

The Trees at Tora Bora

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(published in the Kingston Whig-Standard Monday Dec 17th 2001)

Watching and listening to the television images of the American bombing of the Taliban cave complex at Tora Bora, it appears as if the war in Afghanistan may be in its endgame. Almost every picture shows a group of anti-Taliban fighters in the foreground watching as the B-52 bombers complete yet another saturation run at the hills in the middle distance. The commentators often then quickly shift to a discussion of the plight of refugees followed by images of the feeding stations of the World Food Programme. Then they profile the work of a long list of other non-governmental organizations engaging in humanitarian relief efforts before the arrival of winter. They call it balanced reporting.

In many of these news reports and visual images I am increasingly aware of a new background element. Now that the coverage is focusing on the war in the mountains and areas further north along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border we are no longer just seeing the bare rock and desert landscapes that cover much of the country - there is a scraggly tree cover in the hills around Tora Bora - the last vestige of the forests of Afghanistan. It reminds me that there is a third element that needs to be discussed in these stories – another layer that needs to be better understood, if we wish to find a long-term solution in the country.

The forests that you now see in these pictures once comprised up to 4% of the country by all accounts and flourished in the mountainous northeast. From Tora Bora to points north there once was a relatively sustainable timber industry providing construction materials, firewood and raw material for a significant cottage industry in furniture - the Nuristani designs in particular are the basis for a prosperous antique trade in Europe. More importantly the forested mountain slopes provided a significant, but seldom understood ecological role, specifically with respect to erosion control, reduction of natural hazards and the provision of potable water.

For the trees of Afghanistan it has been a sad story. The degradation of these forests during the last 25 years of conflict helps to emphasize a different part of the background story in the country – and it's one we will have to understand in much greater detail if there is to be a sustainable long-term solution to the conflict in Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia. Widespread deforestation has taken place for a wide range of reasons, including rampant illegal logging since the outbreak of the present conflict. The inattention of the Taliban (and their predecessors, no doubt) to the basic activities of government in the rural areas has been an ongoing issue. But the root causes are much

deeper and are neither the legacy of a single type of administration nor a prevailing ideology.

In short, it's human poverty that's killing the trees, not the loggers or the bombers.

The poverty cycle in Afghanistan predates the present conflict by decades and contributes, in part to the civil war. Breaking the poverty cycle is imperative if civil war is not to recur. The poverty cycle works something like this..... a combination of social, cultural and environmental factors have led to a steady increase in population at rates that are non-sustainable (estimated to be as high as 4% per year through the 1990s in Pakistan). Food production is limited by the extreme environmental conditions at the best of times but the droughts of recent decades have made things demonstrably worse. People clear more land to produce more food and while this may work for awhile, but it usually means that much more marginal land is used, forests are cleared and conditions almost always deteriorate. People then starve or leave – there is a flow of internal environmental refugees from the mountain areas to the valleys and into the urban areas such as they are. Once stable communities are no longer viable – health conditions deteriorate, no one goes to school and people stay very, very poor. No one can afford to re-plant the trees.

Add to this mix a Cold War proxy fight between the former Soviet Union and the West from 1979 till the early 90s followed by the civil conflict that may now be coming to an end and there is simply no way for either the people or the forests to survive and flourish

But the flows of refugees across the borders of Afghanistan are composed of both internal refugees resulting from environmental degradation as well as the refugees from the conflict itself. So an end to the conflict is certainly a great achievement however the repatriation of a group of people back to villages that were not able to sustain the community in the first place is not a long term solution. If they return to newly reconstructed homes but those houses are surrounded by denuded hillsides they will eventually leave again. Even if they are able to plant crops in newly de-mined nearby fields, but those fields are washed away in floods they will have to leave again.

A mere end to the conflict is simply not good enough.

Long-term reconstruction will need long-term inputs of money, technical assistance and a new approach to seeking sustainable development through alternative income generation and food production. If we feed people in the short term, find ways to promote community stability, educate the children – within a context of cultural and religious respect and tolerance – and support improved human health; then people will begin planting trees again. And that will be an indicator of a sustainable future for Afghanistan.

A case in point is provided by the circumstances in Pakistan. Conventional wisdom has it that refugee communities will cause considerable additional environmental degradation however the evidence with many Afghan refugee communities is quite the opposite. With the exception of many of the fluctuating camps in the immediate vicinity of Peshawar, a lot of the more rural communities have in fact stabilized. Trees have been planted, new

irrigation works are in place, schools built and sufficient food is now produced. Many of these new towns have significant new tree cover providing a degree of energy self-sufficiency.

A refugee support program that was put in place, with German assistance, over 25 years ago has promoted a local furniture industry that exports around the world today. *Shisham* (rosewood) trees are planted by farmers as wind and shelter breaks around irrigated lands that produce annual food supplies. These and other fast growing species are harvested on a rotational basis, dried for a year and then used to manufacture a suite of basic household furniture. In the northern valleys of Pakistan, refugees have been trained to both restore damaged traditional furniture from areas such as Nuristan Province of Afghanistan. Artisans have been given incentives to produce new reproductions of traditional designs with spectacular success – the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto made a practice of using Nuristani, Chitrali and Swati furniture as gifts to visiting world leaders. It's not a great leap of logic to extrapolate this sort of program back into the remote valleys and towns where the designs originated.

So the present forlorn state of the forests of Afghanistan presages a longer term story – and foretells a longer term need for development assistance. As we receive the welcome news of the partial peace settlement and achieve progress towards a new form of government we see a new international emphasis on Afghan civil society. But all the new institutions in the world will not solve the root causes of the human conflict in this country. There has to be a new emphasis on sustainable human development, starting with fundamental living conditions village-by-village. This absolutely must include an approach that recognizes and mediates a relationship between village life and the forests on the slopes above, for the benefit of both.

As go the trees, so go the people – when those hillsides north of Tora Bora grow a forest again, then you will know that the lands below are a new, productive home for a new generation of Afghan children.

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