

Reason 13

Extreme Environmental Toxicity – National and International Poisons

“The illegal drug trade is an environmental crisis.”

Eric Sterling, President, Criminal Justice Policy Foundation

This failed War on Drugs contributes extensively to global warming.

As AIDS and hepatitis are to the individual, pollution is to the planet. This war adversely affects everything, from our inner city ghettos to the tropical rain forests of South America. This chapter points out six appalling ways the drug war drastically pollutes the environment, how it impacts our state and national parks, and how it even contributes broadly to global warming.

Ruinous Deforestation and Watershed Pollution

One quarter of the Amazon’s tropical forest deforestation has been a direct result of illegal drugs. Why would a 2002 U.S. State Department report use hectares instead of acres? Or El Salvador, which many believe is a tiny country? Only one reason: to disguise the enormity of the problem. *The mind-boggling fact is that 2.4 million hectares equals six million acres of deforestation, which is greater than the combined total acreage of Connecticut, Delaware, and two Rhode Islands. And there’s been five more years of deforestation since then.*

According to our own State Department, “To clear the way for drug crops, forests are cleared and burned before planting coca. Due to low fertility and the need for concealment from authorities, the fields are often abandoned after two or three growing seasons and new fields are cleared deeper in the forest. This practice accelerates deforestation, and destroys timber and other resources that would otherwise be available for more sustainable uses of forestland.”

[It also causes] “soil erosion and downstream siltation. [It] increases the severity of floods and droughts [and in] 1987 resulted in the worst flooding in Peru’s history, causing massive landslides that killed scores of rural residents. [It] reportedly even exacerbated the damage and death toll from earthquake-triggered landslides in western Colombia in the late 1990s.

“Across Peru’s entire Amazon River basin, coca plantings, along with processing and trafficking activities, caused the destruction of another 700,000 hectares of jungle — 10 percent of the total rain forest destruction in Peru this century — according to a 1987 study.” And there’s been another 20 years of destruction since then.

In the past twenty-five years, Colombia alone has lost more than three million acres of tropical rainforest and this is about the size of Yellowstone National Park. If this continues, one third of Colombia’s forests will be ruined in five years and all will be destroyed in the next 40 years. The total losses are even worse. “The expansion of coca cultivation, production and trafficking in Peru, Bolivia and Colombia has resulted in the destruction of, at an absolute minimum, 2.4 million hectares of fragile tropical forest — an area the size of El Salvador — in the Andean region over the last 20 years.” (1)

“Seventy-three percent of the Andes, an area that is vital to the conservation of Colombia’s water supply, has been deforested as a result of both migration (up the slopes) and drug cultivation. ... Encompassing a mere 0.8

percent of the world's land mass, Colombia's total forest coverage accounts for 10 percent of the earth's biodiversity.