

Big city life may make residents lean toward green, study says

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Big city life -- like that in Beijing -- is leading citizens to behave more environmentally correct. Credit: Sue Nichols, Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability at Michigan State University

The downsides of China's explosive urbanization – like pollution and greenhouse gas emissions – now are joined by an upside: Better environmental citizens.

It's the first time scientists have weighed employment and leadership when considering environmental behavior in China's cities. In the latest online edition of the British journal [Environmental Conservation](#), scientists at the Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability at Michigan State University and collaborators in the U.S. and China show that city size – especially the good jobs there -- lead people to pro-

environmental behavior, like recycling plastic bags and sorting their trash.

"It is essential to study human behavior because behavior directly affects the environment," said Jianguo "Jack" Liu, center director and a co-author on the paper. Liu holds the Rachel Carson Chair in Sustainability at MSU. "As China is the world's fastest growing economy and cities are the economic engines with severe environmental challenges, understanding environmental behavior of urban residents in China is particularly important "

Xiaodong Chen, who conducted the study while working on his doctorate at MSU, and his colleagues took advantage of China's General Social Survey of 2003 – a year in which some 5,000 respondents in urban areas of different sizes were asked specifically about their environmental behavior. The study was administered jointly by the Survey Research Center of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and the Department of Sociology at Renmin University of China.

Scientists have studied environmental attitudes for years, but the paper notes that it's behavior that ultimately counts to conservationists. This survey addresses just that: if in the last year people had sorted their garbage to separate recyclables, recycled plastic bags, talked about environmental issues with family or friends, participated in environmental education programs, volunteered in environmental organizations or took part in environmental litigation.

People who live in larger cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin showed significantly more of this green behavior than people in smaller cities.

But Chen emphasizes it's about employment – not money – a finding

that flies in the face of some traditional thought that pegged green attitudes as a luxury of the fiscally comfortable.



New research from Michigan State University's Center for Systems Integration and Sustainability shows that employees who work for large companies in China -- especially the workplace leaders -- engage in environmentally friendly behavior the most. They tend to sort trash and participate in environmental litigation more than those who are unemployed or who are not workplace leaders. Credit: © 2011 Jupiterimages Corporation

"You don't have to be rich to consider environmental issues," Chen said. "Even if people are poor and their material needs are not as well met, they still consider the environmental quality because those people may be threatened more by environmental problems."

The workplace appears to be a strong leader in environmental education, a dynamic that may be particularly powerful in China, which has a tradition of policies and regulations being shaped from the top down. Employers, with their accompanying status and political power, are proving to be powerful drivers of conservation, and those workers who are workplace leaders report the most environmentally friendly behavior.

Chen said companies in big cities likely have more resources to promote

environmental initiatives, such as education. He also said people who live in the largest cities are more widely exposed to media reports about the environment.

The findings will help China, as its urban areas continue to grow, determine which audiences to target to encourage behaviors that can help counter the environmental costs associated with rapid economic growth.

Provided by Michigan State University

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