

China's Land Resources and Land Use Change

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Abstract

Studies of land use change in China have long been hampered by the lack of accurate and reliable data. This research analyzes systematic data on land use gathered in the 1996 survey, the first nation-wide land survey ever conducted in the history of the People's Republic. The actual size of the Chinese territory on the mainland in 1996 was 9.5 million square kilometers, not 9.6 million as generally believed. It took the world's third largest position next to Russia and Canada. Over two-thirds or 67 percent of China's land coverage were devoted to agricultural activities. The bulk of the construction land was widely scattered in the countryside as a result of rural industrialization and urbanization. The 1996 land survey revealed a total cultivated land of 130 million hectares, nearly 40 percent more than what was reported by local cadres to the State Statistical Bureau. Much of the "discovered" farmland was located in the hilly and mountainous regions where the quality of land is low. Cultivated land per capita continued to drop because of the growing population. Only 14 percent of China's land was cultivable and cultivated land per capita was a mere 0.106 hectare which was significantly smaller than the world's average of 0.236 hectare. A comparison of data for 1949 and 1996 revealed a pattern of land use change characterized by the expansion of cultivated and construction land at the expense of pasture and unused land subsequent to the environmentally disastrous campaigns of land reclamation. The processes of agricultural restructuring, rural industrialization, and rapid urbanization since the 1990s have given rise to a new trend of massive farmland loss for the benefits of market farming and non-agricultural developments. Newly reclaimed low-graded farmland in environmentally fragile frontier regions has never been able to compensate the loss of fertile land in the southeastern part of the country where multiple cropping index and population density are high. There is pressing need for China to use its limited land resources most efficiently and effectively for the sake of not only its own growing population but also the globalizing world.