

# Environmentalists are Ignoring the Elephant in the Room: U.S. Military is the World's Largest Polluter

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Global Research, May 23, 2017

[Washington's Blog](#) 22 May 2017

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#),  
[Environment](#), [Militarization and WMD](#)

In-depth Report: [Depleted Uranium](#)

*The Military Pumps Out Staggering Quantities of Toxic Waste, Water and Air Pollution and Radiation*

*Environmentalists are ignoring the elephant in the room ... the world's largest polluter.*

Newsweek [reported](#) in 2014:

The US Department of Defence is one of the world's worst polluters. Its footprint dwarfs that of any corporation: 4,127 installations spread across 19 million acres of American soil. Maureen Sullivan, who heads the Pentagon's environmental programmes, says her office contends with 39,000 contaminated sites.

Camp Lejeune is one of the Department's 141 Superfund sites, which qualify for special clean up grants from the federal government. That's about 10% of all of America's Superfund sites, easily more than any other polluter. If the definition is broadened beyond Pentagon installations, about 900 of the 1200 or so Superfund sites in America are abandoned military facilities or sites that otherwise support military needs.

"Almost every military site in this country is seriously contaminated," said John D Dingell, a soon-to-retire Michigan congressman, who served in the Second World War.

The U.S. military is the [third-largest polluter of U.S. waterways](#).

The Washington Post [noted](#) Monday:

The U.S. military is the single largest consumer of fuel in the world.

We use a [highly-polluting](#) form of nuclear power so the U.S. military [can make bombs](#). U.S. military considerations also drive nuclear policy [in Japan](#) (*that didn't turn out very well*) and other countries.

The government has been covering up nuclear accidents for [more than 50 years](#).

Above-ground nuclear tests – which caused numerous cancers to the “[downwinders](#)” – were covered up by the American government for decades. See [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#).

At least [33,480 U.S. nuclear weapons workers](#) who have received compensation for health damage are now dead.

And the country's main storage site for nuclear waste from military production [may be in real trouble](#).

The Pentagon is also [one of the largest greenhouse gas emitters](#) in the world ... and yet has a [blanket exemption](#) from all greenhouse gas treaties.

The defense department also uses [open-air burn pits](#) which send a parade of horrors into the air.

Sealife is not exempt. Military sonar [kills](#) whales and dolphins.

And the military has long been a flagrant user of [chemical weapons and depleted uranium](#) ... which can trash ecosystems and human health.



Defoliant spray run, part of Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War by UC-123B Provider aircraft. (Source: Washington's Blog)

Things Get Even Worse During Wartime

And then there's actual war-fighting ...

Then UN Secretary Ban Ki Moon [pointed out](#) in 2014:

The environment has long been a silent casualty of war and armed conflict. From the contamination of land and the destruction of forests to the plunder of

natural resources and the collapse of management systems, the environmental consequences of war are often widespread and devastating.

The WorldWatch Institute [notes](#):

An estimated 35 percent of southern Vietnam's inland hardwood forest was sprayed [by the U.S. military with Agent Orange defoliant] at least once. Some areas—those bordering roads and rivers, around military bases, and along the forested transport route known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail—were hit up to half a dozen times.

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With each spraying some portion of the trees failed to recover. Estimates ranged from about 10 percent in some forests sprayed only once to 80 percent or even more in those sprayed repeatedly. Denuded areas sometimes became desert-like, with blowing sand dunes.

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About 14 percent of southern Vietnam's teeming hardwood forests were destroyed ....

Vietnam's coastal mangrove forests fared even worse: by a quirk of physiology, a single spraying could wipe out almost the entire plant community. Mangroves can live where other species cannot, at the brackish interface of land and sea, because their roots filter the salt out of seawater so that fresh water is drawn up into the plant's leaves. The defoliants interfered with this filtering mechanism and allowed lethal doses of salt to accumulate in the plants.

Worse, the vegetation seemed utterly unable to regenerate, leaving bare mudflats even years after spraying.



Agricultural spray pump (Source: The Dollar Business)

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Pfeiffer later recalled "a vast gray landscape, littered with the skeletons of herbicide-killed mangroves."

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A mid-1980s study by Vietnamese ecologists documented just 24 species of birds and 5 species of mammals present in sprayed forests and converted areas, compared to 145-170 bird species and 30-55 kinds of mammals in intact forest.

The Guardian [notes](#) of the Iraq War:

Sewers flowed into the streets and rivers, and refineries and pipelines leaked oil into the soil. The sanctions that followed meant little was repaired and land and cities have been poisoned. [One observer in Basra in 2008](#) said people "live amid mud and faeces... Childhood cancer rates are the highest in the country. The city's salty tap water makes people ill. And there is more garbage on the

streets than municipal collectors can make a dent in”.

Lutz says the images of 630 burning oil wells, torched by the retreating Iraqi army in Kuwait in 1991, advertised the inherent ‘[ecocide](#)’ of war. But this type of destruction is “the tip of the iceberg”, she says.

