such as climate change, resource scarcity and overpopulation.

Tang points to climate change and unchecked industrialization as reasons for water and other ills.

"It is true that there are more people now in the city, using more water. But factories are also large users of water," he said. "For example, there is a nearby river called Yong Ding He. The river has a dam with water behind it, but none in front of it. All the water from this river is used in the steel mill and nearby power plants."

Industrial water consumption increased 94 percent between 1980 and 1993 and has accelerated throughout the 2000s, according to RAND's Wolf.

From the top of a nearby mountain, one can see the Capital Iron and Steel mill sprawled across the valley floor. Large coal-fired power plants can also be seen lining the hillsides, sitting next to an ancient Buddhist temple.

On Dec. 30, a damaged oil pipeline released diesel oil into a tributary of the Yellow River in the Shaanxi Province. About 150,000 liters leaked out into the river, and oil has been detected far downstream. The Yellow River is a source of water for approximately 140 million residents, as well as many factories and farms in northern China. Three counties in the Shaanxi Province have warned residents not to drink or take supplies from the river water.

During a hike, Tang pointed across the mountain to a small farming village. "See how tall the crops are?" he asked. "They should be much taller by this time of year, but the lack of water is stunting their growth."

In order to combat the massive water shortage, the government has been promoting a policy called nan shui bei diao, Tang said, to divert water from the Yangtze river in the south to supply the north. But the ex-steelworker warns the scheme is "only a short-term solution."

"The water problem does not just belong to Beijing," he said. "It is national, and even global. I think the only way to solve the problem is to better conserve water."

This report comes from a journalist in our Student Correspondent Corps, a GlobalPost project training the next generation of foreign correspondents while they study abroad.

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