

PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEMAKING MINUTES



A map of North America near the Arctic Circle showing 30 radar sites spread out along the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line. Running from Alaska, across Northern Canada to Greenland.
Map Wikipedia Commons

What the DEW line teaches us about the environment

Canada's manned DEW line stations completely ceased operations in 1993. Twenty-one sites had already been decommissioned during the 1960s as the DEW line transitioned to the unmanned radar stations of the North Warning System.

A great deal of thought and effort had gone into the construction of the DEW line in the 1950s. Mapping teams had travelled more than 1,600,000 km and reviewed over 80,000 aerial photos as part of planning for positioning of the radar stations. Here are other statistics:

- 417,690 metric tons of materials were transported to the north in all climate conditions
- 68 plus million metric gallons of petroleum products were shipped, of which almost 40 million metric gallons were in 818,000 metal drums
- Over 142,000 metric tons of steel were used during construction
- More than 20,000 people worked on the various sites in two-and-a-half years of construction

There was a hidden downside to this mighty effort. The environmental construction standards of the 1950s were considerably lower than today's standards. After decommissioning, the sites were found to be full of

hydrocarbons, soil that contained lead and PCBs and materials such as batteries, antifreeze, solvents and paint thinners.

A CBC radio story from 1997 tells of rotting vehicles in Arctic lakes, containers full of abandoned hazardous fluids and dumps leaking arsenic and PCBs.

The clean-up controversy still rages as burial of the toxic wastes poses problems for the future and shipping them away great expense. And, although there is northern employment in the clean-up and reclamation of the sites, there is also a continuing risk to people and the environment.

The DEW Line acts as a potent case study to look at other man-made constructions such as wind turbines and large scale industrial sites. The DEW line teaches us that we ignore the end-of-life cycle of materials at great peril.