

Myth 6 'It impacts only me'

Drug use has multiple often negative effects not only to your overall health and to your social relations, and to the ones around you, but also to the environment. This fact sheet wants to raise the more seldom discussed **environmental consequences of substance use** to the table. The substances used by people can find their way to the nature and the environment surrounding us for example via dirty needles or empty bottles commonly found from play grounds in many places, or via the sewage system, but it is especially the production of illicit substances that has negative impact on nature, causing a considerable environmental damage globally.

Cultivators and producers of drugs focus on maximizing the harvest or production, which puts the needs of environment or local population under risk. Several environmental damages can be identified as a result of the cultivation of illicit drugs. This fact sheet lists a few examples:

➤ **Impacts on soil and water resources**

In areas where illicit drugs are cultivated, soils become low in important organic nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorus, and very high in acidity and aluminium toxicity. This makes soil unfertile in the long run.

Some drugs are manufactured synthetically. Toxic and highly inflammable chemicals are used for these chemical processes and the waste created is highly toxic. As the production of drugs is illegal, producers are not able to use specific infrastructures for safely processing the waste. Therefore, it is the easiest and most common solution to throw the waste in water supplies, farmlands or roadsides. This can lead to soil and groundwater pollution that persists for years. For example, the production of one pound of methamphetamine leaves six pounds of toxic waste.

Toxic waste that makes its way into soil causes several negative impacts, for example impacting plant growth¹. Also, these chemicals can impact human health, as they contaminate food and water supplies. The exact scale of environmental impact of drug production remains unclear, as there is very little reliable data available on it.

¹ For more detailed information on specific effects on plant growth, have a look at a study conducted by researchers at the University of Exeter Medical School and Plymouth University
<http://phys.org/news/2014-12-drugs-environment-affect-growth.html>

➤ **Deforestation**

The disappearance of forests is the most visible environmental effect coca and opium poppy cultivation. For example in the Andeans, entire forests, and with them some unique forest types, are disappearing totally. This causes for example fires, changes in humidity and temperature, and reduction of diversity of animals and plants.

The fact that drug cultivation and production is illegal leads to a situation in which any rules and regulations are often not followed, including the ones meant to protect the nature and for example natural reserves.

➤ **Effects on local people and organized crime**

Also, social issues come along with illicit drug cultivation, such as migration and violence that can impact the local population. Violence with the involvement of armed groups plays a role in the location and mobility of illicit crops.

The zones that are most affected by the drug industry are in South America, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. There are many programs trying to reduce the environmental consequences of illicit drug growing. Crop substitution programs aim to help the communities to replace the drug industry with the production of other products, such as wool or bananas. However, in many regions the drug industry is more profitable compared to legal trades.

Ressources

UNODC: Discussion Guide II. Online access: http://www.unodc.org/documents/drug-prevention-and-treatment/Discussion_guide_II_2012_12.pdf

UNODC: Environmental effects of illicit drug cultivation and processing in the Andean region. Online access: http://www.unodc.org/pdf/andean/Andean_report_Part2.pdf

Phys.Org: Drugs in the environment affect plant growth. Online access: <http://phys.org/news/2014-12-drugs-environment-affect-growth.html>