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# Resilience after Catastrophe? Five Reflections on “Apocalypse Then”

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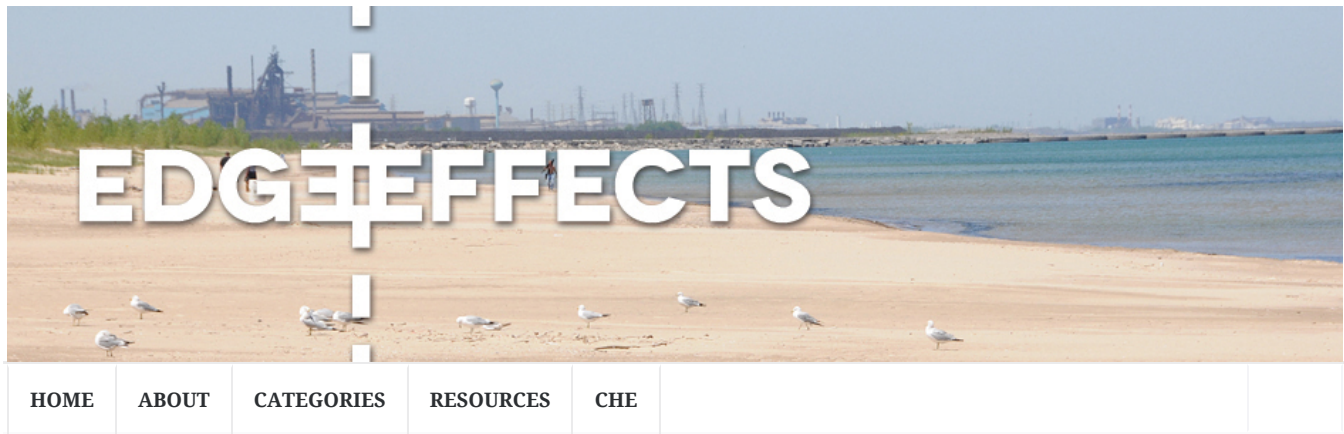
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## Resilience after Catastrophe? Five Reflections on “Apocalypse Then”

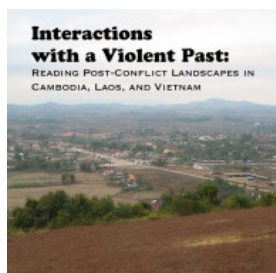
By: [Mitch Aso](#)

Posted on: February 24, 2015

How do humans cope with disaster? Can ecologies recover after catastrophe?

As a historian my instinct is to examine resilience in time and place. I want to test the usefulness of this idea by thinking through the aftermath of disasters in the past. In particular, I'm interested in what the history of recovery after the Vietnam Wars can tell us about resilience and vice versa.

By any measure, the Vietnam Wars were a catastrophe for millions of people in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam (CLV). Most of the literature on the Vietnam Wars has focused on tracing the political, military, and diplomatic histories before and during the period lasting from 1945 to 1975. Only recently have scholars started to publish on the legacies of this violence. *Interactions with a Violent Past*, edited by [Vatthana Pholsena](#) and [Oliver Tappe](#) has highlighted



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two issues of particular relevance for those concerned with resilience: [dioxin](#) and [unexploded ordnance \(UXO\)](#).<sup>1</sup>



In the years between 1964 and 1973, known in Vietnam as the America War, "American planes dropped 2,093,100 tons of ordnance in 580,344 bombing missions in the borderlands of Laos and Vietnam."<sup>2</sup> These bombs were meant to prevent soldiers and supplies from North Vietnam from entering the Republic of Vietnam. Many of these munitions did not detonate, which has left areas heavily contaminated with UXO. During the same ten-year period, the United States military sprayed more than nineteen million gallons of herbicides and defoliants over South Vietnam. These chemicals were contaminated with dioxin, a [persistent organic pollutant \(POP\)](#) that does not readily decompose and accumulates in fatty tissues. Exposure to dioxin has [ruined many bodies](#) of those living in the CLV. All told, the violence of the Vietnam Wars resulted in over a million deaths and many more displaced and disabled people.

Here are five reflections on resilience based on the findings of the contributors to *Interactions*.

### 1. State and individual interests involving resilience often diverge

The material stakes of postwar recovery have highlighted the independent strategies of individuals and states. A good example of this is the case of [Agent Orange](#) and dioxin. [Susan Hammond](#) reminds us that the post-1975 Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) chose not to push for payment of the reconstruction funds promised by U.S. president Richard Nixon in 1973. Indeed, the SRV was reluctant even to admit the existence of "Agent Orange victims" as the presence of dioxin in the environment could scare off would-be buyers of Vietnamese agricultural products. Instead, Agent Orange victims were left to fend for themselves even as the SRV attempted to rebuild its economy through normalized relations and trade agreements.



*A fourteen-year old boy and his father at their home in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. This boy and his younger brother are victims of dioxin poisoning. Photo taken by Morgan Ommer.*

State and individual trajectories also diverge in relation to psychological healing. In Cambodia, [Sina Emde](#) argues, state memorial practices for the victims of the Khmer Rouge regime have focused on sites such as [S-21](#), a structure where political prisoners were kept and tortured, and the nearby killing fields of [Choeung Ek](#). These sites have attracted widespread attention, but they have channeled memorial practices in ways that have been more useful for reinforcing political power than for addressing collective and individual suffering. Only recently have events such as the film [Enemies of the People](#) created space for visible, public, and non-state sanctioned grieving.