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In all wars, displaced people congregate en masse without infrastructure to support their presence. Refugees turn to the environment in order to fulfil their basic needs. [i.e. they strip the land bare just to survive.]

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“War is bad for wildlife in as many ways as for people.

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In Afghanistan too, wildlife and habitats have disappeared. The past 30 years of war has stripped the country of its trees, including precious native pistachio woodlands. [The Costs of War Project says](#) illegal logging by US-backed warlords and wood harvesting by refugees caused more than one-third of Afghanistan’s forests to vanish between 1990 and 2007. Drought, desertification and species loss have resulted. The number of migratory birds passing through Afghanistan has fallen by 85%.

[Syria](#) and [Yemen](#)’s environments have also been trashed by U.S.-backed wars.

So environmentalists who stay silent about imperial wars of adventure are totally ineffective.

Environmental Issues Cannot Be Separated From Defense Issues

Foreign Policy Journal [explains](#):

No matter what we’re led to believe, the world’s worst polluter is not your cousin who refuses to recycle or that co-worker who drives a gas guzzler or the guy down the block who simply will not try CFL bulbs. “The U.S. Department of Defense is the largest polluter in the world, producing more hazardous waste than the five largest U.S. chemical companies combined,” explains Lucinda Marshall, founder of the Feminist Peace Network. Pesticides, defoliants like Agent Orange, solvents, petroleum, lead, mercury, and depleted uranium are among the many deadly substances used by the military.

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The U.S. military and its fellow polluters—trans-national corporations—treat the planet like it’s a porta-potty...with little or no opposition from the general population. In fact, the military typically enjoys unconditional support even from those who identify as “anti-war.” Keep this in mind the next time you hear the phrase “war on terror”: Our tax dollars are subsidizing a global eco-terror campaign and all the recycled toilet paper in the world ain’t gonna change that.

Project Censored [pointed out](#) in 2010:

The US military is responsible for the most egregious and widespread pollution of the planet, yet this information and accompanying documentation goes almost entirely unreported. In spite of the evidence, the environmental impact of the US military goes largely unaddressed by environmental organizations .... This impact includes uninhibited use of fossil fuels, massive creation of greenhouse gases, and extensive release of radioactive and chemical contaminants into the air, water, and soil.

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According to Barry Sanders, author of *The Green Zone: The Environmental Costs of Militarism*, "the greatest single assault on the environment, on all of us around the globe, comes from one agency . . . the Armed Forces of the United States."

Throughout the long history of military preparations, actions, and wars, the US military has not been held responsible for the effects of its activities upon environments, peoples, or animals.

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As it stands, the Department of Defense is the largest polluter in the world, producing more hazardous waste than the five largest US chemical companies combined. Depleted uranium, petroleum, oil, pesticides, defoliant agents such as Agent Orange, and lead, along with vast amounts of radiation from weaponry produced, tested, and used, are just some of the pollutants with which the US military is contaminating the environment. Flounders identifies key examples:

- Depleted uranium: Tens of thousands of pounds of microparticles of radioactive and highly toxic waste contaminate the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Balkans.
- US-made land mines and cluster bombs spread over wide areas of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East continue to spread death and destruction even after wars have ceased.
- Thirty-five years after the Vietnam War, dioxin contamination is three hundred to four hundred times higher than "safe" levels, resulting in severe birth defects and cancers into the third generation of those affected.
- US military policies and wars in Iraq have created severe desertification of 90 percent of the land, changing Iraq from a food exporter into a country that imports 80 percent of its food.
- In the US, military bases top the Superfund list of the most polluted places, as perchlorate and trichloroethylene seep into the drinking water, aquifers, and soil.
- Nuclear weapons testing in the American Southwest and the South Pacific Islands has contaminated millions of acres of land and water with radiation, while uranium tailings defile Navajo reservations.
- Rusting barrels of chemicals and solvents and millions of rounds of ammunition are criminally abandoned by the Pentagon in bases around the world.

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Between 1946 and 1958, the US dropped more than sixty nuclear weapons on



the people of the Marshall Islands. The Chamoru people of Guam, being so close and downwind, still experience an alarmingly high rate of related cancer.

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Meanwhile, as if the US military has not contaminated enough of the world already, a new five-year strategic plan by the US Navy outlines the militarization of the Arctic to defend national security, potential undersea riches, and other maritime interests, anticipating the frozen Arctic Ocean to be open waters by the year 2030.

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Linking the antiwar and environmental movements is a much-needed step. As Cindy Sheehan recently told me, "I think one of the best things that we can do is look into economic conversion of the defense industry into green industries, working on sustainable and renewable forms of energy, and/or connect[ing] with indigenous people who are trying to reclaim their lands from the pollution of the military industrial complex. The best thing to do would be to start on a very local level to reclaim a planet healthy for life."

It comes down to recognizing the connections, recognizing how we are manipulated into supporting wars and how those wars are killing our ecosystem.

Postscript: War is also [bad for the economy](#).

*Featured image: Popular Resistance*

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