

Editorial

**"Wrecking Fields are a Terrible Place": A Global Look at Earth Day,
War and the Environment¹**

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In his reminiscences on the seven-year evolution towards the establishment of Earth Day, Senator Gaylord Nelson wrote, "the state of our environment was simply a non-issue in the politics of the country" (Nelson, n.d.). Since that first Earth Day in 1970, what we term the "environment" has garnered much international and national attention. Over the span of 33 years, cross media pollution is finally recognized as a reality, as are the transboundary implications of waste releases and dumping, and unsustainable fishing and farming practices. Due to the work of many NGOs and activist groups, the impact of radiation, weapons testing and their deleterious effects on both human and ecosystem integrity have also risen to the forefront of public consciousness.

But bear with me as I explain what I mean by the notion of "environment." *Environment* is nothing less than the *shared space in which humans and the natural world co-exist*. In other words, what we understand as environment shares space with multitudes of creatures, including earthworms and the last remaining snow leopards and white rhinos. This mutual landscape, in which all species breathe, eat, love, play, and die, may also be thought of as an ecosystem, and is nothing less than a relationship with the life, both visible and not, that abounds within and around us. As E.O. Wilson so majestically stated, humans feel a deep affinity and responsibility towards life; he termed this kinship biophilia, or "the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life." Many have mirrored the idea of biophilia without naming it as such: Edward Abbey, Thomas Berry, David Brower, Rachel Carson, Black Elk, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bhikshu Tenzin Gyatso, Julia Butterfly Hill, Aldo Leopold, George Perkins Marsh, John Muir, Scott Nearing, Albert Schweitzer, Paul Shepard, Paul Taylor, and Henry David Thoreau. So many, many others have written, in one way or another, the personal and collective experience humans have with the natural world and our responsibilities toward our fellow inhabitants. The point I am struggling to make to you, dear reader, is this elusive and complicated thing we call "environment" is not an abstraction: this is *your planet, your Earth Day*. And it is Earth Day for all things. So, Earth Day is, in my opinion, about protecting the environment we have, and finding ways to reconstruct the environment we've lost. By its namesake, Earth Day is also a reflection of the idea of the earth *as a creative and grand life support system*. Moreover, Earth Day is a time of contemplation as we mourn the loss of life's diversity-

including that of human culture-as well as damage to precious ecosystems.

This particular [Earth Day](#), however, I find myself reflecting on the intended and unintended harm to both human and natural ecosystems in the [War in Iraq](#), the air campaign of [shock and awe](#), and dimly remembered Wars in [Afghanistan](#) and the [Balkans](#). It's next to impossible not to equate ecological disruption with War; even those classified as [just](#) wars. War and warfare-related activities have brought incredible suffering to the Earth's natural and human [environments](#). It seems to me the small things are almost always casualties of battle and [occupation](#), from our species' most beloved resource, [children](#), to the [little soil microbes](#) that contribute rich, musty dirt of the earth, to the [biggest and kindest brains](#) on the planet, [the dolphins](#), the tentacles of War pull at [everything](#) within reach. Those estranged from Nature may be quick to dismiss my sentiment as just that, but we who believe in the intrinsic value of all life forms are pained by the [damage of this current War](#), and indeed, [all War](#).

In one way or another, we've all been touched by War with a capital W. In the Wars of the 20th century, not less than 62 million civilians have perished, nearly 20 million more than the 43 million military personnel killed (Hedges, 2002, p. 13; see also [Deaths by Mass Unpleasantness](#)). Much like Chris Gray's (1997, p. 90) thought that War has become something that happens to us, not something we do, by way of the [numerous](#) (and [secret](#)) federal facilities that have created weapons and parked [residual waste downwind](#) from our communities, through the viciousness of [genocide](#), military [service](#), as a [prisoner of war](#), or a [child](#) during various Wars ([Holocaust](#), [Japanese American internment](#), [Vietnam](#), [Gulf War](#)) and conflicts (the [Cold War](#), [today's](#) global battlefield), the chill of War has a claim on most all of us. Even coming generations are not free; the residue of War remains both in memory, and in waste.

Perhaps this is the nature of War with a capital W. Jonathan Lash, President of World Resources Institute, remarked that [War destroys, it does not create](#) (Lash, 2002). While I understand the subtleties of Mr. Lash's statement, in my mind's eye I see the detritus of countless Wars, a struggling [cormorant](#) in the sticky ooze of crude, the [hesitant steps](#) of a mother on her way to somewhere. I disagree with Mr. Lash; *War does create*. Acts of War and [war crimes](#) put into motion unimaginable [suffering](#), [indifference](#), and [secrecy](#). War with the W has become such a common and destructive event, in 2001 the United Nations General Assembly declared November sixth of each year as the [International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict](#). In taking this action, the U.N. wrote:

The lesson to be drawn is that modern warfare needs environmental rules,

considered that damage to the environment in times of armed conflict impairs ecosystems and natural resources long after the period of conflict, often extending beyond the limits of national territories and the present generation.

