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ECOCIDE: THE CRIME AGAINST NATURE

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ABSTRACT

Ecocide, the huge-scale destruction of ecosystems due to human sports, has grown to be an urgent global challenge. From deforestation and commercial pollutants to grease spills and nuclear failures, reckless exploitation of herbal assets has caused irreversible environmental harm. notwithstanding growing cognizance, prison frameworks continue to be insufficient, permitting organizations and governments to keep dangerous practices with little accountability.

This article examines the historical evolution of ecocide, its legal implications, and foremost case studies, along with the Amazon rainforest destruction, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, and the Chernobyl catastrophe. Efforts to criminalize ecocide as the "fifth Crime in opposition to Peace" below the international criminal court (ICC) are gaining momentum, with countries like France, Sweden, and Belgium taking steps to understand it inside their prison structures. however, worldwide enforcement remains a venture due to economic and political pursuits.

The results of ecocide make bigger beyond environmental degradation, accelerating biodiversity loss, climate change, and human displacement. It also disrupts economies and public fitness, with pollution and habitat destruction leading to excessive crises international. To fight ecocide, stronger felony measures, company responsibility, and global cooperation are essential. recognizing ecocide as a criminal offense at the worldwide degree would no longer best function a deterrent however also make certain justice for affected groups and ecosystems.

As weather alternate intensifies and ecological destruction worsens, pressing motion is needed. by way of reinforcing prison frameworks, retaining perpetrators accountable, and prioritizing environmental protection, the sector can take a critical step closer to sustainability and justice.

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THE URGENCY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Ecocide, defined as the extensive devastation of the environment due to human actions, has surfaced as a worldwide dilemma that endangers the planet's ecosystems, biodiversity, and future generations. Characterized by significant and enduring environmental harm, ecocide arises from activities like deforestation, pollution, industrial catastrophes, and climate change. The escalating depletion of natural resources has resulted in irreversible damage, with dire outcomes such as increasing global temperatures, ecosystem disintegration, and large-scale displacement of human communities³. Despite these troubling developments, the legal structures in place to confront ecocide are insufficient, permitting corporations and governments to persist in environmentally harmful practices with minimal accountability.⁴

The concept of ecocide was first introduced in the 1970s, gaining traction after the Vietnam War when the use of Agent Orange devastated forests and agricultural lands.⁵ Over the decades, environmental activists and legal experts have called for ecocide to be recognized as a crime under international law. In recent years, the movement to criminalize ecocide has gained momentum, with growing demands to include it as the "Fifth Crime Against Peace" under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁴ Countries such as France, Sweden, and Belgium have taken steps toward integrating ecocide into their legal systems, but a globally recognized legal framework is still lacking.⁶

This article explores the historical evolution of ecocide, its legal implications, major case studies, and potential solutions to prevent further environmental destruction. As climate change accelerates and natural habitats disappear, the need for urgent action has never been greater. Criminalizing ecocide at an international level is essential to ensure environmental justice and hold perpetrators accountable. Without decisive intervention, the long-term survival of the planet remains at risk.

³ *United Nations*, Global Environmental Outlook, *UN Environment Programme*, 2019.

⁴ Polly Higgins, *Eradicating Ecocide: Laws and Governance to Prevent the Destruction of Our Planet*, 2nd ed. (Shepherd-Wahyn, 2015).

⁵ Arthur W. Galston, "Herbicides: A Mixed Blessing," *BioScience* 20, no. 16 (1970): 897 ⁴ *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, art. 5, 1998.

⁶ *European Parliament*, Resolution on the Environment and Human Rights, 2021.

In an era of escalating environmental crises, the concept of ecocide—the widespread destruction of ecosystems—has emerged as a pressing global concern. Defined as the severe and lasting damage to the natural environment caused by human activities, ecocide threatens biodiversity, accelerates climate change, and disrupts the lives of millions. From deforestation and industrial pollution to oil spills and nuclear disasters, the reckless exploitation of natural resources has resulted in irreversible harm. Unlike conventional environmental crimes, ecocide is being proposed as an international crime against humanity, requiring legal recognition at the global level.

This article explores the origins and legal framework of ecocide, major case studies, its consequences, and potential solutions to prevent large-scale environmental destruction. As the movement to criminalize ecocide gains momentum, the need for stricter policies and international cooperation has never been more urgent.

