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Environmental Peacebuilding: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

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The field of environmental peacebuilding emerged as a counter to the idea that violent conflict was an inevitable byproduct of environmental change. Two decades ago, my colleague Geoffrey Dabelko and I published a book, Environmental Peacemaking, sketching the argument that ecological interdependencies could be instrumentalized as a force for peace (Conca & Dabelko, 2002). Other early works from this period focused on the peace opportunities in biodiversity conservation (Matthew et al., 2002) and transboundary protected areas (Brock, 1991; Ali, 2007). Since that time, a substantial community of research and practice has emerged around these ideas. In this essay I discuss the origins of the field, sketch some of its core concepts, and look to the future, pointing to some key challenges ahead.

Keywords: Environmental change, environmental conflict, environmental interdependence, human security, social justice, environmental peacebuilding

Introduction: The environment, peace and violent conflict

The planet and its people face extraordinary environmental challenges. According to a recent update of the Planetary Boundaries Framework, the planet has transgressed six of nine critical boundaries, including biosphere integrity, climate change, and changes to freshwater systems (Richardson et al., 2023). In its most recent Global Environmental Assessment, the United Nations Environment Programme stated that “Without additional policies, trends in environmental degradation are projected to continue at a rapid rate and the related Sustainable Development Goal targets and internationally agreed environmental goals are not expected to be achieved, including on climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, excess nutrient run-off, land degradation and ocean acidification.” (UNEP, 2019, 19). Closer to where people and ecosystems live, these broad global trends become specific material consequences: changes in the water cycle, declining availability of renewable resources such as fisheries, soils, and groundwater, and disruption of crucial ecosystem services such as stormwater absorption, climate regulation, plant pollination, and water and air purification.

These environmental transformations worsen public health, erode the well-being of people and ecosystems, and stymie efforts for social justice. Crucially, they can also undermine the prospects for peace. Consider a few examples, plucked from today’s headlines, involving the construction and operation of large dams. In war-torn Libya, two dams collapsed during heavy flooding in September 2023, killing more than 11,000 people. The fragmented government and the tensions between rival militias created the conditions for poor maintenance and operating procedures, which left the dams vulnerable to failure. Just a few months earlier, in Ukraine, another disastrous dam failure occurred at the Kakhovka Dam on the Dnieper River. In this case, the dam’s rupture appears to have been a deliberate act of sabotage, with Russia suspected given its control of the dam site at the time. According to the Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS, 2023), the flooded area contains 88 hazardous industrial facilities, as well as half-a-dozen ecologically significant sites, and is home to more than 100,000 people.
These two examples connect the environment to violent conflict in different ways. In the Libyan case, people and the environment were casualties of a conflict; in Ukraine, the environment was weaponized as an instrument of warfare. In other instances, the violence may be structural. For example, in Colombia, the government allowed construction of the Hidroituango Dam on the Cauca River despite strong local opposition over impacted livelihoods, environmental damage, and human rights abuses. The project displaced more than 13,000 people, triggered extensive die-offs of fish downstream, and has threatened a community of 130,000 people with flooding, landslides, and other effects. The violence here is more than just structural, however: at least eight activists have been assassinated since 2018 for their association with an anti-dam organization. As one activists put it, “They assassinated El Mono [a local nickname for the river] the same way they want to assassinate us and the movement” (Kryt, 2021).

A large body of scholarly literature exists on the various ways that environmental harm may be connected to violence and conflict. The linkages are several: as a source of tensions, a means of sustaining war financially through resource exploitation, a weapon of war, or a source of tension that can undermine the fragile peace of post-conflict settings. Historically, much less attention has been paid to how the environment may be tied to peace. Yet, here, too, there are several important causal pathways: as an entry point for dialogue, a shared interest stretching across conflict divides, an opportunity to build trust, or a way to minimize grievances by stabilizing local livelihoods.

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**Origins of the field**

The end of the Cold War came as a surprise both to the field of mainstream international relations (IR) and to its more critical counterpart, peace studies. Neither the geopolitical-realist nor liberal-institutionalist wings of IR theory contained the conceptual tools to explain what had happened. One byproduct of this conceptual wake-up call was to trigger, among both scholars and more practical “strategic studies” policy advisers, a quest to understand new threats and insecurities in the international system.

