



Department of Anthropology

Why Anthropology Matters

"One important contribution of environmental anthropology should be to work with community members to shape development policies that promote both human welfare and long-term environmental sustainability." Dr. Bryan Tilt

Environmental Anthropology & Sustainable Development



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The United States and China recently inaugurated a partnership to reduce air and water pollution. The Joint Committee on Environmental Cooperation met for the first time in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 9, 2005. Both sides vowed to work together to reduce toxic emissions, assess impacts of pollution, and clean up contaminated sites.



Research

Oregon State University anthropologist Bryan Tilt views the process with interest. An environmental anthropologist, he examines how natural resource policy decisions affect the social and cultural dynamics of rural communities including those in China.

Since 2001, Tilt's research has taken him to an industrial township in southern Sichuan Province. Using data from ethnographic surveys, Tilt has found that most community members perceive a significant threat to their health and livelihood from industrial pollution. That finding flies in the face of conventional wisdom in risk research, namely that impoverished individuals and communities tend to worry less about environmental risk than their better-off counterparts.

Tilt's findings have important implications for the study of environmental risk. He explains,

"The study of risk is important to anthropology as it engages environmental and health issues. Risks occur at the interface of society, technology, and the environment. The creation and distribution of environmental risks tells us something about people's capacity for managing the physical and social environment."

Environmental Justice

As for broader social implications, because environmental anthropology assists policy-making and program planning, Tilt is interested to learn whether there is a green movement among rural dwellers in China, driven by concerns about the adverse effects of pollution on their health and ability to make a living. "As Westerners we can talk about environmental justice," Tilt says, "but the idea doesn't exist in China. In fact, Western ideas about the rule of law, including respect for individual rights and property rights, are not the same within the Chinese cultural and political context." He says he didn't witness any environmental activism among his informants but that it will take further inquiry to determine whether the impetus for such a movement exists.

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Impact

Tilt has also returned to China to do research funded by the National Science Foundation. He was the co-principal investigator on a project to examine how rural industry drives labor migration. It took him to a community 50 kilometers away from the area where he conducted his risk-perception research.

The proximity gave Tilt the opportunity to see how concerns about pollution have spurred informants from the earlier study to take political action to redress their grievances.

The research in China reflects Tilt's ongoing interest on the impact of environmental and economic policy on rural populations. "People with the least political power are the most vulnerable to environmental changes," Tilt said.

Ultimately, Tilt's research program on the environmental effects of



industrialization is part of a broader effort to contribute to sustainable development in rural China. This would mean acknowledging that the country's rapid industrial growth has caused widespread environmental damage, and taking steps to mitigate the damage.

Environmental Anthropology

Tilt feels strongly that one important contribution of environmental anthropology should be to work with community members to shape development policies that promote both human welfare and long-term environmental sustainability. This is particularly important in China, a nation of 1.3 billion people whose economic policies, and their ecological consequences, affect the entire world. He collaborates on projects with Chinese colleagues from Sichuan University, the Sichuan Nationalities Research Institute, and the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences.

The Anthropology Department at Oregon State University is proud to be a sponsor of Tilt's important work.