FROM CONCEPT TO CRISIS

The concept of ecocide emerged in the 1970s when growing environmental concerns led to discussions about the large-scale destruction of ecosystems. The Vietnam War served as a pivotal moment in shaping the awareness of ecocide when the U.S. military used Agent Orange, a highly toxic herbicide, to destroy forests and agricultural lands.⁷ This chemical warfare not only wiped out vast ecosystems but also had severe health consequences for local populations, triggering debates on the need for legal accountability for environmental destruction.⁸

Over the following decades, ecocide became increasingly linked to industrialization, deforestation, and resource exploitation. The rapid expansion of industries such as mining, logging, and oil extraction led to widespread habitat destruction and pollution, causing irreversible damage to ecosystems.⁹ High-profile environmental disasters, such as the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown in 1986 and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, further emphasized the scale and consequences of unchecked industrial activities.¹⁰ These disasters devastated local environments, endangered

⁷ David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (University of Georgia Press, 2011).

⁸ *International Criminal Court, Report on the Proposed Crime of Ecocide, 2021.*

⁹ *Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), Global Biodiversity Outlook 5, 2020.*

¹⁰ *National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill: Final Report, 2016.*

species, and displaced entire communities, reinforcing the need for stronger environmental regulations.

In the early 2000s, the legal recognition of ecocide gained momentum as environmental advocates and legal scholars called for it to be recognized as an international crime. British lawyer Polly Higgins became one of the leading figures in the movement to criminalize ecocide, advocating for its inclusion as the "Fifth Crime Against Peace" under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Her work laid the foundation for discussions on the legal implications of ecocide and the responsibilities of corporations and governments in preventing environmental destruction.

Today, as climate change accelerates and ecological degradation worsens, the push to criminalize ecocide has intensified. Several countries, including France, Sweden, and Belgium, have taken legislative steps to recognize ecocide within their national legal frameworks. Meanwhile, international organizations continue to push for ecocide to be included in the Rome Statute of the ICC, which would make it a punishable international crime. Despite these efforts, global consensus on criminalizing ecocide remains elusive, highlighting the ongoing struggle between environmental justice and economic interests.

The term ecocide was first introduced in the 1970s, following the devastating environmental impact of the Vietnam War, where the U.S. military deployed Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide, to destroy forests and crops. The long-term effects of chemical defoliants on both ecosystems and human health fueled discussions on the need for environmental accountability. Since then, ecocide has been linked to industrial disasters, deforestation, oil spills, deep-sea mining, and climate change-related destruction.

The growing ecological awareness in the 21st century has amplified calls for ecocide to be recognized as the "Fifth Crime Against Peace", alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and crimes of aggression, under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC). Despite decades of environmental advocacy, the absence of legally binding measures has allowed corporations and governments to continue exploiting natural resources without consequences.

TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The legal framework surrounding ecocide remains fragmented, with no universally accepted definition or enforcement mechanism at the international level.¹¹ Despite the increasing urgency of environmental destruction, ecocide has not yet been officially recognized as a crime under international law. However, momentum has been building toward criminalizing ecocide, with efforts focusing on integrating it into the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which currently prosecutes crimes such as genocide and crimes against humanity.¹²

In 2021, an independent legal panel drafted a formal definition of ecocide, proposing its inclusion as the "Fifth Crime Against Peace" under ICC jurisdiction. This definition describes ecocide as unlawful or reckless acts that cause widespread, severe, or long-term damage to the environment. If adopted, this would hold corporations, governments, and individuals criminally liable for largescale environmental destruction. However, for ecocide to be recognized by the ICC, it requires the support of at least two-thirds of its 123 member states, a challenging process due to political and economic interests.

Some nations have taken proactive measures by integrating ecocide into their domestic legal systems. France, Sweden, Belgium, and Vietnam have passed national laws criminalizing ecocide, imposing heavy fines and imprisonment on those responsible for severe environmental damage.¹³ The European Union has also considered adding ecocide provisions to its environmental protection policies, reflecting the growing international recognition of the crime.

Despite these efforts, global enforcement remains weak. Many powerful nations, particularly those with major industrial sectors, have resisted ecocide legislation, fearing economic repercussions. The challenge remains in balancing economic development with environmental justice. Until an internationally binding legal framework is established, addressing ecocide will largely depend on regional initiatives, advocacy efforts, and voluntary corporate responsibility measures. The fight to recognize ecocide as a crime continues, but legal recognition at the global level remains a work in progress.

Currently, international environmental laws remain fragmented, with no universally recognized legal definition of ecocide. The Rome Statute of the ICC, which governs the prosecution of the most severe international crimes, does not explicitly include ecocide. However, in 2021, an

¹¹ *International Criminal Court, Rome Statute, art. 5.*

¹² *European Environmental Agency, Legal Pathways to Criminalizing Ecocide, 2021.*

¹³ *European Parliament, Ecocide and Environmental Protection Laws, 2022*

independent legal panel drafted a definition of ecocide as an international crime, proposing its inclusion under the ICC's mandate. This definition emphasizes the unlawful and reckless actions that cause severe environmental damage, regardless of intent.

