

Vietnam Environment Now in Ruin

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WASHINGTON — Regardless of when U.S. forces leave Indochina, one aspect of the war will remain for years — the impact of war on the environment, particularly in South Vietnam.

The toll of war on the natural resources of the host countries is difficult to measure. So far, the only attempted assessments have come from a handful of scientists, some of whom have visited North and South Vietnam. Public interest has been minimal.

"A number of statements have been made, half jokingly, that we should bomb Vietnam back to the stone age," said Dr. Arthur Westing, a leader of one scientific expedition to South Vietnam. "The horrible thing about this is that Vietnam was darned close to the stone age when we started in over there."

Depend on Land

Westing, a professor of botany at Windham College in Vermont, noted, "we are destroying the natural resource base of a people who depend on the land on a day to day basis."

Scientists' assessments are made on the basis of information collected in the field and what the Pentagon tells them. For example, the United States has expended more than 27 billion pounds of explosives in Indochina since 1962 or an average of 97,000 pounds per square mile in North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Westing said the bombing has permanently rearranged the landscape of the region, deeply affecting agriculture, forestry and wildlife. In South Vietnam, the United States has also cleared more than 750,000 acres of forest and brush land by giant bulldozer and

has dumped chemical herbicides (plant killers) on 5.7 million acres of forest and cropland, or one-seventh the land mass of South Vietnam, in strengths 10 times more potent than those used for domestic purposes in the United States.

Scars Remain

The U.S. military forces stopped mass applications of herbicides in early 1971 and turned over bulldozer operations to the South Vietnamese in early 1972. But the scars of these operations, according to scientific observers, will remain for years.

Dr. E. W. Pfeiffer, University of Montana zoology professor who traveled to both North and South Vietnam,

said: "My total feeling is that North Vietnam (environmentally) is in one hell of a lot better shape than the South."

Pfeiffer said he took a bird census while on a 65-mile boat trip through a defoliated mangrove swamp in South Vietnam. In an area which should have supported a rich variety of tropical birdlife, he said, he observed only flesh-eating birds such as buzzards.

South Vietnam's mangrove swamps are a source of charcoal and act as a natural breeding ground for many fish in the Vietnamese diet. Almost half of these mangroves have been killed by herbicide spraying. Sci-

entists say it may take 10 years or longer to regenerate the region.

Congress has shown little public interest in the war's impact on Indochina's environment and its natural resources. Sen. Gaylord Nelson (D-Wis.) in January introduced the Vietnam Ecological Assessment Act of 1972, and it probably will not get a committee hearing, according to staff sources.

The only other piece of legislation which might affect Vietnam's environment was introduced by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.). He proposes an international treaty to ban weather modification as a weapon of war.