

The environment is not a particularly profitable topic. Sensationalist headlines about celebrity gossip and government scandals are closer to home: more applicable to us on the *right* side of the Brandt Line, more enticing, more pressing. But the outdated artefact that is the Global North is slowly being invaded by a fresh enemy, one that has already wrought havoc across the South: an enemy that presents itself in the form of increased meteorological volatility; disappearing coastlines; incinerated forests; soaring pestilence; and the bloodstains of millions of fauna. The international community (defined in this essay as all of the countries in the world<sup>1</sup>) is experiencing a mutiny in the form of environmental degradation. And in spite of these pervasive and seemingly indelible issues, humanity is still plagued by our age-old enemy: war. Is environmental degradation a truly greater threat to the international community than war? This essay will attempt to address this question; the question that is undeniably the most important one asked on the global stage today.

How do we determine “a threat”? Besides the obvious physical threats - such as respiratory issues and loss of land (and life) - the threats posed by climate change are political and financial. The 6th “anthropogenic” mass extinction - or Holocene extinction - has been proposed by a plethora of organisations globally<sup>2</sup> and is attributed to the effects of humanity on our natural environment. Currently, the background extinction rate is estimated to be up to 1000 times greater than normal. But how does this affect the international community? Humanity benefits from biodiversity in two primary ways: from its services and its products. The importance of products is evident from the timber in your house to the cobalt in your phone. In fact, these products seem to necessitate environmental degradation for their very use. But sustainable forestry and mining not only benefits the aforementioned products: it also conserves the less obvious, such as the cancer-curing rosy periwinkle<sup>3</sup> in the rainforests of Madagascar. Meanwhile, pollination is arguably the most important biological service offered to humanity by nature; in 2009 it was estimated that its contribution to the global economy was \$170 billion annually<sup>4</sup>. As such, the ongoing extinction of insect pollinators (such as the flagship bumblebee) due to the overuse of pesticides in farming will have decimating effects on

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Such as the WWF, UNEP and European Commission

<sup>3</sup> Oxford Plants 400: *Catharanthus roseus*. Alison Foster

<sup>4</sup> Economic valuation of the vulnerability of world agriculture confronted with pollinator decline: Nicola Gallai et al. 2009

economies both domestically and internationally. This is not just to a decrease in crop yields: although experts are optimistic about the experimental development of AI in pollination<sup>5</sup>, the effects of this loss will severely impact consumers who must turn to cheaper, less healthy alternatives. A health crisis will arise alongside the cost of living and economic crises, further pressuring healthcare systems and economies worldwide, which will affect international trade, GDP, quality of life... All of these issues arising from the extinction of a handful of insect species. If the Arab Spring taught world leaders anything, it was the importance of affordable food in minimising civil unrest. Moreover, the interdependence of ecosystems means that the collapse of one biological service is always in tandem with another. The extinction of pollinating insects will be hand-in-hand with decreased pest control; as their habitats are destroyed, CO2 will undoubtedly be emitted and less flora will exist for crucial oxygen production; and this will further exacerbate the climate crisis. Environmental degradation is more than a vicious circle: it mimics the very thing it seeks to destroy, with its disastrous consequences branching out from one common trunk.

From Syria to Ukraine, Venezuela to Palestine, our world is still one of war. Whilst they are not world wars, their death tolls are still horrific; they still appear on television, on the radio, and on a new form of media: social media. With social media at the forefront of our lives, is it any wonder our world feels so war torn? War is still a prevalent matter, especially to the international community. It is not only a few more grey hairs under our diplomat's white hats; as we have seen with the Russian Invasion of Ukraine, war spreads its tendrils into the lives of the average citizen too. While the global economy has been stifled by increasing oil prices, the cost of living crisis has ignited a mental health crisis, with 78% of British adults<sup>6</sup> being affected by the additional financial pressures posed. Additionally, globalisation has caused the effects of the conflict to proliferate beyond the region: soaring inflation rates, grain shortages and a shift from Russian to African oil demonstrate how the internationality of war means that it poses a threat to the international community now more than ever. But in spite of this, war is still not as detrimental to the international community as environmental degradation. This is because of the limitless, sustained environmental effects of war. Ceaseless airstrikes on the Gaza Strip have emitted the more carbon than 2300 homes annually, or 4600 cars<sup>7</sup>; Syrian

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<sup>5</sup>WIPO: Oman: Pollinating Date Palms with AI and Drones. 2021

<sup>6</sup>Mind, Almost 20 million adults never speak about mental health – and it's set to get worse due to the cost-of-living crisis. 2023

<sup>7</sup>Is Israel's Gaza bombing also a war on the climate? - Indlieb Farazi Saber, 2023

refugee camps have put pressure on domestic infrastructure and ecosystems, and those in Jordan<sup>8</sup>; and the Kakhovka Dam Disaster destroyed hectares of protected land in the area<sup>9</sup>. And there are many more dated examples, such as Hussein's obliteration of Iraqi marshlands<sup>10</sup>, and the catastrophic nuclear fallout from Soviet bomb tests in Kazakhstan<sup>11</sup>. Environmental degradation is ubiquitous within war, but it does not depend upon the presence of conflict: as such, it poses a greater threat to the international community than war, since it is more omnipresent and prolonged than the aforementioned conflicts. War stops when the final bombs drop, but environmental degradation continues to scar our planet for millenia.

