

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.

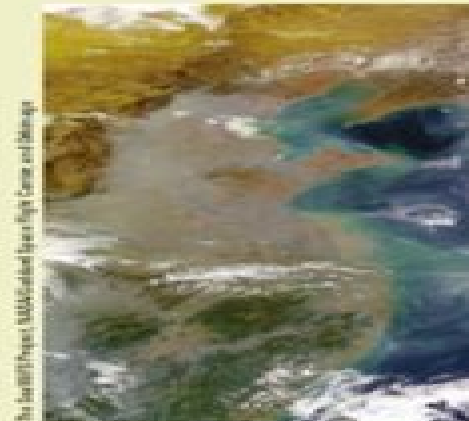
Instead of blue skies, many of the people living under these clouds see brown or gray polluted skies much of the year (Figure 18-2). The clouds are changing weather patterns and affecting food production in China by causing decreased rainfall in the north and increased flooding in the south.

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.



As Satellite Images Show, the South Asian Brown Clouds are massive.

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, 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.

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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Table of Contents Living In The Environment 17th Edition

1. Understanding the eBook Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - The Rise of Digital Reading Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Personalized Recommendations

- Living In The Environment 17th Edition User Reviews and Ratings
- Living In The Environment 17th Edition and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing Living In The Environment 17th Edition Free and Paid eBooks
 - Living In The Environment 17th Edition Public Domain eBooks
 - Living In The Environment 17th Edition eBook Subscription Services
 - Living In The Environment 17th Edition Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Living In The Environment 17th Edition eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - Living In The Environment 17th Edition Compatibility with Devices
 - Living In The Environment 17th Edition Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Interactive Elements Living In The Environment 17th Edition
- 8. Staying Engaged with Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers Living In The Environment 17th Edition
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Living In The Environment 17th Edition
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Setting Reading Goals Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Living In The Environment 17th Edition
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Living In The Environment 17th Edition

- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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