

## What is Environmental Security?

The relation between the environment and the security of humans and nature has been the object of much research and the subject of many publications in recent decades, but it is only recently becoming an important focus of international environmental policy.

A recent comprehensive overview of the environmental security field observes that:

- The environment is the most transnational of transnational issues, and its security is an important dimension of peace, national security, and human rights that is just now being understood;
- Over the next 100 years, one third of current global land cover will be transformed, with the world facing increasingly hard choices among consumption, ecosystem services, restoration, and conservation and management;
- Environmental security is central to national security, comprising the dynamics and interconnections among the natural resource base, the social fabric of the state, and the economic engine for local and regional stability; and that,
- While the precise roles of the environment in peace, conflict, destabilisation and human insecurity may differ from situation to situation and as such are still being debated in relation to other security and conflict variables, there are growing indications that it is increasingly an underlying cause of instability, conflict and unrest.



Sandstorms like this one in China caused by over-intensive farming and climate change have caused deserts in Asia and Africa to spread, directly affecting millions of the world's poorest people.  
©W.Ming/UNEP/Still Pictures

## Why is Environmental Security Important?

To the extent humankind neglects to maintain the globe's life-supporting eco-systems generating water, food, medicine, and clean air, current and future generations will be confronted with increasingly severe instances of environmentally induced changes.

Such events will test our traditional concepts, boundaries, and understandings of national security and alliance politics and, if taken for granted, may lead to conflict, including violent conflict, from the global to the regional, national, local or human level.

Environmental security, broadly defined, affects humankind and its institutions and organizations anywhere and at anytime.

## When Resources are Scarce

Environmental scarcity is determined by environmental change, population size and growth, and unequal distribution (or access to) resources. Of these factors, unequal access to resources is not bound by physical limits alone. It is also a reflection of societies' preferences, beliefs and norms.

Leading examples of emerging environmental change are: depletion and pollution of fresh water supplies, depletion of fisheries, degradation and disappearance of biodiversity, degradation and loss of agriculture lands, food and health safety, stratospheric ozone depletion, and global warming.

Of these major environmental changes facing humankind, the first five are now, or will likely be, growing threats to environmental security in the near term; the latter two will increasingly affect human security in the coming 50 years.

The interaction among and between the determinants of environmental scarcity sets the stage for addressing the environmental security challenges humankind will be confronted with.

Our ability (or lack thereof) to make innovative institutional arrangements and/or technological advances for managing the environmental security challenges we face, will increase or decrease global environmental security.

## When Resources are Abundant

The basic framework for understanding the relationship between environment and security is the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment which looks at all the functions of ecosystems and the services they deliver to people and nature.



Illegal logging. Photo by SarVision.

Conceptually one may make a difference between environmental services and natural resources such as minerals, oil and gas.

They also may lead to conflicts - and very often do! But then it is not scarcity, but abundance, and the motives are not need, but greed.

In practice, mining the minerals and exploiting the oil, coal and gas, can lead to serious environmental degradation through pollution, infrastructure, corruption and violent conflicts - in short to a decrease of environmental security.

## Environment Conflict and Cooperation

Another important aspect in the relationship between environment and security is the impact of conflict on the environment. Violent conflict, war, displaced persons, etc. may lead to a decrease of environmental security and spiral up a vicious circle of scarcity and further conflict.

On the other hand, as stated recently by Adelphi Research, “the sustainable use of natural resources and joint efforts to protect the environment across national borders and social divisions can contribute to conflict prevention and peace building. For example, the predictions of future wars over access to water have thus far failed to come true. On the contrary, various forms of cross-border water cooperation are contributing to stability and peace in regions of latent conflict.”



Photos from “Environment Conflict and Cooperation” exhibition by Adelphi Research and Weltformat. Design.

## The Need for Innovative Institutional Arrangements

Present global institutions were established in response to two world wars fought in the last century. A cause for great concern is that the world's political, legal and economic institutions from the global to the local level operate on outdated concepts and trail behind in formulating and implementing preventive policies through improved and innovative institutional and financial arrangements. Global institutions need to be equipped for the 21st Century and resolve environmental security challenges by peaceful means.

The design, development and implementation of innovative global institutions arrangements bridging the areas of science, diplomacy, law, finance and education is an integral part of the overall mission of the Institute for Environmental Security and its **Horizon 21** work programme.

See also: [Environmental Security: What's New and Different?](#)

by Professor Norman Myers, *Consultant in Environment and Development*, Special Advisor to The Hague Conference on Environment, Security and Sustainable Development, May 2004

## Institute for Environmental Security

**Horizon 21 — Advancing Global Environmental Security**  
Science · Diplomacy · Law · Finance · Education

[www.envirosecurity.org](http://www.envirosecurity.org)