

Breaking Boundaries: Protecting Our Planet from Ecocide

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"The ones who push the limits, discover the limits sometimes push back".

Frosty Hesson

Introduction: Frosty Hesson once said, *"The ones who push the limits, discover the limits sometimes push back."* These words resonate deeply as we stand at the edge of an environmental crisis that pushes the limits of our planet's resilience. And now, as the Earth begins to push back—through rising seas, devastating wildfires, and collapsing ecosystems—we are faced with an undeniable truth: we must change course.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the Hans Günter Brauch Foundation, dear students, and citizens of Mosbach,

Thank you for welcoming me here today. I am truly honoured to receive this award, but more importantly, I am here to talk to you about something far bigger than myself: the survival of our planet. Today, I want to discuss the very real threat of *ecocide* and why it matters to each and every one of us.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members of the Hans Günter Brauch Foundation, dear students and dear citizens of Mosbach,

I am deeply honoured to stand before you today, not only as the recipient of this esteemed scientific award but also to engage with you on one of the most pressing issues of our time: *ecocide*.

As I speak to you, I want to convey that although this topic may seem complex, it touches each of our lives in ways that matter—our environment, our health and, ultimately, our future.

What is Ecocide? To put it simply, ecocide is the deliberate destruction of our environment. Imagine vast forests disappearing overnight, oceans filled with toxic oil spills, or nuclear disasters poisoning the air and water for generations. These are not just isolated tragedies—they are acts that threaten the very survival of our planet and humanity. Yet, despite their devastating impact, ecocide remains under-addressed in our legal systems.

Examples of Ecocide:

Let's take a moment to reflect on some infamous acts of ecocide. You may have heard of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 or the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989. More recently, in 2023, the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam during the war in Ukraine has wreaked havoc on both human and environmental security. These are not just events from history books—they represent ecological catastrophes that continue to affect our ecosystems and societies.

Oil Tanker Example: Impact on Multiple States and Ecosystems

Now, let's consider a hypothetical but all-too-realistic scenario to demonstrate the grave consequences of ecocide. Imagine an oil tanker being deliberately sunk in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean. The malicious intent behind this act is for the shipping company to collect a hefty insurance payout. However, the ramifications extend far beyond financial fraud. The result would be a massive release of hazardous substances into the ocean, causing a catastrophic die-off of marine species and significant disturbances to the ecosystem.

This disaster wouldn't be limited to one nation. **Countries with direct access to the South Atlantic**, such as Argentina, Brazil, Namibia, and South Africa, would immediately feel the effects. The oil would rapidly spread across the ocean, carried by powerful currents, reaching the shores of nations as far apart as **Uruguay, Venezuela, and West African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal**. Even countries with access to both the North and South Atlantic, such as **Sao Tome and Principe, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Equatorial Guinea**, would suffer the consequences.

The impacts would be severe and long-lasting, affecting these countries in several ways:

1. **Marine Ecosystem Damage:** The spillage of thousands of tons of oil into the ocean would cause devastating harm to marine life. Fish, seabirds, and marine mammals, including dolphins and whales, would suffer immensely. Heavy crude oil would suffocate marine organisms, block the gills of fish, and coat birds in a toxic layer, impairing their ability to fly and insulate themselves. Marine mammals would experience severe internal and external damage, leading to widespread mortality.
2. **Biodiversity Loss:** The death of marine species would disrupt the food chain and cause significant biodiversity loss. Predators that rely on smaller marine organisms for sustenance would struggle to survive, leaving the entire ecosystem in a state of imbalance for decades.
3. **Economic Consequences:** The economies of coastal nations dependent on the South Atlantic would be devastated. **Fishing industries in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Namibia, and South Africa** would face severe downturns due to a sharp decline in marine life. Coastal tourism, another major economic driver, would suffer as the oil reaches the shores, contaminating beaches and turning once-thriving tourist destinations into environmental wastelands.
4. **Health Risks:** Coastal communities could face serious health risks if they consume seafood contaminated by the oil. Residents could develop cancers, respiratory conditions, and skin diseases as a result of their exposure to the toxins.
5. **Long-Term Environmental Impact:** The oil could sink and mix with the sediments on the ocean floor, creating a toxic environment that could persist for decades. The damage to the benthic (bottom-dwelling) ecosystem would be catastrophic, with oil residues potentially remaining in the environment for extended periods, continuing to harm marine life.
6. **Climate Change Consequences:** Ocean ecosystems play a vital role in regulating the Earth's climate. For example, plankton absorbs carbon dioxide, helping to mitigate the impacts of climate change. However, the damage caused by an oil spill to these organisms could reduce this capacity, exacerbating global warming. Even countries far from the South Atlantic would eventually feel the ripple effects of this intensified climate crisis.

The intentional sinking of an oil tanker would thus be an **international disaster** with transnational repercussions. The direct and indirect effects would jeopardise the

economies, health, and environments of dozens of countries, and in doing so, would threaten the peace and security of the international community. This underscores why we need global accountability and why **ecocide** should be prosecuted as an international crime under a dedicated court—the **International Criminal Court for the Protection of the Environment (ICCPE)**.

Why Should We Care? You might wonder, why is ecocide important to me? It is important because the environment knows no boundaries. Pollution from an oil spill in one part of the world can drift across oceans, affecting countries far away. A nuclear disaster like Chernobyl poisoned the land for thousands of miles and its effects are still felt today, almost four decades. The health of our environment is interconnected with our own well-being. When ecosystems collapse, food security, clean water, health and even our own very existence are put at tremendous risk.

