

BEYOND TREES: FORESTS, WAR, AND UNEASY PEACE

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In 1899 the first Hague Peace Conference convened 100 delegates from 26 countries, including three of the first recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize. All had high hopes for peace in the coming century. The countries represented 75 percent of the world's people and resources, largely a consequence of colonial rule that acquired by force natural resources, goods, and human labour. From our viewpoint today the Peace Conference was strangely silent on the linkages among inequity, civil instability, and violent conflict. There was no mention at all of the status and use of natural resources –such as forests– in peace or in war. King Leopold of Belgium, allowed sole ownership of the Congo by the world, was an icon for the terrible paradox. Between 1880 and 1920, his ruthless and violent exploitation of its forest resources directly caused the deaths of approximately 10 million people, half of the total population. The area still suffers from conflict and violence over forests and governance.

We know today that forests are central to the life of the planet, covering 40 percent of the earth's terrestrial surface and harbouring 80 percent of its biodiversity. They are crucial to the generation and quality of freshwater flow and are key to atmospheric maintenance. Most of the low-income populations classified by the World Bank having subsistence economies are rural and highly dependent upon local economies and resources. For example,

biodiversity in the Andes and Amazonia is both a crucial local process and a global public good –encompassing food security, health care, and local as well as global environmental quality.

Viewing biodiversity as a global or primarily economic resource only may ignore the important local uses and meanings critical for peace and stability among indigenous and traditional peoples. Unless these values are taken into account, economic decisions can have unanticipated adverse impacts on ecosystems, with a variety of cascading effects on subsistence agriculture, irrigation and other water uses, pollination, crop improvement and protection, and possibly more.

Throughout the world natural forests are the most extensive and accessible terrestrial resources. They are the environmental bank of capital and credit supporting individual subsistence and community resilience, as well as a growing global demand for wood fibre. However, elite groups seek to concentrate wealth from forests by extraction and exploitation, wasting the essential capital of the earth's life support, damaging the global fabric of biodiversity and exhausting the environmental assets of the local resource-dependent poor. Rampant deforestation from unrestricted exploitation impacts regions far larger beyond the forest boundary, unraveling the quality and structure of biodiversity, ecosystem services, public health, and environmental stability.

Recent studies have shown that deforestation acts as a significant predictor of social disintegration, civil instability and armed conflict. In over 120 countries, deforestation has been found to be inversely

related to the strength of the rule of law, with general lawlessness and dysfunctional governance acting as key factors. “Disinvestments” in forest ecosystems appear to reflect a breakdown in governance. Elites, such as a controlling rebel group, members of a ruling junta, or other economic interests profit in the chaos of loss. Primary commodities such as forests are lootable resources inviting rapid economic over-exploitation, the essential fuel of civil wars –the dominant form of conflict since 1946. Their origins are perplexing and not well researched. Many lack a distinct beginning or end. They last almost twice as long as interstate wars, consume the societies in which they occur, and take billions in world aid and finance to rebuild. Women and children are the primary casualties, and many children are forced into fighting.

Despite these trends, the concepts of international security that emerged from the end of World War II through the present continue to focus on sovereign leadership and hegemony, regional alliances and nuclear weapons. Current international security theory does not seem to address the fundamental challenges presented by forest losses, environmental degradation and civil wars to the global population. Protection of the environment, resource management and individual human welfare form a new and growing security challenge that relates closely to ecological practice and global policy. Ultimately it reflects a calculus about who has access to, and control of, the essential support functions of the natural world.

Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the US Forest Service, said in a famous address given in 1940: “Conservation is clearly a

world necessity...international cooperation in conserving, utilizing, and distributing natural resources...might well remove one of the most dangerous of all obstacles to a just and permanent world peace...”. In 1908 he had worked with Theodore Roosevelt on an international meeting for which invitations had been sent to countries, but which was stopped by a turnabout in the Presidential election. Until his death in 1947 Pinchot fought for a world environment conference and its implication for peace. In 1949 the UN held such a meeting, but it fell far short of Pinchot's dream.

We believe that the nexus of conflict and the environment is already shaping the trajectory of societies and our common planetary future. Science, particularly the ecological sciences, urgently need to work with the peace and conflict community and with the rest of society. There is a need to identify the prospects for the environment as an important element across several scales that can help shape confidence building, reconciliation, and peace.

A list of references is available on request from kklubnikin@fs.fed.us

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