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Afghanistan: Bombing the Land of the Snow Leopard

By Joshua Frank
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“If we greens don’t broaden our thinking to tackle war, we may save some wilderness, but lose the world.”

–David Brower

News alert! Despite what you may have heard, the war in Afghanistan is still raging. Nearly 10,000 US troops remain, and since 2014 the Obama administration has carried out almost 2,000 airstrikes on whatever they damn well please in the country. No question the mounting Afghan death toll and the bombing of hospitals and civilian infrastructure ought to infuriate the few remaining antiwar activists out there; but the toll the Afghanistan war is having on the environment should also force nature lovers into the streets in protest.

Natural habitat in Afghanistan has endured decades of struggle, and the War on Terror has only escalated the destruction. The lands most afflicted by warfare are home to critters that most Westerners only have a chance to observe behind cages in our city zoos: gazelles, cheetahs, hyenas, Turanian tigers and snow leopards among others.

Afghanistan’s National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), which was formed in 2005 to address environmental issues, has listed a total of 33 species on its Endangered list.

In 2003, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) released its evaluation of Afghanistan’s environmental issues. Titled “Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment,” the UNEP report claimed that war and long-standing drought “have caused serious and widespread land and resource degradation, including lowered water tables, desiccation of wetlands, deforestation and widespread loss of vegetative cover, erosion, and loss of wildlife populations.”

Ammunition dumps, cluster bombs, B-52 bombers and land mines, which President Obama refuses to ban, serve as the greatest threat to the country’s rugged natural landscape and the biodiversity it cradles.

The increasing number of Afghanis that are being displaced because of military conflict, UNEP’s report warned, has compounded all of these problems. It was a sobering estimation. However, it was an analysis that should not come as much of a surprise: warfare kills not only humans, but life in general.

As bombs fall, civilians are not the only ones put at risk, and the lasting environmental impacts of the war may not be known for years, perhaps decades, to come.

For example, birds are killed and sent off their migratory course. Literally tens of thousands of birds leave Siberia and Central Asia to find their winter homes to the south. Many of these winged creatures have traditionally flown through Afghanistan to the southeastern wetlands of Kazakhstan, but their numbers have drastically declined in recent years.

Endangered Siberian cranes and two protected species of pelicans are the most at risk, say Pakistani ornithologists who study the area. The war’s true impact on these species is not yet known, but President Obama’s continued bombing campaign is not a hopeful sign.

Back in 2001, Dr. Oumed Haneed, who monitors bird migration in Pakistan, told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) that the country had typically witnessed thousands of ducks and other wildfowl migrating through Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Yet, once the US began its air raids, few birds were to be found.

“One impact may be directly the killing of birds through bombing, poisoning of the wetlands or the sites which these birds are using,” said Haneed, who works for Pakistan’s National Council for Conservation of Wildlife. “Another impact may be these birds are derouted, because their migration is very precise. They migrate in a corridor and if they are disturbed through bombing, they might change their route.”

Intense fighting throughout Afghanistan, especially in the White Mountains, where the US hunted bin Laden in the Battle of Tora Bora, has been hit the hardest. While the difficult-to-access ranges may serve as safe havens for alleged al-Qaeda operatives, the Tora Bora caves and steep topography also provide refuge for bears, Marco Polo sheep, gazelles and mountain leopards.

Every missile that is fired into these vulnerable mountains could potentially kill any of these treasured animals, all of which are on the verge of becoming extinct.

“The same terrain that allows fighters to strike and disappear back into the hills has also, historically, enabled wildlife to survive,” Peter Zahler of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) told New Scientist at the onset of the Afghanistan invasion.

But Zahler, who helped to open a field office for WCS in Kabul in 2006, also warned that not only are these animals at risk from bombing, they are also at risk of being killed by refugees. For instance, a snow leopard, whose endangered population in the country is said to be fewer than 100, can score \$2,000 on the black market for snow leopard fur. That money in turn can help these displaced Afghanis pay for safe passage into Pakistan.

Bombings, however, while having an initial direct impact, are really only the beginning of the dilemma. As Zahler told me, “The story in Afghanistan is not the actual fighting – it’s the side effects – habitat destruction, uncontrolled poaching, that sort of thing.”

Afghanistan has faced nearly 30 years of unfettered resource exploitation, even prior to the most recent war. This has led to a collapse of government systems and has displaced millions of people, all of which has led to the degradation of the country’s habitat on a vast scale.

Forests have been ravaged to provide short-term energy and building supplies for refugees. Many of the country’s arid grasslands have also been overgrazed and wildlife killed.

“Eventually the land will be unfit for even the most basic form of agriculture,” explained Hammad Naqi of the World Wide Fund for Nature in Pakistan. “Refugees – around four million at the last count [in 2001] – are also cutting into forests for firewood.”

In early 2001, during the initial attacks, the BBC reported that the United States had been carpet bombing Afghanistan in numerous locations.

John Stufflebeem, deputy director of operations for the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters at the time that B-52 aircraft were carpet bombing targets “all over the country, including Taliban forces in the north.

“We do use [carpet bombing strategies],” said Stufflebeem. “We have used it and will use it when we need to.”

Additionally, Pakistani military experts and others have made allegations that the United States has used depleted uranium (DU) shells to target specific targets inside Afghanistan, most notably against the Taliban frontlines in the northern region of the country.

Using DU explosives is not far-fetched for the United States. The US-led NATO air force used DU shells when it struck Yugoslavia in 1999. Once these deadly bombs strike, they rip through their target and then erupt into a toxic cloud of fire. Many medical studies have shown that DU’s radioactive vapors are linked to leukemia, blood cancer, lung cancer and birth defects.

“As US and NATO forces continue pounding Afghanistan with cruise missiles and smart bombs, people acquainted with the aftermaths of two recent previous wars fought by the US fear, following the Gulf and Balkan war syndromes, the Afghan War Syndrome,” wrote Dr. Ali Ahmed Rind in the Baltimore Chronicle in 2001. “This condition is marked by a state of vague ailments and carcinomas, and is linked with the usage of Depleted Uranium (DU) as part of missiles, projectiles and bombs in the battlefield.”

Afghanistan’s massive refugee crisis, lack of governmental stability, and extreme poverty, coupled with polluted water supplies, drought, land mines and excessive bombings, all contribute to the country’s intense environmental predicament.

Experts unanimously agree, there simply is no such thing as environmentally friendly warfare.