



ENV

**Preventing the spread of
desertification**

YIDA WANG

Forum: Environment Commission

Issue: Preventing the Spread of Desertification

Student Officer: Yida Wang

Position: Chair of Environment Commission

Introduction

According to the action plan of the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD), that met in Nairobi in 1977, desertification is defined as the diminution or destruction of the biological potential of the land, which can ultimately lead to desert-like conditions. The process is typically as a result of drought, deforestation and/or inappropriate agriculture. The issue of desertification has long been recognized as a major economic, social, and environmental concern to many regions of the world. There have been many UN conferences starting with the 1977 UNCOD one, but the results have not been favorable. As a result, the question of how to tackle desertification is still a major concern for the UN and the world.

In 2007, a UN study described desertification as “the greatest environment challenge in our times”. The UN study, by the United Nations University proposes that if action is not taken, some 50 million people could be displaced with the next 10 years. What’s more horrific is that they also issued a report saying one third of the Earth’s population (two billion people) are potential victims of desertification. In the UN study, prevention methods of desertification have been suggested such as using more innovative irrigation methods, as to not damage fertile land.

The spread of Desertification is a world issue as the livelihoods of over 1 billion people in more than 100 countries are being jeopardized by desertification since farming and grazing land becomes less productive. Areas of major concern are in Africa, since 66% of the total area is arid or semi-arid. About 40% of the continental US is considered vulnerable to desertification by the US bureau of Land Management, and most of Australia is semi-arid.

Definition of Key Terms

Desertification

The process by which fertile land becomes desert-like, typically as a result of drought, deforestation, or improper agriculture/irrigation practices.

General Overview

What it is, and the effects

Desertification has emerged as an environmental crisis of global proportions and is currently affecting an estimated 100 to 200 million people, and also threatening the lives and livelihoods a much larger number (1/3 of the world's total population.) The cause of this enormous issue is the climate change degrading the soil on top of overexploitation of land and unsustainable irrigation practices. The climate change is due to excessive rise in temperature from too much carbon dioxide in the air, which causes an increased loss of water from soil and rainfall. Desertification must be prevented before it spreads any more because it can lead to a massive chain reaction; when people are displaced elsewhere they put new strains on the natural resources in other societies nearby threatening international stability. The largest area affected by this issue is probably sub-Saharan Africa where people are moving to northern Africa or Europe, and the second area is the former Soviet republics in central Asia. This can also lead to great social turmoil.

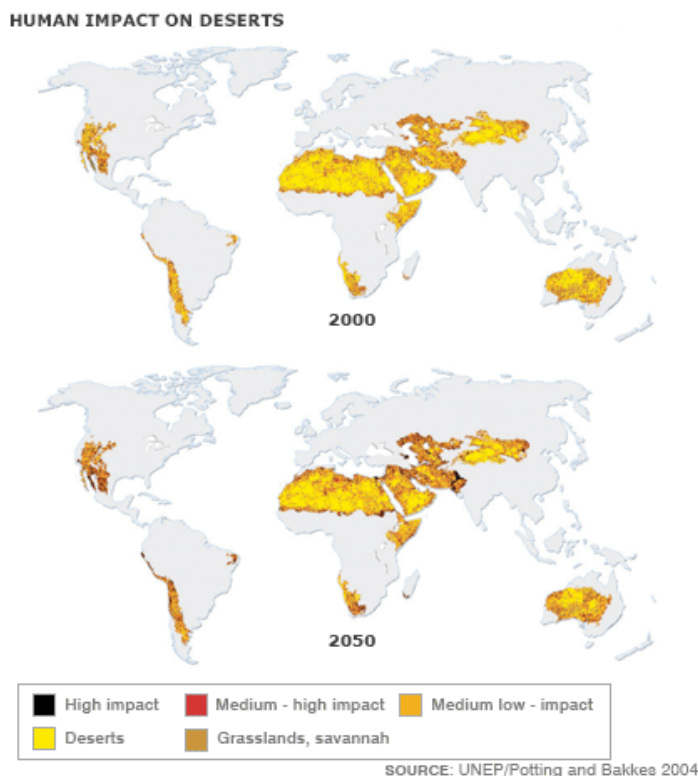


Figure 1: Human Impact on Deserts 2000-2050

Possible Solutions

Some possible ways to prevent desertification is introducing new farming practices, which could remove carbon from the atmosphere and prevent the spread of deserts. Some countries like China have embarked on tree-planting programs to stem the advance of deserts. In the 2007 UN report by the United Nations University, they suggest encouraging forests in dryland areas to remove carbon from the atmosphere. More innovative irrigation methods such as using solar energy as opposed to traditional cropping based on irrigation, cattle farming, etc. will put less pressure on natural resources and therefore prevent the spread of desertification.

Country Positions

The United States of America

The US suffers from desertification problems predominantly in Western states, caused by the intense agricultural growth that has been encouraged by government subsidies and growing demand for food and biofuels. As many of the environmental consequences of unsustainable farming methods have not affected urban populations yet, there is a lack in the political will from Washington D.C. to act quickly. Although the US has tightening environmental regulations in the past, this still remains an issue.

The People's Republic of China

Many parts of China are feeling the devastating effects of desertification. Major economic and political hub such as Shanghai and Beijing, home to millions of people, are experiencing serious water shortages and increases in abnormal weather conditions such as hail and sandstorms. Although the government is tackling this issue with resolve and is doing what it can to protect urban populations, rural areas seem to be suffering the most, as seen by numerous droughts all over China in recent years.

UN Involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

In 1977, the United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) adopted a Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (FACD), but unfortunately the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) concluded in 1991 that the desertification had intensified although there were some local examples of success. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was held in Rio de Janeiro. The conference supported a new, integrated approach to the problem, emphasizing action to promote sustainable development at the community level. The UN General Assembly established an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INCED) to prepare a Convention to Combat Desertification. In 1992, the GA agreed and adopted resolution 47/188. In 1994 the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) was adopted, and entered into force in 1996.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1977	United Nations Conference on Desertification (UNCOD) adopts Plan of Action to Combat Desertification (PACD)
1991	United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) concludes the problem of land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas have intensified
1992	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) is held in Rio de Janeiro
December 1992	General Assembly agreed and adopted resolution 47/188
June 1994	The Intergovernmental Committee (INCD) for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification established by the UN General Assembly prepares a Convention To Combat Desertification
June 17, 1994	UN Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD) adopted, and opened for signature in October
December 26, 1996	CCD entered into force

Bibliography

"BBC NEWS | Africa | UN Issues Desertification Warning." *BBC - Homepage*. Ed. Matt McGrath. BBC News, 28 June 2007. Web. 25 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6247802.stm>>.

Fildes, Jonathan. "BBC NEWS | Technology | Wall 'could Stop Desert Spread'" *BBC News - Home*. Technology Reporter, BBC News, Oxford, 24 July 2009. Web. 25 Dec. 2010. <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8166929.stm>>.

UN Development and Human Rights Section. "UN Convention to Combat Desertification." *Welcome to the United Nations: It's Your World*. United Nations Department of Public Information, Feb. 1997. Web. 25 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/sustdev/desert.htm>>.

UNCCD. "The Convention." *UNCCD - United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification*. UNCCD, 4 Oct. 2010. Web. 25 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.unccd.int/convention/menu.php>>.