

Protecting the Environment

By Mr. Thomas O'Hara III



Photo by Thomas O'Hara III

Protecting the environment is one of the principles of the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) operations throughout the world. Some might argue that in a hostile environment, such as that in Iraq, attention to environmental concerns would take a back seat to engineering operations. Those people would be surprised to learn that a focus on preserving natural resources and safe disposal of harmful products has fallen in step with the fast-tracked effort to restore Iraq.

One USACE job is to make sure we leave the environment in no worse condition than it was found. Environmental specialists are assigned to all military sites throughout the country to ensure that military operations do not adversely affect the areas. Realistically, Iraq is still a war zone, but we still have a responsibility to do the right thing.

Environmental assessments are also done to protect the troops in the field. Environmental specialists at forward operating bases attempt to determine if

air, soil, and water are free of pesticides, chemicals, smoke, and bacteria that would harm those serving in the area.

When inspecting a temporary landfill in the Green Zone, where Iraqi government offices and US forces are based in Baghdad, environmental specialists ensure that only approved construction debris is being dumped (see photo above). The site, located adjacent to the Tigris River, is not ideal, but it serves immediate needs for the rebuilding effort. Once hostilities settle down to a point that an external site can facilitate disposal of construction debris from the Green Zone construction, then this area will be cleaned back to the open field it once was.

Environmental specialists also manage and develop procedures to properly dispose of hazardous materials. Drums of chlorine wash are stockpiled until they can be properly disposed of. In other areas, reuse of hazardous materials has helped minimize the impacts of multinational force operations.

For example, oil waste from operations is being used as a burn product for some of the electrical generation projects in country.

Simply because a combat environment is not conducive to typical environmentally conscious activities doesn't mean the military or coalition can turn a blind eye to it. Not only is the multinational force not turning a blind eye, it is investing substantially so the efforts here to liberate the country don't leave its environment unnecessarily scarred.

When not in the field performing project oversight, environmental specialists are combing through baseline assessments of operations throughout Iraq, identifying potential environmental concerns and impacts—impacts the multinational force will one day return to assess and, in some cases, remediate or clean up.

In addition to monitoring the efforts of the multinational force, USACE environmental specialists also work with



Photo by Thomas O'Hara III

This landfill on the banks of the Tigris River is a temporary solution to handle construction debris. Local Iraqi workers manage the disposal of the debris.

the newly established Ministry of the Environment to develop new policies in Iraq to minimize the damages that occurred prior to Iraq's liberation. There was a lot of environmental damage during the 30 years of oppression under Saddam Hussein, but Iraq can recover. Containment for spillage of oil operations, protection of water resources to minimize the spread of disease, as well as advancements in industrial waste monitoring will eventually help the country's 25 million people enjoy a healthier society.

Iraq is a beautiful country, and its history is significant for all cultures—not just the Iraqis. We must make sure it is preserved for all to enjoy. 

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