SPECIAL SERIES

A series of articles and multimedia examining the human toll, global impact and political challenge of China's epic pollution crisis.

SPECIAL SERIES

A series of articles and multimedia examining the human toll, global impact and political challenge of China's epic pollution crisis.

In China, a Lake's Champion Imperils Himself

Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

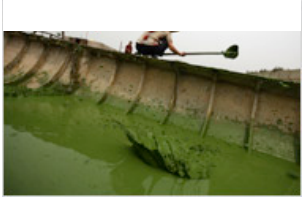
In May, a bloom of toxic cyanobacteria turned China's Lake Tai fluorescent green.

By JOSEPH KAHN
Published: October 14, 2007

E-MAIL
PRINT
REPRINTS
SAVE
SHARE
SHARE

ARTICLE TOOLS SPONSORED BY THE DARJEELING LIMITED

ZHOUTIE, China — Lake Tai, the center of China's ancient "land of fish and rice," succumbed this year to floods of industrial and agricultural waste.



This is the third in a series of articles and multimedia examining the human toll, global impact and political challenge of China's epic pollution crisis.

Toxic cyanobacteria, commonly referred to as pond scum, turned the big lake fluorescent green. The stench of decay choked anyone who came within a mile of its shores. At least two million people who live amid the canals, rice paddies and chemical plants around the lake had to stop drinking or cooking with their main source of water.

The outbreak confirmed the claims of a crusading peasant, Wu Lihong, who protested for more than a decade that the region's thriving chemical industry, and its powerful friends in the local government, were destroying one of

More Articles in International »

Go to Complete Coverage »

VIDEO: LAKE TAI'S ENVIRONMENTAL WARRIOR

AUDIO SLIDE SHOW: A LAKE IN CRISIS

EXPERT ROUNDTABLE: SUBMIT A QUESTION

In Translation

Summaries of articles in this series are available in Chinese.

Download a written translation of this article. (pdf)

Listen to a reading of the translation. (mp3)

Listen to a reading of the translation. (mp3)

Reuters

Environmental activist Wu Lihong with petitions against pollution.

China's ecological treasures.

Mr. Wu, however, bore silent witness. Shortly before the algae crisis erupted in May, the authorities here in his hometown arrested him. In mid-August, with a fetid smell still wafting off the lake, a local court sentenced him to three years on an alchemy of charges that smacked of official retribution.

Pollution has reached epidemic proportions in China, in part because the ruling Communist Party still treats environmental advocates as bigger threats than the degradation of air, water and soil that prompts them to speak out.

Senior officials have tried to address environmental woes mostly through pulling the traditional levers of China's authoritarian system: issuing command quotas on energy efficiency and emissions reduction; punishing corrupt officials who shield polluters; planting billions of trees across the country to hold back deserts and absorb carbon dioxide.

But they do not dare to unleash individuals who want to make China cleaner. Grass-roots environmentalists arguably do more to expose abuses than any edict emanating from Beijing. But they face a political climate that varies from lukewarm tolerance to icy suppression.

Fixing the environment is, in other words, a political problem. Central party officials say they need people to report polluters and hold local governments to account. They granted legal status to private citizens' groups in 1994 and have allowed environmentalism to emerge as an incipient social force.

But local officials in China get ahead mainly by generating high rates of economic growth and ensuring social order. They have wide latitude to achieve those goals, including nearly complete control over the police and the courts in their domains. They have little enthusiasm for environmentalists who appeal over their heads to higher-ups in the capital.

Mr. Wu, a jaunty, 40-year-old former factory salesman, pioneered a style of intrepid, media-savvy environmental work that made Lake Tai, and the hundreds of chemical factories on its shores, the focus of intense regulatory scrutiny.

In 2005 he was declared an "Environmental Warrior" by the National People's Congress. His address book contained cellphone numbers for officials in Beijing and the provincial capital of Nanjing who outranked the party bosses where he lived.

But Mr. Wu was far from untouchable. He lost his job. His wife lost hers. The police summoned, detained and interrogated him. The local government and factory owners also tried for years to bring him into the fold with contracts, gifts and jobs. When party officials offered him a chance to profit handsomely from a pollution cleanup contract, a friend warned him not to accept. Mr. Wu, who needed the money, said yes.

