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Unsung Hero: Chris North

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to unsustainable levels of wood removal. Perhaps there are endangered orchids that thrive today in the mine-infested hills around Sarajevo. And so on.

The above examples all have the same theme. Positive environmental effects are obtained when human impact is reduced. Clearly, such a perspective has little relevance from a development perspective—or does it? Environmental science is not about removing humans from the landscape. It is about repairing damage and achieving sustainable use. In a post-war scenario, there is no more central theme than sustainable reintegration of humans to a destroyed environment, and reintroduction biology is a core theme of environmental science. Clearly, environmental science has much to offer the science of post-conflict development. But what does any of this have to do with mines?

Having joined the demining industry, I inevitably began asking questions about environmental issues. I remember one early conversation beginning, “Is there any demining technique that reliably removes all mines?” The answer described a gravelcrushing being used in Afghanistan. The soil is dug up (to a designated depth) and then returned to the source. I was shocked at this cavalier treatment of desert soils, which are extremely sensitive to disturbance and are well-known (by biologists) to be the most difficult on which to mitigate even limited impact. I commented that the effect was likely to be no soil at all, because, with its structure and roots removed, it would all blow away. The answer: “Yes, they are having a bit of trouble with that. Yes, the land is now ‘mine-free’.” But is it also free of any other—value?

During the first meeting of the advisory group to A Study of Mechanical Applications in Demining” initiated at the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining in 2001, I was delighted to hear a voice arguing that environmental issues should be a significant concern when mechanical systems were being used and that they should be a part of the study. The advisory group endorsed the principle that environmental issues be addressed, although there was too much to do at the time (environmental issues are not usually discussed). Nevertheless, there are promising consequences. The following may summarize the ideas of “Mechanical Applications in Demining” including a study titled “The Environmental Effects of Mechanical Applications in Demining” This publication is a result of a comprehensive review and field consultation, but it is an important beginning. The first step in addressing an issue is to acknowledge that it exists. I doubt that a well-informed community would choose a mine-free moonscape over productive land containing a residual hazard. But of course, local communities tend not to be well-informed about issues, options and consequences. Nor do they control the funding for demining; or have much involvement in the decision process. Due to displacement and social disruption, they might not even be represented by acceptable and knowledgeable leaders. Such alienation of beneficiaries from process is entirely incompatible with the development perspective. There is, therefore, a strong requirement for the demining administration (i.e., not just the demining organization) to ensure that local needs are properly addressed, both in the short term (when demining is primarily an emergency response activity and compromise on environmental impact might be justifiable) and in the longer term (when demining is part of a development package and issues of environmental impact should be a central concern).

Currently, there are few practitioners in the industry with any understanding of environmental issues. Nor does training about environmental issues feature in the management courses attended by national staff. If an assessment at all, it is at the most superficial level only. Some examples are listed below.

- Afghanistan: Is it an empty desert; there is nothing there. Correction: Overgrazing and drought, both endemic, ensure that plants have little above-ground growth most of the time, but in reality the subsurface environment is alive, active and healthy (or wax, until the flail did its job).
- Cambodia: Vegetation growth is prolific and everything has to be chopped before the deminer can go to work. Correction: “Everything” includes plants with important medicinal properties that require years of growth to reach maturity and/or do not reinvade easily into disturbed environments.
- An influential modern writer on environmental issues, David Orr, recently outlined a series of principles based on a lifetime of experience with a teacher and a researcher. He noted in the discussion of Law 1 that it is the height of folly to believe that we can eradicate soils, destroy biological diversity, and create ugliness—human and ecological—without paying. Sooner or later, the full costs will have to be paid— one way or another”. Law 2 says, “Problems of ecology are first and foremost political problems having to do with who gets what, when and how.” Law 3 is, “Humans are more ignorant than smart and most seem to prefer it that way.”

Demining agencies have a job to do and are under strong incentives to do that job (or, the one that is the safest and most cost-effective). They also have a very difficult objective: to ensure that absolutely all mines are located and removed. It is hardly surprising, then, that any issue perceived as peripheral to those imperatives will be set aside. Environmental issues are currently treated as peripheral. They must therefore be established as an imperative.

