



Environmental activism to clean up the consequences of China's economic growth

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Abstract

“Environmental Accountability,” one of PBS NewsHour’s Under-Told Stories, highlights how companies’ environmental behavior can be influenced by other actors in their supply chains and by those directly affected by the pollution these companies generate. The video raises questions about the interplay of economics and job growth, on the one hand, and responsibility to planetary and public health, on the other.

The Institute of Public & Environmental Affairs (IPE), a Chinese NGO, has taken publicly available emissions data and made them user friendly and easy to access. The organization has also made apparent the links between Chinese companies that pollute and their worldwide corporate customers. By so doing, IPE has helped reduce China’s pollution.

This learning module can stimulate discussion about the competing goals of promoting economic development, especially in the developing world, and tamping down the worst effects of the climate crisis. It also shows how committed individuals can play a powerful role in promoting societal change, even when pitted against a pro-growth government as powerful as China’s.

Story Link

<https://www.undertoldstories.org/2015/12/08/environmental-group-trying-to-clean-up-chinas-pollution/>

Learning themes/topics for consideration

- How civic organizations and actors seek and gain leverage over powerful corporations.
- Interconnections between local causes of environmental pollution and effective global responses.
- The power of data and information in promoting transparency, awareness, and action.
- The tensions between efforts to maintain a livable planet and promote economic progress.

Preparation

For an in-depth discussion, students should view the video ahead of time and explore the IPE website. Students unfamiliar with the environmental situation in China should also review the information listed under “Background.” At the instructor’s discretion, the questions listed (or others s/he chooses) can be assigned to be completed before class, in writing, to ensure a better-informed discussion.

IPE Website: <http://www.ipe.org.cn/>

Background

- Brief history of recent air pollution: from China’s 2013 “airpocalypse” to 2019:
 - <https://grist.org/article/chinas-plan-to-reduce-smog-basically-just-moved-it-to-other-areas/>
 - https://epic.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/UCH-EPIC-AQLI_Update_8pager_v04_Singles_Hi%20%282%29.pdf
- Health effects and relationship to climate change:
 - <https://www.pnas.org/content/early/2019/08/06/1812881116> (technical)
 - <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/14082019/climate-change-china-pollution-smog-soot-jet-stream-global-warming>
- Pollution and green economics:
 - <https://www.ft.com/content/b60f76c2-a7d2-11e9-b6ee-3cdf>

Salient Facts:

- China controls one-half of world's the coal-power capacity¹
- China's carbon emissions are close to twice that of the United States²

Related Videos about Ma Jun and IPE

- Ma Jun's acceptance of Skoll Award for IPE's work:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvoRiXNjlbq>
- More on IPE's work: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaBqO52ytrU>

Related Under-Told Story: India's Car Demands Eclipse Environmental Concerns

<https://undertoldstories.stthomas.edu/indias-car-demands-eclipse-environmental-concerns/>

- India's population is 1.2 billion (mostly young) people. Auto manufacturers want to capitalize on India's auto market.
- There is a global mindset that a car is a sign of progress and status.
- Projections show that 45% of the world's annual oil supply will be consumed by India and China by 2025.
- For many consumers in emerging economies, climate change is not a consideration: The rest of the world has enjoyed cars, so now they believe that it's their turn.

Discussion Questions

1. What was the logic for IPE first to reveal to China's citizens data about factory emissions and second to link emissions to global companies and brands?
2. Why wouldn't the Chinese government simply regulate or fine companies that pollute?
3. Is it enough for companies such as Apple to understand the environmental violations by their suppliers? Or must Apple's customers also know this? How could this information be shared or communicated to customers?

¹ Source: David Wells-Wallace, *The Uninhabitable Earth*, 2019

² See this USA today article:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/07/14/china-us-countries-that-produce-the-most-co-2-emissions/39548763/>

4. Are developed-world consumers complicit in China's pollution? How and to what extent?
5. Do developed-world consumers have sufficient information to make well-informed decisions about their consumption? Do they even want to?
6. The United States is the largest per-capita carbon emitter, while China emits more in total. Is it fair to call on China (and India and African countries) to curb their economic progress so that the world curtails its carbon emissions?
7. How might progress be reframed to take in into account both environmental and economic considerations?

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