

On the verge of disaster: top 5 environmental problems in Ukraine

1. Consequences of the Donbas war



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Almost every day, the media draws our attention to different environmental issues, such as global warming, climate change, melting icebergs, disappearing species, etc., but we should first stop and take a look around us, at our own country first, and highlight the biggest environmental threats in Ukraine, many of which could soon end in complete disaster.

According to the most negative environmental forecasts, in 20 years the steppe will reach Kyiv, in 50 years- the waters of the Dnipro River will decrease considerably, and in 100 years – Ukraine may be left without forests.

What is killing the environment in Ukraine? What can be done to counteract environmental degradation? Some questions and answers to consider...

Consequences of the Donbas war

Prior to the onset of the war, the Donetsk and Luhansk regions were home to some 4,500 environmentally hazardous enterprises. Between 2014 and 2017, companies in the region reported over 500 cases of operational disruptions and related incidents, many of which were classified as potentially harmful to human health and the environment.

Shelled apartment buildings in the war zone



The following list includes industrial facilities damaged during the armed hostilities that pose the greatest hazard for the environment:

- the Yasynivsky, Avdiyivka and Yenakiyevo **Coke** Plants,
- the Yenakiyevo, Makiyivka and Donetsk **Metallurgical** Plants,
- the Toretsk **Ferroalloy** Plant,
- the Alchevsk **Metallurgical** Complex,
- the Lysychansk **Oil** Refinery,
- the Donetsk State-Owned **Chemical Plant**, and
- the Sloviansk, Luhansk, Vuhlehirsk and Myronivka **Thermal Power** Stations.

In the course of the war, multiple reports have been received of **damaged infrastructure and power outages at coal mines, leading to the shutdown of mine-water drainage systems, and in a number of cases, resulting in full-scale flooding in the mines.** An OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation of Europe) report predicts the following:

“The continued large-scale flooding of area mines will inevitably result in both surface flooding and subsidence of the surrounding area, rendering buildings unusable, engineering and communication infrastructure – gas lines, sewage and water supply systems – inoperative, and polluting surface and groundwater with iron, chlorides, sulfates, other mineral salts and heavy metals.”

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The effects of this initial of destruction on the environmental protection system in the conflict area are plainly evident. Ecologists report that, with the onset of war, environmental activities in eastern Ukraine were virtually paralyzed.

The Donbas region has also been devastated by **massive wildfires, endangering the ecosystem, forests and wildlife**. The causes:

1. First, fires are often caused by incendiary ammunition.
2. Second, fires spread quickly as the grass burns, and cannot be extinguished due to the absence of fire equipment.
3. Third, to prevent the enemy from advancing, the warring parties set fire to environmentally valuable windbreak belts.

Kateryna Norenko, an analyst and environmentalist with Ecology-Law-Man, an international charity organization, explains the situation:

“In the first four months of the war, 20% of the occupied territory was devastated by fires. When we compared ignition points in different satellite images, we saw that in the dry season of 2014 there were 15 more fires than in the same season of 2013. This trend continues today.

The **fires are destroying natural steppe communities in the Donbas**, some of the best steppe areas in Ukraine, ancient pine forests that will be difficult to restore, entire territories of Ukraine’s nature reserve fund, including indigenous species of plants listed in the Red Book of Ukraine.”

Land and soil have been heavily impacted by the war. In the areas affected directly by the hostilities, the soil reveals systemically elevated concentrations of mercury, vanadium, cadmium and non-radioactive strontium, as well as gamma-radiation in excess of the respective values measured in areas unaffected by the fighting. Such dangerous substances can cause numerous diseases in humans and wildlife.

Oleksiy Vasyliuk, head of a Ukrainian environmental group, concurs:

“In my opinion, the pollution from explosive weapons, especially Grad missiles, causes the most harm to the environment. Each explosion releases an enormous amount of toxic elements into the soil and atmosphere. Thus, these heavy metals accumulate in the human body, causing changes in the nervous and cardiovascular systems, autism, renal failure, metabolic disorders, and even fetal death.”

Eco-activists agree that **soil contamination** will continue until war activities cease completely. It is impossible to cultivate anything on such soil or consume food products grown on such terrain without preparing and implementing a land recultivation program.