

# The complex relationship between national security and nature

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Wildflowers bloom in the demilitarised zone on the Korean peninsula, where humans do not freely roam. Credit: Kim Jae-Hwan (AFP)

PRESERVING INTACT ecosystems in the world's marine and national parks is key to global security. This was the message of Pulitzer prize-winning *New York Times* correspondent Tom Friedman, who covers national security for the paper.

He told last year's IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney that he chose to attend the Parks Congress rather than the concurrent G20 summit because "I can't think of anything that will affect national security more in the 21st century than the health of the ecosystem".

Friedman explained: "When we talk about protected areas, when we talk about protected forests or marine sanctuaries, there is a tendency to think of these as big zoos, as places you go to visit — you buy a ticket and go in — or as places you simply preserve."

But national parks are "huge engines of life, basically, that sustain life not only in the immediate areas but downstream and in the air for millions and millions of people. And it's not just something you go and you visit and therefore preserving these is really, really essential for stability in every and any society."

Friedman said the Arab Spring and the revolution in Syria, for example, was a "huge climate, environmentally-driven event". It was preceded from 2006 to 2010 by the worst drought in modern history, which resulted in a million Syrian farmers and herders leaving the land and going to the cities, where they overwhelmed the

infrastructure. "They didn't start the revolution, but when the revolution started, they couldn't wait to join."

However, Professor Hugh Possingham, Australian Research Council Laureate Fellow at the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Queensland asks, "Does loss of biodiversity cause loss of security or does loss of security cause loss of biodiversity?"

He agrees with Friedman that, "if we lose biodiversity it will cause security problems," using the example of environmental refugees, escaping problems like drought, which can cause security problems long-term.

However, Possingham, an international leader in conservation biology, says the relationship between security and biodiversity is not a simple one: "Conflict and security issues can be good or bad for biodiversity. It's very circumstance dependent."

In some situations, conflict zones have "hidden benefits" for wildlife and biodiversity. "The land between North and South Korea is effectively one of the only wilderness areas left in that entire peninsula, because human beings don't walk around there," he says.

Software developed by his laboratory is used across the world for planning national parks and conservation areas. Possingham says parks which cross national boundaries, like the 37,500 square-kilometre Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park, which joins reserves in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe, benefit wildlife and security.

"If you have border tensions with another country, making a big national park is a win-win. You create a buffer zone with a big national park and it can be a really good way of regulating the inflow of people and stopping a lot of the trafficking of goods."

He says to combat illegal fishing in Australian marine parks, security would be "enhanced if more sections of the marine parks were not just no-take, but no-go zones, and therefore if there is a boat in that place you know it shouldn't be there."

### **Parks inciting conflict**

Some areas set aside for conservation purposes are, ironically, inciting conflict, rather than preventing it. At the Parks Congress, conservation leaders from around the world told of the battle to protect national parks and biodiversity hotspots, with more than 750 rangers killed in 2014. They described how poachers linked to big crime syndicates and armed with sophisticated weapons were slaughtering

elephants, rhinos, tigers, pangolins and other wildlife; how forests were being illegally logged and burned and fisheries plundered.

Professor Lee White, executive secretary of the National Parks Agency in Gabon, said 70 per cent of the forest elephants in the north-east of Gabon had been killed and 17 to 18 staff murdered between 2000 and 2010. "We've been faced in the last five to six years by increasingly violent, increasingly organised criminal networks attacking our national parks and in particular our ivory."

He said the parks agency had been forced to become a paramilitary organisation and to partner with the army.

"We are facing a similar situation in the oceans with pirate fishing boats coming into Gabon, destroying our fisheries," said White.

Associate Professor James Watson of the School of Geography, Planning and the Environment at the University of Queensland meanwhile believes \$68 billion annually could help save the earth from natural disasters and improve national and international security if the money was spent on preserving and extending protected natural areas and conserving biodiversity. "Protected areas offer us solutions to some of today's most pressing challenges. But by continuing with 'business as usual', we are setting them up for failure."

Watson is the lead author of a [review](#), published in *Nature*, which showed that around AUD\$55 billion to \$93 billion is needed to extend and manage a network of protected areas that would meet the United Nations' Convention on Biodiversity's (CBDs) target of conserving 17 per cent of the land and 10 per cent of marine areas. The amount needed is just 2.5 per cent of annual global military expenditure, with the review noting that adequate protection of marine and terrestrial environments is "also crucial to global security".

The study said: "Fundamentally it requires the recognition that protected areas are core to the future life on our planet...It seems sensible to invest an amount equivalent to a tiny percentage of global military spending to help provide security for humans and all other living organisms on earth."

Watson, Co-Chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission Climate Change Specialist Group, comments that "the cost for achieving the CBDs goal for protected areas globally sounds a lot, but when you see it is the approximately the same amount of money [people in] the US spent on their pets, the figure is put in a more clear light.

"It really is a tiny sum of money that if invested well, could safeguard thousands upon thousands of vulnerable species, conserve iconic landscapes and seascapes,

and ensure the most vulnerable people on earth have access to key ecosystem services that functioning nature provides."