



Beijing's Desert Storm

The desert is sweeping into China's valleys, choking rivers and consuming precious farm land. Beijing has responded with massive tree-planting campaigns, but the Great Green Walls may not be able to buffer the sand, which could cover the capital in a few years

By Ron Gluckman /Beijing, Fengning and Langtougou, China

<http://www.gluckman.com/ChinaDesert.html>

FROM HIS ROOFTOP, Su Rongxi maintains an unsteady balance, perched between the past and a precarious future. One foot is planted firmly upon his tiled roof. The other sinks ankle-deep into a huge sand dune that threatens to engulf his house and Langtougou village, where his ancestors have lived for generations. For this dirt-poor town in Hebei province, the sands of time aren't just a quaint notion, they are close at hand, burning the eyes and lungs. And for Langtougou, the sands seem to be ticking out.

"We have no money to move and, besides, who would have us?" says Su. "There's nothing to do but dig away the sand and wait to see what happens. Sometimes I dream of the sand falling around me faster than I can dig away. The sand chokes me. I worry that in real life, the sand will win."

Su and his neighbors are ethnic Manchurians who survive by cultivating subsistence crops and raising horses, goats and pigs. But this year violent sandstorms dumped entire dunes into the once-fertile Fengning county valley. Now most of the grass is gone and the Chaobai River stands dry. Besieged villagers say they have no idea where the sand came from. The scary bit? Su's almost-buried house is nowhere near the heart of China's rapidly encroaching deserts. It is just 160 km north of Beijing. Suddenly, rural Langtougou has become a barren outpost on the front line of a national battlefield.

Premier Zhu Rongji raised the war cry in this very village in May, after the worst sandstorms in memory buffeted Beijing. Zhu stood on Su's roof, pledging urgent measures to combat the encroaching sand. Then the premier left with his entourage, a huge government caravan, on 1,000-kilometer safari across China's desert hotspots. The next month newspapers ran daily stories about desertification as armies of tree-planters were mobilized. The 5th Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee, starting Oct. 9, has put the issue near the top of its agenda. Zhu has called it "an alarm for the entire nation."

Su, 53, missed that address — and the visiting premier. Su was in the grass-stripped hills tending his hungry goats. He doesn't know much about the goings-on in Beijing anyway, having never traveled further than Fengning's county seat, about 25 kilometers away. That trip used to take 40 minutes; now it can last days. Local workers cleared a path for the premier, yet just weeks later the road vanished — reclaimed by the relentless desert.

Few people think of China as a desert nation, yet it is among the world's largest. More than 27%, or 2.5 million square kilometers, of the country comprises useless sand (just 7% of Chinese land feeds about a quarter of the world's population). A Ministry of Science and Technology task force says desertification costs China about \$2-3 billion annually, while 800



km of railway and thousands of kilometers of roads are blocked by sedimentation. An estimated 110 million people suffer firsthand from the impacts of desertification and, by official reports, another 2,500 sq km turns to desert each year.

This is nothing new, of course. In the 4th century B.C. Chinese philosopher Mencius (Mengzi) wrote about desertification and its human causes, including tree-cutting and overgrazing. Experts argue over the reasons and

consequences, but all agree that Chinese deserts are on the move. Sand from the distant Gobi threatens even Beijing, which some scientists say could be silted over within a few years. Dunes forming just 70 km from the capital may be drifting south at 20-25 km a year. Conservative estimates say 3 km a year. And despite massive spending on land reclamation and replanting, China is falling behind.

In the northwest, where the biggest problems lie, desertification has escalated from 1,560 sq km annually in the 1970s to 2,100-2,400 sq km in the 1990s. According to many environmentalists, Beijing has been largely content to issue proclamations about student-supported tree-planting rather than tackle complicated land issues.

But that was before clouds of grit roared through the capital this spring. Sandstorms are hardly novel in Beijing, but the sheer ferocity of these tempests was. For days on end, wave after fearsome wave, sand closed the airport and casualties filled hospitals. Just as surprising was the public outrage. Even state-run media lambasted government officials. The frustration is easy to understand. According to Chinese records, dust storms came to the capital once every seven or eight years in the 1950s, and only every two or three years in the 1970s. But by the early 1990s, they were an annual problem.

The government responded with huge "greening" campaigns and in the past 20 years alone, according to the People's Daily, more than 30 billion trees have been planted. This year, however, the storms blew away any sense of security.

Grasping the enormity of the problem is easy on the road north from Beijing to Langtougou. Nestling among fields of corn and sunflowers, villages bloom with flowers. After two hours' driving, the views are still green. But over one steep mountain a surreal landscape astounds the eyes. Mountains rise on both sides of the valley ahead, but the hills are an ugly gray, denuded of vegetation. Even weirder, hillsides are dotted with white, much like highway stripes stretching into the horizon.

The real shock hits on the descent into the valley. Those dots are actually white-painted stones, lining small pockets of soil. Inside each is a tiny tree. But the entire countryside has been stripped of grasses, topsoil and mature trees — meaning the saplings have little chance of survival.

