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Top international lawyers unveil definition of "ecocide"

Global expert drafting panel reveals proposal for a fifth crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court



Commissioned by the [Stop Ecocide Foundation](#), an [expert drafting panel](#) of 12 highly renowned international criminal and environmental lawyers from around the world has just concluded six months of deliberations. The result: a legal definition of "ecocide" (core text and commentary link [HERE](#)) as a potential 5th international crime, to sit alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and the crime of aggression.

The Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide, chaired by barrister and author Philippe Sands QC (UK) together with UN jurist and former prosecutor Dior Fall Sow (Senegal), was convened in late 2020 at a powerfully symbolic moment, 75 years after the terms “genocide” and “crimes against humanity” were first used at Nuremberg. The project emerged in response to a request from parliamentarians in the governing parties of Sweden.

The proposed definition will now be made available for states to consider, and will henceforth be visible on the newly launched [Ecocide Law website](#), an academic and legal resource hub co-managed by the [Stop Ecocide Foundation](#) and the [Promise Institute for Human Rights](#) at UCLA School of Law.

Jojo Mehta, Chair of the Stop Ecocide Foundation and convenor of the panel, said: *“This is an historic moment. This expert panel came together in direct response to a growing political appetite for real answers to the climate and ecological crisis. The moment is right - the world is waking up to the danger we are facing if we continue along our current trajectory.”*

The drafting work, she explained, *“was high-level, collaborative and informed by many experts as well as a public consultation comprising hundreds of legal, economic, political, youth, faith and indigenous perspectives. The resulting definition is well pitched between what needs to be done concretely to protect ecosystems and what will be acceptable to states. It's concise and powerful, it's based on strong legal precedents and it will mesh well with existing laws. Governments will take it seriously, and it offers a workable legal tool corresponding to a real and pressing need in the world.”*

Rebecka Le Moine, Member of Swedish Parliament, who initially approached the Stop Ecocide Foundation with a request for a definition of ecocide, said:

“I welcome this definition, as it makes the term ecocide more concrete and clear, it also makes it a lot easier for me as a politician and a lawmaker to find support for criminalization of it.”

Quotes from the panel co-chairs:

Philippe Sands QC, Professor, University College London; barrister, Matrix Chambers; author, *East West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes against Humanity* (UK/France/Mauritius):

“It has been a privilege to contribute to this work, inspired by the efforts of Hersch Lauterpacht and Rafael Lemkin in giving the world ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘genocide’, back in 1945. Ecocide is about law in the service of our planet, a means of changing consciousness and of harnessing the idea and ideals of international justice for the greater good.”

Dior Fall Sow, UN jurist and former prosecutor (Senegal):

“This is the beginning of a difficult but exhilarating adventure that should only end with the introduction into the Rome Statute of this fifth crime of ecocide. Let's dare to do it!”

[Additional panelists’ quotes below.]

Support for an ecocide law criminalising mass damage and destruction of ecosystems is gaining momentum around the world with recorded interest from both island nations (Vanuatu and the Maldives) and European states (France, Belgium, Finland, Spain, Luxembourg). It has been endorsed by high-profile figures such as the Pope, Greta Thunberg and Dr Jane Goodall. Belgium is the first European nation to have raised criminalizing ecocide at the International Criminal Court, and the European Parliament has now supported in principle on [several occasions](#).

MEP Marie Toussaint who has made it her mission to progress recognition of ecocide by the EU, is delighted: *“After years and years of non-stop mobilisation and struggle all over the world, recognition of ecocide has gained strength and public support. This recognition is essential if we want to protect all life on our planet, as well as peace and human rights.”*

She continued: *“This highly qualified panel has shown today not only that this is legally feasible, but also that we can have a shared international understanding and definitions. Our role now, as parliamentarians from all over the world, is to work towards legal recognition in every single state along with support for this amendment to the Rome Statute. You can count on me for that! Justice and nature will prevail!”*

There is currently no legal framework to deal with ecocide at an international level, and therefore no system to hold corporate and government decision-makers accountable for environmental damages and abuses such as oil spills, mass deforestation, ocean damage or

severe pollution of waters. Enshrining ecocide in international law would enable perpetrators to be put on trial at the International Criminal Court or in any ratifying jurisdiction.

You can keep up to date with Stop Ecocide International and the work of the Stop Ecocide Foundation on: [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

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Notes to Editors

The [Stop Ecocide Foundation](#) both advocates for and facilitates steps towards making ecocide a crime at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in order to prevent devastation of nature and so protect the future of life on Earth. It is the only global NGO with this exclusive focus.

