

Dust to Dust!

“Dust thou art, to dust returnest” is one of those phrases that has remained in memory longer than the rest of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “The Psalm of Life”. The poet knew his 19th Century readers would recognize the reference to Genesis (3: 19) and even in the 21st Century the line resonates as we contemplate the coming of Ash Wednesday.

Dust and dusting are not the constants in our lives as they once were. Do you remember when your mother would trace “dust me” on the furniture in your room when you were growing up? High summer finds us in dust-free air-conditioned interiors but nonetheless dust deserves our attention. Dust is the bits of our planet! Although moved around willy-nilly by wind, newer scientific methods can tell us from where the dust came, from China, for example, to our windowsills? Amazing! The mystery of how and where it settles has been explored by scientists, who are drilling into the surface of the planet in their determination to understand and explain the weather patterns throughout the centuries.

Those of us who were around in the 1930s remember the greatest environmental disaster in US history. By plowing up the Midwest grassland for wheat, that land, when hit by droughts and strong winds, became airborne. Once an area of cherished farms, those lands became dust bowls, the farms quite literally blown away. And the people, in a sad migration, drifted west, giving rise to a genre of novels and plays.

Something similar happened in Russia in the 1950s and 60s. One hundred million acres of grassland was plowed under in Russian Kazakhstan and Western Siberia in an attempt to feed people. When drought hit, the topsoil blew away. Currently there are two new dust bowls in the making, not from over-plowing as was done here and in the Soviet Union but by overgrazing on China’s grasslands. These semi-arid grasslands are suited to grazing but as both the population of sheep, goats, and people balloon, 90% of China’s grasslands are becoming degraded. Sadly, this means villages are deserted and people migrate to cities looking for work.

A dust storm in 2006 dumped 330,00 tons of dust on Beijing, and no, I have no idea how this phenomenon is weighed. The following year a dust storm originating in a China desert circled the globe, reminding us that this is, indeed, just one world. Korea has a similar story and desertification continues to plague Africa. This is a serious problem but it can be avoided by long-range planning to preserve the fertility of the land and although an expensive process taking many years, deserts are being reclaimed, plot by plot, on several formerly desolate places on the planet.

Update on Wind:

For the wide open spaces a wind farm featuring tall towers of blades converting wind to energy are great. But not here! Not in our small-scale environment are these marvels appropriate. However we may eventually profit from the savings wind energy bestows. A curious device invented at Cornell University uses little blocks of foam loosely set into a panel in such a way that they vibrate in the wind to convert the oscillation to energy. Whether this idea becomes practical or not isn’t really the issue. What is important is the fact that all over the world there are smart people coming up with ideas that shared and proliferated will lead us to that era, ‘beyond coal’.

All Rube Goldberg jokes aside, wind energy generation is on the rise worldwide. Even in our Johnny-come-lately US, five of our states generate more than 10% of the electricity they use by wind power. In some areas small variations of those towers have become practical. Even

better news is that 67% of the equipment used is made right here in this country by 75,000 employees.

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