

Vietnam's Untold Victim: The Land

Fifth Estate Collective

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Shortly after we published our issue with a discussion of the war in Vietnam, [Looking back on the Vietnam War, FE #320, Spring, 1985] an article appeared in the *New York Times* about studies done by the Vietnamese government and the Switzerland-based International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources concerning the effects of the “ecocide” (a word coined during the Vietnam war to describe the U.S. war there) on the land since the end of the U.S. war. The study traces developments since 1945 in a 97-page document, portraying a rural and agricultural nation devastated by “deliberate destruction of the environment as a military tactic on a scale never before seen in the history of warfare.”

The picture is of an already delicate ecology devastated not only by direct assault on it through herbicides, bombing and bulldozing of lands, but on all the secondary and tertiary effects of disruption of agriculture, war-caused neglect, and destructive land-use caused by widespread hunger.

In 1943, some 44% of Vietnam was covered by forest. Today, less than 23% is forest and one third of the country is considered wasteland. In the 30 years of war, about 40 million acres of forest were lost. U.S. statistics indicate that more than 19 million gallons of herbicides were dropped on croplands and forests.

“Colossal damage from 25 million bomb craters, which caused displacement of a billion cubic meters of earth,” says the report, now results in health hazards and disrupts water flow. Further damage was caused by clearing of large tracts of forest, cropland, even villages and cemeteries with giant bulldozers; and the burning of large areas by napalm also contributed to the destruction of the land. Dikes and other agricultural systems were bombed and an unidentified acid was sprayed on limestone. Wildlife such as oxen and elephants were systematically destroyed to prevent their being used for transportation.

The long-term effects, of course, are most serious: “for more than 12 years after the spraying, the forests have never recovered, fisheries remain reduced in the variety and productivity even in coastal waters, wildlife has not returned, cropland productivity is still below former levels and there is a great increase in toxin-related diseases and cancer.” The current agricultural area cannot support the growing Vietnamese population, and food now must be imported to this former “rice basket of Asia.”

The U.S. “final solution” to the Vietnamese “problem”—the problem being in actuality the American Empire’s thirst for power and profit at all cost to the earth and its people—goes on today, in the erosion of Vietnam’s soil and in the mutation of cells and genes of its living beings. For now, the criminals who administered this war have escaped justice. More than ever, now that this war is being rehabilitated by the Empire and its accomplices in preparation for the next wave, we must never forget what they have done—to Vietnam, to the earth.



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