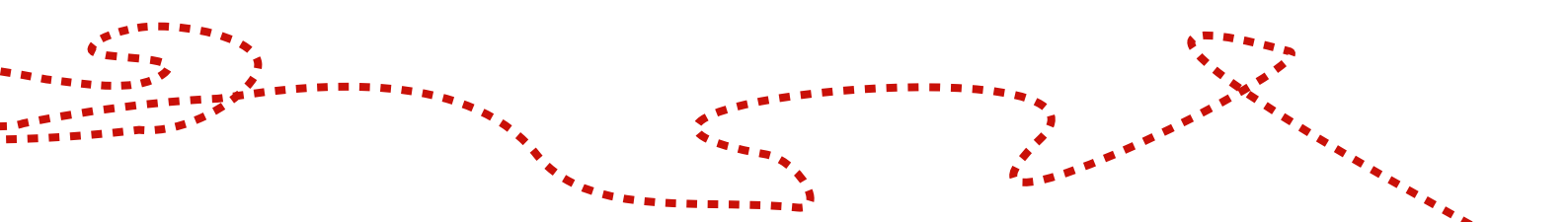




A mural shows industrial infrastructure, environmental devastation, and human displacement, illustrating the close relationship between ecological destruction and social harm. Photo: Verena Lasso Mena, Belém, Brazil, 15.11.2025.

From Genocide to Ecocide: Confronting Political Violence Against the Environment

Verena Lasso Mena & Markus Lederer



From Genocide to Ecocide

Confronting Political Violence Against the Environment

Large-scale destruction of ecosystems through resource extraction, deforestation, and pollution rarely leads to accountability. Such harm is often enabled through different forms of political violence, including displacement, intimidation, lethal violence, and other forms of coercion. In this sense, ecocide is not merely an environmental harm but a systemic practice that destroys the ecological conditions of collective survival, paralleling the dynamics of genocide. As more states debate criminalizing ecocide, the central political question is how national and international institutions should respond to environmental destruction that is systemic and intertwined with political violence. This TraCe Policy Brief examines how ecocide emerged as a political and legal idea, and why it matters for policymakers today.

by Verena Lasso Mena and Markus Lederer

Criminalizing Ecocide: Approaches to Accountability

Ecocide, the large-scale destruction of ecosystems with severe and lasting consequences, is highly contested in international policy debates. Early proposals drew on the structure of the Genocide Convention but focused on the protection of ecosystems. Although the International Law Commission discussed environmental crimes for decades, the Rome Statute ultimately criminalized ecological harm only as a narrow war crime requiring knowledge of widespread, long-term, and severe environmental damage, leaving most ecocidal harm outside international law. In response, advocates like the End Ecocide on Earth initiative, the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, and Stop Ecocide International advanced proposals for an international crime of ecocide applicable in both war and peace, including the 2021 definition by an Independent Expert Panel, which has since influenced domestic reforms and EU debates.

The Independent Expert Panel's definition proposes a standalone crime of ecocide that challenges the anthropocentric focus of existing international criminal law, lowers the threshold for severe environmental harm, and

introduces a "wantonness" standard based on reckless disregard for damage that is clearly excessive in relation to anticipated social and economic benefits. This approach is often represented as a pragmatic compromise, targeting large-scale environmental destruction while setting a high bar intended to exclude routine economic harms.² While holding political and corporate leaders personally liable could send a strong signal that large-scale environmental destruction will no longer be tolerated, amending the Rome Statute remains a slow and contested process dependent on uncertain state support. By contrast, domestic measures and EU initiatives are progressing faster: the EU's 2024 Environmental Crimes Directive, which includes an ecocide-like offence, is expected to spur further national legislation, following earlier moves in Belgium, France, and Chile.³ These debates parallel earlier discussions on the criminalization of genocide, addressed in the next section.

More than a Precedent: The Genocide-Ecocide Nexus

The trajectory of the ecocide debate reflects earlier struggles over how to define and criminalize genocide. Both concepts evolved through political bargaining, legal innovation, and attempts to address forms of destruction inadequately addressed in existing law. Table 1 outlines key moments in the development of both crimes and the parallels shaping contemporary discussions.