Lake of Plenty

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED

1. Maureen Dowd: A Mock Columnist, Amok
2. Frank Rich: The 'Good Germans' Among Us
3. Op-Ed Contributor: Questions You Should Never Ask a Writer
4. Public Lands: As Logging Fades, Rich Carve Up Open Land in West
5. Bob Herbert: The Trivial Pursuit
6. High Tea, India Style
7. Thomas L. Friedman: Who Will Succeed Al Gore?
8. At an Army School for Officers, Blunt Talk About Iraq
9. In China, a Lake's Champion Imperils Himself
10. 36 Hours in São Paulo

Go to Complete List »

The country's third largest freshwater body, Lake Tai, or Taihu in Chinese, has long provided the people of the lower Yangtze River Delta with both their wealth and their conception of natural beauty.

It nurtured a bounty of the "three whites," white shrimp, whitebait and whitefish, and a freshwater crustacean delicacy called the hairy crab. Natural and man-made streams irrigated rice paddies, and a network of canals ferried that produce far and wide.

Along the lake's northern reaches, near the city of Wuxi, placid waters and misty hills captured the imagination of Chinese for hundreds of years. The wealthy built gardens that featured the lake's wrinkled, water-scarred limestone rocks set in groves of bamboo and chrysanthemum.

Since the 1950s, however, Lake Tai has been under assault. The authorities constructed dams and weirs to improve irrigation and control floods, disrupting the cleansing circulation of fresh water. Phosphates and other pollution-borne nutrients made the lake eutrophic, sucking out oxygen that fish need to survive.

Even in its degraded state, Lake Tai made an ideal habitat for China's chemical industry, which expanded prolifically in the 1980s. Chemical factories consume and discharge large quantities of water, which the lake provided and absorbed. Its canals made it easy to ship goods to the big industrial port city of Shanghai, downstream.

With strong local government support, the northern arc of Lake Tai became home to 2,800 chemical plants, most of them small cinder-block factories that took over rice paddies beside canals.

Mr. Wu's hometown alone had 300 such plants. His narrow village road was reinforced with concrete to withstand the weight of cargo trucks. Factories here made food additives, solvents and adhesives.

The industry transformed the economy. By the mid-1990s, taxes on chemical industry profits accounted for four-fifths of local government revenue, according to a report from the city of Yixing, which oversees Zhoutie.

Mr. Wu benefited as well. In his early 20s, he got a salaried job as salesman for a factory that made soundproofing material. It allowed him to travel around the country, and paid nice commissions on his sales. His wife, Xu Jiehua, made dyes.

Mr. Wu took long walks after dinner. The acrid tinge in the cool night air was the smell of prosperity to some locals. But it nauseated him, Mr. Wu recalled in later interviews.

In streams where he and Ms. Xu played as children, teeming whitefish used to tickle their legs. By the early 1990s, there were no fish in the streams, which ran black and red. "Rivers of blood," Ms. Xu quoted him as saying.

Mr. Wu is small and pudgy. Ms. Xu calls him "little fatty." He also has a short temper, and pollution sparked it.

"In the beginning I didn't understand it myself," he recalled years later in an interview with Farmers' Daily. "It was my personality that decided all of this. I felt the burden getting bigger."

He began by snapping photos of factories dumping untreated effluent into canals. He mailed them, anonymously at first, to environmental protection agencies.

When that produced few results, he signed the letters and included his phone number,

volunteering to help inspectors see the problem for themselves.

Local regulators ignored him. But fish kills, declining rice yields and slumping tourism to the once pristine area made Lake Tai's ecology a broader concern. Higher-ranking officials in Nanjing, capital of Jiangsu Province, got in touch.

One evening, Mr. Wu brought provincial inspectors to see concealed pipes running from a factory near his home to a stream that flowed into the lake. The factory, Feida Chemical, got slapped with a fine, and Mr. Wu got his start.

Friends and Enemies

Mr. Wu's farmhouse filled up with the evidence he amassed, a bit haphazardly, of a looming environmental disaster. He used his pantry to store plastic bottles containing muddy water samples from streams and canals. Near his queen-size bed he kept stacks of newspaper clippings and photographs, letters and petitions.

