

WAR & ENVIRONMENT speech for IPAN's No War on Iran rally, Sun 22 Sept 2019
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Gillian Hunter.

In peacetime many of our routine practices as a society are already effectively aggressions to nature - clearing land for stock grazing, export driven mono-cultures of grain crops, over fishing, draining essential water sources for irrigation of commercial crops of geographically inappropriate plant species like cotton, etc, etc. But military activity has hugely significant impacts on the environment. It produces massive amounts of greenhouse gases, pollution, and resource depletion and has other disastrous impacts.

To give an idea of what various wars have done to this our one planet home:

The effects of colonialism and war on tropical forests. Land theft by the Spanish and American colonial powers went hand in hand with the exploitation of tropical woodlands. The Spanish in particular harvested massive quantities of various hardwoods for the construction of forts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

During WWII governments funded extensive research into the technology of timber exploitation and paved the way for massive postwar tropical logging.

In Vietnam War chemical agents were used to destroy vegetation. The Viet Cong remained invisible by taking cover in dense vegetation, so US and Aust troops used more than 20 million gallons of herbicides to defoliate forests, clear growth for military sites and eliminate the locals' crops. Vegetation was unable to regenerate and left behind bare mudflats even many years after spraying. Only a small fraction of bird and mammal life survived. The long-term effects of such herbicides cause cancers and other diseases.

The Rwandan civil war created a massive migration to refugee camps and put huge pressure on the ecosystem. Forests were cleared for wood for shelters and cooking. The park became the first UNESCO world heritage site listed as endangered because of the conflict's depleting natural resources and diverse wildlife, including rare mountain gorillas.

In the disorder and desperation of war the protections for precious wildlife habitats evaporate.

The massive influx of high-powered weaponry into areas means that during and after conflict, the scale of poaching can increase dramatically. In just two months in 2006, rebels in the DRC slaughtered almost the entire hippopotamus population of two major rivers - changing the ecosystem forever. Throughout Africa, war has produced decline of wildlife populations inside national parks and other protected areas. In all wars, displaced people congregate *en masse* without infrastructure to support them so refugees turn to the environment in order to fulfil basic needs.

Climate change is going to create unprecedented refugeeism.

World War II's destruction was massive. The ecological effects of it are still visible 7 decades after the conflict. European forests experienced traumatic impacts from fighting. Forests in the battle zones were shattered. Use of heavily hazardous chemicals was first begun. The long-term effects of chemicals result from both their persistence and the poor disposal program of nations with stockpiled weapons. During WWI, German chemists had developed chlorine gas and mustard gas. The development of the gases led to many casualties, and poisoned lands on and near the battlefields.

In WWII, chemists developed even more harmful chemical bombs, which were packaged in barrels and directly deposited in the oceans. Marine ecosystems were damaged not only from chemical contaminants, but also from wreckage from naval ships, which leaked oil into the water. Oil contamination in the Atlantic due to shipwrecks was estimated at over 15 million tonnes. Oil spills are hard to clean up and it takes many years. To this day, oil can still be found in the Atlantic Ocean from the naval shipwrecks which happened during World War II.

Environmental impacts of practically all wars are drastic. They all reduce populations of flora and fauna and species diversity.

During the 1991 Gulf War, the Kuwaiti oil fires were a result of the scorched earth policy of Iraqi military forces retreating from Kuwait after conquering the country but being driven out by Coalition military forces. The Gulf War oil spill, regarded as the worst oil spill in history, was caused when Iraqi forces opened valves at the Sea Island oil terminal and dumped oil from several tankers into the Persian Gulf.

People do drastic and horrendous things in the propulsion of battle.

Even outside wartime The maintenance of standing armies just to counter the threat of war exerts enormous strain on environmental resources.

The US Department of Defense is the highest user of fossil fuel in the world and each year produces similar CO₂ total emissions of a mid-sized European country. And that's before they go to war. The carbon footprint of a deployed modern army is typically enormous.

As climate change worsens, resources will be a key source of conflict between nations: environmental degradation will exacerbate scarcities and become an additional reason for armed conflict. Obviously, a nation's survival depends on resources from its environment.

In order to maintain resource stability, chemical and nuclear warfare have been used by nations to protect or extract resources, and during conflict. These substances have been used frequently: massive amounts of chemical agent were employed during World War I, and during the Viet-Nam conflict. Nerve gas was used at lethal levels against humans and destroyed much biodiversity. Agent Orange was one of the herbicides and defoliants used by the British military during the Malayan Emergency and the US military in its herbicidal warfare program during the Vietnam War exposed nearly 5 million Vietnamese people to Agent Orange, and resulted in untold deaths and disabilities. Half a million children were born with birth defects. Agent Orange also caused major soil erosion to areas in

Malaya. The British government manipulated the numbers and kept its secret very tight in fear of negative world public opinion.