Living in times of "perpetual war for perpetual peace" (see the work of [Robert A. Devine](#) and [Gore Vidal](#)) not only means War with a capital W is waged on the battlefield, but through countless [Operation Endless Deployment\(s\)](#) and the "cradle" stages of [\[global\] weapons development](#), [\[global\] weapons testing](#) and [\[global\] military exercises](#). The constant condition of Perpetual War, as well as that of [low intensity warfare](#) and [MOOTW](#), often exacerbates existing social and political conflicts rooted in [environmental change](#), hunger, lack of adequate healthcare, poor infant mortality, poverty, religious repression and ethnic rivalries. A [recent PBS special](#) dramatically illustrates the relationship of these factors, including that of [environmental security](#), with the outbreak of conflicts and full fledged Wars. This finding suggests to me that many [conflicts](#) *may be prevented* if the basic foundations of life can be met.

To make a deadly serious scenario even more grave, [some](#) believe funding research to study existing environmental problems are a vestige of another time, a different planet. Research into the [extent and prevention of deforestation](#), [environmental illness\(es\)](#), [ozone depletion](#), [pollution](#), [species loss](#) as well as the ethics of employing [technology](#) and [newer, unimaginable weapons](#) on humans and animals aren't a matter of convenience (or [terrorism](#)); finding and fixing our environmental problems are an issue of [rights](#), duties and dignity, global security and ultimately, survival.

War, and prospects of War, also begets suspicion and extreme forms of information secrecy. Historically speaking, for the last 50 or so years, secrecy has evolved into a form of [government regulation](#). To illustrate my point, one merely needs to read *Life* magazine's 1950 article on the subject of atom bomb and information secrecy. *Life* wrote

This information, so vitally necessary to the making of policy, is denied to the people who are finally responsible for determining what policy shall be: the citizens of the U.S. and their elected representatives. There is no possible justification for this kind of overextended secrecy. (Is the bomb none of the people's business? 1950)

From the information blackout regarding the exposure of [veterans](#) to atomic, biological, and chemical warfare testing, the secrecy of [plutonium experiments](#) to the secrecy surrounding [Gulf War illness](#), to the non-reporting of [circumstances](#) in previous conflicts, to [invasion and restriction of](#)

citizen rights under the so-called "Patriot" Act, including the Computer Assisted Passenger Pre-Screening Program II, the questionable validity of information regarding Iraq's alleged nuclear program and finally, information regarding casualties in Iraq, the right to information is itself an endangered species. As the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy wrote

Excessive secrecy has significant consequences for the national interest when, as a result, policymakers are not fully informed, government is not held accountable for its actions, and the public cannot engage in informed debate. This remains a dangerous world; some secrecy is vital to save lives, bring miscreants to justice, protect national security, and engage in effective diplomacy. Yet as Justice Potter Stewart noted in his opinion in the Pentagon Papers case, when everything is secret, nothing is secret. (Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy, 1997)

Nation-states can learn much from the publicity techniques of Mohandas Gandhi, who openly shared his policies, plans, and movements. This truth force or *satyagraha* (Sanskrit, truth-force) is the Gandhian practice of nonviolence. Truth-force enabled Gandhi, as Bok wrote, to develop a broad-based constituency in India, as Gandhi understood that trust is no small matter-*it can change the course of history*. Trust is also a social good that should be protected as a common good in much the same way we pass laws and create regulations to protect air and water (Bok, 1989). We must map different forms of trust and distrust in order to recognize the "unwise and pathological degrees of each" (Bok, 1989). In doing this cartographic work, it may be possible to instill a participatory system that cherishes debate regarding the stakes a proposed action such as War would involve while still protecting information that could be misused. This shift would entail a retooling of democracy as an outcome, to a process of equal political inputs (Saward, 1998, p. 131). This "retooling" would also see information as an energetic property of human systems that should be zealously guarded from exploitation.

As I write on this Earth Day, I believe we can no longer think of War as an isolated event, or as a localized occurrence confined to one area of the globe that has no impact on other parts of this lonely Blue Marble. War must be seriously considered in a different kind of way, perhaps using a powerful visual metaphor such as the Butterfly Effect. Ascribed to MIT mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz in a talk to the New York Academy of Sciences, the Butterfly Effect states that "a single flap of a single seagull's wings would be enough to change the course of all future weather systems on the earth" (Chaos theory, n.d.).

As a metaphor for War with a capital *W*, the Butterfly Effect reminds us that acts of War have consequences for all things, including children, earthworms, snow leopards, rhinos, and dolphins. In other words, that which happens in the name of War generates both immediate and delayed reactions in human systems as well as earth's terrestrial and space ecosystems. As we understand only a fraction of how earth's great systems operate, and have only a passing glimpse into Gaia's intricate workings, the Butterfly Effect reminds us to be *mindful* of our actions before we indeed act. Above all, this Earth Day, mindfulness taps us on the collective shoulder, reminding us of the fragility of life and our inherent responsibility in stewardship of all things.

Mindfulness asks difficult things of us. For Wars with the capital *W*, it means redefining deeply entrenched, worn out policies that simply cannot be carried into the 21st century. Mindfulness demands we make connections between our actions and their impact; for mindfulness not only means being alert to our motives in order to eliminate suffering as Ayya Khema says, it also involves active participation by humans to explore all possible avenues to reduce conflict, become a stakeholder in changing state policies regarding sanctions against the innocent, and transforming military aid into humanitarian acts of compassion and sustainability. These are not easy tasks to accomplish. But if we can wage Wars with the capital *W*, *anything is imaginable*.

¹The phrase the "wrecking fields are a terrible place" is from Midnight Oil's song Common Ground.

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