One letter from local farmers described how a nearby factory making 8-hydroxyquinoline, used as a deodorant and antiseptic, emitted noxious fumes that "make our days and nights impassable." Another writer referred to a local factory as "a new Unit 731," after the Japanese team that conducted chemical warfare experiments in World War II. Members of another group said they did not dare tend their rice paddies without wearing gloves and galoshes because irrigation water caused their skin to peel off.

Mr. Wu answered many such calls for help. Between 1998 and 2006, the environmental protection agency of Jiangsu Province recorded receiving 200 reports of pollution incidents and regulatory violations from Mr. Wu.

Many of those he helped became allies. But Mr. Wu was making as many enemies as friends.

"Our society lacks the right atmosphere for environmental protection," he told one local newspaper. "Even in areas where pollution is most severe, I still have a hard time winning people's support."

Some residents feared for their jobs, with good reason. The soundproofing factory fired Mr. Wu in 1999. His notice of dismissal, which he saved among his other papers, cited his failure to attend a meeting.

His family lived off his wife's salary at the dye factory for a time. Then one day Ms. Xu mentioned to Mr. Wu how the stream near her factory changed colors depending on which dye they made that day. Mr. Wu brought a television crew to film the rainbow-colored stream. Ms. Xu soon lost her job as well.

"He did not always have our family's happiness at heart," Ms. Xu recalled. "He probably should have investigated someone else's factory."

Such pressure, though, made him confront local authorities more directly.

In 2001, Wen Jiabao, then a vice premier, now China's prime minister, came to investigate reports of Lake Tai's deterioration. Like most Communist Party inspection tours, word of this one reached local officials in advance. When Mr. Wen asked to see a typical dye plant, one was made ready, according to several people who witnessed the preparations.

The factory got a fresh coat of paint. The canal that ran beside it was drained, dredged

and refilled with fresh water. Shortly before Mr. Wen's motorcade arrived, workers dumped thousands of carp into the canal. Farmers were positioned along the banks holding fishing rods.

Mr. Wen spent 20 minutes there. A picture of him shaking hands with the factory boss hangs in its lobby.

Mr. Wu fired off an angry letter to Beijing recounting the ruse and warning the vice premier that he had been "deceived." Mr. Wu circulated copies among his friends. Local officials saw it, too. Several villagers said they were warned then that they should keep a distance from Mr. Wu.

Words From Above

One summer afternoon in 2002, Mr. Wu went out on an errand and saw a banner stretched across the main road downtown. It read: "Warmly welcome the police to arrest Wu Lihong for committing blackmail in the name of environmentalism."

Mr. Wu told friends he initially suspected that the banner was hung by local factory bosses to intimidate him. But when he went to the police to complain, he found a stack of placards with the same exhortation in the police station. The police had erected the banner themselves, and they detained him on the spot.

His family received a detention notice accusing Mr. Wu of inciting farmers to stage a public protest about pollution a few weeks earlier. The notice did not mention blackmail, as the banner had, and the police never pressed charges. He was released within two weeks.

That episode appeared to be part of an inconsistent, somewhat bumbling effort to keep Mr. Wu boxed up and harmless.

There were carrots as well as sticks. Zhang Aiguo, the chief environmental regulator in the city of Yixing, struck up a dialogue with Mr. Wu, several friends said.

Hang Yaobin, a truck driver and sundry shop owner in Zhoutie who has also pressed for better environmental controls, said Mr. Zhang told Mr. Wu that they could improve the environment together. But Mr. Wu should expose problems in other jurisdictions and should stop damaging Yixing's reputation.

"Zhang Aiguo told him: 'Don't make me stink, or I'll lose my job. Then we'll accomplish nothing,'" Mr. Hang said.

In a telephone interview, Mr. Zhang declined to discuss his dealings with Mr. Wu in detail. But he acknowledged that the two talked regularly before he was assigned to another position in the Yixing government.

In 2003, Mr. Zhang offered Mr. Wu a business opportunity. A steel plant in Zhoutie had been ordered by environmental authorities to buy new dust-control equipment. Mr. Wu could find a vendor for the equipment and earn a handsome commission, several people told about the arrangement said.

