November 6th: International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflicts

November 6th marks the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflicts. In observing this day, the General Assembly of the United Nations recognizes “that damage to the environment in times of armed conflict impairs ecosystems and natural resources long after the period of conflict, often extending beyond the limits of national territories and the present generation.”

“But there is another dangerous menace which threatens us, namely war. Unfortunately, modern science already has the capacity to change the environment for hostile purposes. Alterations of this kind over the long term could have unforeseeable and still more serious consequences. Despite the international agreements which prohibit chemical, bacteriological and biological warfare, the fact is that laboratory research continues to develop new offensive weapons capable of altering the balance of nature.

Today, any form of war on a global scale would lead to incalculable ecological damage. But even local or regional wars, however limited, not only destroy human life and social structures, but also damage the land, ruining crops and vegetation as well as poisoning the soil and water. The survivors of war are forced to begin a new life in very difficult environmental conditions, which in turn create situations of extreme social unrest, with further negative consequences for the environment.”

Pope John Paul II, 1990 World Day of Peace Message, #12

REFLECTIONS

Modern warfare causes extensive environmental destruction. Warfare destroys natural vegetation and disrupts food production and disturbs and destroys ecosystems. It destroys wildlife, disrupts native habitats and contaminates the land, air and water. The damage can last for generations.

Bombs, missiles, shells, bullets, and military fuels poison our land, air and water with lead, nitrates, nitrites, hydrocarbons, phosphorous, radioactive debris, corrosive and toxic heavy metals

Even in peace time, or during preparation for war, military activities actively contribute to the loss of precious natural resources and to environmental damage. Production, testing and maintenance of conventional, chemical, biological and nuclear weapons produce large quantities of poisons and radioactive substances and poison the earth, the air and the waters of our planet.

“War not only causes human suffering. It can also be devastating to the environment. Long after peace has been restored, the negative environmental impacts of conflict often remain.

The United Nations is now regularly invited to assess how conflict affects the environment . . . The lesson to be drawn is that modern warfare needs environmental rules, just as earlier wars highlighted the need to regulate the impact of war on civilians and prisoners of war.

Every effort must be made to limit the environmental destruction caused by conflict. The international community must unreservedly condemn all deliberate destruction of the environment during conflict.”

Excerpted from UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s address for the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict, 2002

Source: Environmentalists Against War, www.envirosagainstwar.org
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Kuwait, 1991
A scientist from a Desert Laboratory toured Kuwait’s burnt-out oilfields. “I’ve never seen such devastation. Kuwait’s desert before the Gulf War was very healthy, despite centuries of nomadic grazing and decades of oil development. It supported substantial greenery and wildlife. But now it’s coated in oil residues that affect water permeability, seed germination and microbial life. Plants are dying because they can’t breathe through blackened leaves under dark skies.”

Capping the burning oil wells took ten months. Crude oil released into the sea killed tens of thousands of marine birds and mammals. Oil from extinguished wells formed huge petrochemical lakes, destroying the land surface. Toxic smoke and fumes killed migratory birds and aggravated human chest conditions. A veterinarian at the liberation of Kuwait said: “I saw birds just dropping out of the sky. Later I found a herd of dead camels covered with dead flies: whatever killed the camels killed the flies at the same time.”

Vietnam, 1962-71
US military carried out a massive herbicidal program in Vietnam for almost a decade. With 72 million liters of chemical spray, they defoliated the forests which provided cover for guerrillas.

“All our coconut trees died,” recalled a woman ten years later, in hospital with a third miscarriage, and also having chemotherapy; she asked not to be identified. “Some of our animals died, and those that lived had deformed offspring. The seeds of the rice became very small, and we couldn’t use them for replanting.”

People exposed to the spray suffered headaches, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness and chest complaints. Meanwhile, Agent Orange’s carcinogenic dioxin was sinking into the soil, washing into the sea, and entering the food chain, where it is still at work today. Children born since the war have consumed high levels of dioxin; and many fathered by men exposed to the spray (many of whom are now dead or suffering from cancers) have spina bifida and other congenital abnormalities.

Discussion Questions
Prior to today, did you ever consider the environment a casualty of war? Why or why not?

Why do you think that the environmental destruction caused by war and preparation for war is so rarely discussed in the news? Have you heard or read any news about environmental destruction caused by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq earlier this year? If so, share what you know with the rest of the group. What are some current proposals (if any) for reversing or reducing the environmental devastation?

The state of the environment is intrinsically related to issues of human life and development. Why do you think that international law regulates the impact of war on both civilians and prisoners of war, but not on the environment? How is this inconsistent? More importantly, why do conflicts and wars continue, despite the grave ecological threats they pose to the entire human family—even the supposed victors?

What new knowledge have you gained from the case studies? What are some ways that you can stay informed about the environmental impacts of war and preparations for war both in the U.S. and around the world?