COMMENTARY

The Next Steps for Environment, Population, and Security

I n 1994, interest in environment and security issues exploded. Civil unrest in Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, and Haiti offered graphic illustrations of "state failure." Senior politicians, like U.S. Vice President Albert Gore, began to ask how these conflagrations might be related to natural resources. In academia, Canadian political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon (1994) published the results of his investigations into environmental scarcity and acute conflict in the widely respected journal *International Security*. His Swiss counterpart Günther Baechler undertook the first round of the Environmental Conflicts Project (ENCOP) case studies. Critics in the global North and South took aim at these claims, spurring a lively debate (Conca, 1994; Dalby, 1994; Käkönen, 1994; Levy, 1995a, 1995b).

Robert Kaplan's influential 1994 piece in *The Atlantic Monthly,* "The Coming Anarchy," brought this research to a wider audience. Kaplan's breathless claim, based on his travels in West Africa, that environment would become *the* national security issue of the 21st century grabbed newspaper headlines and shot to the top of policymakers' agendas. Citing Kaplan's piece and political instability in West and East Africa, Gore created the State Failure Task Force to investigate these collapses, mandating that the analyses fully integrate environmental and demographic variables.[1]

Kaplan's hyperbolic comparison of Homer-Dixon's ideas to George Kennan's influential "X article"[2] on Soviet containment raised the ire of many old hands (and did few favors for

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Homer-Dixon or the nascent field). Environmental security was not all-encompassing enough to provide a new template for international affairs, as some hoped. That same year, the United Nations threw its hat into the ring with "human security," which focused attention on the individual person, who is usually neglected under state-centered definitions of security (United Nations Development Programme, 1994). But these concepts only supplemented, not replaced, traditional frameworks of development and security.

Founded by P.J. Simmons in 1994, the Woodrow Wilson Center's Environmental Change and Security Project (ECSP) waded through post-Cold War struggles to redefine security in order to understand the environment's role in conflict. ECSP offered Washington policymakers a neutral, nonpartisan forum where odd bedfellows—army generals and conservation biologists, demographers and CIA analysts—could learn from one another. Heads of state and directors of UN agencies, untenured post-docs and field workers: ECSP brought together everyone trying to trace the complex links among environment, population, and security, and devise effective policies and programs for the field.

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After 10 years of multisectoral, multidiscipli-
nary cross-pollination, where are we now? What
are the key questions and themes for the next
decade? For this 10th issue of the *ECSP Report*,
we asked six scholars, practitioners, and policy-
makers to offer their recommendations for the
future of environmental security.

Eminent scientist and Pulitzer Prize-winning
author Jared Diamond connects environmental
degradation to societal failure, and offers steps
that any of us—scholar, policymaker, or con-
sumer—can take to promote sustainable devel-
opment and reduce the threat of political col-
lapse. Former European Commission environ-
ment official Margaret Brusasco-Mackenzie
laments the loss of momentum that pushed
environmental security and sustainable devel-
opment forward in the heady rush of the early
nineties. She highlights some of the European
Union's efforts to reinvigorate these policies in a
world dominated by "hard" security headlines.

Erika Weinthal of Tel Aviv University tackles
the evolving concept of environmental peace-
making, utilizing examples from the Middle
East and Central Asia to promote the potential
of environmental paths for reaching peace—
and keeping it. Richard Cincotta builds on
Population Action International's influential
report *The Security Demographic* to outline con-
crete steps for research and policy to untangle
the significant correlations between demogra-
phy and security. Both a scholar and an advo-
cate, Cincotta presents a compelling case for
why the foreign and security policy community
must seriously consider demographic dynamics
such as demographic transition theory, youth
bulges, and migration.

Roger-Mark De Souza of the Population
Reference Bureau points out that while popula-
tion-health-environment (PHE) programs have
enjoyed some success in the field, they are
endangering that success by not effectively
communicating the advantages of these
approaches. Without systematically document-
ing and advertising the benefits of integrating

PHE, programs will not receive the support of
policymakers and donors in both the develop-
ing and developed worlds. Finally, Richard
Matthew and Bryan McDonald of the Center
for Unconventional Security Affairs at the
University of California, Irvine, apply lessons
from environmental security research to devel-
op their concept of a broader network of threats
and vulnerabilities that they believe constitutes
a new 21st century security agenda.

