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Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

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March 28, 2009 in [missives from academia](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

I began reading Pallavi Aiyar's [Smoke and Mirrors](#) on my flight to Philadelphia last week to get me into a China-India frame of mind before I attended the "[Asia and the Environment](#)" conference held at Saint Joseph's University on March 20-21. Although Friday's sessions (which I unfortunately missed) were devoted to India, and Saturday's topic was China, the goal of the conference organizers was to encourage some comparative discussion of the environmental problems—and possible solutions—shared by the two countries. Readers interested in specific presentations should watch the above SJU website, where podcasts of the talks will be available in the future; for now, I'll share a few of the most frequently recurring themes from Saturday's events.

As Ken Pomeranz pointed out in "[China's Water Woes](#)" (Feb. 12, 2009, China Beat), China and India are inextricably bound by their shared water resources. Since China controls the headwaters of many of Asia's major rivers, this gives Beijing a tremendous amount of control over the fates of various populations living beyond Chinese borders. Pollution, of course, doesn't stop at national boundaries, and dams built in China have major effects on downstream communities. Given the increasing scarcity of unpolluted water in Asia, the potential for international conflict over river resources seems to be heightening with each new dam project or toxic spill.

To put a more positive spin on this situation, however, several conference-goers emphasized that dependence on shared resources also provides China, India, and other Asian countries new opportunities for negotiation and cooperation. How much optimism is warranted? Perhaps not as much as I have, but the transboundary nature of environmental issues does seem to offer an ideal platform for countries to develop good working relationships with each other. State officials simply cannot afford to ignore the necessity of collaborating with leaders in other countries; it is in their best interests to unite together as they attack environmental problems.

As one panelist at the concluding round table discussion noted, "We can talk about Asia as a whole through the environment," and it would seem natural for China and India to take the lead in promoting environmental protection throughout the continent. Although a fair number of ominous-sounding facts and figures were mentioned by different speakers as they related the terrifying extent of Asia's environmental troubles, the final message that I took away from my day at the conference was the importance of looking beyond the problems and thinking more about what's being done right, and seeing the creative solutions taking hold in response to various crises.

State leaders, NGOs, and private corporations throughout Asia are already stepping in to address environmental issues, and will hopefully make enough progress to prevent any sort of catastrophic event in the future. The next major step that needs to be taken is for those organizations to recognize how essential international cooperation is for environmental protection measures to work. China alone is not "[Choking on Growth](#)"; the country shares its problems—and, with luck, successes—with every one of its neighbors.