Several countries have taken individual steps toward criminalizing ecocide. France, Sweden, Belgium, and Vietnam have incorporated ecocide into their national laws, imposing penalties on entities responsible for large-scale environmental harm. Meanwhile, the European Union is considering new regulations that would make ecocide a punishable offense under environmental protection laws.

ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHES

Ecocide has led to some of the most devastating environmental disasters in human history, with severe consequences for ecosystems, wildlife, and human populations.

These case studies highlight the long-term impact of unchecked industrial activity and government negligence in preserving natural resources.

One of the most alarming examples of ecocide is the deforestation of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil. Often referred to as the "lungs of the planet", the Amazon has been systematically destroyed due to illegal logging, mining, and agricultural expansion. This widespread deforestation has led to biodiversity loss, disrupted indigenous communities, and contributed significantly to global warming by reducing the planet's capacity to absorb carbon dioxide.¹⁴ Despite global efforts to curb deforestation, large swaths of the rainforest continue to be cleared, threatening one of the world's most vital ecosystems.

Another major ecological disaster was the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010. This catastrophic event resulted from an explosion on a BP-operated offshore drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico, releasing over 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the ocean. The spill had devastating effects on marine life, killed thousands of seabirds, fish, and marine mammals, and severely impacted local fishing communities. The failure of corporate safety measures and inadequate government oversight demonstrated the urgent need for stricter regulations on oil extraction operations.

¹⁴ *United Nations, Amazon Rainforest Report, 2020.*

The Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster in 1986 remains one of the worst cases of ecocide in modern history. The explosion at the Chernobyl power plant in Ukraine released vast amounts of radioactive materials into the environment, causing long-term ecological damage and rendering large areas uninhabitable for centuries. Similarly, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984, caused by a toxic gas leak from a Union Carbide pesticide plant in India, resulted in thousands of deaths and lasting environmental contamination, exposing the dangers of industrial negligence.

These disasters underscore the urgent need for robust legal mechanisms to hold corporations and governments accountable for large-scale environmental destruction. Without stringent regulations and international legal recognition of ecocide, the exploitation of natural resources will continue unchecked, endangering the planet and future generations.

The destruction of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil is a glaring example of ecocide. Often referred to as the "lungs of the planet", the Amazon has been rapidly deforested due to illegal logging, mining, and agricultural expansion. This widespread destruction has led to biodiversity loss, disrupted indigenous communities, and contributed significantly to global warming. Another major example is the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in 2010, which released over 4.9 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill caused devastating effects on marine life, coastal economies, and human health, exposing the failure of corporate accountability in environmental disasters.

Nuclear disasters also exemplify ecocide, with the Chernobyl explosion in 1986 causing catastrophic radiation exposure and rendering large areas uninhabitable for centuries. Similarly, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy in 1984 saw the accidental release of toxic gas from a Union Carbide pesticide plant, killing thousands and leaving lasting environmental contamination. These cases highlight the long-term impact of unchecked industrial activity and the urgent need for stronger legal frameworks to prevent future occurrences.

THE PRICE OF DESTRUCTION

The consequences of ecocide extend far beyond immediate environmental destruction, with long-lasting and often irreversible effects on ecosystems, human populations, and global stability. One of the most severe impacts of ecocide is biodiversity loss. The destruction of forests, wetlands, and marine ecosystems leads to habitat loss for countless species, pushing them toward extinction. Scientists estimate that over 1 million species are currently at risk due to habitat destruction,

pollution, and climate change, resulting in the collapse of entire ecosystems that are crucial for maintaining planetary balance.

Ecocide also accelerates climate change, as activities such as deforestation and fossil fuel combustion increase greenhouse gas emissions. The loss of carbon sinks, such as rainforests and peatlands, reduces the planet's ability to absorb carbon dioxide, leading to more extreme weather events, rising global temperatures, and shifting climate patterns that disrupt agriculture and water supplies.

Another devastating consequence of ecocide is human displacement. As ecosystems collapse, communities that rely on natural resources for their livelihoods are forced to migrate. Rising sea levels, droughts, and desertification drive millions into climate migration, leading to resource conflicts, political instability, and humanitarian crises. Small island nations face an existential threat as rising waters submerge their lands, making entire regions uninhabitable.

Beyond environmental and social impacts, ecocide has profound economic consequences. Many countries depend on natural resources for agriculture, fishing, and tourism, and large-scale environmental destruction results in massive financial losses. The destruction of coral reefs, for example, not only disrupts marine ecosystems but also affects fisheries and coastal economies that rely on healthy ocean biodiversity.

Additionally, ecocide contributes to public health crises. Air and water pollution, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and radiation contamination from industrial disasters increase the risk of respiratory diseases, cancers, and other health conditions. Communities living near deforested or polluted areas experience higher rates of illness, leading to increased healthcare costs and lower life expectancy.

