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Afghanistan, Ecology and the End of War

By Dana Visalli
March 14, 2013

The United States has spent over \$600 billion dollars on its Afghan war effort¹, but most of the money has gone to military infrastructure and sophisticated weaponry; little of it has gone to the education of Afghan youth or to addressing the degradation of Afghan land.

The children I am working with had never heard the word 'ecology.' They can only conjecture at the species of animals and plants that might co-inhabit their nation, guessing at camels, elephants and lions, all of which are wrong. One student suggested the word 'snake', when I asked her if she knew what a snake was, she said that she thought it was "some kind of bug."

This is one small indicator of the level of ignorance that humanity faces about the physical world that we inhabit and ecological basis of life on earth.

Traveling around Afghanistan, one impression that dominates is the absence of vegetation and the abundance of rocks. It has been estimated that 50% of the country was swathed in forests 2000 years ago², but today tree cover is reduced to 0.25% of the land.³

The loss is driven by an ancient and growing human population and its attendant herds of domestic sheep, goats, cows and pigs. The removal of a large portion of the biomass from the landscape means far less moisture is transpired into the atmosphere, reducing precipitation. Thus human impacts have initiated a negative feedback loop that has reduced the productive capacity of the Afghanistan's ecosystems.

The ecological deterioration has reached crisis proportions, as the human population has grown from 10 million to 35 million in the past 50 years, and is projected to reach 82 million by 2050.⁴ The impoverishment of the land has led to the deepening impoverishment of the Afghan people, with one quarter of the total population, many of them children, living on less than a dollar a day.⁵

The American response to this basic lack of ecological insight has been a military one; an attempt to eradicate poverty and environmental degradation with a massive influx of bullets and bombs.

Our irrational behavior in Afghanistan reflects a pattern that extends well back into history. It is a little known fact for example that the genesis of the Korean War was the U.S. military occupation of the country two days after South Korea declared its independence. Korea's issues at the time were social and environmental; the U.S. response was to drop 600,000 tons of napalm on North Korea—more than we dropped during the entire Vietnam War⁶—and another 660,000 tons of explosives, virtually atomizing the human infrastructure and inflicting immeasurable damage to the biological foundations of North Korea's ecosystems.⁷

A similar dynamic unfolded in Vietnam at nearly the same time. In September of 1945, Vietnam declared its independence from both the French, who had occupied the country for 100 years, and the Japanese, who invaded during World War II.

The United States responded to this declaration by entering into a protracted war with this impoverished nation of rice farmers, dropping 6 million tons of bombs (far more than we dropped in all of WW II) on Vietnam over the next 20 years, along with igniting 400,000 tons of napalm and spraying 19 million gallons of carcinogenic and teratogenic defoliant on one of the richest tropical rainforests on the planet.⁷ The spraying program, called Operation Ranch Hand, had a motto, "Only you can prevent forests." At the same time that we were assaulting Vietnam we carpet-bombed Laos and Cambodia, dropping 3 million tons of bombs and spraying two million gallons of defoliant on these rural, agricultural societies.⁸

War has become a way of life for the United States. Our country funded the civil wars in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s (Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua), funded the fundamentalist Islamic Mujahideen fighting against the Russians in the 1979-1989 war with Afghanistan, funded both sides in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, and then in 1990 went back to war ourselves, with Iraq, in Afghanistan from 2001 until the present, war again with Iraq from 2003-2012, and now a covert war with Pakistan and Yemen. Vietnam veteran Mike Hastie characterizes the United States as "a non-stop killing machine." This country also maintains a nuclear arsenal of 7000 hydrogen bombs, many times more than enough to destroy the majority of life on earth.

Because American war-making is so persistent and pervasive, and because every bomb that is dropped, whether it be on Korea or Vietnam or Afghanistan, in the end falls on the earth and damages the life-enhancing capacity of the biosphere, the realization slowly dawns that this unending aggression is actually a war against the earth itself. The United States has dropped 15,000,000 tons—that's 30,000,000,000 (thirty billion) pounds—of bombs on the planet's ecosystems in the last 60 years, along with 1,000,000 tons of napalm, and at least 20,000,000 gallons of defoliants sprayed on rainforests and crops with the intention of destroying them.⁷

The irony is that the physical earth and the life-sustaining qualities of the biosphere are the very foundation of human life. The elements that make up the human body are derived from the earth and the atmosphere; the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe are all dependent

upon an interrelated web of living organisms. If the earth is the source of our lives, why are we expressing so much violence against it?

We can only speculate. Most male mammals have an inherent urge for power, and humans have an inherent fear of death. The genetically-induced emotions related to these passions may be the subconscious forces that are driving our dysfunctional and self destructive aggressive behavior. There is also a genetically driven proclivity for humans to submit to external authority.

But modern warfare is clearly suicidal. The great paradox of the current drama is that the very people who understand the ecological basis of our existence are spending their entire lives funding and otherwise supporting the psychosis of war and the attendant destruction of the biosphere. The current fear-driven model of endless war makes a mockery of the lives of those who are drawn to live a compassionate and intelligent existence, while in fact find all of their resources being stolen by the alpha males of the dominant paradigm of power and aggression.

Human consciousness has changed dramatically over time; there is no reason to think that this will not continue in the future. One major shift that has already occurred is the locus of the individual's sense of personal identity, which has transitioned over time from the family to the clan, thence to the village, city-state and nation. Our distant ancestors had no way of knowing that we live on planet earth; now that we do know the recognition is dawning that the earth is the source of our lives and is our true home. Once this reality takes root in the human mind and heart, destruction of the 'ecos'—the homeland—through modern warfare will be recognized for what it is; as an unimaginably perverse and psychotic act.

Dana Visalli is an ecologist and organic farmer living in Twisp, Washington. He is available for powerpoint presentations on the topics covered in this article in the Pacific Northwest. Contact him at dana@methownet.com

Authors Note:

I am currently spending two weeks teaching biology and ecology at a private school in Kabul to young Afghan students who are being prepared to go to college abroad, in hopes that improved education of youth can improve Afghanistan's future.

Notes

1. <http://www.costofwar.com/>
2. A Green History of the World, Clive Ponting
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_forest_area
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_Afghanistan & <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/afghanistan/population>
5. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/86889/In-Brief-Nine-million-Afghans-living-on-less-than-a-dollar-a-day-survey>
6. North Korea: Another Country by Bruce Cummings. A detailed discussion of the damage sustained by Korea in the Korean war.
7. <http://www.methownaturalist.com/20-War,Ecology&Intelligence.pdf> 8. <http://www.japanfocus.org/-marilyn-young/3125>