Environment, Development, and Sustainable Peace

To these worthy ideas, I would add a few prior-
ities. As scholars, we must identify the pieces
missing from the environment, conflict, and
cooperation puzzle and examine the gaps that
inhibit political responses. We must move
beyond the false dichotomy between scarcity
and abundance. We must push forward with
the growing effort to invert the conflict thesis
and look at environmental pathways to confi-
dence building and peacemaking. In
Environmental Peacemaking, Ken Conca and I
(2002) presented case studies, including one by
commentary contributor Erika Weinthal, to
spur the conversation and spark interest in
these mechanisms; however, the research com-
munity has yet to trace the pathways, examine
a significant set of cases, and evaluate relative
success. In many ways, academia is just catch-
ing up to the policy world, where organizations
as diverse as local NGOs, the World Bank, and
the U.S. military have engaged in environmen-
tal peacemaking.[3]

But policymakers must act fast to avoid
missing opportunities to build peace. Instead of
merely reacting to the symptoms of environ-
ment-conflict linkages, they should proactively
extinguish hotspots by bolstering confidence
and building cooperation. As Alexander Carius
and I outlined in *Understanding Environment,
Conflict, and Cooperation*, published by the
United Nations Environment Programme
(UNEP) in 2004, institutions need to bridge
disciplinary borders between academia and pol-
icy, reduce compartmentalization among their

departments, balance participation by elite-level and broad-based stakeholders, and improve the ways in which policies are communicated, perceived, and justified.

Population is often on the other side of the disciplinary boundary, even though it is an integral variable. ECSP has sought to draw population out of its political and theoretical isolation and into the mainstream of environmental security research and policy. Population and environment organizations, offices, and researchers do not spend enough time engaging each other, partly due to fears that population is a political scarlet letter and environment is a marginal issue. Some may find focusing on population growth in the developing world exploitative, xenophobic, or hypocritical, given the impact of Northern consumption on resources. Yet, pretending demography is disconnected from environment and security misrepresents reality and excises an effective avenue for understanding environment, conflict, and cooperation.

Just as we cannot ignore demography, it is equally shortsighted not to investigate how livelihoods, poverty, and resource use are related to conflict. As UNEP Executive Director Klaus Toepfer told ECSP (2004), "Sustainable development is a security imperative. Improving degraded environments and achieving sustainable development enhances human security, prevents conflict, and builds peace." Environmental security has come late to these issues, but our Southern colleagues' ever-louder calls for placing the issues within a development context will help address this shortcoming.

Just as the field of environmental security must better take account of the development imperative that drives policy in the global South, so too must it tackle consumption and the role of the global economy. Local conflicts in the developing world are often related to global patterns of resource use, and therefore we must factor them into our equations more explicitly. Examining how Northern consumption exacerbates climate change, for example, could add nuance to a discussion dominated by doomsday scenarios that drown out practical ideas for action.

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Planting Trees, Making Peace

When I learned that environmental activist Wangari Maathai of Kenya had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her decades-long fight to protect Kenya's forests from corruption and degradation, I was overjoyed—it was the best 10th anniversary present ECSP could receive. Maathai's Green Belt Movement planted 30 million trees across the country, and in the process, employed thousands of women and offered them empowerment, education, and even family planning.[4] Maathai firmly believes that environmental protection is inextricably linked to improving human living conditions. As she told Norway's TV2, "If we improve the management of our natural resources, we help promote peace."

Awarding the peace prize to an environmental activist certainly raised eyebrows. Some accused the Nobel Committee of straying too far from the traditional concept of peace. According to these naysayers, the committee should not expand its view of war and peace to include local livelihood conflicts that emerge from natural resource exploitation, corruption, constrained public participation, maldevelopment, and inequity.

But the struggle over natural resources fuels conflicts across the world. "Maathai stands at

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Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Winner (credit: Goldman Environmental Prize)

the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic, and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa," said the Norwegian Nobel Committee (2004). "She represents an example and a source of inspiration for everyone in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy, and peace." The academic world should stop arguing over two sides of the same coin, and instead explore how livelihood security could encourage cooperation and prevent conflict. Policymakers and practitioners must rise above interagency squabbles and ineffective Band-Aid approaches, and instead pursue integrated and sustained efforts to redress the roots of conflict and promote environmental pathways to peace. As the Nobel Committee proclaimed, "Peace on earth depends on our ability to secure our living environment."

Notes

1. The State Failure Task Force is now known as the Political Instability Task Force. Its Phase III results are available on the website of the University of Maryland's Center for International Development and Conflict Management at http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/stfail/.

2. The "X article," originally a telegram sent by George Kennan to the U.S. Department of State in 1946, was published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947 as "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"; see http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/04/documents/x.html.

3. See Friends of the Earth Middle East's "Good Water Makes Good Neighbors Project" at http://www.foeme.org/water.htm; the work by the World Bank and UNDP to facilitate the Nile Basin Initiative, at http://www.nilebasin.org/; and the Arctic Military Environment Cooperation Programme, through which the United States, Norway, and Russia cooperatively address radioactive contamination in northwestern Russia, at https://www.denix.osd.mil/denix/Public/Intl/AMEC/declar.html.

4. See Dabelko (2004) for more information on Maathai's Nobel Peace Prize.

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