

China and India 'hold the world in balance'

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Development giants China and India “hold the world in balance”, says a new report by a US environmental think tank.

“The choices these two countries make in the next few years will lead the world either towards growing ecological and political instability – or down a development path based on efficiency and better stewardship of resources,” says a report from the Worldwatch Institute in Washington DC, US.

One in every two tonnes of cement poured today will be in China – such is the country’s breakneck pace of economic development. The country also uses one-quarter of all the world’s steel, eats one-third of the world’s rice, and is the world’s largest importer of tropical timber and second largest importer of oil.

As well as using ever more resources, the two countries are also creating an increasing proportion of the world’s pollution. China, which gets two-thirds of its energy from coal, is now the second largest source of greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, while India is fourth, says Worldwatch’s *State of the World 2006* report.

Head count

The two countries argue that while they are high in the league tables of environmental damage, this is only because of their huge populations – their citizens, per head, cause only a fraction of the environmental damage of individual Europeans or North Americans.

Worldwatch agrees with this, estimating the worldwide “ecological footprint” – the amount of resources needed to support each individual – of the average Chinese person at 1.6 hectares, the average Indian at 0.8 hectares. The average US citizen’s ecological footprint is estimated at a whopping 9.7 hectares.

Nonetheless, veteran US ecologist and China-watcher Lester Brown last week warned that if China’s economy continues to grow at the present rate, average

Chinese incomes will reach current US levels by 2031. At that point “China would consume two-thirds of the world’s current grain harvest and twice the world’s current paper production”.

Leapfrogging

However, the think tank warns against assuming that economic growth is an environmental problem only in poor countries. “Record-shattering consumption levels in the US and Europe” are equally to blame, stresses Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch. In the past decade alone, the ecological footprint of the average American has grown by the same amount as the total footprint of a Chinese person today.

But Flavin says countries like China and India have the chance to develop in a more benign way than already industrialised nations. “[By] leapfrogging today’s industrial powers, they can become world leaders in sustainable energy and agriculture within a decade,” he says.

This is not unrealistic. China recently announced plans for the world’s first “eco-city” on marshes outside Shanghai. India has the world’s fourth largest wind-power industry and plans to generate one-quarter of its energy from renewables.

“We are resolved to change practice of polluting first and cleaning up later, and we are striving to build a resource-saving, environmentally friendly society,” says Xie Zhenhua, the former director of China’s State Environmental Protection Administration, in a foreword to the report.

After writing the foreword, Xie was sacked in the aftermath of the highly publicised chemical spill on Songhua River in northern China last November.