The effects of ecocide are interconnected and far-reaching, threatening the very foundation of life on Earth. Addressing ecocide is not just about environmental conservation; it is a matter of survival for future generations. Without urgent legal and policy interventions, the ongoing destruction of ecosystems will continue to accelerate, pushing the planet toward ecological collapse.

The consequences of ecocide extend far beyond immediate environmental damage. Among the most pressing effects is the loss of biodiversity, with over 1 million species facing extinction due to habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change. The acceleration of climate change through deforestation, carbon emissions, and ocean degradation is another alarming consequence, contributing to rising global temperatures and extreme weather conditions. Human displacement

is also a major fallout, as climate-related disasters and ecosystem collapse force millions into climate migration, straining resources and intensifying global refugee crises. Furthermore, ecocide leads to economic collapse in nations dependent on agriculture, fishing, and natural resources, while also triggering severe public health crises due to air and water pollution, radiation exposure, and chemical spills.

MITIGATING THE IMPACT

Addressing ecocide requires a comprehensive approach that includes legal enforcement, corporate accountability, policy reforms, and public advocacy. One of the most critical steps is the formal recognition of ecocide as an international crime under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court (ICC).¹⁵ If ecocide is classified as a crime against humanity, individuals, corporations, and governments responsible for large-scale environmental destruction could face criminal prosecution. This legal measure would serve as a deterrent and ensure greater accountability.

Governments must also implement stricter environmental regulations to prevent industries from engaging in ecocide activities. Policies should include higher penalties for deforestation, pollution, and habitat destruction, along with incentives for sustainable business practices. Strengthening environmental laws at the national and international levels would help close legal loopholes that allow corporations to exploit natural resources without repercussions.

Corporate responsibility plays a crucial role in combating ecocide. Large multinational companies must adopt sustainable practices, reduce their carbon footprint, and prioritize environmental protection. Governments and international organizations should enforce transparency and require companies to report their environmental impact. Additionally, holding corporations financially liable for ecological damage would encourage industries to prioritize long-term sustainability over short-term profits. Public awareness and activism are also essential in driving change. Environmental movements such as Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Greenpeace have successfully pressured governments and corporations to take action against climate change and deforestation. Grassroots activism, combined with media campaigns and policy advocacy, can influence global decision-making and push for stronger environmental protections.

¹⁵ ICC, Rome Statute.

International cooperation is key to addressing ecocide. Countries must work together through agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord to implement unified policies aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, protecting biodiversity, and preventing large-scale environmental destruction. Without collective action, isolated efforts will not be enough to mitigate the devastating effects of ecocide.

Ultimately, avoiding ecocide necessitates a change in worldwide priorities, with environmental protection prioritized in political and economic decision-making. By reinforcing legal systems, implementing corporate accountability, enhancing public involvement, and promoting international cooperation, humanity can make significant progress in safeguarding the Earth for generations to come.

Addressing ecocide necessitates a robust international legal structure that holds corporations and governments responsible for environmental damage. The ICC should officially acknowledge ecocide as a crime against humanity, guaranteeing that individuals and organizations accountable for significant environmental harm undergo criminal prosecution. Additionally, governments need to enforce stricter environmental laws and impose substantial financial penalties on industries that partake in harmful practices.¹⁶ Corporate responsibility is crucial in averting future environmental catastrophes.

Public consciousness and activism are essential in instigating change. Initiatives led by Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion have highlighted environmental degradation on a global scale, urging lawmakers to act. Countries need to emphasize sustainable policies by funding renewable energy, reforestation initiatives, and prohibiting detrimental industrial activities. Enhancing global collaboration through multilateral accords will be critical in successfully addressing ecocide.

A CALL TO ACTION

Ecocide is more than merely an environmental issue—it constitutes a crime against those who will come after us. As climate change intensifies and biodiversity diminishes, the necessity to make

¹⁶ *UNEP, Environmental Crimes and Legal Responses, 2019.*

ecocide a criminal act has reached unprecedented heights. The absence of stringent legal repercussions has permitted industries and governments to perpetrate environmental harm without facing consequences. Nevertheless, with increasing worldwide awareness and legal progress, there is optimism that ecocide will soon be acknowledged as a crime under international law, guaranteeing justice for the Earth and all life forms that rely on it.

The struggle against ecocide demands a comprehensive strategy, integrating legal enforcement, corporate accountability, and grassroots movements. By ensuring that offenders are held responsible, moving toward sustainable policies, and enhancing global collaboration, humanity can make significant progress toward safeguarding the planet's ecosystems. The moment to act is now—prior to irreversible damage occurring to the sole planet we inhabit.