



CLIMATE CHANGE



BEFORE



Tsunami Damage in Southeast Asia

AFTER

The original mission of the National Reconnaissance Office was to obtain satellite reconnaissance photos, as needed by US Government leadership, to evaluate and monitor the potential threats of Soviet missile activity. Over the course of its 60-year existence, the NRO's mission has evolved significantly. In the decades since its creation, the work accomplished by the NRO has influenced developments, not only within the classified world of the intelligence community, but also in the unclassified arenas of space exploration, agriculture, meteorology, communications, medicine, technology, and climate change. For example, NRO capabilities assisted with the assessment of damage from the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia and of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and has helped save lives by supporting the responders that fight wildfires in the American West. Today, multiple civilian agencies use NRO overhead systems to, among other things, assess and predict climate change, study crop production, map habitats of endangered species, respond to natural disasters, and track geological and glacial change.

DECLASSIFICATION OF NRO IMAGERY

Early NRO imagery collection, obtained by the space-based reconnaissance systems of the 1960s and early 1970s, was driven mostly by the need to confirm purported developments in Soviet strategic missile capabilities. At the time, the photos were also used to produce maps and charts for the Department of Defense and other US Government classified mapping programs.

In the early 1990s, a Classification Review Task Force, led by the Central Imagery Office, examined imagery security policy and the utility of satellite photo reconnaissance imagery for public purposes. The task force evaluated the associated national security risks, in the post-Cold War era, of releasing the 1960s

reconnaissance photos to the rest of the US Government and the public. It was concluded that the value of the images, to the study and analysis of climate change, was more significant than the continued protection of mostly obsolete technology and the identification of early targets of reconnaissance missions. The task force then made recommendations to the White House to declassify the imagery.

In February 1995, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12951, "Release of Imagery Acquired by Space-Based National Intelligence Reconnaissance Systems," which directed the declassification of imagery obtained by the Corona, Argon, and Lanyard photoreconnaissance missions. The order resulted in the declassification of more than 800,000 images collected by these satellites between 1960 and 1972.

IMPACT

Prior to the declassification of the reconnaissance images, environmentalists were limited by the imagery provided by the Landsat system, which became operational in 1972, but had poorer image quality than the earlier NRO programs. The release of the previously classified archive of reconnaissance photos, covering the previous twelve years (1960-1972), provided an additional basis for the systematic and comprehensive coverage of the earth's surface to scientists and environmental researchers. The images acquired by the NRO's earliest reconnaissance satellites (Corona, Argon, and Lanyard), allowed environmentalists to establish a 1960s baseline, not available by any other means, to assess environmental changes and provided significant contributions to the analysis and understanding of global environmental processes. Subsequent declassification of the NRO's Gambit and Hexagon programs and associated imagery further enlarges the imagery data available for climate change analysis.