

Editorial

Environmental aesthetics and athletics

The August 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China marks an important but underappreciated point in environmental health discourse. The “green” qualifier made its debut in describing the games, and air quality commanded the same level of attention as threats of political boycotts in the days preceding 8/8/08. A testament to the lofty position of environmental issues in the Olympics is the widespread advertisement of a specially designed logo, in the appearance of an exuberant human form juggling numerous leafy green plates (Figure 1). The juggling act captures the sensitivity of the blossoming economic relationship between China and Africa, which was tested recently as some globetrotters and juggernauts protested the situation in Darfur, Sudan and the purported inaction of China in denouncing human rights abuses. But the important story for us is in the intersections of the quadratic relationship between environment, international affairs, human health, and technology. The complexity of the relationship can be illustrated by protests that arose over the action of certain American athletes who covered their noses with activated carbon filters when they disembarked from an airplane for the Olympics in Beijing.

Humans everywhere have an innate understanding of the connection between aesthetics and health. The connection explains why we tend to avoid “dirty” products and environments, although the level of tolerance varies considerably within and between people and cultures. Nevertheless, in desperation, we occasionally breathe dirty air, drink dirty water, and eat contaminated food. In many situations, the “dirt” is obvious to the unaided eye – as in urban smog and cloudy water – and the outcome is predictable as the variations in the local burden of disease reflect this desperation. Most people find the slimy brown layer of smog repulsive, except that even when one is inside such an environment, the smog seems deceptively far away, thereby increasing the level of tolerance. In general, the difference between perception and reality has to do with the critical reflection on how we perceive and value nature, defined in axiology as *environmental aesthetics*¹. Athletes from most nations of the world converged in Beijing, to participate in activities that are admired as much for the grace with which their performance is executed, as for the increasing recognition of the health benefits of physical activity throughout the life course. However, the full benefits of physical activity can only be derived in unpolluted environments. Jogging in smoggy conditions will provoke and exacerbate respiratory problems, and the body will not function properly if it is burdened with toxic pesticides and heavy metals.

The relationship between China and Africa promises to be economically beneficial to all parties involved, but there is also a danger that environmental quality will suffer if this relationship is built upon the old model of industrial activity that carelessly exploits environmental resources. The hope is that China’s new found focus on environmental issues will survive the Olympic ceremonies to influence all Sino-African affairs. We may differ in our thresholds of tolerance through innate differences in environmental aesthetics, but we can have uniform standards that protect human health. This is the function of international environmental policies such as those articulated by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) based in Nairobi, Kenya (<http://www.unep.org/>). It is heartwarming that the UNEP’s first Environmental Champion is China’s Olympic athlete, Yao Ming². To further sweeten the relationships between environment and industrial activity, and between China and Africa, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) officially opened the Centre for South-South Industrial Cooperation (UCSSIC) on 23 July 2008 in Beijing, China³.

The UNEP and UCSSIC must now build upon the environmental aesthetics and athletic momentum established through the Beijing Olympics to ensure that only good tidings come out of Sino-African collaborations in business and in health.

¹ CARLSON, ALLEN (2002). Environmental aesthetics. In E. Craig (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge. Retrieved August 18, 2008, from <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/M047>.

² UNEP. 2008. Top Olympic Athlete Yao Ming Becomes UNEP’s First Environmental Champion. <http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=543&ArticleID=5894&l=en>. Retrieved on 18 August, 2008.

³ UNIDO. 2008. UCSSIC in Beijing. [http://www.unido.org/index.php?id=128&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=222&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=6&cHash=f9bd9664b7](http://www.unido.org/index.php?id=128&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=222&tx_ttnews[backPid]=6&cHash=f9bd9664b7). Retrieved on 18 August 2008.

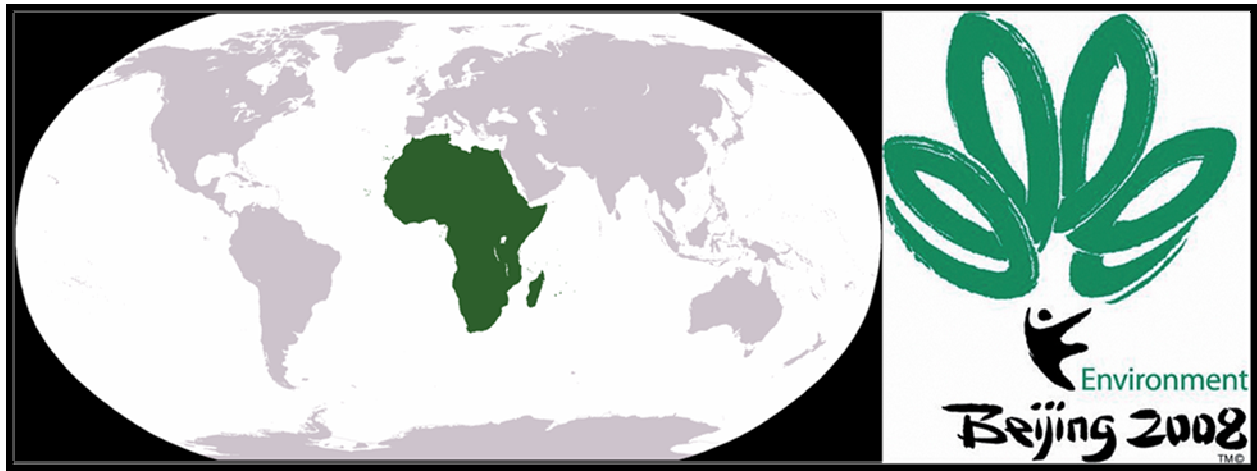


Figure 1. The greening of the relationship between Africa and China is essential, and should build upon the global exposure to environmental and economic challenges highlighted by the 2008 Olympics. The logo of Environment Beijing 2008 by courtesy, The Beijing Organizing Committee for the Games of the XXIX Olympiad (BOCOG; <http://en.beijing2008.cn/bocog/> and <http://en.beijing2008.cn/bocog/environment/guidelines/n214068399.shtml>).

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