

Summary of the Seminar 'Nature in War: Biodiversity Conservation during Conflicts'

Organized by the Netherlands Working Group Ecology and Development

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The Working Group Ecology and Development is an independent network that since 1975 strives for the acknowledgement of the importance of international nature conservation and management in relation to human acting. All members participate on personal title in the working group and share a wide interest and knowledge in the field of the ecological aspects of sustainable development and international nature conservation. It can therefore be described as a knowledge network in the Netherlands. Our main aim is ensuring that the Netherlands development policy is based on the relevant ecological principles. Target groups are among others Dutch Ministries like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (incl. Development Cooperation) and Agriculture, Nature and Fisheries, political parties and Dutch (internationally focused) institutions.

In May 2000, the Working Group Ecology and Development organised a seminar subject titled 'Nature in War; Biodiversity conservation during conflicts'. Herewith the main conclusions from this seminar are given.

From all contributions at the seminar, it appears that the impact of war on biodiversity is high. Not only the impact during the conflict (including habitat destruction, pollution and local species extinction), but also afterwards. Impacts may last for a long time and many losses are irreversible. In spite of the difficult conditions and alongside efforts to help relieve immediate human suffering, some organisations remain motivated to strive for the conservation of their environment. These organisations deserve worldwide support, especially because they are the very organisations that will be able to support the rebuilding of the country after a conflict is ended. However, not only nature organisations have an eye for environmental aspects, but also other organisations like the humanitarian organisations and some military forces are developing an affinity with it. Although the new focus concerns largely and understandably the general environmental aspects (e.g. water pollution and soil erosion), the interest in other aspects such as biodiversity is growing.

Nevertheless, in times of conflict, results in the field of biodiversity conservation may be, and are being, accomplished. Many of these results do not show readily but emanate from the continued presence of an organisation in or near the area concerned. Their continued presence is also important in that there is no need to establish a new conservation network once the conflict is over and normal life is resumed.

The results can best be accomplished when there is a firm cooperation between the various stakeholders in the area. More than ever, it was shown that nature conservation touches upon many disciplines; not only is it an ecological issue, but also it has important social, economic and institutional dimensions.

Of course, it depends very much on the type of war, which conservation possibilities remain.

In this paper, recommendations are presented for each of the stakeholders on how nature conservation can be strengthened during conflicts. Logically, only those stakeholders that may be expected to contribute to biodiversity conservation are included (paramilitary rebel groups and corrupt regimes for example in general are not interested in conserving their environment and are therefore not included).

- Local NGOs

NGOs often find themselves juxtaposed between the various parties involved in a conflict, and must find their own way to fulfil their tasks. This often requires a neutral attitude towards the various parties and, where possible, creation of awareness among - and even cooperation with - the various parties. Abuse by corrupt regimes or rebels should be avoided. Temporary partners in nature conservation should always be checked on possible hidden motives, such as the wish to expel indigenous peoples from protected areas).

They should also seek diverse financial support. In a way this is a general rule for NGOs but in times of conflict this may even become crucial since donors are often inclined to withdraw their financial support when a conflict breaks out.

It is advisable to establish good working relations with the different opposing parties so that control on abuse of biodiversity is maintained.

- National government and services

In times of conflicts, conservation should remain an important issue, deserving due attention. Park guards should have the possibility to defend themselves and the parks they manage against poachers and rebel groups.

An interesting concept is the development of Peace Parks, nature reserves that are established to contribute to the stability in a region. Not only do they add to the peace building, these parks also have a strong conservation value.

- International nature conservation organisations

For international nature conservation organisations, it is crucial to find cooperation with local groups because they are well informed on the exact circumstances in the area and they often continue their work in the region even when the conflict has developed. Cross-border cooperation is also important, especially in regional conflicts, since it could promote dialogue and contribute to peace building.

It is of little use to start a conservation programme in times of conflict; the basis should already be there before the conflict starts. It is important to use any possible means (like humanitarian programmes) to stay in contact and to support the nature conservation network in the conflict area.

There should be a certain degree of funding flexibility; flexible and independent minimum funding should be available, the use of which may be adapted to the situation.

For international NGOs the same applies as for the local NGOs: be neutral, try to find cooperation with the various parties but do not consort with parties that claim to care for nature conservation for the wrong reasons.

It is crucial to make structural agreements with the humanitarian partners.

- Intervention forces and their governments

For intervention forces it is highly important that guidelines for military and peacekeeping activities are developed that will prevent or limit possible environmentally unfriendly activities. Awareness and sensitivity should be created among the staff on environmental issues in general and biodiversity issues specifically.

When considering whether to intervene in an area or not, the threat armed conflicts may pose to biodiversity hotspots should be included as an extra argument.

Also in managing and directing the refugee flows, the environmental sensitivity of the hosting areas should be taken into consideration. (See for example: UNHCR: www.unhcr.ch/environment)

Whenever possible, support should be given to local forces that aim for biodiversity conservation. Priority should be given to enabling those organisations that directly try to conserve nature and natural resources to do their work properly.

Intervention forces should try to assess the actual damage that conflicts have imposed on the environment so that this information can be used when rehabilitating the area.

Appropriate legal instruments should be more developed and applied.

- Consumers and business

Consumers, but also governments and politicians, should be made more aware of the origin of the products they buy and the circumstances under which the products were obtained from the area. Consumers, for their part, should demand that the products they buy are clean in the sense that no bloodshed or environmental destruction should be involved in their production. Labelling of products, like the FSC label for sustainably produced timber, may be applied to other products as well.

- Humanitarian organisations

Humanitarian organisations increasingly develop guidelines taking into account the environment of the areas in which they are active. This should be further stimulated and elaborated. There should be more integration of biodiversity issues in the strategic policy and operational packages of relief agencies. Environmentally sensitive areas should be avoided as refugee camps.

More intensive cooperation with environmental and nature conservation organisations could improve the work of these organisations.

There should be more awareness raising among stakeholders such as the refugees.

- Other development organisations

Development organisations should maintain or increase their support to grass root organisations that remain active in difficult areas as it is very important to maintain support regarding the ownership of natural resources (including biodiversity) of the people in the area.

Despite the conflicts in many biodiversity hotspots, they should try to keep channelling aid to these areas instead of restricting support to stable areas with 'good government'.

The Parks for Peace concept appears to be promising and therefore worthwhile to support, together with the governments of the country.

Besides these specific recommendations for each type of stakeholder, there are also several general suggestions which apply for all parties involved. It can be stated that there is an urgent need for further information sharing and data collection in order to further detect the actual impact of conflicts. International fora, involving the whole spectrum of stakeholders, could further strengthen and promote the mutual actions. The prevention and mitigation of negative impacts of conflicts on nature should be put high upon the agenda of international and national meetings.