The environment figured prominently in these new formulations, with growing attention to the idea of environmentally-triggered violent conflict. As the 1990s wore on, a growing body of scholarly literature documented instances in which environmental scarcities—around arable land, fresh water, forests, and agricultural livelihoods—triggered intergroup tensions, undesirable migration, resource capture, and other destabilizing responses (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Spillmann & Bächler, 1995).

This work gained attention from policy makers, despite lingering controversies over
methodological issues, case-selection bias, and causal complexity. In the words of John Deutsch, a former director of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency,

National reconnaissance systems that track the movement of tanks through the desert, can, at the same time, track the movement of the desert itself.... Adding this environmental dimension to traditional political, economic and military analysis enhances our ability to alert policymakers to potential instability, conflict, or human disaster and to identify situations which may draw in American involvement (Deutsch 1996).

As the 1990s wore on, both unreconstructed understandings of national security, as reflected in the quote above, and more transformative visions of human security began paying increasing attention to the idea of ecological security. As optimism about global environmental cooperation—which had reached a high point at the 1992 Earth Summit—faded, this new paradigm was seen as a way to renew a sense of urgency around international environmental cooperation and multilateral financing. As the date approached for the ‘Rio+10’ summit in Johannesburg, some actors in and around the UN system began advocating for the meeting to embrace an ecological security framework, just as the prior summit had embraced the framing concept of sustainable development.

Environmental peacebuilding emerged, in part, as a response to problematic aspects of the ecological security frame, with its emphasis on scarcity, conflict, instability, and the triggering of violence (Conca, 1994). One concern was the clear wariness of countries across the global South to embrace Northern and Western paradigms that securitized the environment. As Conca and Dabelko noted in Environmental Peacemaking,

“Ecological security is emerging within the OECD nations as a powerful frame for international environmental protection—yet its terms of reference constitute an obstacle to international cooperation in the very places where the ecological insecurities of people and communities are most starkly displayed. In our judgment, the central reason for this is that neither environmental-conflict research nor ecological-security polemics has provided a clear strategy for peace (Conca & Dabelko 2002)”.

It is important to stress that, while scholarship played a role, environmental peacebuilding has strong activist and practitioner roots, with researchers learning at least as much from those efforts as they may have contributed. Simply put, what we know about the environment and peace has been crowd-sourced from the start. A good example is the Post-conflict and Disaster Management Branch of the UN Environment Programme, spawned in the wake of the Balkans wars of the early 1990s. The branch began to conduct post-conflict environmental impact assessments for dozens of war-torn countries that were seeking to chart a course toward recovery, as well as partnering with other parts of the UN system such as Peacekeeping Operations and Humanitarian Affairs. This work, which embraced the premise that the environment could be a tool for peace, reconciliation, and recovery, provided rich streams of data for scholars seeking to build out the field’s conceptual basis with evidence (Conca & Wallace 2009).
A civil-society example of learning-by-doing is EcoPeace Middle East, which formed in 1994 to bring together environmental activists from Jordan, Palestine, and Israel to work under a single, unified structure. Their work has stressed the barriers that conflict poses to essential regional environmental cooperation, as well as the many opportunities for collaborative problem-solving in the environmentally fragile region. Working for three decades in the context of asymmetric conflict, occupation, sustained structural violence, and episodic warfare, Ecopeace’s efforts have created a rich vein from which to mine insights about the possibilities, limitations, and mechanisms of environmental peacebuilding (Djernaes et al., 2015; Giordano, 2018; Ide & Tubi, 2020).

**Key concepts and common themes**

Over time, early practice-based and research-based efforts have given way to a growing ecosystem of environmental peacebuilding initiatives. For example:

- The grassroots peacebuilding organization *Search for Common Ground* has worked with farming and herding communities in the Sahel, a dryland region feeling significant effects from climate change, to peacefully navigate their complex relationships around land and water use. In partnership with local communities, they developed a methodology for facilitating dialogue, anticipating tensions, and bridging social distances and barriers (Jobbins & McDonell, 2021). Their work also helps development practitioners and other outsiders to understand how their interventions can be more conflict-sensitive and peace-enhancing. In doing so, they punctuate myths of inevitable scarcity-driven conflict between these groups.

- The “peace parks” movement has sought to expand the practice of creating border-straddling conservation areas, as a way to reduce the “fencing in” of fragile ecosystems and migratory species as well as enhancing dialogue among neighboring countries around sustainable development in border regions. Perhaps the most famous example is the tripartite cooperation among Rwanda, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Virunga region of East Africa, centered on mountain gorilla habitat (Martin et al., 2011). Advocates have proposed creating peace parks in several regions of sustained tension, including the Himalayas, the South China Sea, and the demilitarized zone separating North and South Korea.