Projections by the WHO estimate that 250,000 additional deaths will occur yearly between 2030-2050 due to climate change related reasons (such as malaria and heat stress). Five million deaths over 20 years is almost five times greater than the estimated death tolls of the War in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, the Syrian civil war, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine *combined*.<sup>12</sup> These are four of the most infamous and deadly conflicts of the last two decades: and yet climate change will utterly eclipse these figures if humanity continues on our course. Such an immense depletion of humankind may seem like Mother Nature's retaliation to centuries of one-sided warfare; it would also seemingly solve many of the issues that cause environmental degradation in the first place, such as over-population. But this troglodytic interpretation of such an immense scale of death as justified - and even *beneficial* - blatantly ignores how many of the countries most affected by climate change (and environmental degradation in general) are those that contribute to it the least: in terms of CO2 emissions by country, Fiji places 156th, Samoa 194th and Kiribati 201st<sup>13</sup>. "Carbon outsourcing" perpetuates the West's legacy of colonialism, as the meagre emissions produced by these countries are largely attributed to tourism. Moreover, the United States emitted 5 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2022<sup>14</sup>. As such, it is reasonable to anticipate some dissent from the countries that it expects to shoulder the burden of climate change - not only in converting to green energy, but

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<sup>8</sup> Socio-economic and environmental impacts of Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Jordanians' perspective - Hamzah Khawalda and Nidal Alzboun, 2022

<sup>9</sup> The Kakhovka Dam Disaster: Responsibility and Consequences - Andrian Prokip, 2023

<sup>10</sup> After Comeback, Southern Iraq's Marshes Are Now Drying Up - Wil Crisp, 2023

<sup>11</sup> Keep it Secret: The Environmental Effects of Nuclear Armament in the Soviet Union and the United States - Tuomas Räsänen, 2017

<sup>12</sup> Using data from various sources (predominantly news outlets such as Al Jazeera), the upper bound of the cumulative death toll for these four conflicts was calculated at roughly 1,228,456.

<sup>13</sup> Worldometer: CO2 emissions by country

<sup>14</sup> Statista - Ian Tiseo, 2023

also in mitigating and resisting its effects. Such countries are generally NEEs or LICs (with legacies of suffering from colonialism) that are not only encouraged to sacrifice their economic development whilst the world's largest economic powers still dominate carbon emissions: they are also subject to “carbon outsourcing” that keeps said economies churning. Developed nations rely on their factories in South Asia to produce their consumables - areas which experience some of the worst effects of climate change, such as the 2022 Pakistani floods. Meanwhile, certain countries with an abundance of natural resources are expected to compromise their natural environment to mine aluminium and cobalt for our use: this is carbon colonialism in action<sup>15</sup>. Hence, environmental degradation *is* war, in the very Hobbesian sense of the word: the state of nature is “a war of man against every man.”<sup>16</sup> Aside from distinct correlations between conflict and climate change<sup>17</sup>, environmental degradation is certainly a war between the masses; between the producers and consumers; between those who suffer and those who exploit. It is evident that the perpetrator of environmental degradation is capitalism - thousands of acres of rainforests being cleared for farmland, trawlers obliterating seabeds worldwide, and exponential greenhouse emissions due to the cost of green energy - what else is to blame? The Bangladeshi textile worker and Congolese miner or the tech-billionaire yacht owner on his fifth trip to the Seychelles this month? Global issues require global solutions, but when developed countries place the burden of solving and defending against the effects of environmental exploitation on developing nations, international cooperation is sure to fail. Alliances are sure to disintegrate, and others are sure to emerge. This will inherently change the balance of power amongst the international community, perhaps presenting a new threat when ‘rebellious’ states lose crucial support from the West. Accountability for environmental degradation is already a controversial topic; and it will undoubtedly continue to undermine the civility of the international community without imminent change.

Environmental degradation is omnipresent in our lives. Seemingly, so is war. But the effects of the former are evidently far greater than the latter: in magnitude, universality, ceaselessness and cost, environmental degradation certainly poses a greater threat to the international community than war. If we do not pressure world leaders and conglomerates to act immediately, these effects will be evident everywhere: we will no longer be able to ignore the consequences of our actions.

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<sup>15</sup> Carbon Colonialism - Laurie Parsons and Alesha de Fonseca, 2021

<sup>16</sup> The Leviathan, Chapter III - Thomas Hobbes, 1651

<sup>17</sup> Quantifying the Influence of Climate on Human Conflict - Solomon Hsiang et al., 2013

Round the decay Of that colossal Wreck, burnéd and bare The lone and level universe stretches far away.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Amended from line 12 of Ozymandias - Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818

**10. After Comeback, Southern Iraq's Marshes Are Now Drying Up - Wil Crisp, 2023**

[<https://e360.yale.edu/features/iraq-marshes-drought-climate-change#:~:text=But%20in%20the%20early%201990s,water%20levels%20by%2090%20percent.>]

**13. Worldometer: CO2 emissions by country**

[<https://www.worldometers.info/co2-emissions/co2-emissions-by-country/>]

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[<https://www.statista.com/statistics/183943/us-carbon-dioxide-emissions-from-1999/>]

**15. Carbon Colonialism - Laurie Parsons and Alesha de Fonseka, 2021**

[<https://decolonisegeography.com/blog/2021/11/carbon-colonialism/>]

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