Achieving such an outcome requires a political process (Ort’s Law 2), and that process must be built on knowledge (Ort’s Law 3). Cost-effectiveness still applies, but there must be a new line in the budget that takes environmental consequence into account. The new scenario—mainstreaming demining with development—provides the framework. The immediate challenges are to explore the issues, raise awareness, create incentives and educate the practitioners.

Thanks to A. Arnold, H. Bach, I. Mansfield, S. Nellen, R. Sargisson and E. Tollefsen for discussion and comments.

See “References and Endnotes,” page 106

Ivan McLean is an environmental biologist and dog specialist, employed by the GICHD as a researcher from 2003 to 2005. Originally from New Zealand, he has taught environmental biology and animal behaviour in universities in Canada, New Zealand and Australia. He began training dogs for the humanitarian mine clearance work in the 1980s and consulted as a dog handler for the Angola and Mozambique demining projects. In 2001, he established the Humanitarian Demining Research Centre in Pretoria, South Africa, where he has been demining advisor for the Southern African Institute for Plant Protection.

by Charlotte Dombrower [ MAIC ]

I n many of his colleagues’ eyes, Chris North is someone who is determined to fight for mine action and make changes, whether those changes are through managing projects or expressive poetry. His unwavering dedication to mine action makes North a hero in his field.

Working as a senior non-commissioned officer of the British Army and an explosives ordnance disposal officer for 20 years, North spent most of that time with the Royal Engineer Bomb Disposal Regiment. In this regiment, North taught bomb disposal to reserve soldiers. When a former officer and friend mentioned humanitarian mine action to North, the concept appealed to his sense of adventure. North could not escape his passion for mine action and decided to use the army to try and be hands-on at humanitarian mine action. “It [had] moved to a small town on the west coast of Scotland where there were not many employment opportunities; a friend of mine promised me to apply for a job with Handicap International France and the rest is history,” he says.

Over the years, North worked in different countries on a variety of projects. First, he visited the Mozambique dog training and accreditation program, which uses dogs and mechanical shovels alongside manual deminers. North used information gained there to help establish the HR France Mine Direction Dog Team programs in Bosnia and Kosovo. He then opened about three years establishing a clearance capacity for HI in Djibouti and training a 30-person local demining and explosives ordnance disposal team. North also taught EOD to other agencies—non-governmental organizations and commercial companies—and from 2006-2010, North served as the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre in Pretoria. He also led a team to train and supervise over 100 Kosovo Protection Corps workers to battle area clearance, EOD and demining.
North embarked on numerous humanitarian mine action missions and tasks with HI, including teaching a humanitarian mine clearance manager’s course to the Swedish Rescue Services Agency.

His next mission was a trip to Angola, where he was responsible for conducting research on mine clearance opportunities and collaborating with other agencies in Angola. Upon completion of this mission, North took a position in Iraq heading the initial deployment of Handicap International personnel into the country.

Wanting to remain in the country, North was forced to find another job when HI withdrew from Iraq in April 2004. “I took a position in Iraq with RONCO, where I was part of the national QA/QC team,” says North. The quality assurance/control team was short-handed in Iraq. RONCO, an international humanitarian mine action consulting corporation, redeployed North to Sudan. Since then, he has returned to Iraq to head a training school for Iraq army EOD companies up to level three EOD—a total of 600 men in five years.

Each new task and location has offered North heightened knowledge and experiences. He not only gets satisfaction from changing the lives of others affected by landmines, but he is also aware that his involvement in humanitarian mine action has affected him personally and molded him into the individual he is today. “I feel I have grown from a relatively selfish person, concerned only with my life and my family’s welfare, into a more open and aware guy who cares about the plight of the people affected by war and post-war difficulties,” he admits. “I still need to work in this trade to earn a living, but the money is not the most important thing. There has to be an element of doing good, feeling good about doing good, and I have to feel that what I am involved in is worthwhile.”

One of the ways North deals with the harsh realities of mine action is by expressing his feelings through poetry. His mine-related poetry has been published in four books: *Risky Business*, *War Trade*, *Victory*, and *Distant Shore*.