### 2. Geography matters for resilience

A key step in increasing resilience for those exposed to UXO and dioxin has been limiting and pinpointing the spatial extent of the problem. In the case of dioxin, the work of groups such as the Canadian NGO [Hatfield Consultants](#) has helped resolve pollution into "hotspots," or focused areas of high POP concentration. Containing the potential scope of pollution has helped make dioxin claims more convincing and manageable, thus contributing to the willingness of the U.S. government to participate in cleanup costs. Until quite recently, Susan Hammond notes, officials in the U.S. embassy in Hanoi

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stonewalled any discussion of dioxin (I had a similar experience in 2001 when I went with a group of volunteers to talk with the deputy Chief of Mission.) By identifying more concretely the distribution of dioxin in space, the Vietnamese government has been able to reassure potential aid donors and confront consumer worries about food contamination, thus channeling resources to those in need.



*In a region where many grow coffee, this family cannot afford the investment; they grow rice instead. Photo taken by Morgan Ommer.*

### 3. Resilience has created opportunities for some and not others

Disasters can both destroy lives and create opportunities. They can even temporarily turn society **upside down**. In the rural commune of Thanh Ha in northern Vietnam, **Markus Schlecker** argues, relatives of war martyrs have been able to make monetary claims on a Vietnamese state invested in commemorating its war dead. These trends have created differences among neighbors and elevated some war dead above others in supposedly egalitarian commemoration practices. As war martyrs and their relatives die, however, fewer state resources flow to the commune, putting its future in question.

By contrast, those on the losing side of the war have been more reluctant to make claims on state resources. **Ian Baird** explores the relocation of a Mon-Khmer speaking minority by the socialist Lao government in the 1990s and 2000s. The most direct cause of the resettlement of almost 40% of this population of approximately 7,000 was a power-generating dam project. Although members of this group have had many good reasons to resist resettlement, they have only done so informally as the past has constrained their ability to object officially. During the American War they supported the anti-communist Royal Lao Government and, like many highland groups, were on the payroll of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. In this way, legacies of the war have shaped resilience to economic projects started long after the end of the American War.

### 4. Resilience has been difficult without international aid

After the end of the Vietnam Wars in 1975, recovery in CLV took place only slowly as domestic and international politics combined to isolate these societies. Killing and disruption continued in Cambodia, while in Vietnam a U.S. embargo slowed economic recovery before the 1990s. This situation made addressing the legacies of warfare difficult. For example, **Elaine Russell** and **Christina Schwenkel** show that the contributions of international demining experts have done much to remove UXO. These professionals have contributed to safer removal practices even as "hobby" scrap metal collectors have carved out a risky living by selling explosives and metal. Furthermore, from 1996 to 2012 the U.S. government contributed \$3.2 million annually to demining programs—an

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amount that pales in comparison with \$2.7 million it spent *daily* on bombing the same area between 1964 and 1973.

Yet, integration into a neo-liberal economic system has made resilience more difficult for many. As the governments of CLV adopt international financial practices, they have moved towards strategies of disaster relief reminiscent of a colonial-era emphasis on private charities and individual response. Such an approach was a factor in the 1945 [famine in northern Vietnam](#) that left over 1 million dead.



*The father said he is not affected but was carrying the toxin and that the sickness skipped a generation. Photo taken by Morgan Ommer.*

## 5. There have been limits to resilience

The legacies of the Vietnam Wars show that some people and landscapes recover and others do not. Oliver Tappe argues that in Laos “the idea of Viengxay as a bomb-crater-turned-healthy-and-lively-town suggests the healing of both topographical and social wounds.”<sup>3</sup> [Krisna Uk](#) shows how members of two highlander communities in Cambodia have woven resilience into the fabric of life, in literal cloth and in other repositories of collective memory, including sculptures and funeral huts. These objects bear symbols of the war and can either be employed in village life or sold to international tourists.

The ruined bodies of “Agent Orange victims,” however, remind us that there are limits to resilience. The minimal ability of the CLV governments to provide aid to victims and their families has meant continued suffering. Finally, Vatthana Pholsena shows that those who were put through the re-education camps in Laos after 1975 were denied even the salve of psychological resilience, as their suffering has been defined by the state as justified.

Current American interest in resilience has been motivated by a growing awareness of the ways humans are driving massive and rapid changes in multiple earth systems. This power of human activity, [many authors](#) have argued, has resulted from the coupling of systems acting on very different time scales. The spatial and temporal scale of these transformations has even encouraged some scientists to use the term “[Anthropocene](#)” to describe the current geologic epoch.

So what, if anything, can resilience after the Vietnam Wars tell us about resilience in the Anthropocene? In [The Sixth Extinction](#), Elizabeth Kolbert provides an intellectual history of catastrophe and shows the growing acceptance among scientists of irreversible change as one mechanism of nature. Given the potentially irreversible character of human-induced environmental change, more commonly known as a [tipping point](#), current literature on resilience shows us a lot about the parts, but very little about the whole. At

the very least, books such as *Interactions* suggest that individuals will perceive, and thus live through, the (potential) apocalypse together but in distinct ways.

Mitch Aso is an Assistant Professor of the Global Environment at the University at Albany, SUNY. He has held fellowships at the National University of Singapore and the University of Texas, Austin. He is currently finishing a book manuscript called *Forest without Birds: Rubber and Environmental Crises in Vietnam, 1890-1975*, which explores the making of environments, human health, and knowledge through the lens of rubber production. [Contact](#).



1. I have also written a review of *Interactions* that will be coming out in the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. [↗](#)
2. Pholsena and Tappe, *Interactions*, 4. The authors cite Channapha Khamvongsa and Elaine Russell, "Legacies of War: Cluster Bombs in Laos," *Critical Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2009), 289 for this information. [↗](#)
3. Pholsena and Tappe, *Interactions*, 71. [↗](#)

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