

Desert Storm

A War Against the Earth

Fifth Estate Collective

1991

“Oil is industrial capitalism’s ‘crack.’”
—anti-war placard

In the late 1980s, it became increasingly and undeniably obvious that modern civilization was undermining the complex ecological web sustaining life on the planet. The earth’s “vital signs” were becoming seriously stressed by industrial activity, and global responses would be necessary to reverse some of the dangerous trends. Yet there was an inertia among the world powers capable of responding. As French President Francois Mitterand said at a summit on the environment in 1989, there seemed to be “no political authority capable of making decisions on a global scale.”

But by the early 1990s, the global powers assembled their resources in a common effort. Billions of dollars, hundreds of thousands of people, and enormous amounts of equipment were mobilized to confront the urgent task. Was this massive undertaking coordinated to stop the total strip-mining of ocean biomass by greedy fishing industries? Was it to halt the wanton, unprecedented leveling of the world’s forests, particularly its rainforests? Was it to clean up the billions of tons of toxic and nuclear wastes generated by industrialism? Was it to restore and redistribute agricultural lands to end mass starvation? Was it to save the wolf, the whale, the gorilla, the rhino, the spotted owl, the redwoods? No, it was organized for many reasons, but none of these. It was organized to protect the industrial world’s “way of life” and its oil supplies, to punish a renegade state, to test new, fabulously destructive weaponry, and perhaps most of all to put an end to imperial self-doubt in the name of the dreaded “Vietnam Syndrome.” It was called Operation Desert Storm.

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This war, like all wars waged by nation states, was first and foremost a war against the earth. That a staggering number of human victims were probably women (who do the greatest amount of activity in sustaining basic life processes in culture and in nature) and children (who represent the future survival of humanity) underscores this fact. To the earth-hating, patriarchal technotrons who waged “surgical” war on them, they were simply “a target-rich environment,” in the words of one bomber pilot. The land and her people have always been “target-rich” to such men.

The western world decided to teach its former protegee, Saddam Hussein, a lesson, no matter what the consequences, and thus every opportunity to avoid military conflict was rejected. And the consequences are already turning out to be grim.

A worse military “theater” could not have been chosen—the oil fields of Iraq and Kuwait. The photos of the black skies of Khafji and Kuwait City at the end of February and early March are testimony to the disaster. The oil fires at hundreds of wells—caused by allied bombing and Iraqi demolition—will continue to rage for at the very

least another two years, and probably as long as five. Their catastrophic results will most likely include a regional cooling due to large amounts of soot and dark clouds of oil-fire residues, which will affect weather patterns and hurt harvests in Central Asia and perhaps the Indian subcontinent; massive acid rain; widespread contamination from burning plastics and other petroleum products; and damage to the ozone layer from soot and nitrous oxides. Black, greasy rain has already fallen in western Iran since early in the war—a taste of what is bound to come.

Then there is oil spilled into waterways due to Iraqi spills and to allied bombing of supertankers and ports. The Persian Gulf was already heavily stressed by industrial activities, but the war has tipped the balance. Millions of gallons are now in the water, destroying reefs, coastline and wetlands. Two million birds winter (125 species) or pass through (113 species) the Gulf during winter months. The Gulf has some 180 species of mollusk, 106 species of fish, 450 coral reef animals, five species of dolphin, three types of whale, scores of waterbirds, turtles, the unique dugong, and more. None of these victims had any voice in the months leading up to the conflagration; military commanders, all the while denouncing the environmental terrorism of their opponents, reduced these beings to the status of “collateral damage.”

Other effects are also being felt, such as the destruction of fragile desert ecosystems by heavy vehicles, digging, explosions and explosive remnants, the ten to twelve million gallons of sewage produced by U.S. forces daily, the burning of garbage in open pits, and the toxic fuel wastes used and spilled. The bombing of Iraq and Kuwait also destroyed petrochemical facilities, refineries and nuclear reactors, spreading their contents. It destroyed water treatment plants and disrupted agriculture in Iraq, which now teeters on the brink of pandemic. The thousands of refugees produced will also have a serious impact on the regional ecology.

On the empire’s homefront, the war against the earth continues as well. The “environmental president” unveiled his energy program during the course of the war, which gave the green light to further nuclearization and a full-speed-ahead to the Death Armada’s oil exploitation, and called for the opening of the last few partially protected areas such as coastlines and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Even energy conservation, which is far more widely practiced in other industrial capitalist nations, was ignored in the brazen drive for profits and the pathological desire for total industrialization.

Another significant aspect of the war was the disgusting, craven capitulation of the mainstream environmental movement to the ecocidal designs of Fortress America. Guess the Middle East wasn’t warm and fuzzy enough for them—especially if taking a principled ecological stand might deter corporate grants. In a gesture weirdly reminiscent of the socialists and anarchists who supported their respective nation states in World War I or the “state department socialists” who helped engineer U.S. involvement in Vietnam, groups like the Sierra Club, Audubon Society, NRDC, EDF, the (Mc)World Wildlife Fund and others remained silent on the war and even loaned themselves out for selective denunciation of Hussein for Iraqi destruction of the environment while remaining mute on the most intense aerial bombardment in history. If the war hadn’t ended so rapidly, one expected to see these creeps calling for recycling to aid the war effort.

To their credit, groups like Greenpeace and Earth Island came out squarely against the war and began organizing against it. Much valuable information has been compiled on the war’s environmental effects. Information is available from the following groups:

Greenpeace (briefing papers and related materials on the war): 1436 U Street NW, Washington DC 20009;

Arms Control Research Center (has a pamphlet Hidden Casualties—The Environmental Consequences of the Gulf Conflict for \$5): 942 Market Street, Suite 202, SF CA 94102 (415/397-1452);

Political Ecology Group (partly made up of the now-defunct EPOCA members, preparing a report on the Persian Gulf war): 519 Castro, Box 111, SF CA 94114–2577 (415/861-5045 or 512–9025).

The final EPOCA (Environmental Project on Central America) update contains material on the Global Environmental Alliance for Peace in the Persian Gulf, which includes the above groups and others such as Earth First!, the National Toxics Campaign and the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC). Write them at 300 Broadway Suite 28, SF CA 94133.

Locally, the Evergreen Alliance has organized anti-war/anti-oil demos and publicized the ecological dimension of the conflict. A Festival of Life is planned for the Spring. Contact them at (313) 832–1738.

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