

# On Revalorizing Natural Capital in Conflict and Climate Crisis



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**Submission:** February 1, 2024; **Published:** February 13, 2024

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## Abstract

The environmental impacts of war include natural capital loss, with cascading impacts on development and peace, whereas investments in biodiversity and ecosystem restoration offer opportunities to mend social fabric and build peace. A revalorization of natural capital is needed in conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

**Keywords:** Natural capital; War; Peace; Environmental peacebuilding; Nature security; Climate security

**Abbreviations:** ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross; NAP: National Adaptation Plan

## Introduction

The legacy of modern warfare and violent conflict is multi-temporal and -spatial in nature. Not only through the direct and immense loss of human life and suffering, but also indirectly, through the destruction of natural capital, much greater devastation is wreaked on many other populations and long afterwards on ensuing efforts for recovery and peacebuilding.

Some 90% of conflicts between 1950-2000 took place in countries with biodiversity hotspots, 80% within hotspot areas [1], while an estimated 40% of all internal conflicts over a 60-year period were linked to the exploitation of natural resources [2]. Reflecting this, the ICRC offered guidance on protection of environment in times of armed conflict, following the environmental devastation of the Gulf War, updated in 2020 [3]. The myriad impacts of conflict on nature and biodiversity play out in manifold ways, reflecting context diversity. For example, the Cold War effectively sheltered large tracts of forest areas in the Korean Peninsula and Gangwon is now recognized as a UNESCO biosphere reserve [4]. However, increased deforestation and natural capital loss were noted in the resulting vacuum, created following the conclusion of the peace agreement in Colombia [5].

UNDP's (2023) work on climate, peace and security, while examining the NAPs, actually highlights a gap in understanding of the impact of violent conflict on natural capital. Firstly, it

underscores a recognition of the challenges related to their post-conflict contexts to Member States achieving priorities defined in NAPs, even though none of the Rio Conventions even reference conflict. The environmental impacts of war are addressed directly in some NAPs, but indirectly in others, often relating to natural resource-based conflicts. Secondly, and relating to this, a lack of availability of credible data sets due to conflict, including the destruction of weather stations during the civil war in Sierra Leone, is noted to have resulted in a lack of data, including on precipitation. A third point relates to the physical destruction of built, but also natural environments, including unexploded ordinance which affects land use and availability. Fourthly, overexploitation of wildlife is noted in the case of South Sudan, where combatants and civilians alike were left dependent on bushmeat for survival, alongside a decrease in the number of conservation personnel witnessed due to civil war. Finally, Niger's NAP makes the link between human insecurity and fragile ecosystems, such as wetlands [6].

The invisibility of natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services, in our economic and financial calculus engenders further suffering for many conflict-affected populations. It is a root cause of biodiversity loss and ecosystem degradation, as it incentivizes the overexploitation of natural resources in peace times. Conflict presents a different gamut of challenges in addition.

Military build-up and offensives constrain national budgets, impacting investments, including in nature and climate, forgone as result. Direct and indirect consequences of war can destabilize ecosystems. Environments are laid to waste by scorched-earth tactics, with enormous cost to biodiversity and ecosystem services. The activities of armed groups in relation to natural resources [7] also makes access precarious and threatens the sustainability of investments in nature and climate. Plundering of natural resource wealth and environmental crime – now, the third largest criminal sector in the world [8]- further serve to sustain illicit and/or war economies. Often, with continued political instability, the natural resource base and ecosystem services including land and water resources suffer from weak natural resource management, long after violent conflict has ended. While the UN General Assembly now acknowledges the “right to a healthy environment,” [9] legal experts continue to debate the basis of “ecocide” as a fifth “international crime against peace” [10].

Nature underpins our lives, society and economy. The loss of nature severely compromises our ability to regain well-being, rebuild livelihoods and to prosper. Beyond a purely economic valorization and the “business case,” such investments in nature afford important opportunities to strengthen cooperation around sound biodiversity and ecosystem management in post-conflict settings and can yield a peace dividend. UNDP’s work in Colombia, supported by the Global Environmental Facility highlights how the restoration of ecosystems, environmental conservation and nature-based solutions can help build trust and repair social fabric, as evidenced more broadly by the environmental peacebuilding field [11]. It shows that participatory monitoring can empower local communities as strategic partners, help build trust and strengthen transparency [12].

### Conclusion

While capitalizing on investments in nature to maximize peace dividends, we need to address other underlying causes of social and political grievances, and rule of law and governance deficits. Time and again, in war and peace, we ignore or discount the value of nature thereby compounding the losses in long-term resilience and sustainable peace. At COP28, with the operationalization of the loss and damage fund, we are reminded that climate change-related economic and non-economic losses can “cascade” into one another [13].

We can make similar analogy of the cascading impacts of war on nature loss, likewise economic and otherwise, and argue that the indivisibility and compounding effect of such losses, requires a revalorization of natural capital, in conflict-affected and fragile contexts, for sustainable development and to sustain peace.

### Acknowledgement

With sincere thanks to Bill Dougherty, Srilata Kammila, Rohini Kohli, Samuel Rizk and Cassie Flynn for their contributions to the research which informs this article and to the Government of Sweden and the Climate Security Mechanism for the valuable support which made this work possible.

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DOI:[10.19080/JOJWB.2024.05.555655](https://doi.org/10.19080/JOJWB.2024.05.555655)

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