

Simulating WWII and the Specter of Irreversible Ecological Change

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via ZOOM



As the United States and the Soviet Union massively increased both the power and the range of their nuclear weaponry, it became possible to conceive of a catastrophic, global-scale war, and the Atomic Energy Commission funded studies to investigate the economic and environmental consequences of such a war. Along with military planners, sociologists, and even science fiction writers, ecologists were tasked by the U.S. government with envisioning the immense destructive potential of nuclear weaponry. In so doing, ecologists did not picture the outcome of World War III as the total annihilation of life on earth; there would have been no point to such an exercise. Instead, they anticipated a period of environmental and economic recovery after World War III and studied how the government could hasten that recovery – how they could pursue ecological restoration. Their Doomsday imaginings drew on ecological succession theory, expanding the category of “environmental disturbance” beyond windstorms, fires, and floods to include nuclear bombs – and, ultimately, any human action. Meanwhile, in order to simulate the effects of nuclear war, ecologists began to destroy ecosystems intentionally. They irradiated forests and fumigated islands, trying to measure how intentionally stressed communities responded. These ecosystem destruction studies reveal the key contributions that the Cold War arms race made to the theory and practice of ecological restoration.



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