

Environmental impacts of the Chernobyl Disaster

Shortly after the radiation leaks from Chernobyl occurred, the trees in the woodlands surrounding the plant were killed by high levels of radiation. This region came to be known as the "Red Forest" because the dead trees turned a bright ginger color. The trees were eventually bulldozed and buried in trenches.

The damaged reactor was hastily sealed in a concrete sarcophagus intended to contain the remaining radiation: How effective this sarcophagus has been — and will continue to be into the future — is a subject of intense scientific debate. Plans to construct a safer and more permanent containment structure around the reactor have yet to be implemented.

Despite the contamination of the site — and the inherent risks in operating a reactor with serious design flaws — the Chernobyl nuclear plant continued operation for many years, until its last reactor was shut down in December of 2000. The plant, the ghost towns of Pripyat and Chernobyl, and a large area surrounding the plant known as the "zone of alienation" are largely off-limits to humans.

There are, however, exceptions: A few hundred former residents of the area have returned to their former homes, despite the risks of radiation exposure. Scientists, government officials and other personnel are allowed on the site for inspections and other purposes. And in 2011, [Ukraine opened up the area to tourists](#) who want to see firsthand the after-effects of the disaster.