



Afghanistan

Post-Conflict
Environmental Assessment

United Nations Environment Programme

First published in Switzerland in 2003 by the United Nations Environment Programme.

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ISBN 92-1-158617-8

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Design and Layout: Nikki Meith and Peter Hulm

Cover design: Enid Ngaira, UNEP

Maps: GRID-Geneva

Satellite Imagery: UNOSAT

Front cover photo: Luke Powell, 2002

Printer: Imprimerie Chirat, France

Printed on Recycled Paper



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**This report by the United Nations Environment Programme was
made possible by the generous contribution of the governments of
Canada, Finland, Luxembourg and Switzerland**

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Foreword

The year 2002 brought hope for peace, stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan. It was the year that saw the massive return of refugees to the country, the first *Loya Jirga* in decades, and impressive financial assistance from the international community.

It was also the year when Afghans started rebuilding their country with resolute determination. Facing huge reconstruction challenges, this war-torn society showed exceptional leadership and dedication in establishing post-conflict policies and institutions.

Decades of conflict and violence coupled with drought and earthquakes have had devastating impacts not only the people of Afghanistan, but also on its natural environment, once pristine and rich in biological diversity, but now suffering from years of overexploitation of natural resources and habitat loss.

It was clear from the outset that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as part of the overall response by the United Nations, would give its support to the people and authorities of Afghanistan by offering its expertise in post-conflict environmental assessment and analysis.

This report presents facts on the state of the environment, specific findings concerning the urban environment and the natural resources of Afghanistan and recommendations on how to improve environmental conditions and policies.

UNEP was able to meet this challenging task thanks to the close cooperation with the Ministry of Water Resources, Irrigation and Environment, and I extend my thanks to the Minister, Dr Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani, for his collaboration and strong commitment, and for the hard work by his staff. Moreover, the activities were planned in close coordination with the Afghan Assistance Coordination Agency (AACA) and the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA).

I am especially grateful to the governments of Canada, Finland, Luxembourg and Switzerland for having provided generous financial support for this assessment, and to all the environmental experts, both Afghan and international, who made the environmental assessment in Afghanistan possible.

I sincerely hope that this report will be useful not only to the people of Afghanistan, but also to all donor countries and international organizations looking for facts, figures and the vision needed during the reconstruction phase.

Klaus Töpfer
United Nations Under-Secretary General
Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme

Foreword

Afghanistan is at a crucial point in its tumultuous history. Since 1973, Afghanistan has changed regimes frequently, and has been led by eight different leaders. Instability and war has caused widespread devastation, insecurity, displacement, poverty and severe environmental degradation. After the tragic events of 11 September 2001 in the United States, Afghanistan received unprecedented international attention, and the events drew strong support for the required humanitarian, political and military actions and solutions needed to put Afghanistan on the road to peace, stability, recovery and development.



The Afghanistan Transitional Authority under the leadership of H.E. Mr. Hamid Karzai, is keen to see rapid change that will benefit the Afghan people. Serious efforts in the emergency relief and development sectors are crucial to assist Afghans in rebuilding lives worth living. Today, we are seeing many efforts dealing with the repatriation of returnees, provision of food security, private sector development and agricultural rehabilitation, as well as a proper education system and reliable health care. Environmental quality, protection and sustainable management of natural resources are the foundation on which all these dramatic improvements to our society need to be built.

It is tragic to see how many people have left Afghanistan due to war and drought-related issues. Apart from the conflict, environmental degradation has been an important force driving people to find a better future elsewhere. The lack of water resources has led to the collapse of many livelihoods, and most of the country is subject to an alarming degree of land degradation propelled by poverty, population growth and the need to survive. The country has also been robbed of its precious forest resources by Afghan and non-Afghan timber mafia and smugglers. The net result of the degradation is widespread desertification and erosion, and increased vulnerability to environmental disasters. Now is the time to take stock of the current conditions, develop systems for the sustainable use of resources and look for ways to rehabilitate degraded ecosystems.

UNEP's post-conflict environmental assessment illuminates Afghanistan's current levels of degradation, and sets forth a path that the country can take towards sustainable development. It warns us of a future without water, forests, wildlife, and clean air if environmental problems are not addressed in the reconstruction period. With the work that is presented to you in this document, UNEP has been instrumental in outlining the relationship between environment and development. The Afghan government will benefit greatly from this report as it develops the country's environmental policies and plans for rehabilitation. On behalf of the Afghan Transitional Authority, I urge readers to note carefully this report's priorities and recommendations, and to find the means and resources to put them into immediate practice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dr. Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani'. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Dr Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani
Minister of Irrigation, Water Resources and Environment
Afghanistan Transitional Authority



DENNIS BRUHN/UNEP,2002

Loss of vegetation has caused serious soil erosion across the country, such as in this village near Mazar-e-Sharif

Introduction

In the capital of Afghanistan there is a saying: *May Kabul be without gold rather than without snow*. For most of the country's people the land, its biological resources and its ecological processes are the source of their livelihood and the foundation for their existence. Apart from the country's most arid deserts and frozen mountains, virtually the entire land surface of Afghanistan has been used for centuries – whether for local farming or, on a more wide-reaching basis, for livestock grazing, fuelwood collection and hunting.

Tragically, the combined pressures of warfare, civil disorder, lack of governance and drought

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