

Environment Is War's Silent Casualty

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Washington, DC

26 March 2008

Loss of human life is the most serious consequence of war. But war also devastates the earth and has unintended consequences on the environment and public health. That often untold story is the subject of a new documentary, *Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives: The Environmental Footprint of War*.

The film, which debuted at the 2008 Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C., is the latest collaboration between sociologists Alice and Lincoln Day, who have been married for 56 years. Alice Day says the purpose was to raise awareness that the environment is war's silent casualty. "What we really mean by that is that the attention to the wounded ... in a war is great, and the trauma associated with that is so great that the environment is often not mentioned at all in thinking about the costs of war." Lincoln Day adds that it is not that the environment is silent, "It is people who are silent about the environmental costs."

The documentary weaves together eyewitness accounts, interviews, archival footage, and news video from wars past and present. The images portray a story rarely considered in the heat of battle: how war pollutes the air, water and land, destroys biodiversity and drains natural resources.

In one interview, combat medic and Vietnam War veteran James Janko recalls bombing missions that targeted heavily forested land suspected of harboring the enemy. "We've become experts in blowing the earth up, huge chunks at a time, using bombs, artillery, motors, C4, gun ships, napalm, using everything but our nuclear arsenal to reduce the earth to ashes."

Retired Lieutenant General Robert Gard reflects on the 78-day NATO bombing campaign in 1999 to force Serbia to withdraw its forces from Kosovo. "We bombed petrochemical plants and fertilizer factories, spreading mercury, other carcinogens on the landscape and into a canal that led into the Danube River. It will take ecosystems decades to recover."

Gard says unexploded mines and cluster bombs that remain on battlefields continue to destroy lives long after the fighting has ended. He saw the lasting impact of those munitions in a visit to Phnom Penh a few years ago. "There were countless Cambodian men with their legs blown off above the knee, who were scooting through the dirt begging in the marketplaces, and they were, for the most part, mine victims."

Thomas Lovejoy, President of the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, says war and preparations for war put added stress on a planet already imperiled by human impact on the environment. "Whether it's sonic booms affecting marine mammals or the burning oil fields in Iraq or it's destroyed coral reefs in the Pacific for [military] landing purposes. The list goes on and on."

Filmmaker Alice Day says the documentary was made with the hope that a fuller accounting of the environmental costs and consequences of war will lead to a public outcry for peace. "So actually this huge amount of damage we have done in the past can become a stimulus for people to think differently and want to change."

Alice and Lincoln Day spent three years – and much of their savings – making *Scarred Lands and Wounded Lives*. But, they say, the project is far from over. They are working on getting the film distributed to a broader audience around the globe.