

China and India are making a Greener Earth

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Despite climate change, water scarcity and the many ills affecting the planet, this generation is living on an increasingly greener Earth.

Measurements from space show that some parts of the northern hemisphere, notably China and India, are a lot greener than they used to be, which is potentially very good news for the climate.

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Up to now scientists who have already noted the appearance of global greening thought it was because plants were responding to the fact there was more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (which is needed for photosynthesis) and so were growing faster, in a process known as the fertiliser effect.

This turns out to be only partly true, because a new study reported in the online community Nature Research Sustainability has shown that it is more intensive agriculture and the use of much more artificial farm fertilisers that is one of the main contributors to greening.

This is causing its own environmental damage by polluting watercourses and damaging biodiversity.

But despite these reservations there is much good news in the latest research. Since the turn of the century China has shown a remarkable growth in its green areas because of the planting of new forests and the intensification of agriculture. Although the country contains only 6.6% of the global vegetated area, it alone accounts for 25% of the net increase in leaf area of the planet in that time.

Of this, 42% of the increase in green areas was from newly planted forest and 32% from croplands. The forests are designed to hold back the deserts, cut air pollution and reduce climate change.

Brazil leads browners

They compiled a league table of greening and the reverse – browning – where satellites show countries have degraded or abandoned land and so reduced the vegetation cover.

Brazil, which has more green land than any other country on the planet, came top of the browning table, having degraded 11.6% of its green land since 2000. Indonesia came second in the browning table with 6.8%, Argentina a close third with 6.7%, and Canada fourth with 5.7%.

This does not tell the whole story, because while some land became browner other patches became greener, so in nearly all countries the browning was balanced out by greening. Altogether the Earth became a lot greener in this period, particularly in the northern hemisphere.

The Nature study concludes that a third of the vegetated land on Earth is becoming greener, in other words more productive, but this is not simply the effect of more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

Most of the greening is down to more intensive agricultural practices, as in China and India, and more planting of forests. This, rather than the fertiliser effect, is responsible for at least a third or probably more of the greening of the Earth this century. – Climate News Network

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