

The cost of Chinese air pollution

January 23 2015, by Dave Wieczorek

China's fabled air pollution assaulted Linda Greer, J76, the moment she arrived in Beijing in 2008, on her first trip there for the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). "I literally could not see down the block," she recalls.

The city's fine-particle emissions, which cause lung and [heart ailments](#), peaked at 35 times the World Health Organization's recommended limit in 2013—the same year China's health ministry reported that 71 of 74 cities there failed to meet air-quality standards. The effects are felt even across the Pacific. "If you live in California," Greer says, "nearly a third of the [air pollution](#) you breathe comes from China."

The country has emerged as "manufacturer to the world" largely because of its cheap labor and lax environmental regulation and enforcement, which help keep production costs low. As director of the NRDC's health and environment program, Greer has made it her mission to enlist U.S. corporations' help in cleaning up Chinese industry.

"We are complicit in a lot of China's pollution, because they are making so much of our stuff," Greer says. "We are buying things cheaper and cheaper every day at places like Walmart, which has a huge hidden environmental cost."

The NRDC, a large nonprofit environmental advocacy organization based in New York City, employs 30 Chinese nationals in its Beijing office. Greer and her staff work with factories and local government officials to cut pollution through more efficient use of energy, water and

chemicals and installation of pollution control devices.

They also pressure American businesses to hold Chinese suppliers to higher environmental standards. "We're pushing corporations to reward the factories that have done these improvements with longer contracts and more business, and to deny contracts where environmental behavior is egregious," she says.

Getting American firms on board isn't easy. The companies "are not bound by any U.S. laws having to do with protecting the environment abroad," Greer says. "And they benefit from the opacity of their operations, which are located so far away from their customer base."

So far, a handful of U.S. corporations known for their social responsibility programs—including Target, VF, Gap, Levi and H&M—have actively participated in the NRDC program.

Greer, who joined the NRDC staff in 1990, is sustained by her sense of humor—without which, she says, "I don't think I could have stayed in this line of work." She adds: "I regard my China initiative like missionary work: one soul at a time. It's an 'OK, that's one factory, 55,000 to go' kind of problem."

But she does see a game-changer or two on the horizon. The Chinese government recently required some 15,000 of the country's biggest factories to post hourly online reports of air emissions and wastewater discharges. And citizens are unmasking offenders on their own.

"In the last five years, thanks basically to social media, there is so much visibility globally of the [pollution](#) problems, with people in China taking pictures on their cell phones and posting on websites," Greer says. "The curtain is definitely rising, and the anonymity with which multinational companies have been able to operate is rapidly coming to an end."

Provided by Tufts University

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