

Call for action to prevent environmental damage during military conflict

The 1990s saw the emergence of calls for a Fifth Geneva Convention to safeguard the environment during armed conflicts in the aftermath of deliberate environmental damage in the first Gulf War¹. But this war was not the only conflict to witness widespread environmental damage; other examples include large-scale use of defoliant agents during the Vietnam War and poisoning of water sources during the Darfur conflict². A Fifth Geneva Convention would provide a multilateral treaty to reduce or mitigate such environmental destruction, including legal instruments for site-based protection of critical natural resources and areas of ecological importance². Yet, over two decades later, we still lack such a Convention³ despite continued environmental damage due to a global increase in armed conflicts⁴. Recent articles covering conflicts demonstrate the continued role of conflict in environmental damage, including driving social disruption⁵; megafauna collapse^{6,7}; and species extinction⁷. The uncontrolled circulation of arms resulting from conflicts⁸ exacerbates such negative impacts, including driving unsustainable hunting of wildlife⁷, and contributes to ongoing regional instability. The UN International Law Commission will meet shortly to move forward a program of work initiated in 2013 to protect the environment in relation to armed conflicts (<http://legal.un.org/ilc/sessions/71/>). We call on governments to accelerate the progress of this work; to ensure explicit safeguards for biodiversity protection are incorporated; and to use the resulting recommendations to finally deliver a Fifth Geneva Convention to uphold environmental protection during armed conflict. There is also an urgent need for better mechanisms to hold the military industry to account for the impacts of their activities, and companies and governments should work together to regulate arms transfer and minimize the illicit diversion of weapons (www.thearmstradetreaty.org). The establishment of robust international legal frameworks combined with improved regulation will provide better environmental protection and build a safer world^{9,10}.

Authors:

Sarah M. Durant^{1*}, José C. Brito^{2,3}, Susan Canney⁴, Sílvia B. Carvalho², Nathalie Pettorelli⁴, Hugo Rebelo^{2,5}, Teresa Abáigar⁶, Walid Algadafi⁷, Ali Berbash⁸, Lynn Besenyei⁷, Pierre Comizzoli⁹, Pierre-André Crochet¹⁰, Soumía Fahd¹¹, Hamissou H.M. Garba¹², David Mallon¹³, Abdullah Nagy¹⁴, John Newby¹⁵, David Olson¹⁶, Juan M. Pleguezuelos¹⁷, Abdeljebbar Qninba¹⁸, Abdoukarim Samna¹⁹, Alaaeldin Soltan²⁰, Andack S. Sow²¹, Christopher H. Young⁷

1 Institute of Zoology, Zoological Society of London. Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY, UK.

2 CIBIO/InBIO, Centro de Investigação em Biodiversidade e Recursos Genéticos da Universidade do Porto, R. Padre Armando Quintas, 11, 4485-661 Vairão, Portugal.

3 Departamento de Biologia da Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade do Porto, Rua Campo Alegre, 4169-007 Porto, Portugal.

4 Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Zoology Research and Administration Building. 11a Mansfield Rd, Oxford OX1 3SZ. UK.

5. CIBIO/InBIO, Instituto Superior de Agronomia, Universidade de Lisboa, Tapada da Ajuda, 1349-017 Lisboa, Portugal

6 Estación Experimental de Zonas Áridas (EEZA), CSIC. Carretera de Sacramento s/n, 04120-La Cañada de S. Urbano, Almería, Spain.

7 School of Sciences, Faculty of Science & Engineering, The University of Wolverhampton, Wulfruna Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1LY, UK.

8 Protected Area & Biodiversity Section, Nature Conservation Dept., Environment General Authority, Libya.

9 Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, National Zoological Park, Washington, DC, USA.

- 10 CEFE, CNRS, University of Montpellier, University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, EPHE, IRD, Montpellier, France.
- 11 Département de Biologie, Faculté des Sciences, Université Abdelmalek Essaâdi. Tétouan, Morocco.
- 12 Direction Générale des Eaux et Forêts, General Direction for Water, Forest and Wildlife, B.P. 578, Niamey, Niger.
- 13 3 Acre St, Glossop, SK13 8JS Derbyshire, UK.
- 14 Al-Azhar University, 1 Al Mokhaym Al Daem, Cairo Governorate, Egypt.
- 15 Sahara Conservation Fund-Europe. Immeuble Grand Place, 3 bis Grand Place, 77600 Bussy Saint Georges, France.
- 16 WWF Hong Kong, 15/F, Manhattan Centre, 8 Kwai Cheong Road. Kwai Chung, New Territories.
- 17 Departamento de Zoología, Facultad de Ciencias, Universidad de Granada. E-18071 Granada, Spain.
- 18 Mohammed V University of Rabat, Scientific Institute, Laboratoire de Géo-Biodiversité et Patrimoine Naturel (GEOBIO), Av. Ibn Battouta, BP 703, 10090, Agdal, Rabat, Morocco.
- 19 Direction de la Faune, de la Chasse et des Aires Protégées, Niger.
- 20 Nature Conservation Sector, Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA), Egypt.
- 21 Direction du Contrôle Environnemental, Ministère de l'Environnement et du Développement Durable. Nouakchott, Mauritania.

*To whom correspondence should be addressed. E-mail: sarah.durant@ioz.ac.uk

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Email addresses of authors:

Teresa Abáigar	abaigar@eeza.csic.es
Walid Algadafi	walid.saed1975@yahoo.com
Ali Berbash	aberbash83@yahoo.com
Lynn Besenyei	L.Besenyei@wlv.ac.uk
José Carlos Brito	jcbrito@cibio.up.pt
Susan Canney	susan.canney@zoo.ox.ac.uk
Sílvia B. Carvalho	silviacarvalho@cibio.up.pt
Pierre Comizzoli	comizzolip@si.edu
Pierre-André Crochet	pierre-andre.crochet@cefe.cnrs.fr
Sarah M. Durant	s.durant@ucl.ac.uk
Soumía Fahd	sfahd@uae.ac.ma
Hamissou Halilou Malam Garba	hamissou66@yahoo.fr
David Mallon	dmallon7@gmail.com
Abdullah Nagy	A.Nagy@azhar.edu.eg
John Newby	john.newby@bluewin.ch
David Olson	dolson@wwf.org.hk
Nathalie Pettorelli	nathalie.pettorelli@ioz.ac.uk
Juan Manuel Pleguezuelos	juanple@ugr.es
Abdeljebbar Qninba	qninba_abdel59@yahoo.fr
Hugo Rebelo	hugo.rebelo@cibio.up.pt
Abdoulkarim Samna	samna_abdou@yahoo.fr
Alaaeldin Soultan	alaaeldeen80@gmail.com
Andack Saad Sow	sowandacksaad@yahoo.fr
Christopher H Young	c.h.young@wlv.ac.uk