Secrecy over immoral acts is easy within the military it's so often "classified" info, they are not answerable; activities and methods are routinely hidden, under a 'security' cloak of protection from parliamentary and public scrutiny.

More examples of side-effects of war:

Explosive weapons don't always detonate properly and remain unexploded. This creates a serious physical and chemical hazard for the civilian populations living in areas which were once war zones, due to the possibility of detonation after the conflict, as well as the leaching of chemicals into the soil and groundwater.

Armed forces from around the world were responsible for the emission of two thirds of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that were banned in the 1987 for causing damage to the ozone layer.

During the Cold War over 50 nuclear warheads and 11 nuclear reactors were accidentally dropped into the ocean, they remain to this day on the ocean floor.

Military land use needs (such as for bases, training, storage etc) often displace people from their lands and homes. Military activity uses solvents, fuels and other toxic chemicals which leach their toxins into the environment and remain there for decades and even centuries. Heavy military vehicles cause damage to soil and infrastructure.

Military units are also highly resource intensive. Weapons and other equipment make up the second largest international trade sector. The International Peace Bureau says that more than fifty percent of the helicopters in the world are for military use, and approximately 25% of jet fuel consumption is by military vehicles. These vehicles are also extremely inefficient, carbon intensive, and discharge emissions that are more toxic than those of other vehicles.

Military funding is higher than ever before. Even in times of peace our militaries have a hugely damaging impact on nature.

The former UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon called on nations to do more to protect the environment from the devastation of war. "The environment has long been a silent casualty of war and armed conflict. From the contamination of land and the destruction of forests to the plunder of natural resources and the collapse of management systems, the environmental consequences of war are widespread and devastating," he said.

War changes our parameters. In the face of actual or perceived threat, acts that would normally be abhorrent become acceptable and even routine. One of the first of our sensibilities to be discarded is, it appears, the protection of nature.

According to the Institute for Economics and Peace, only 11 countries in the world are not involved in any conflict – despite this being "the most peaceful century in human history". Even in relatively peaceful countries the forces assembled to maintain security consume vast resources with relative impunity. While in war the environment suffers from deliberate abuse on a terrible scale.

During the first Gulf War, the US bombed Iraq with 340 tonnes of missiles containing depleted uranium. Consequent cancer rates have risen steeply. Researchers say the radiation from these weapons has poisoned the soil and water of Iraq, making the environment carcinogenic. The UK government meanwhile says these accusations are false. No comprehensive study has been done to establish or disprove the link between cancer and depleted uranium weapons but many are certain that depleted uranium results in genetic mutation – many disabled children are born.

Many contend that the most serious environmental damage caused to Iraq over the course of decades of war has been the systematic destruction of the country's apparatus of society, including the systems that supported the environment.

One scientist commentator said the images of 630 burning oil wells, torched by the retreating Iraqi army in Kuwait in 1991, advertised the inherent 'ecocide' of war. But this type of destruction is "the tip of the iceberg", she said. In the military "the environment goes out the window even outside of war."

In Afghanistan too, wildlife and habitats have disappeared. The past 30 years of war has stripped the country of its trees, including precious native pistachio woodlands. The Costs of War Project says illegal logging by US-backed warlords and wood harvesting by refugees caused more than one-third of Afghanistan's forests to vanish between 1990 and 2007. Drought, desertification and species loss have resulted. The number of migratory birds passing through Afghanistan has fallen by 85%.

Especially in a dry and arid region, rivers are essential for survival. Polluted rivers will spread the oil into other bodies of water, affecting all aquatic life for miles to come. Oil seepage from the wells destroys wetlands, as all the birds, aquatic life and plants get covered with oil, and have no oxygen to survive.

Bombs destroy quality of air. When detonated they release enormous quantities of radioactive material into the atmosphere, which is carcinogenic.

Environmental ill-effects of preparation for war are often much longer lasting than those of combat itself. The ecological impacts associated with military bases - unprecedented levels of energy use as well as chemical and nuclear contamination are wide reaching and substantial, because of the global reach and expansion of American military power.

Many of these examples could be considered violations of international law. The Geneva Convention places restrictions on methods of warfare "which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment". but the international legal protections are "rudimentary" and clearly ineffectual.

Warmongering has no conscience, negligible guiding moral code, it's win the prize at any cost. More often than not the declared justification for declaring war is self-protection or securing one's border rights but this is often mere pretext - the real motive is seizure of resources ...

In 2017 climate change was declared to accounts for 87 per cent of disasters worldwide. Some of the worst droughts in decades are continuing to unravel across south-eastern Africa and Latin America. Cyclonic storms, floods, wildfires like we're seeing here, and landslides are bearing on the world's most vulnerable populations.

Ensuring a healthily viable future of this world for our progeny should always be the number one priority. And meanwhile war is never a solution - violence incites retaliatory violence. This has universally and eternally been true.

Why can't we fight instead for climate adaptation? Then everyone, including the creatures and their habitats, would survive and thereby 'win'!