

# Reclaiming the Earth from Military Destruction

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Increasingly, environmental awareness is leading individuals and organizations to work against military activities that devastate ecological balances. In Hawai'i, civil disobedience campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s led to an executive order in 1990 by George Bush Sr. to end the Navy's bombing of Kaho'olawe, an island whose sacredness was being reclaimed by native Hawai'ian activists. The subsequent \$420 million program to remove munitions and restore the island's landscape has been accompanied by a popular program to visit the island for cultural and religious activities.

So far, civil disobedience has been more effective than legal actions in stopping the Navy from bombing in Vieques. After a Marine pilot missed his target by nearly two miles in April 1999, killing a local civilian guard, civil disobedience camps--supported by a public consensus of Puerto Rican civil society against the Navy's presence in Vieques--successfully prevented the Navy from bombing Vieques until May 2000, when the camps were removed by federal marshals. Since then, nearly 1,000 people, mostly Puerto Ricans, have entered the range, committed civil disobedience, and been arrested. In April, the mayor of Vieques was among those who occupied the impact area during training by the USS Enterprise (which then steamed for the Persian Gulf). The Navy dropped inert bombs on the area, despite the mayor's action, but the peaceful and determined protests dealt a severe blow to Navy's legitimacy in Vieques.

General Antwerp said the Army has trained personnel in "relationship-building and outrage management," apparently because Army actions have provoked community outrage. Asking Congress for assistance, he said, "The best technical solution might not always be the best community solution." The Pentagon already funds "Joint Land Use Studies" to prevent "encroachment" by civilian development that might affect military base activities.

## FULL TEXT

### Reclaiming the Earth from Military Destruction

It may seem obvious, but it needs to be stated: the military's mission of destroying enemies has terrible consequences for the health of the earth, water, and air on which human life depends. That destruction is a result not only of combat operations, but of military training and the operation and maintenance of ships, aircraft, and other polluting machines.

The Defense Department has jurisdiction over about 25 million acres of land--an area larger than Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island combined. "The increased speed and lethality of modern weapons systems," wrote a pair of Pentagon contractors in 1994, "along with better communications and the ability to see deep in the enemy's rear echelon has resulted in the need for increased training space."

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that devastate ecological balances. In Hawai'i, civil disobedience campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s led to an executive order in 1990 by George Bush Sr. to end the Navy's bombing of Kaho'olawe, an island whose sacredness was being reclaimed by native Hawai'ian activists. The subsequent \$420 million program to remove munitions and restore the island's landscape has been accompanied by a popular program to visit the island for cultural and religious activities.

More recently, the Army has suspended live ammunition training in Makua Valley, Hawai'i for nearly three years while the Fish & Wildlife Service evaluates the effects of training on rare plants and the Earth-justice Legal Defense Fund forces the Army to complete an environmental impact study. "Are the future children of this community condemned to drink bottled water and be forced to swim in hotel pools?," asked resident Frenchy DeSoto at a public hearing on Makua Valley in January. "Dear God, your responsibility is to protect us, not poison us!" Hearings required by environmental laws have provided important opportunities for the public to voice broader concerns about military impacts.

Concerns about the Navy's environmental destruction also have played a central role in the movement to end bombing on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico. There, 9,300 Vieques residents suffer high levels of cancer and other disease, believed to be caused by heavy metals and organic compounds that leach out of unexploded ordnance into the food chain and the air people breathe. Viequesenses have sued the Navy under the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and other environmental laws to stop the Navy from bombing and to bring about a cleanup of the island's land and water. As environmentalist lawyer Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. has pointed out, it is sad and ironic that federal law has stronger protections for non-human endangered species than it does for human health threatened by military training and operations.

So far, civil disobedience has been more effective than legal actions in stopping the Navy from bombing in Vieques. After a Marine pilot missed his target by nearly two miles in April 1999, killing a local civilian guard, civil disobedience camps--supported by a public consensus of Puerto Rican civil society against the Navy's presence in Vieques--successfully prevented the Navy from bombing Vieques until May 2000, when the camps were removed by federal marshals. Since then, nearly 1,000 people, mostly Puerto Ricans, have entered the range, committed civil disobedience, and been arrested. In April, the mayor of Vieques was among those who occupied the impact area during training by the USS Enterprise (which then steamed for the Persian Gulf). The Navy dropped inert bombs on the area, despite the mayor's action, but the peaceful and determined protests dealt a severe blow to Navy's legitimacy in Vieques.

Meanwhile, the environmental evidence on the impact of Navy training is mounting. A devastating study released in January by biologist Arturo Massol and radiochemist Elba Diaz showed that vegetables and plants growing in the civilian area of Vieques are highly contaminated with heavy lead, cadmium, copper, and other metals. Edible crops had metals substantially above the maximum set by the European Union Council, and also far exceeded plants tested in the Puerto Rican town of Guanica. The plants most affected were those with shallow roots, such as chili, squash, pasture, and grasses, while trees were less contaminated. This is consistent with the thesis that heavy metals are deposited in the civilian area through air dispersion by wind from the bombing zone. Adding offense to injury, the Navy has openly scoffed at the results of this and other studies demonstrating heavy contamination in Vieques.

In Panama, when the Pentagon attempted in 1995-1998 to negotiate a military base agreement to stay in the country after the Canal Treaties required the US military's departure, revelations about the military's explosive environmental legacy played an important role in illustrating what a poor guest the Army had been. The Fellowship of Reconciliation, working with Panamanian groups, uncovered a history of chemical and conventional weapons

tests in the canal area, and the resulting popular awareness of the environmental costs of hosting the US military contributed to the collapse of the talks.

In Colombia, where US contractors are carrying out a chemical war with glyphosate to wipe out coca plants, environmental and human rights groups have denounced the effects of spraying on subsistence crops, children's health, and the economic choices available to peasants, who in most cases simply plant coca leaf somewhere else. The US Army's defense of this use of poison is to issue reports on the negative effects of the cocaine processing industry, as if to say: "They do it worse."

Signaling a broader military resistance to citizens' environmental and health concerns, Army Deputy Chief of Staff General R.L. Van Antwerp testified before a Senate committee in March that the Army is seeking "relief from compliance with environmental statutes." Clearly upset by the precedent set at the Massachusetts Military Reservation, a firing range in Cape Cod closed because of groundwater contamination, the General focused on what he called "encroachment" onto firing ranges by civilian concerns.

General Antwerp said the Army has trained personnel in "relationship-building and outrage management," apparently because Army actions have provoked community outrage. Asking Congress for assistance, he said, "The best technical solution might not always be the best community solution." The Pentagon already funds "Joint Land Use Studies" to prevent "encroachment" by civilian development that might affect military base activities.

Public opinion has now forced even President Bush to acknowledge that the Navy's training in Vieques cannot be allowed to continue. Its ultimate end will be a victory for the idea that national security does not rest on guns and bombs, but on protecting the integrity of human relationships to the lands and waters from which we draw sustenance.

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