- The *Arava Institute* and the *Palestinian Wastewater Engineers Group*, civil-society organizations in Israel and Palestine, respectively, have collaborated on initiatives for graywater recycling, sustainable agriculture, and wastewater treatment in both Israel and the West Bank, extending the idea of transboundary watershed management and demonstrating cooperative possibilities across the conflict divide.

- El Salvador and Honduras addressed their long-simmering tensions around their shared border, including disputed islands in the Gulf of Fonseca, by ramping up environmental cooperation efforts beginning in the 1980s. Institution building for the purpose of joint problem-solving, emphasizing transboundary water resources, led to a significant de-escalation of tensions (Ide & Detges, 2018).

- Indigenous communities in Brazil (and elsewhere) have begun to develop “consultation
protocols” that specify their requirements for consultation and consent on projects that affect their territories, interests, cultures, and livelihoods (Monteiro Joca Martins, 2023). In theory, these communities enjoy constitutional and other legal protections against encroachment, but requirements for consultation and assent are often skirted, conducted superficially, or simply ignored, and legal redress for affected communities is inconsistent to non-existent. By developing their own protocols, communities are seeking to define the judicial standard for consultation, but they also create procedures for sustained dialogue with extractive industries in cases where indigenous communities may wish to participate in resource development.

Although these initiatives address very different forms of conflict and operate at different scales, they start from a shared premise: that environmental challenges and interdependencies create opportunities for proactive peacemaking efforts. This is so for several reasons. First, the environmental problems in the foregoing examples cannot be managed sustainably in a unilateral manner. The problems ignore the social boundaries constructed around conflicts and demand joint action for their effective resolution. At the same time, ecological interdependencies bring people into sustained forms of engagement, and they do so in ways that link both to people’s interests and to their place-based identities. While such engagements may be sources of tension, they also create potential moments of conflict transformation. Conflict situations are so challenging in part because they create a very poor climate for cooperation. Mistrust is high; so is uncertainty. Actors retreat into very short time horizons for decision making, as well as exclusionary identities that make violence against “the other” easier to envision. Borders of various types—political, identity-based, socio-economic—limit social ties between groups or entities in conflict.

Thus, environmental peacebuilding efforts seek to achieve several transformations:

- Identify mutual gains from environmental action;
- Soften exclusionary identities and promote a sense of common community around places and ecosystems;
- Strengthen trust through cooperative learning;
- Build and sustain social networks across conflict boundaries;
- Reduce tensions through stakeholder dialogue, “good governance” initiatives, and enhanced livelihoods.

**Does it work?**

The simple answer to this complex question is “sometimes.” Much depends on how we define success. There is no consensus definition of peace, and the concept is generally recognized to have distinct ideational, relational, and structural elements (Söderström et al., 2021). Progress along any of these dimensions is often non-linear, making it difficult to isolate cause and effect. Much of environmental peacebuilding practice focuses on intermediate outcomes such as enhanced dialogue, cooperative learning, and the building of trust and mutual understanding, based on the assumption that these, in turn, will enhance the prospects for peace.

Evidence for environmental peacebuilding effectiveness consists primarily of single-case studies, with a handful of broader and more systematic studies beginning to appear. A recent meta-analysis of the existing scholarly literature found mixed results (Johnson et al., 2021). The authors culled a
set of 79 published case studies and used them to identify both outcomes and the mechanisms by which they occurred. Of the 79 cases (all of which involved ‘post-conflict’ settings), they identified 55 (70%) which showed at least some positive effects on peace outcomes (with 20 cases unambiguously positive and 35, mixed). Positive outcomes were defined as the absence of violence, shared identity, increased capabilities for peacemaking, or “substantial integration.” The authors identified a large number of specific mechanisms associated with these positive outcomes, including but not limited to livelihood improvements, political inclusion, gains in trust of the opposition, and joint action by parties in conflict.

