

## **Illegal Drug Trade is Environmental Crisis**

Everyone who loves the national parks and national forests, or is concerned about global environmental problems should put solving the drug problem on his or her agenda.

The Los Angeles Times story on the "War of the weed" in Sequoia National Park is the latest chapter in the story of drug prohibition's contribution to spoiling our natural heritage. The article quotes law makers and law enforcers calling for more helicopters, more agents, and more money. How will squadrons of low-flying "choppers" protect the tranquility (or wild life) of wilderness areas? Who believes for a moment that helicopters and DEA agents patrolling once-peaceful national park valleys will dent the marijuana trade? Only regulating the now illegal drug trade can restore safety to the trails in the parks.

Drug enforcement has driven marijuana growers and meth lab operators to public lands. In the 1980s, the Members of Congress I worked with pressured the Justice Department to forfeit the lands of suspected pot growers. But if the government owns the land, the owner can't be prosecuted or investigated. Drug activity in the national parks is the result of intensified enforcement elsewhere. And enforcement drives up the price of marijuana making it more profitable to grow.

Illegal meth labs, with highly toxic chemicals, are another threat to our pristine wild areas. Criminals locate labs away from folks who might smell the fumes and call the police. This is another unfortunate, but logical consequence of drug enforcement.

The threat of drug prohibition to the environment is felt elsewhere in the world as well.

Deforestation is leading to global warming and loss of precious plant and animal species. One quarter of all Amazonian deforestation in the 20th century was a result of the demand of the illegal drug trade, says the U.S. State Department.

Over the past 20 years, growers of coca and opium destroyed 2.3 million hectares of rainforest to create new fields for cultivation, according to a 2002 briefing by Rand Beers, then-assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs.

Not only are forests destroyed, but millions of gallons of toxic chemicals - gasoline, kerosene, sulfuric acid and toluene - are discharged into the watersheds in the processing of coca leaf in jungle "labs." Growers use pesticides to control weeds while the U.S. pays to spray pesticides to eradicate coca. All this pollutes surface water, aquifers, kills legitimate foodstuffs and livestock, and causes skin diseases and birth defects.

Silt and chemicals flowing into Latin American rivers flow into the surrounding seas damaging fragile coral reefs.

Tragically, it is the prohibition approach to drug control that is hurting the environment. Is the war on drugs like other social and economic benefits that inevitably result in some environmental price?

No. The war on drugs is not controlling drugs. Every measure shows prohibition is not working: the illegal death rate has tripled since 1980, adult and teenage use is up over the past dozen years, the price of cocaine and heroin has dropped steadily, and the purity of those drugs sold in the U.S. market is higher than ever. The illegal U.S. drug market exceeds \$60 billion in retail year after year.

The spread of marijuana cultivation to the national parks is another example that the underlying policy is a failure.

Since I toured Peruvian coca fields with Members of Congress in 1983, American anti-drug efforts have become more grandiose. It is during the past 20 years that the deforestation has escalated. We've defeated the Medellin and Cali cartels, but the illegal drug trade is not smaller.

Close to home, drug prohibition crime in urban centers is a major cause of suburban sprawl, and the loss of open space and scarce farmland.

Most disputes in the illegal drug trade are resolved violently. (For example, you can't sue the seller of adulterated cocaine in Superior Court for breach of contract.) Open-air drug markets create disorder on urban streets. Without crime, these neighborhoods would be great places to live and build new homes. They have complete infrastructure (sewerage, water, electricity, gas, telephone, cable) and proximity to jobs. Suburban development requires expensive investments and new roads.

Prohibition-driven crime in our cities forces developers, home buyers, employers and retailers away to the suburbs. The result is more traffic congestion, foreign oil imports, air pollution, global warming, and sprawl.

These environmental losses will be substantially reduced when marijuana and the drug industries are regulated, licensed and taxed.

What strategy is more likely to protect the environment in the long term: intensifying the war on drugs, or regulating and controlling the use, manufacture and distribution of psychoactive drugs? How much of the environment do we have to lose before we stop the failed war on drugs?

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