

The Environment And War



An Agent Orange spray run during the Vietnam War by UC-123B Provider aircraft.

As well as the cost to human life and society there are various environmental issues that result from war or from its preparation. Scorched earth methods during, or after war have been in use for much of recorded history but with modern technology war can cause a far greater devastation on the environment. Unexploded ordnance can render land unusable for further use or make access across it dangerous or fatal.

Agent Orange

Agent Orange is the code name for an herbicide and defoliant used by the U.S. military in its herbicidal warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War. An estimated 21,136,000 gallons of Agent Orange were sprayed across South Vietnam exposing 4.8 million Vietnamese people to Agent Orange, and resulting in 400,000 deaths and disabilities, and 500,000 children born with birth defects.

Atomic bombing in Japan

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the first use of an atomic weapon and it had a devastating effect on the built environment and on human life. The bombs killed as many as 140,000 people in Hiroshima and 80,000 in Nagasaki by the end of 1945, roughly half on the days of the bombings. Amongst these, 15 to 20% died from injuries or illness attributed to radiation poisoning. Since then, more have died from leukemia (231 observed) and solid cancers (334 observed) attributed to exposure to radiation released by the bombs. In both cities, the overwhelming majority of the dead were civilians.

Depleted uranium munitions

The use of depleted uranium in munitions is controversial because of numerous questions about potential long-term health effects. Normal functioning of the kidney, brain, liver, heart, and numerous other systems can be affected by uranium exposure, because in addition to being weakly radioactive, uranium is a toxic metal. It is weakly radioactive and remains so because of its long half-life. The aerosol produced during impact and combustion of depleted uranium munitions can potentially contaminate wide areas around the impact sites or can be inhaled by civilians and military personnel. In a three week period of conflict in Iraq during 2003 it was estimated over 1000 tons of depleted uranium munitions were used mostly in cities.

The U.S. Department of Defense claims that no human cancer of any type has been seen as a result of exposure to either natural or depleted uranium. Yet, U.S. DoD studies using cultured cells and laboratory rodents continue to suggest the possibility of leukemogenic, genetic, reproductive, and neurological effects from chronic exposure. In addition, the UK Pensions Appeal Tribunal Service in early 2004 attributed birth defect claims from a February 1991 Gulf War combat veteran to depleted uranium poisoning. Also, a 2005 epidemiology review concluded: "In aggregate the human epidemiological evidence is consistent with increased risk of birth defects in offspring of persons exposed to DU."

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Fossil fuel use

With the high degree of mechanisation of the military large amounts of fossil fuels are used. Fossil fuels are the major contributor to global warming and climate change, issues of increasing concern. Access to oil resources is also a factor for instigating a war. The United States Department of Defense (DoD) is a government body with the highest use of fossil fuel in the world. According to the 2005 *CIA World Factbook*, when compared with the consumption per country the DoD would rank 34th in the world in average daily oil use, coming in just behind Iraq and just ahead of Sweden.

Gulf War

During the first Gulf War the Kuwaiti oil fires were a result of the scorched earth policy of Iraqi military forces retreating from Kuwait in 1991 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.

Some American military personnel complained of Gulf War syndrome, typified by symptoms including immune system disorders and birth defects in their children. Whether it is due to time spent in active service during the war or for other reasons remains controversial.

Intentional flooding

Flooding can be used as scorched earth policy but using water to render land unusable. It can also be used to prevent the movement of military personnel. During the Second Sino-Japanese War dykes on the Yellow and the Yangtze Rivers were breached to halt the advance of Japanese forces.

Testing of nuclear armaments

Testing of nuclear armaments has been carried out at various places including Bikini Atoll, the Marshall Islands, New Mexico in the US, Mururoa Atoll and Maralinga in Australia.



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