

# New Pollution Monitoring: Our Air is Dirtier Than We Thought

April 14 2009, by Miranda Marquit

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Air pollution is worse than we thought. Image credit: U.S. government.

(PhysOrg.com) One of my pet peeves is the focus we have on global warming. While global climate change is important, it continues to provide a red herring of sorts, taking attention away the public health concern that is air pollution. Recent developments in pollution tracking may change things. With help from satellites, scientists are beginning to understand just how dirty our air is becoming.

The idea of combining [satellite data](#) with ground data has been introduced to measure particulate [pollution](#) on the ground. In many areas, the equipment used to measure pollution at ground level is unavailable. However, it is possible to use satellites to track [air pollution](#) in those areas. According to [Discover](#) magazine, Sundar Christopher, a

scientist at the University of Alabama, found that it was possible to measure particulate pollution remotely:

"Remote sensing is the only viable way to monitor global particulate matter,' he says. Using NASA's Terra and Aqua satellites, he and his team examined 20 cities with populations greater than 10 million. In 15 of them, pollution levels were five to ten times higher than the World Health Organization's guidelines."

In order to get an idea of what the ground measurements of pollution are in some of the areas without this capability, the satellites were first trained on areas that had good ground sensing. After getting an idea of what particulate pollution *looks* like at certain levels, it was possible to compare the images to areas without ground monitoring, getting a good idea of what the pollution levels are in areas without on the ground pollution feedback. In addition to seeing how much pollution there is (and there is more than we thought), the University of Alabama team is going to be tracking the way air pollution moves across the globe.

This is probably a good thing. Having images to show us just how dirty our air is can help us make inroads in terms of pollution as a [public health](#) risk. Global warming is still debatable from a number of different standpoints; even though most climatologists agree that it is real, many people find ways to debate aspects (such as whether people are causing it) are debatable. However, air pollution is not really debatable. We're seeing it -- at ground level and now in the sky -- and we know it causes health problems. Perhaps a visual will encourage us to make a switch to energy sources that are better for the earth. And better for humans as well.

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