

This post was delayed due to a technical problem at Legal Planet, but it was originally scheduled for Memorial Day — an apt date to think about how wars, along with their other tragic costs, impact the environment.

We are now in the process of ending our “Forever War” in Afghanistan. The country has been at war at least since the Soviet invasion decades ago. The impact on the environment has been stark. As the [Guardian](#) wrote a few years ago,

“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%.”

The effect of war on forests in Afghanistan was not unusual. In France today, it is still [possible](#) to see the effects of the devastating forest destruction of World War I. It was not only the youth of Europe who were mown down by that senseless conflict. Soils in many places remain contaminated by heavy metals to this very day.

U.N. General Secretary [said](#) 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.”

Only recently has the international legal system begun to take this harm into account. The U.N. claim commission established in the aftermath of the first Gulf War gave particular attention to claims of environmental harm, paving new ground in its efforts to measure damage to ecosystems. The UNCC was established after the first Iraq War to handle claims against Iraq for war-related damages. The U.N. Security Council held that Iraq “is liable under international law for any direct loss, damage, including environmental damage and the depletion of natural resources, or injury to foreign Governments, nationals and corporations, as a result of Iraq’s unlawful invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

This directive gave rise to intense dispute about compensation for damage environmental resources and for interim damages to those resources prior to restoration. The UNCC ultimately held that these damages were compensable. One method used to measure the value of resources was the cost of mitigation measures – for example, creating new wetlands

to replace those that were destroyed by oil spills. This was used as a way to measure the loss of ecosystem services. The UNCC awarded approximately \$5 billion dollars for 109 successful claims. As Cymie Payne has [observed](#), the amount of damages was limited by the rigorous standards imposed by the tribunal. No doubt the actual amount of ecosystem harm was much greater.

Although war can damage the environment, causation may also run in the opposite direction. There are increasing [grounds](#) for concern that climate change can interact with other factors to increase the chances of war. That does not mean that climate change will inevitably produce more war. It does seem likely to increase the odds of armed conflict in combination with weak economies, ethnic conflict, and impaired governance.

“War is not good for children and other living things” was a popular slogan years ago. It remains true, now as much as ever.