

The Environmental Impact of War in Iraq

“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

Modern warfare causes extensive environmental destruction. A report¹ by the United Nations Environment Programme on environmental conditions in Iraq offers a preliminary assessment of the main environmental threats facing that country and recommends actions for immediate relief and long-term recovery.

The report lists the following environmental threats:

•Damage to Iraq’s environmental infrastructure

The destruction of water and sanitation systems has led to higher levels of pollution and health risks. Furthermore, continuous electricity cuts have often stopped the pumps that remove sewage and circulate freshwater. An elevated risk of disease epidemics is likely, as well as an increased pollution burden on the Tigris River.

•Damage to, and destruction of, military and industrial infrastructure

This damage has released heavy metals and other hazardous substances into the air, soil, and freshwater supplies.

There are widespread quantities of military debris, including unexploded ordinance, throughout the country. Military debris risk contaminating the environment and are also a serious safety risk to humans.

•Oil-well and oil-trench fires

The dense black smoke from the oil-well fires and burning oil-trenches contains a range of toxic substances and has caused local air pollution and soil contamination. Multiple large fires may result in large-scale regional impacts, reduced penetration of sunlight, accumulated tar on ground surface, exposure of the general population to pollutants, and widespread damage to vegetation.

•Damage to Iraq’s Natural Ecosystems

Intensive military activities have caused widespread degradation of fragile desert ecosystems that may take many decades to recover. This will increase erosion, loss of top soil, and vulnerability to sand storms.

•Radioactive Contamination

Depleted uranium (DU) is a by-product from the process that enriches natural uranium ore for use as fuel in nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons; it is chemically toxic and radioactive. DU has been used extensively in U.S. munitions and armored vehicles. The intensive use of depleted uranium weapons has likely caused radioactive contamination of land and ground water, which could result in serious health risks to humans.

¹UNEP Desk Study on Environment in Iraq, 2003

Discussion Questions

Prior to today, did you ever consider the environment a casualty of war? Discuss your perceptions on the environment and war.

Have you heard or read any news about environmental destruction caused by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq? 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? Why is it important that the environment be fully integrated into reconstruction plans?

Why do you think that the environmental destruction caused by war is so rarely discussed in the news?

How is the state of the environment intrinsically related to issues of human life and development, a main concern of Catholic Social Teaching?