The Foundation has an expanding network of communication teams around the globe and websites in multiple languages. A growing number of ICC member states (as well as the Pope and the European Parliament) have publicly expressed interest in an international crime of ecocide.

This progress has been actively facilitated by Stop Ecocide's campaign narrative alongside strong legal, diplomatic and grassroots collaborations. The work of the Foundation sits at the intersection of these three areas, and is thus uniquely positioned both to support and to amplify the global conversation.

Assets:

[Expert panel photographs](#)

[Ecocide Law website](#) - just launched: a comprehensive and growing resource hub of academic and legal material, including historical timeline and publications relating to ecocide.

[FAQs](#)

Additional panelist quotes:

Deputy Chairs:

Kate Mackintosh, Executive Director, Promise Institute for Human Rights, UCLA School of Law (US/UK):

“This is an exciting moment for us all, as we emerge with a practical definition of ecocide that is both timely and overdue. I believe this legally robust and credible text can take its place alongside the other international crimes, and signal a sea change in our attitudes to the protection and preservation of our planet.”

Richard J Rogers, Partner, Global Diligence; Executive Director, Climate Counsel (UK)

“ ‘Ecocide’ is a criminal law for the 21st Century. If humanity is to reach the 22nd Century with peace and security, we must tame the environmental abuse that has plagued the earth for hundreds of years.”

Panelists:

Valérie Cabanes, International jurist and human rights expert (France):

“We need to broaden the range of the most serious international crimes by recognising a fifth crime against the peace and security of humanity: the crime of ecocide. By destroying the ecosystems on which we depend, we are destroying the foundations of our civilisation and mortgaging the living conditions of all future generations. This is no less serious than war crimes, crimes against humanity, or the crimes of genocide or aggression. As well as being a major issue of global socio-environmental justice, is it not ultimately the survival of the human species that is at stake?”

Pablo Fajardo, Environmental lawyer (Ecuador):

“It is imperative to recognize that ecocide is a global threat and needs to be responded to accordingly. We are pleased to be part of this Panel because it has managed to propose a legal formula capable of addressing these types of threats.”

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, Director, Bangladesh Environmental Law Association (Bangladesh):

“We, in the global south, are witnessing massive destruction of natural systems in the name of development, against which national legal systems are not responding adequately. If forests are not protected, emission of greenhouse gases not curtailed and sea level rise not prevented, the next generation will have to draw maps of Bangladesh and other South Asian countries differently. We need recognition of ecocide in international law, to defend Mother Earth, nature and both present and future generations.”

Charles C Jalloh, Professor, Florida International University/UN International Law Commission (Sierra Leone):

“It has been wonderful to work with such a great team of international law scholars and practitioners on this independent expert panel for the definition of a new crime of ecocide. I am pleased that, despite our diverse backgrounds and expertise, we reached a consensus definition. I am hopeful that the outcome will prove useful to States. And that it might even catalyze a much needed amendment to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to finally include ecocide in the list of most serious crimes of concern to the international community as a whole.”

Rodrigo Lledó, Director, Fundación Internacional Baltasar Garzón (Chile/Spain):

“The intellectual generosity of the panel members was truly surprising and motivating, and enabled us to reach a balanced definition. I hope that the States will adopt this definition as their own. It is urgent. Destroying the environment in a massive and irresponsible way must cease to be internationally legal.”

Tuiloma Neroni Slade, Former ICC judge (Samoa):

“The panel's proposals are based on established principles of law and are aimed at strengthening the ability of the ICC to respond to matters of the utmost seriousness to the international community. It has been a special privilege to take part in the work of such a highly committed and distinguished international panel.”

Christina Voigt, Professor, University of Oslo (Norway):

“The definition is a tool to which we applied our collective expertise in the conviction that severe destruction of the environment needs to stand on par with other international crimes. It is a tool we can only hope governments will find useful in their future deliberations.”

Alex Whiting, Former International Criminal Court prosecutions coordinator; Professor, Harvard Law School (US):

"Defining the crime is a first step on a path of discussion, debate, and, one day, ratification. The hope is that the process will energize states to think about how to use international criminal law to target the most grave environmental crimes while at the same time deploying domestic criminal and regulatory law to address a broad range of environmental harms that threaten our planet."

The Stop Ecocide Foundation is a registered foundation in the Netherlands with charitable (ANBI) status. Registered address: Nieuwe Herengracht 18, 1018DP, Amsterdam. Postal address: Postbus 601, 1180 AP Amstelveen. Registered foundation number: 76532054.