The same study also noted, however, that more than half the cases showed some negative effects, in the sense of an erosion in the aforementioned outcomes. Negative effects occurred primarily in the mixed-effects cases, but also in 13 cases that were unambiguously negative. Findings such as these caution us to pay attention to unintended consequences and perverse effects. For example, the aforementioned Virunga conservation efforts in East Africa have been controversial for stimulating privatized, centralized hydropower development while undermining local energy systems (Marijnen & Schouten, 2019). Ide (2020) cautioned about the dangers of a “dark side” to environmental peacebuilding, citing several risks: that initiatives emphasizing technical expertise may have depoliticizing or technocratic effects; that emphasis on social and political outcomes may fail to attend to environmental needs; that benefits may be distributed unequally or discriminate along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, or region; and that projects may displace or otherwise harm local communities (for example, by creating exclusionary protected areas that deny access to natural resources).

**Conclusion: Challenges going forward**

As the field has grown, demand for a stronger knowledge base and more effective practice triggered the formation of the Environmental Peacebuilding Association in 2019. The association links scholars and practitioners in interest groups on topics such as water, forests, gender, and environmental education. A recent stock-taking assessment of the field’s strengths and weaknesses (Brown & Nicolucci-Altman, 2022) called for the field to strengthen inclusivity, emphasize bottom-up initiatives, embrace a more anticipatory stance toward preventing environmentally-linked conflicts, and continue to build the evidence base. To these important recommendations I add a few personal observations for the field’s future, based on my own experience as a researcher who has also worked closely with civil-society and intergovernmental organizations as they try to put ideas into practice.

First, as the field has grown increasingly institutionalized, there is a growing danger of gaps between the perceptions and priorities of international actors operating from standardized approaches, on the one hand, and those closer to a specific conflict, on the other. A recent study of a sustainable-livelihoods peacebuilding initiative in Caquetá, Colombia compared the perceptions of global experts, national experts, and local experts/practitioners. The study found gaps when examining which dimensions of the initiative the various expert groups prioritized (Morales-Muñoz et al., 2021). While each group prioritized socio-economic inclusion, the external experts were much more likely to stress governance, while those closer to the project site more frequently emphasized transitional justice and “peace culture.”

A second challenge relates to how we evaluate what we know. Recent studies of the scholarly
literature have demonstrated a substantial “streetlight effect” in which scholars have focused disproportionately on a highly skewed sample of places and cases. Hendrix (2017) found that research on climate change in Africa oversampled countries that were former British colonies, had stronger civil liberties, and enjoyed greater political stability, as opposed to stressing factors related to climate risk and vulnerability. In other words, the researchers’ access, language skills, and convenience determined where evidence was collected, rather than any climate-related circumstances or other key factors. In another example of skewed attention, a study focused specifically on conflict risks around climate change found a heavily disproportionate focus on sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and the Sahel at the expense of other world regions (Adams et al, 2018). During the rise of first-generation eco-conflict research in the 1990s and 2000s, Barnett (2000) warned that the disproportionate emphasis on areas of strategic and geopolitical interest to western governments risked delegitimizing the field. Environmental peacebuilding research and practice must not make the same mistake.

Finally, the scholarship and practice of environmental peacebuilding must maintain a critical perspective on the merits of environmental cooperation and a grounded, historically informed understanding of the roots of violence. Some stakeholders around socio-ecological controversies are not particularly interested in peace, and may wield violence and repression opportunistically (Le Billon, 2001). The civil-society organization Global Witness (2021) documented the death or disappearance of 227 environmental and land-rights activists around the world in the year 2020 alone. Nor are cooperation and dialogue inherent goods: they may be a step toward peacebuilding, equity, and sustainability—but they can just as easily enable joint resource plunder that perpetuates unsustainability and structural violence. Even initiatives working explicitly for environmental sustainability can result in repressive measures, as we have seen in the increasing militarization of parks, protected areas, and anti-poaching initiatives around the world (Duffy, 2016). True peace must be built through peaceful means.

This essay is based on a conference presentation by Dr. Ken Conca at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Peace Studies Conference, which took place at the College of Saint Benedict / Saint John’s University on September 18, 2023. Dr. Conca’s research and teaching focus on global environmental governance, environmental peacebuilding in war-torn societies, environmental politics and policy in the United Nations system, water governance, and environmental policy analysis. His most recent books are The Oxford Handbook of Water Politics and Policy and An Unfinished Foundation: The United Nations and Global Environmental Governance. He is the editor of the widely used teaching anthology Green Planet Blues. Dr. Conca’s research has been recognized with several prestigious awards, including the Grawemeyer Prize for Ideas Improving World Order; the International Studies Association’s Harold and Margaret Sprout Award, for best book on international environmental affairs; the Chadwick Alger Prize, for best book in the field of International Organization; and the Al-Moumin Environmental Peacebuilding Award.
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