“Initially, my poetry was purely a means by which I was able to cope with some disturbing episodes and events in my life,” says North. This poetry not only helped North survive his personal struggles with the landmine plight, but many of them also helped others in the field know that they are not alone. “Some of the poems have been used in documentary films and I hope they have helped to convey to others some of the realities of the mine problem in the world,” explains North. Some of his poems have also been used by charities and other organizations as fundraising publicity materials, he adds.

While North has seen mine action as a positive influence in his life and in the world, he agrees there is much to be improved upon. “Without too many political influences, the drive behind the prioritization structure needs to be balanced between purely humanitarian need and national emergency infrastructure requirements,” North says. “International embassies should coordinate their efforts to be able to direct global resources to be in a position to help.”

There is a critical improvement in mine awareness. “Safety is always in mind, in reporting all occurrence accidents for the benefit of the demining community,” North says. “Also, there are many examples of funds, which has been used in document- ary films and I hope they have helped to convey to others some of the realities of the mine problem in the world.”

One of the most traumatizing—and influential—events in van der Merwe’s life was his involvement in two demining accidents. “In the one incident in 1981, I sustained 15% percent second- and third-degree burns to my hands and up to my armpits, a total of 15% burn wounds after the vehicle I was traveling in detonated two anti-tank mines and caught on fire,” he says. He was lucky—the other three men affected by the explosion in the vehicle died, leaving van der Merwe the sole survivor of the accident.

I can just remember looking down—you have to cover your face. And I could remember seeing the sign to tee off the buckle. I pressed it and jumped out and my troopers were on me to put the fire out.”

Although van der Merwe survived the accident, his near-death experience landed him in the hospital, where he spent three months in intensive care recovering from his injuries. This experience did not deter him from his military career.

“I wasn’t afraid to go back, continue the work,” he says. “Even though I remained in the army after the incident, I realized the terrible destruction of landmines and the need for some to abolish them.”

Unfortunately, van der Merwe’s brushes with death were not over. In 1984, he was involved in another landmine accident while traveling in numerous Angola during a military campaign carried out by the South African Defense Force. Similar to the prior incident, he was traveling in a vehicle when...
Humanitarian Demining as a Precursor to Economic Development, Lundberg [from page 53]

Endnotes

The Road to Mine Action and Development: The Life-Cycle Perspective of Mine Action, Paterson and Filipponi [from page 55]

Endnotes
1. This phrase is from The World Bank, which has been in the forefront of planning, managing and financing post-conflict reconstruction efforts since the wars arising from the break-up of Yugoslavia. The central role played by The World Bank in one of the defining features of post-war reconstruction efforts, and during such periods the Bank may be an important source of financing for demining.
2. Rogoff's work has a strong similarity to Figure 1 in the article from Issue 9-1 (Chip Brown). “The Mining Link in Strategic Planning: ALARA and the End-state Strategy Concept for National Mine Action Planning,” which was developed independently in 1998 by Chip Brownes to illustrate the “End-state Strategy” approach to developing a national mine action strategy for Cambodia. GICHD personnel developed the life-cycle perspective to illustrate not only that the size of a programme would eventually diminish, but also that the principal purposes of and partnerships for a mine action programme will evolve in a manner that can be understood and planned for.
3. Raw data does not help decision-makers unless it is “analysed” into information. Information is the right data presented in the right format at the right time to the right people.

Mine Action and the Millennium Development Goals, Van Der Linden [from page 58]

Endnotes
3.更多 detailed information on the United Nations Millennium Declaration 2000, the eight MDGs, its target 18 and 46 indicators, can be found on the United Nations’ site.

Environmental Applications in Demining, McLean [from page 60]

Endnotes
4. Editor’s Note: Some countries and mine action organisations are using the term the term “mine free”, while others are adopting the term “mine safe” or “impact free”. “Mine free” connotes a condition where all landmines have been cleared, whereas the terms “mine safe” and “impact free” refer to the condition in which landmines no longer pose a credible threat to a community or country.

That Landmine Thing: Students Take On the Landmine Crisis, Hudson and Fuentes [from page 77]

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Chris North, Dombrower [from page 62]

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References and Endnotes [from page 98]

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