

Karen Telleen-Lawton: The Environmental Ripple Effect

History reveals that competition for resources correlates closely with violence

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 03.31.2011 9:08 a.m.



Every once in awhile I read an article that is so intriguing I'm compelled to dig into the topic. Usually it's because it supports or refutes a long-held but unjustified belief. In this case it began with a [Los Angeles Times](#) op-ed piece written by a [U.S. Army](#) officer regarding the Somali pirates.

“During my 20 years of military service in some of the toughest corners of the world,” Lt. Col. Shannon Beebe writes, “my job was to translate how developments in little-known areas could threaten U.S. national security.” She describes soil mismanagement in Sudan relative to ethnic, religious and political tensions, and the contribution of Haiti's denuded land to its poverty and political instability.

Beebe draws a provocative but clear line between overfishing and the evolution of the international security crisis of Somali piracy. It's provocative because life is much easier when we think we can delineate the good guys from the bad guys and just wall off the “bad guys.”

Crises typically result from a confluence of deteriorating factors. Beebe describes how Somalia's waters were particularly rich fishing grounds until their government collapsed in the 1990s. When the government in chaos, Somalia was unable to police its waters, which were subsequently plundered by foreign, especially European and Asian, vessels. The foreign ships moved on when the fisheries were depleted, but Somalia was left with a decimated economy and young, jobless, hungry fishermen desperate to provide for their families. Voila, the pirate.

“Besides the tragic cost in lives,” Beebe writes, “the U.S., many other nations and [NATO](#) spent roughly \$2 billion combined last year to safeguard the busy international sea lanes off the Horn of Africa from Somali pirates.”

This article recalled to me a comment I gleaned as a volunteer naturalist for [Channel Islands National Park](#). The accepted wisdom of the 13,000-year human record of activity along the California coast has been that our plentiful resources led to peaceful interactions among the dozens of tribal nations. But then I heard that there were violent times, and that these have been traced by tree rings to times of prolonged drought.

The late Dr. Phillip Walker, an anthropologist at [UCSB](#), offered evidence in an article titled “A Bioarcheological Perspective on the History of Violence.”

“One sobering pattern that emerges from a survey of past violence,” Walker wrote, “is the close relationship repeatedly seen between large-scale outbreaks of violence and climatic instabilities.” He cited evidence that resource stress was a significant factor in strife in the Santa Barbara area.

It’s not surprising that competition for resources correlates closely with violence. What is surprising is that we aren’t able to recognize it in our own time. In Beebe’s opinion, “Much of this (Somali piracy) could have been avoided had the world made a stronger commitment to conservation and environmental protection years earlier. Somalia provides a classic example of how problems related to poverty and the environment are increasingly evolving into traditional international security risks.”

She suggests that Washington leaders step up their efforts to pass a bipartisan proposal introduced in the last [Congress](#) to create an integrated international conservation strategy for the United States.

After [Superfund](#) sites, empty fisheries, the [Exxon Valdez oil spill](#), climate change, [Hurricane Katrina](#), [BP](#), [Fukushima](#) and on and on, taking caring of the environment should not need justifying for even the most “conservative” voter. Take care of the Earth, and the Earth will take care of us in every way from commerce to recreation to spiritual needs.

In Dr. Walker’s ominous words, “We know from paleoenvironmental records that major climatic fluctuations on a scale unheard of during recent times are a fact of the Earth’s history. Dealing with the violent potential of such a worldwide climatic catastrophe is a challenge future generations surely will face.”

We need to be part of the solution to live sustainably on the Earth.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*