

Sands of Time: Earth's Expanding Deserts Can't Be Stopped

Commentary, Franz Schurmann,
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Editor's Note: Around the world, dust storms are increasing and deserts shifting. In China, where a desert creeps toward Beijing, officials are worried about the 2008 Olympic games.

SAN FRANCISCO--Dust storms and drought don't get as much press as hurricanes or rising sea levels, but they threaten the world nonetheless. They could even hit the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.



On every continent the number of dust storms is increasing. The U.S. Department of Agriculture -- once the second-largest bureaucracy in Washington next to the Pentagon, until Homeland Security bumped it -- is not yet ready to proclaim a "Dust Bowl II." But it has released photos that show the awesome similarity between the first and the putative second dust bowl.

Besides afflicting people with sundry diseases, dust bowls can ravage entire agricultural economies. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s forced thousands of "Okies" and "Arkies" to emigrate to California. And Chinese environmentalists have raised the alarm after a survey earlier this year found almost a third of China's land mass is now desert.

The first yellow dust storm this year struck both Koreas on March 17. The year's first sandstorm struck Beijing in the form of a windy cold front and a yellow, dusty haze coming from the Mongolian steppe. Former Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji predicted that within two or three decades the people of Beijing will have no choice but to abandon their capital. The sand dunes, he noted, are advancing towards Beijing by 1.3 miles plus every year.

A few years ago, we San Franciscans saw and breathed in the same yellow, dusty haze as the people of Korea and North China. The jet stream that begins over Central Asia determines in good part San Francisco's weather. Meteorologists are in general agreement that something peculiar is happening to California's weather.

In China there is worry that the dust storms can harm, and possibly even cancel, the 2008 Olympics. "I cannot say sandstorms won't occur in 2008," Yang Weixi, chief engineer of China's Desertification Control Center told the Beijing Weekend publication.

Weixi added, "What we (in the center) can (only) do is to manage the man-made factors that cause sandstorms and the expansion of desertification." The Beijing Weekend noted, "Beijing's annual spring dust storms have increasingly become a hot political topic, with the government pledging to improve the situation before the 2008 Games."

Cattle ranchers in the heart of Nevada have a different enemy that signals desertification: the purple thistle. This thistle is highly valued by florists because it needs little water. But when ranchers see patches of thistles they know that the cattle and wild horses have lost another grazing ground.

When this observer goes hiking in Point Reyes National Seashore in California, the color is still green. But he is now shocked to find purple thistle. Maybe a century from now the predominant color of Point Reyes will be the beige of sand dunes!

The Chinese environmentalists call for more anti-drought measures. But the reality is that hundreds of years ago there already were huge deserts. The Gobi Desert and the adjacent Takla Makan have been deserts for over 2,000 years. We know this because hundreds of "natural mummies" have been dug up. Many of them look as if they have been buried recently.

Another example of long-term desertification is the Sahara Desert. We know that the predominant color of the Sahara cave paintings was green, and that animals like hippopotami and giraffes, which are not desert creatures, were prominently depicted. Paleo-anthropologists believe the cave painters lived some 7,000 years ago.

Yet long before the cave painters abandoned their caves, people fled eastwards toward the Nile and southwards to the Niger. They did not go northwards because of cold mountains, or westward, because in that direction the desertification extended to the Atlantic.

Look at a map of the globe around 30 degrees latitude. Move your finger eastward from Mexico's northern deserts. Your finger will eventually brush India's Rajasthan Desert. This swath encompasses all the western deserts. But the eastern deserts can be found as well, between 40 and 50 degrees latitude. That upward push was the result of a clash between a flowing "Indian" island and the formidable "Asian" highlands, thereby creating the Himalayan ranges. The Asian eastern deserts can be seen as an extension of the western deserts, or the reverse.

All over the globe, desertification is expanding, whether caused by human work or the work of nature. As Yang Weixi said, all one can do is manage the man-made factors. The changing of the name of a well-known U.S. policy in East Africa points to our helplessness vis-a-vis desertification.

In 1986, the United States brokered the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development

(IGAAD) in the Horn of Africa. The idea was to first conquer drought and then launch development in six East African countries that were members of IGAAD. But in January 2001, the State Department dropped the "Drought" and the acronym became IGAD. The implication was enormous: Humans can do very little about drought, sandstorms and ever moving dunes.

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Photo from June 15, 2001, courtesy of United Nations.