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Pentagon Disputes Study Of Spraying Devastation

By DANA ADAMS SCHMIDT
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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8—The Defense Department denied today that there was conclusive evidence that the United States Army defoliation programs had been as catastrophic for South Vietnam as alleged in a recent study for the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The study, made under the supervision of Dr. Matthew S. Meselson, professor of biology at Harvard University, and reported in The New York Times Dec. 30, asserted that at least a fifth of the 1.2 million acres of mangrove forest in South Vietnam had been "utterly destroyed." It said some unknown factor had prevented any vegetation from returning to those areas.

Jerry W. Friedheim, the Defense Department spokesman, said Dr. Meselson could not know from his study that the mangrove forest would not come back. Citing what he described as expert information available to the Department of Defense, Mr. Friedheim said there was no certainty of this. In addition, he said, some

parts of South Vietnam's economy, notably the forest industry and small farmers, might have benefited from defoliation.

"Parts of the hardwood forest have been destroyed and can now be lumbered," he said. "Defoliation permits easier access, so crews can go in and bring out the wood."

"At the same time," he said, "peasants now find room to grow garden crops right at the edge of the road, where they have easy access to the city."

In his comments on the Meselson study, Mr. Friedheim said a more thorough one was about to be made by the National Academy of Sciences.

He said the defoliation policy had been a military necessity, but he also said that the program was being phased out because changed circumstances had reduced the need for it.

Mr. Friedheim took exception to the description of photographs of a defoliated area contained in the published report of Dr. Meselson's study. The account said the photographs of the delta region show parts that look as if they had been devastated by nuclear attack.