

China's Pollution Olympics

By [Peter Navarro](#), [Asia Times](#). Posted **July 15, 2008**.

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Sometimes it's the little stories that tell us the most. Consider the news of a keel-crippling algal bloom covering a third of the Olympic sailing course in Qingdao, China. While a small army of workers, a large armada of boats, and a full battalion of dump trucks and bulldozers are desperately trying to clear up this embarrassing counterpoint to China's claim of a "green games", international competitors desperate for practice are forced to stew in dry dock.

In fact, this kind of event is far from atypical in the world's most polluted nation. Today, fully 70 percent of China's seven major rivers are severely polluted, 80 percent of its rivers fail to meet standards for fishing, and 90 percent of the country's cities suffer from some degree of water pollution. As a result, over 700 million Chinese drink fetid water of a quality well below World Health Organization standards. Meanwhile, liver and stomach cancers related to water pollution are among the leading causes of death in the countryside, while 21 cities along the Yellow River are characterized by the highest measurable levels of pollution.

As for this particular and particularly extensive -- algal bloom in Qingdao, it is being caused in large part by equally massive misuse of fertilizer. As the world's largest fertilizer user, China consumes more than 50 million tonnes annually. Far too often, untrained peasants apply far too much fertilizer to their meager plots in the false hopes of boosting yields. The result has been a new kind of "flooding" problem, that of excess fertilizer runoff flooding into rivers and streams.

With this runoff, fertilizer nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphates have triggered an explosion of algal blooms as part of a broader process of "eutrophication". This eutrophication process literally sucks the oxygen out of the water and kills all fish and plant life. The net result is an extremely foul-smelling and turbid dead body of water.

A case in point is the algal blooms that keep hitting China's third-largest lake, Lake Tai. Famous for its classic beauty, the lake is more than a major tourist attraction. It also supplies water to 30 million people. Cleaning up of this lake alone is going to cost more than US\$14 billion while panic buying of bottled water during Lake Tai's repeated algal blooms have driven the price of bottled water as high as \$1.50 per liter.

As we see now in Qingdao, China's algal blooms are hardly restricted to its rivers and lakes. China's coastal waters are also suffering mightily from a growing epidemic of "red tides" -- an oceangoing version of eutrophication. The problem is particularly acute in the relatively shallow Bohai and Yellow Seas off northern China where Qingdao is located and where there is minimal tidal exchange.

These red tides are rapidly destroying fish stocks and devastating marine life for both the country and its neighbors while China has seen an astonishing 40-fold increase in the incidence of red tides in just the past few years.

The broader picture that emerges from this little story is a big country choking to death on a wide variety of pollutants. Because of the toxic nature of China's water and air, many Olympic athletes are training in adjacent countries like Japan and South Korea and will fly into China only for brief stopovers for their events next month.

What that says about today's China speaks volumes about the country's need to deal with what is emerging as one of the most far-reaching and irresponsible environmental disasters the world has ever seen. Perhaps the global embarrassment of China's Pollution Olympics will be a catalyst China needs to responsibly confront its environmental problems.

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