

## EDITORIAL

### Loyalty, Integrity, Reality: Environmental Consequences of the War in Iraq

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As this editorial goes to press, the United States is entering the second week of a war against Iraq. Members of the National Association of Environmental Professionals (NAEP) undoubtedly have multiple judgments about this conflict. Some will be called upon to serve directly, others will believe President Bush's choice was correct, and yet others will maintain that in some fundamental way the decision to go to war was flawed. In this way, NAEP's members are unlikely to be different from the American public as a whole.

By the time this statement appears in June, it is unclear exactly what the situation will be. Knowledgeable authorities suggest the war will be short, but time will be the ultimate judge of all predictions and speculations about the conflict's duration. Despite uncertainty about the outcome of the fierce battles now raging, however, one thing is clear. This war, like all others, will have important environmental consequences. We don't yet know what those might be, but surely some effects will be profound.

In late March, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) announced that its Post Conflict Assessment Unit had initiated a "desk study of the environment in Iraq." According to the international agency, the study was intended to assist those involved in post-war relief and rebuilding work. UNEP Executive Director Klaus Toepfer also wanted the study to make recommendations for reducing risks to the environment and human health, avoiding

further damage to ecosystems, and responding to hazards related directly to combat operations.

Damage during the 1991 Persian Gulf War was extensive, especially due to oil spilled from sabotaged Kuwaiti oil fields. Fires burned for weeks, and about 6–8 million barrels of oil were injected into the coastal and marine environments. Over 600 wells were set afire by the departing Iraqi army, which led to atmospheric effects from the smoke on both terrestrial and aquatic habitats.

Even today the complex, long-term consequences from that war are still not completely known, but a 1994 study from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature summed up the situation succinctly: "The recent war highlighted dramatically both the importance and vulnerability of the [Persian] Gulf's marine environment." The 2003 war will differ from the 1991 war, but we can anticipate a long and almost certainly contentious debate over the scope of environmental damage and its significance.

The exact effects of the environmental impacts of the new war, however, are only part of this editorial's concerns. War is occurring in the context of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As a result of those attacks, civil liberties in the United States have already been adjusted to accommodate heightened security concerns. Unfortunately, environmental work thrives best in an atmosphere of openness, not secrecy. Very real questions of process thus attend the inevitable decisions that must be made to minimize and manage this new war's adverse environmental consequences.

Three issues are involved for environmental professionals: loyalty, integrity, and reality. Loyalty in time of war may be the most difficult of the three. When a country is at war, the lives of family members, friends, and colleagues in the armed forces are on the line. Under such circumstances, environ-

mental professionals with differing opinions about the war may find themselves needing to think about what it means to "support the effort."

Protecting the open flow and free analysis of accurate information is critical to environmental work. Those seeking to understand and reduce the environmental damage from the war must not be thought disloyal merely for doing their jobs. Whether environmental analysts of the war's impacts are NAEP members or not, NAEP and its Code of Ethics stand for integrity in environmental assessments. Put simply, this means professionals give careful and full attention to all relevant data, even when the data cast a shadow on other cherished values and beliefs.

Only with this integrity can we hope to understand the reality of environmental impacts from war in Iraq. Effects will come to that country, the region, and the entire earth. NAEP and its members will need to keep these issues of loyalty, integrity, and reality fully in mind during and after this conflict. The well being of the American and Iraqi people depend upon it.

## References

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