Why Do We Need an International Criminal Court for the Protection of the Environment (ICCPE)?

You may ask, isn't there already a body like the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute such crimes? The answer is both yes and no. The ICC exists to address crimes like genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. But ecocide—despite its devastating impact—is not yet recognised as one of those core crimes under international law.

Currently, the ICC is stretched to its limits. It has limited resources, and its mandate is already broad. Trying to fit ecocide into its jurisdiction would likely dilute the effectiveness of both the court and the prosecution of this crime. That's where the **International Criminal Court for the Protection of the Environment (ICCPE)** comes in.

The idea of a dedicated court for environmental crimes stems from the belief that ecocide deserves the same attention, resources, and legal mechanisms as other international crimes. Our planet's health is as important as human rights or the prevention of war. The environment isn't a secondary concern; it's a foundation on which human civilisation depends.

The ICCPE would focus exclusively on environmental crimes, providing a specialised and agile framework to prosecute those who commit acts of ecocide. Imagine holding large corporations or even governments accountable for massive oil spills, deforestation,

or the contamination of entire ecosystems. The ICCPE could act as a deterrent, preventing future ecocides by showing that the international community takes environmental destruction seriously.

What is the Anthropocene, and Why is it Important?

This brings me to a broader concept—one you may have heard in discussions about environmental science: *the Anthropocene*. The term *Anthropocene* originates from the Greek words *anthropos* (ἄνθρωπος), meaning "human," and *kainos* (καινός), meaning "new." It's a proposed epoch in geological time that signifies the profound influence humans have had on the Earth's ecosystems, geology, and atmosphere.

While we live in what geologists call the Holocene Epoch, which began after the last Ice Age about 12,000 years ago, many scientists argue that we have entered a new epoch—the Anthropocene—due to the massive and often destructive influence of human activity. From the Industrial Revolution to the atomic age, we have altered the planet in ways that are now recorded in the Earth's geological layers: carbon dioxide levels are higher than they've been for millions of years, plastics are found even in the deepest oceans, and radioactive particles from nuclear testing have left their mark in the Earth's sediment.

However, some scientists dispute the formal recognition of the Anthropocene as a new epoch, arguing that the changes caused by human activity do not yet meet strict geological criteria. Others suggest that acknowledging the Anthropocene forces us to confront the reality of human impact on the Earth, which carries political and economic implications.

Political and Economic Resistance: Admitting we live in the Anthropocene challenges the status quo, especially for industries and nations heavily reliant on fossil fuels or destructive environmental practices. Recognising this epoch implies a need for drastic systemic changes to mitigate further damage—something many powerful entities resist.

Scientific Conservatism: Some geologists are hesitant to declare a new epoch because it fundamentally alters our understanding of Earth's timeline. But the evidence is compelling. From the sediment layers showing industrial chemicals to microplastics in our oceans, the Anthropocene represents the undeniable imprint of human activity.

Recognising the Anthropocene is more than a geological debate—it is a moral and ethical recognition of our responsibility for the Earth. Just as we seek accountability for ecocide, the Anthropocene reminds us that our actions have global consequences.

Why Does This Matter? Why does it matter if we call this period the Anthropocene? It's more than just a scientific label—it's about acknowledging our responsibility. By recognising the Anthropocene, we recognise the immense power humans have over the Earth, and with that power comes responsibility. If we truly are in the Anthropocene, then we have a moral and legal duty to protect the environment from further destruction. We need laws, like those addressing ecocide, that reflect this responsibility.

A New Definition of Ecocide: In my research, I argue that we need a stronger, more robust definition of ecocide. While many experts have offered legal definitions, gaps remain in how we classify these acts. My proposal introduces a clear framework that can hold corporations, governments, and even individuals accountable for destroying the environment. I believe it's crucial that we create an International Criminal Court for the Protection of the Environment—a body solely dedicated to prosecuting those who commit these crimes on a global scale.

The Role of Law and Responsibility: Why should ecocide be treated as an international crime? It's simple: the effects of these environmental disasters transcend borders. Just as we have laws to protect human rights and punish war crimes, we must protect the rights of our planet. Environmental destruction is not a distant issue—it is a crime, and those who commit ecocide must face justice, just as perpetrators of genocide or crimes against humanity do.

Hope for the Future: Despite the gravity of this issue, there is hope. Around the world, young people like many of you here are pushing for change. Movements calling for climate action and environmental justice are growing stronger every day. By raising awareness and changing laws, we can make a difference. We can protect the environment for future generations.

Conclusion: I stand here today, not just as a scholar, but as a fellow human being who deeply believes in the power of law to bring about positive change. The fight against ecocide is not just for governments or academics—it's for all of us. Together, we can build a future where the environment is respected and safeguarded. I encourage you to take an interest, question, and push boundaries, because the world you inherit depends on the actions you take today. We are living in a time where human activity shapes not just the future of our societies but the future of our planet's ecosystems. Recognising the Anthropocene is not just a scientific debate—it's an acknowledgment that we must take responsibility. And just as we must hold ourselves accountable for our past actions, we must also look ahead to creating laws and systems, such as those that would prosecute ecocide, to protect the Earth for future generations. The establishment of a specialised International Criminal Court for the Protection of the Environment (ICCPE) could make a significant difference at a critical moment when humanity seems to be running out of time.

Thank you.

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