

Peacebuilding through Protecting the Environment

by Justine Wild

Linking the Sustainable Development Goals to Climate Action

Introduction

I am an alum of the 2011/2012 Antarctic Expedition and now a member of the 2021 Climate Action Cohort. When I came home from the expedition ten years ago, I was incredibly fired up about climate change. I did plenty of public talks and engaged in a few volunteer projects, including CPAWS Get Outside BC Program. As I went through my remaining years of high school, I became distanced from the movement as my interest in the sciences dwindled. I found my footing in history and political science and completed my BA in International Relations with a minor in Indigenous Studies in 2021. As I continued my studies and gained new experiences, I began to see my old life and new life collide in the intersections of conflict and climate change. The Climate Action Cohort made it so I could not ignore the collision anymore.

As we gathered in the cabin for the Climate Action Cohort's Nature Retreat and did a gallery walk of the Sustainable Development Goals, I could not help but feel as though I had been called home. Concepts I had studied for years were now clearly related to climate action and I felt excitement and energy that I could do the work from an angle I was passionate about.

Complex Problem, Complex Solution

The fickle thing about climate change is that it simply will not be solved at the hands of scientists who are often depended on. Climate change and its tributaries reach down into all aspects of our lives and require cross-discipline engagement. Both symptoms and causes need to be addressed by a diversity of actors for change to happen. For years, I have watched from the sidelines uneager to learn the scientific mechanisms behind why climate change has happened and how to fix it. However, in my mind, as the complexity of climate change becomes more apparent, the role of political science in climate change discussions becomes clearer.

Climate & Peace

I have always been interested in studying peace and conflict. While I was in high school, it was learning about the concept of peacekeeping that steered me towards a degree in International Relations. Today, I am a member of Rotary International, where two of our areas of focus are Peacebuilding and Protecting the Environment. Finding this intersection reflected to me in my past and present experiences truly helps fuel my passion.

The concept of peace is both challenging and intuitive. We can picture peace in our personal lives, we can picture it at a national or international level. But often our definition of peace remains narrow and defined solely by its 'counterpart': war. Peace cannot simply be the absence of war. Peace is freedom from conflict, freedom from the fear of violence. Peace defined in such a way may challenge how we view our countries, the way we view our own institutions.

Climate change is a threat to peace. Climate change has a significant impact on the security of many nations. While it may not directly result in conflict, climate change exacerbates the factors of conflict including social, economic, and environmental. Climate change can alter crops, animal populations, and available potable water. With less resources to feed populations, violence can break out internally or with neighbouring countries. The dwindling resources can result in mass migration draining resources in neighbouring countries or leaving many individuals stateless.

When conflict breaks out environmental conditions worsen. Crops and water supply can be contaminated during war time, pollutants increase from operating war machinery, and there can be an increase of manufacturing emissions. Explosives used in war contaminate resources, including soil, and can harm animals. Not to mention the devastation on human life. When a nation is in conflict, climate change is simply not a priority. Authorities are less likely to protect the environment during times of war and non-combatants will find it harder to adapt to the changing climate if conflict is happening around their homes.

Climate change and peace have a circular relationship. Climate change makes peace harder to obtain and conflict worsens climate change. It becomes a conundrum of which issue to focus on. However, like all things climate change we don't need to choose which part of it to focus on, we need to work on it as a whole.

Global Issue

When we protect the environment, we are protecting our fellow humans. For many people, including myself, climate change can appear to be intangible. Many of us are privileged to live in places or live lifestyles where the impact of climate change is not seen. Western-centric perspectives and news cycles provide a shield through which we can ignore the devastating impacts of climate change until you see them up close. Further, if you cannot see the impact of your actions or constant reminders of why you are doing the work, passion subsides, and complacency takes hold.

For me, framing climate change as a threat to peace helps me reconceptualize what I am doing. Instead of seeing climate change as a vague looming threat, I can focus on a direct effect that I care about deeply. Whether that means that I can more easily make sustainable choices, have a clearer idea of a career path, or finding NGOs to support – knowing my connection to climate action is my driving force.

Conclusion

Your actions, wherever you are, have a global impact. Visiting Antarctica ten years ago, the key lesson I took away was that if our actions can impact a part of the world so far removed and uninhabited our actions can impact the world over. Climate change is global. It can be difficult to look beyond the borders of our community, city, province, country. But as activists and people working in the sector, we need to know and see our why.

There are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I firmly believe that everyone can resonate with at least one of these. Climate change is multifaceted. It permeates through all aspects of our lives. If you are feeling overwhelmed by where to start (or where to continue) in your activism and service to the environment, the SDGs can help narrow your scope to what you are most interested in. Passion is an inevitable piece of doing this work. If you're trying to fake it because it is what you're "supposed to be doing" your final destination will be burn out. All of us cannot be passionate about everything. Using our

strengths and interests and working as a collective is necessary to create a unified front and tackle this huge issue.