



Environmental impact

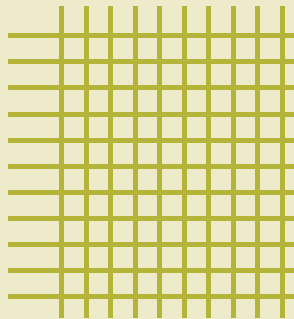
In the host countries of US bases, campaigners have fought long battles to force the US military to carry out the apparently basic task of cleaning up its mess. The vast sprawls of US bases destroy large areas of the environment, ranging from virgin forest to farmland or settlements, just by being built, and they continue to do so as they operate and even after they are closed down.

Respect for the environment of host countries simply doesn't seem to be a priority for the US military. In the Philippines, for example, the US Military Inspector General admitted that the bases “took advantage of the lax regulatory climate”. A Department of Defence spokesperson claimed that it had no environmental obligations there because its policy was of compliance with local environmental laws, and the Philippines had none – despite the Filipino environmental statute book amounting to three volumes at the time. In practice, this means that the USA has refused to take responsibility for widespread pollution from the Clark and Subic naval bases, poisoning ecosystems and damaging biodiversity and fish stocks.

Environmental campaign group Greenpeace has made the US base at Thule in Greenland the target of one of its campaigns, with its ships observing the dumping of hundreds of barrels of waste and piles of metal without protection. They also measured the results of high levels of toxic Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) and radioactive material from tests and accidents, including the crash of a nuclear bomber which released plutonium, working their way up the food chain. Such pollutants are absorbed from the environment by shellfish and are concentrated when these creatures are eaten by

fish, birds and land carnivores, resulting in birth defects, cancers and other diseases in the animals of this formerly pristine environment. Similar loss of biodiversity is reported from Guam and Okinawa, due to chemical pollution and the introduction of alien species to the island by military ships and planes.

In countries where the enforcement of environmental legislation is stronger, such as Germany and Italy, the US military has been on the receiving end of prosecutions for illegal disposal of toxic waste, and been forced to clean up the environments it has abused. The principle of "the polluter pays" is one which has been emphasised by campaigners but which, at least till now, has applied mainly in rich countries with more political clout with Washington.



Panama

The former US military bases in Panama, which closed in 1999, impacted on the environment in two main ways. First, they created an enclave in the canal area, distorting development by creating double standards: one relatively “pristine” and wealthy area, and another that was poor and environmentally exploited. Second, military activities left toxic and explosive materials, most prominently conventional and chemical unexploded munitions on former firing ranges. This rendered large areas of land unusable. The presence of unexploded munitions and chemical weapons means that the land cannot be reclaimed for farming or resettlement.

John Lindsay Poland of the Fellowship of Reconciliation has led efforts by US and Latin American campaign groups to hold the US government to its commitments to clean up the Panamanian environment, as set down in the 1977-1978 Canal Treaties. The severity of the environmental impacts on Panama has brought together the peace movement with mainstream environmental organisations like the Sierra Club. As he explains: “

The principle of environmental cleanup is very simple, and most of us learnt it from our parents: when you make a mess, you clean it up. In the case of toxic and life-threatening chemicals and explosives, it is even more imperative. However, there is very little political will in either Panama or the United States to effect a further environmental cleanup of the firing ranges, where the United States abandoned more than 100,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance, by its own count, and of San Jose Island, where the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons verified the presence of mus-

tard gas bombs left by the US. In Panama – like the successful campaigns in the Philippines and Vieques before and after – activists and local officials focused on getting the US military out, prioritising this over the environmental cleanup issue. But the US took no interest in environmental measures once it had decided to leave. Officials and social movements in ‘host countries’ of foreign military bases, once the pressure is on to close the bases, actually have much leverage to ensure that the US does a cleanup, but typically local officials do little because they are fearful that the Pentagon will change its mind and stay.”

