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Threats to Environmental Security: Fighting for Survival in a Changing Climate

One would think that there are very few things that would connect over seven billion people. We pass through our lives essentially separated from the vast majority of our own kind, often forgetting that there are even other people outside our tiny corner of the universe. Yet there is at least one thing that connects us all: the planet we share. Unfortunately, it isn't always something that brings us together in a positive way. When climate change and environmental events threaten our way of life, we can find ourselves embroiled in violent conflict with one another, fighting for our place on Earth and for our right to survive as human beings.

Environmental security is a growing concern around the world, and two of the readings we discussed in class—Matthew and Krakowka & Rios—point out that it is something nations must begin to address. These threats have been too long overlooked by world leaders, a flaw that has been fatal for individuals around the globe. A poignant example of these fatalities was presented in the Krakowka & Rios reading, which addressed the numerous environmental security issues that have plagued Africa in recent years. The Sahel region is the area of most concern on the continent, as the Sahara has begun to encroach on arable land. Africa, of course, is one of few areas in the world where food security is, by and large, maintained through subsistence farming and small-scale agriculture. With climate change acting as a threat multiplier and intensifying already existent drought, the people of the Sahel region have been left in dire straits, fighting over the little usable land that is left, without the possibility of stable government help (Krakowka & Rios 46).

The article points to this destitution as being a catalyst for human rights tragedies in the region, most notably the Rwandan genocide (Krakowka & Rios 47). High population growth, water scarcity, and lack of food security prompted this battle between ethnic groups, which will forever be remembered as possibly the most tragic period in Rwandan history. Of course, it has been quite some time since all of Africa has been relatively stable, so much of the world would view this simply as the way things are there or as a flaw of the people. But as climate change helps destabilize other parts of the world, it is becoming clearer that this isn't just the way things are. Our mistreatment of the environment is posing a threat to all of us that we have ignored for too long.

This environmentally fueled instability can be seen more recently in the Syrian Civil War. It may seem to the developed world that the conflicts in the Middle East like this one pop up out of nowhere, but many of them have been a long time coming thanks to a lack of water resources. It's hard enough for people to live in such an arid region, so undoubtedly when drought and climate change kicked in, many of the water resources in Syria were choked dry and heightened tension arose. An article from the Huffington Post puts it simply, "When our basic human needs are not met—for water, food, clothing, shelter, or sleep—we get grumpy. When we get grumpy, we fight" (Famiglietti). Because of the drought, many farmers were forced to move into urban centers where they were subsequently unemployed. Anger over the government's lacking management of water resources and growing poverty were key to the formation of the violent conflict, which has plagued the country for three years so far and killed over 150,000 people (Hammer). Wars have almost always been blamed on people and drawn out as battles between good and evil, definitive or not. But a not-so-secret fact is that many of our human wars have been fought over resources, over the environment. They have been a matter of environmental security, yet we have failed to approach them as such.

It's easy to think that this could never happen in a country with such stability as the United States, where most of our citizens have never needed to kill or even physically fight someone for access to basic human resources like water and food. A recent IPCC report showed though, that this kind of environmental resource-based conflict might become more common in the near future. The study found that climate change will indirectly increase the risk of violent conflict and war through amplification of poverty and economic shocks, as well as increasing unplanned displacement of people and changing migration patterns (Connor). This coincides with the theory presented by in Richard Matthew's chapter of Vig & Kraft, which defined climate change as being a "threat multiplier" in the way that the effects of climate change breed more instability in regions of the world already filled with tension (Matthew). The United States has already had its own brushes with environmental security threats, mainly through natural disasters in recent years. Though none of our natural disasters have led to widespread violent conflict, they have led to some of the threats defined by the IPCC report: displacement of people, economic shock, and an increase in poverty. When one examines all of the potential causes of war, it becomes not so far-fetched to believe that maybe one day—whether in the very near future or not—the developed world could succumb to a lack of environmental security as well.

Though things may appear to be grim—and I won't try to say that they aren't—it's not as if we are helpless when it comes to environmental security. The first step to preventing future conflicts is to acknowledge that environmental security is an issue. It would be lovely if our only enemies were the classic "bad guys", a very small slice of the whole world who devote themselves to evil deeds, but that's not the case, especially with environmental security. As difficult as it may be, we have to be open to admitting that we have caused these problems, and that has to begin in the developing world. The climate change problems essentially began here, and we have the resources to help those who are affected by our actions against the planet. We

can provide the aid needed and the governmental resources to begin to soothe current conflicts over environmental resources.

I agree wholeheartedly with Matthew in that education is paramount when it comes to addressing environmental security and making it a priority. These threats won't be resolved if we let our negligence persist, so it is vital to educate as many people as possible in order to raise awareness and concern about the potential for environmental conflict. The next generation—my generation—has to step up to prevent these threats from completely disintegrating the bonds of human kind that have held us together for so long. Nobody wants to be at war over something as simple as a sip of water and a bite of food. What propels them toward violence is the emptiness in their stomachs and the dryness in their throats. If we can all recognize the severity and realness of these issues and how easily we have created environmental security threats, then we might just be able to stop them. If we can use our human connection of planet Earth as a reason for peace and cooperation towards a better world instead of as a reason for violence, then we can begin to protect one another and the home that we love through environmental security initiatives.

Works Cited

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