

South Asia's Massive Brown Clouds

CORE CASE STUDY

Air pollution is no longer viewed as primarily a localized urban problem. Annual satellite images and recent studies by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) have found massive, dark brown clouds of pollution—called the *South Asian Brown Clouds*—stretching across much of India, Bangladesh, and the industrial heart of China as well as parts of the western Pacific Ocean (Figure 18-1).

In most years, this 3-kilometer- (2-mile) thick set of clouds covers an area about the size of the continental United States. The clouds contain small particles of dust, smoke, and ash resulting from drought and the clearing and burning of forests for planting crops. They also contain particles of soot (mostly from the burning of biomass such as wood and animal dung); acidic compounds from vehicle exhaust and from emissions from coal-burning power plants; and particles of toxic metals such as mercury and lead, produced mostly by coal-burning facilities, smelters (see Figure 14-11, p. 355) and waste incinerators.

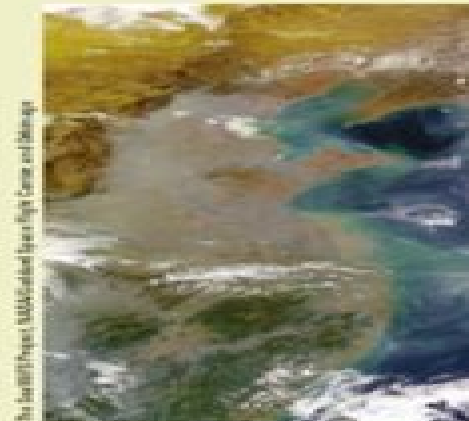
Instead of blue skies, many of the people living under these clouds see brown or gray polluted skies much of the year (Figure 18-2). The clouds are changing weather patterns and affecting food production in China by causing decreased rainfall in the north and increased flooding in the south.

Another problem with the enormous South Asian Brown Clouds is that they do not stay put—they can move across continents within three to four days. Also, satellites have tracked the spread of dense clouds of pollutants from northern China across the Pacific Ocean to the west coast of the United States. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), using measurements by atmospheric scientists, estimates that on certain days, nearly 25% of the particulate matter, 77% of the black carbon (soot), and 33% of the toxic mercury in the skies above Los Angeles, California, can be traced to China's coal-fired power

plants, smelters, wood and dung fires, diesel trucks, and dust storms blowing out of drought-stricken and deforested areas.

Satellite measurements show that these and other long-lived air pollutants from China, India, the United States, or anywhere else on the planet can circle the entire globe in about 2 weeks. Air pollution connects us all.

The history of air pollution control in Europe and the United States shows that pollution such as that in the South Asian Brown Clouds can be reduced fairly quickly by enacting and enforcing standards for coal-burning industries and utilities, and by shifting from coal to cleaner-burning natural gas for industries and homes. China and India are beginning to take such steps but they have a long way to go.



An EarthSatellite Image of the South Asian Brown Clouds

Figure 18-1 The South Asian Brown Clouds are gigantic clouds of dust, smoke, soot, and other pollutants that stretch over much of South Asia. One is visible here over eastern China.



Shanghai, China

Figure 18-2 Shanghai, China, is one of a number of Asia's large cities that have been polluted and darkened by the regional haze from the cocktail of pollutants in the South Asian Brown Clouds. Other cities affected by these clouds include Beijing, China; Bangkok, Thailand; Cairo, Egypt; and Mumbai and New Delhi, India.

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SJ Ball



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