Mr. Zhang confirmed that he told Mr. Wu of the opportunity.

Mr. Wu debated whether to accept. Mr. Hang said he advised his friend against it. "If you're engaged in a confrontation with officials you can't gamble, or visit prostitutes, or have any other vice," Mr. Han said. "They are always looking for ways to get you."

But this contract involved an environmental cleanup. And with both Mr. Wu and his wife out of work, they needed money. Mr. Wu agreed to contact a vendor recommended by Mr. Zhang.

It was not a rewarding endeavor. He brokered a contract. But the dust-control company gave him only a token advance on his promised commission. The steel plant boss, who had befriended Mr. Wu, eventually withheld part of what he owed the dust-control company to compensate Mr. Wu, according to Ms. Xu, his wife.

That was one of several muddled interactions with local officials and businessmen that did not satisfy either side. Mr. Wu remained cash-strapped. He did not stop contacting Nanjing and Beijing about pollution problems.

In 2005, he heard that the local government would be the host of a big delegation of Chinese reporters as part of the China Environmental Century Tour. He got in touch with China Central Television, the leading national broadcaster, and promised to reveal the story behind the story.

He arranged covertly for the reporters to inspect a section of the Caoqiao River that he learned the government planned to show them on the coming tour. He revealed hidden pipes that discharged black effluent from local factories into the river, which flows into Lake Tai.

The China Central Television crew later joined the Potemkin official tour. They aired a special report on "the river that goes from black to clear overnight."

Mr. Wu was the star of that report, an environmental celebrity. Later the same year, the National People's Congress, China's party-run Parliament, declared him an "Environmental Warrior."

Model City

With President Hu Jintao and Mr. Wen demanding tougher action on pollution, local officials in 2006 came under new pressure to clean up Lake Tai. Despite repeated pledges and campaigns to protect the once scenic lake, it was still rated Grade V by the State Environmental Protection Administration, the lowest level on its scale.

Yixing ordered a new crackdown on small chemical factories. It claimed to have reduced the total number by half from the peak of 2,800 in the late 1990s. The city said the industry, which once accounted for as much as 85 percent of the area's industrial output, constituted just 40 percent in 2006.

But local officials put at least as much emphasis on fighting the perception that they had a pollution problem. They lobbied heavily for the State Environmental Protection Administration to declare it a "Model City for Environmental Protection."

Around the same time, Wu Xijun, the Communist Party boss of Zhoutie, called Mr. Wu to his office. The two Mr. Wus, who are not related, had a "face-to-face talk" about the damage Wu Lihong's environmental protests were doing to the area's reputation. The party secretary then made him an offer, according to friends of Mr. Wu and an official court document that confirmed the meeting.

In March 2006, the township party committee paid Mr. Wu to promote tourism on the condition that he stop "nonfactual reporting" of pollution problems. The payments totaled about $5,000, the court document confirmed.

Mr. Wu may have toned down his protests for a time, friends said. But early this year, he

learned that Yixing had won the environmental administration's designation as a "Model City for Environmental Protection." Enraged, he began his most assertive effort to date to embarrass local officials.

He spent weeks traveling throughout the area on his motorcycle, collecting water samples and photographing rivers and canals. He gathered data he hoped could prove that factories released most of their polluted water at night in quantities that the currents could wash away by dawn.

In April, he prepared to bring the water samples and photographic evidence to Beijing. He told friends he intended to file a lawsuit there against SEPA, the environmental administration, for its decision to honor Yixing. He never made the trip.

On the night of April 13, several dozen police and state security officers raided his farmhouse. Climbing ladders, they pried open the windows to his second-floor bedroom, arresting him and seizing documents and a computer.

Prosecutors quickly indicted Mr. Wu on two charges of blackmail. The first charge claimed that after he "gained knowledge" of a contract between the steel company and the dust-control company in 2003, he threatened to use his connections to undermine it unless the dust-control company paid him to keep quiet.

The second charge claimed that Mr. Wu extorted money from the Communist Party Committee of Zhoutie by threatening to report pollution problems.

