

Drugs: Nobody's Winning The War



CLASSIFIED AS CLASS A DRUGS, OR VERY ILLICIT AND VERY ILLEGAL SUBSTANCES, COCAINE AND HEROIN ARE CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS IN NEW ZEALAND. HOWEVER, THE USE OF SOCIAL DRUGS ISN'T JUST A HOMEGROWN ISSUE AS PHOEBE BORWICK AND AMY DONOHUE DISCOVER.

The trade behind cocaine (or coca, as the plant of origin is known) and heroin (which comes from opium poppies) is a global issue. An estimated four million people depend on income derived from the cultivation of illicit drug crops.

In the year 2000, the global drug trade was estimated at a value of US\$400b. It's an issue worth more than the price of feeding the planet over the same period of time.

From the rainforests of South America to the remotest parts of Afghanistan to Pete Doherty's

honker, we trace the journey of the most profitable crops in the world.

FROM THE DARK AGES...

Way back when we were still running around with leaves covering our lower regions, South Americans chewed the leaf of the coca plant. Often incorrectly considered a narcotic, cocaine is actually a stimulant and when chewed suppresses hunger, while increasing strength and energy.

Cue the Spaniards arriving in South America and branding coca 'a plant that the devil invented for the total destruction of the natives'. Or, that's what *one* prominent Catholic artist declared.

They changed their minds a bit when they discovered it really did stimulate quite nicely thus legalising it and charging a nifty little tax for their own economic benefit. For a time, coca was even the main source of income for the Roman Catholic Church. Sneaky, sneaky!

...TO TODAY...

Ironically, the two most fatal drugs are still legal today and taxed to the hilt by governments around the world. Alcohol and tobacco kill more people than illicit drugs every year and are both



...TO ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION...

More than 30 years ago, the US came up with the superhero tactic to rid the world, and especially their own country (where the demand was coming from), of the evil empire of narcotics. They called it the War on Drugs.

The most widespread method of destroying the coca plant in the 90s, and the opium poppy still today, was to manually pull up every single plant in a field. Time consuming and tiring, there must have been an easier way?

Consequently, air eradication with herbicides became rather popular. In as little as ten days after spraying, the plants are stripped bare of their leaves and within around 70 days, the plant will be completely dead. RIP, indeed.

US-sponsored Plan Colombia was, to effect, an aerial fumigation of this country – the second most ecologically diverse in the world. Spraying

caused poisoning and environmental damage.

Herbicides have been linked to diarrhoea, hair loss and skin rashes on children. Also, legal crops like bananas, coffee and pineapples are often destroyed along with the coca plant. Yes, we have no bananas. Not quite the lycra and rippling muscles the US had envisaged.

In Afghanistan, post the US-led invasion, local and international troops are enlisted in eradicating poppy crops – as are schoolchildren in some provinces. This is dangerous work.

Imagine you're a farmer who's invested cash and time in a poppy field. How would you feel if you saw it being literally stamped out? Might make you want to protect your only chance of making a living. Where's that gun that's been lying around since the war?

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widely accepted and available.

The very fact that other drugs are illegal increases the profit to be made. With criminals running the show, the prices skyrocket.

...TO LEAFY FIELDS...

Cocaine is an economical crop for farmers not only because of its high selling cost and ever-present demand, but its quick maturation period. Within one to two years of planting the seed, the coca plant's leaves will be ready to harvest with a drying period of only six hours.

And opium poppies have an even quicker yield.



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grown in the Andean countries. In fact, Bolivia, Colombia and Peru account for more than 98 per cent of the world supply.

Already in poverty, working with poor soil and unempowered to change their circumstances – not to mention the influence of drug lords and anti-government groups – farmers often have no choice if they want to keep food on the table.

Yet, the War on Drugs is not being won. The US' efforts to strip Latin America and Afghanistan of their coca and poppy crops are also stripping the livelihood of millions.

While thrill-seekers in the west demand the drugs, and their governments react by trying to stop the supply, farmers will continue to grow the illicit crops unless they are offered a real alternative way to make a living.

....TO TERRORISM...

Yes, that's right. Terrorism. Stop or they'll shoot (up). The links between terrorism, drugs and war are extensive and very real.

In 2001, just weeks before two planes barrelled into the Twin Towers, the US pledged a further \$1.5m to plump out the reported \$140m in 'humanitarian' aid it sent to Afghanistan. Why?

Because western methods of enforcing drug cultivation laws proved ineffective, but groups with violent means available to them could whip out grenades and guns willy nilly, without a thought for morality.

The Taliban was limiting drug production by threatening to shoot farmers of illicit crops. Thus, they were held in high American esteem until everything went to custard on September 11.

But the corruption ran deeper. After the attacks, the Taliban turned tail to force farmers to grow the poppies. They, and other anti-government organisations, act as trafficking middlemen and a defence force, making profit out of the trade and protecting drug smugglers with weaponry and vehicles.

STILL WANNA GET HIGH, BUTTERFLY?

So, you still down with shovelling that candy up your nose this Friday? Or are you quite content to continue your involvement with one of the world's deadliest industries? You don't need to rent *Traffic*, *Requiem for a Dream* or *Maria Full of Grace* to understand the true repercussions of your habit on the developing countries of the world.

And if you still don't get it, then you *must* be wasted. Go blow your nose and have an OJ. ☘

Further problems arise as more coca plants and poppies are eradicated. Demand for the drug remains constant (or grows) while there are fewer crops, resulting in the existing crops becoming more lucrative.

More farmers then begin to grow the plant to take advantage of the price increase. What a conundrum!

...TO POVERTY...

With secrecy comes vulnerability and international drug rings are not covered by fair trade agreements.

Globalisation of the drug trade has led to even greater exploitation of the crop farmers along with cheaper and easier international trafficking.

The globalisation of the drug trade forms a connection between organised crime, small arms, terrorism, human trafficking and all kinds of criminal and seedy life.

In 1999, nearly 80 per cent of opium cultivation took place in Afghanistan. Chances are, a gram of coke purchased in the US, Europe or New Zealand comes from a coca bush



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