In Langtougou, residents are mumbling about new regulations as they dig huge pits in their yards to compost manure and waste to produce fuel. Each house must have one as part of a government decree against burning wood. Firewood collection (32.4%) is a key cause of desertification in northern China, according to a study by Chinese researcher Ning Datong and published by the University of Toronto. Ning attributed the other causes to excessive grazing (30%) and over-cultivation (23.3%).

None of the 200 villagers is enthusiastic about their new composting brief, but what really upsets them are the other initiatives. Farming will cease, and they have also been told they will have to give up their animals. "This is how we live," says Li Guoyun, 50. "We have 50 to 60 goats. We sell the wool and some for food. Without them, we'll be ruined." Li realizes, of course, that his goats gobble up the grass that used to cover the valley floor and hillsides, "but they are so much easier than pigs or cows."

Up and down the silted-in valley, the story is much the same. "I grow corn, rice, beans and tomatoes, to eat and to sell," says Zhang Baoguan, 43, a father of two from the nearby hamlet of Caonianguo. "Now, I'll have to stop. The government is promising some rice and money, but it's not enough." The moratorium on farming and grazing will apply throughout the valley – and nobody knows for how long. Villagers have already been drafted into China's new green army of tree-planters. "We'll plant trees every day for five years," Zhang says dejectedly. "And if that doesn't work, we'll plant for five more."

That's what they tell us." Neighbor Lin Renrui fears that no amount of tree-planting will bring the valley back to life, since the government has no plans for the sand. "We don't like this plan at all – especially the part about the animals," Lin says. "The government told us we will have to sell them all." And the sand? "That's the real problem," he says, "not the goats. We ask about the sand. Nobody gives us an answer."

Environmentalists in the capital, most of whom speak on the condition of anonymity, say Beijing is missing the big picture. Land and water use, grasslands and forests, desert and climate changes are all interconnected. "The response has really been fragmented," says one. Yet now that the government seems to be throwing its weight behind the issue, some critics call it overkill. "All of a sudden all you read about is desertification," says one foreign observer. "You have to wonder if it's not all propaganda, designed perhaps to win overseas funding for environmental campaigns."

But what about all that sand, sweeping down from the Gobi Desert and threatening to swallow Beijing within a few years. "Silly," responds one official in the Ministry of Agriculture's ecology section. "There are real problems, but everything with desertification is exaggerated." He worries that the current focus misses the step-by-step approaches needed in a well-rounded environmental package. These include planting grasses first to stabilize and enrich soil, then trees. "But everything is going fast now and there is no masterplan."



If ever there is a place to grasp the climatic and environmental changes in China, it is not out on the vast plains, where herdsmen and farmers battle over dwindling water resources and tillable land. Instead, it is along an odd stretch of towering sand dunes just 70 km northwest of the capital. In olden times, this area was a favorite hunting ground of the imperial family, with forests and lakes for picnics.

Now the woods are gone. Nearby sits the junction town of Huailai — except that no one calls it that anymore. Even on the road signs it is Shacheng — Sand City.

The changes also are stark in small villages such as Chai Yuan (Firewood Garden), about 25 km further northwest. From there it is just a few more kilometers to Flying Camel Desert, so named because some Chinese entrepreneurs have surrounded the sand with a fence and charge admission to tourists wishing to experience the desert. Not that it is much of a desert experience. There are dune buggies and motor bikes for careering over the dunes, a mock Mongolian yurt, and camels and Mongolian horses.

Still, there is more at the Flying Camel than exists over the dunes, where huge waves of sand crash to a halt above Longbaoshan. The village of 800 people was set up in 1989 to house mountain folk — moved from nearby hills as part of a resettlement program. The new brick buildings seem impressive, but the village lacks life. "Nobody has any work," explains Zhang Wengui, 78. "We grow crops, some fruit and vegetables, that's about all."

At least, that was about all. When farming was banned by Premier Zhu, officials swept in with their own version of Desert Storm. They introduced a desertification rehabilitation program, which, thus far, has consisted largely of fencing in the nearby sand and erecting signs proclaiming: "Controlling the Desert, State Focus Point." The farming prohibition was mostly a waste of time as well. Crops wilted long ago.

"We have no water," says Zhang. The two village wells, dug deeper each year, have run dry. The people will likely need to be moved again. In the meantime, no prizes for guessing what they have been doing: planting trees.

"It's part of a big campaign," says one villager, who recalls how the local Bank of China staffers joined in one day. They had no choice. "The officials just went in and told everybody: 'You have to plant trees today.'"



It is a similar picture in thousands of villages across China, where population growth has meant rampant farming and wasteful irrigation. Yet if mass tree-plantings register far below the raging-success mark in Beijing's piecemeal fight to stave off the sands, they still look pretty good next to the efforts at Flying Camel Desert.

While Longbaoshan villagers go thirsty, workers at the desert park are busy hosing down a dune so tourists can take a toboggan ride.

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Top two pictures courtesy of Ricky Wong, a Hong Kong photographer based in Beijing. Bottom two photos by Ron Gluckman.