Prosecutors revised the indictment twice in the following weeks. They dropped the charge of blackmailing the Communist Party, offering no explanation. Then they added a new charge, this one for "fraud." It claimed that Mr. Wu had illegally aided the steel company boss in preparing false documentation to account for the money the steel company paid Mr. Wu in 2003.

The three indictments each claimed that Mr. Wu confessed to the various charges. The last week of May, with Mr. Wu in custody, Lake Tai cried for help. Nitrogen and phosphorous, the untreated residue of chemical processing, fertilizer, and sewage, built up to record levels, while rainfall fell short.

Lake Tai's Revenge

Lake Tai had algal blooms before. This time, according to an analysis by the State Environmental Protection Administration, cyanobacteria "exploded" at rates that had not been seen in the past. Much of the lake was covered with a deep, foul-smelling canopy that left most of the 2.3 million people in Wuxi, the biggest city on the northern part of the lake, without drinking water for many days.

Local officials initially called the outbreak a "natural disaster." But state media rushed to the scene, and some showed pictures of chemical factories dumping waste into the lake even as residents formed long lines at supermarkets to buy bottled water.

Neighboring cities shut sluice gates and canal locks to prevent contamination, creating a monumental maritime traffic jam and further reducing circulation around Lake Tai. The problem did not ease until central authorities ordered Yangtze River water diverted into the lake. Even then, the bloom lingered into late summer.

Mr. Wen convened a meeting of the State Council to discuss the matter. "The pollution of Lake Tai has sounded the alarm for us," state media quoted him as saying. "The problem has never been tackled at its root."

Five party and government officials in Yixing and Zhoutie, including three involved in environmental work, were dismissed or demoted. Li Yuanchao, the party boss of Jiangsu Province, vowed to clean up Lake Tai even if it meant taking a 15 percent cut to the province's economic output. Authorities pledged to shut down hundreds of the most egregious polluters in their most sweeping crackdown to date.

Ms. Xu, Mr. Wu's wife, said she hoped the authorities would conclude that it would be improper, or at least inconvenient, to prosecute Mr. Wu under such conditions. His trial, initially scheduled for June, was delayed, prompting speculation that someone at a higher level had intervened.

But although Mr. Wu's arrest generated attention in both the domestic and international media, there is no indication that central government officials objected to his prosecution. On a Friday afternoon in August, the road in front of Yixing's courthouse filled with Volkswagen Santanas, the standard-issue sedans of China's police and security services. In a park nearby, officials hung a banner advertising the city's new status as a "Model City for Environmental Protection."

The evidence against Mr. Wu consisted mainly of written testimony and his own confession. The judges rejected a request by Mr. Wu's lawyer to summon prosecution witnesses for cross-examination.

Mr. Wu told the judges in open court that the police had deprived him of food and forced him to stay awake for five days and five nights in succession, relenting only when he signed a written confession. He said that the confession was coerced and that he was innocent. The judges ruled that since Mr. Wu could not prove that he had been tortured, his confession remained valid.

Mr. Wu lost his temper. "Since I was a child I have never broken the law," he shouted, according to relatives who attended. "If I could right now, I would like to split you in two." He was sentenced to three years.

Shortly after the trial, Mr. Hang, the sundry shop owner and colleague of Mr. Wu, handed a reporter photos, clippings and documents collected over a decade of environmental work. He said he had no use for them now. Environmental work had become too risky.

He said he had recently seen some little fish darting around in the milky green water of a canal nearby. He took it as a good sign. "Once the white shrimp come back, that would be good," he said. The white shrimp had not come back just yet.

Jake Hooker contributed reporting from Beijing and Zhoutie.

More Articles in International »

Tips

To find reference information about the words used in this article, double-click on any word, phrase or name. A new window will open with a dictionary definition or encyclopedia entry.

Past Coverage

In Another Title Shake-Up, Kentucky Shocks Tigers (October 13, 2007)
Under China's Booming North, the Future Is Drying Up (September 28, 2007)
A Slippery, Writhing Trade Dispute (July 3, 2007)
World Briefing | Asia: China: Cities Suffer More Pollution (June 13, 2007)

Related Searches

China
Water Pollution
Environment
Factories and Industrial Plants