Until the Second World War, genocide was, in Winston Churchill's words, "a crime without a name" lacking clear legal status in international law until Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide" in 1944 to capture the systematic destruction of groups, most notably during the Shoah. Earlier experiences of colonial violence and mass group

Box 1: Definition by the Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide

According to the draft definition by the Independent Expert Panel, convened by Stop Ecocide International (2021), ecocide means "unlawful or wanton acts committed with knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage to the environment being caused by those acts."¹

Table 1:	
Genocide	Ecocide
1944: Term “genocide” coined by Polish-Jewish lawyer Raphael Lemkin during WWII	1973: International law professor Richard A. Falk drafts International Convention on the Crime of Ecocide
1948: UN adopts Genocide Convention	1980s–1990s: International Law Commission considers environmental crimes but drops ecocide except as narrow war crime
1948–1950s: Early proposals for broader genocide scope (incl. “cultural genocide”) removed under political pressure	1998: Rome Statute includes environmental damage only in armed conflict, with high thresholds (Art. 8(2)(b)(iv))
1998: Rome Statute includes genocide as a core International Criminal Court (ICC) crime	2010–2016: New ecocide proposals by Polly Higgins (bar-rister, author, and environmental lobbyist), Laurent Neyret (environmental law professor), Valérie Cabanes (lawyer and environmentalist)
Ongoing: Challenges in prosecution and politicization of genocide charges	2021: Independent Expert Panel issues influential ecocide definition
	2024: EU Directive includes offence comparable to ecocide
	2025: International Court of Justice (ICJ) addresses states’ climate obligations in ways with important implications for accountability debates, including ecocide proposals ⁴

destruction had already shaped how such atrocities were understood.⁵ Lemkin documented patterns of occupation and mass violence and laid the intellectual groundwork for what would become the 1948 Genocide Convention. The Convention defined genocide as acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, including killing, serious bodily or mental harm, conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, preventing births, and forcibly transferring children.

This definition reflected political compromise: political and social groups were excluded, and states’ obligations to “prevent and punish” genocide were left deliberately vague, revealing a tension between legal precision and broader recognition of mass harm. Scholars and practitioners debate the scale, intent, and strategies of genocide, which range from total physical annihilation to sustained practices that undermine group survival, while recognizing that although states are the most common perpetrators, non-state actors may also commit genocide, particularly in settler-colonial contexts. Across these interpretations, intent to destroy remains central, but methods range from mass killing to cultural destruction, economic domination, and the targeted elimination of community leadership. These debates over scale, intent, and strategy continue to shape how atrocities are defined and prosecuted today.⁶ They nevertheless offer two key insights for framing ecocide as a crime.

First, research on the “genocide-ecocide nexus” increasingly shows that ecocide is closely connected to genocide and often interacts with it in mutually reinforcing ways. Early advocates already argued that acts of ecocide should be treated with the same gravity as genocide, with some referring to “genocidal ecocide.” Ever since, research has shown

that ecological destruction can create the conditions that enable or accelerate genocidal violence by undermining the material and cultural foundations of group life. This framing has recently re-emerged as environmental justice movements, climate activists, and legal advocates have pushed for recognition of ecocide as an international crime.⁷

Second, a key overlap between genocide and ecocide concerns how intent is understood. While genocide law formally requires an “intent to destroy” a protected group, courts and scholars increasingly interpret that such intent may be inferred from patterns of conduct, including sustained actions carried out with the knowledge or reasonable expectation of their destructive effects. This approach is now reflected in discussions of ecocide, as the term “wanton acts” in the above definition shows. This does justice to the fact that ecocide is produced through cumulative, foreseeable harm resulting from sustained human actions that undermine the ecological conditions necessary for collective survival. Just as genocidal intent can be established through repeated, foreseeable acts, constructive intent can encompass policies or practices that, while framed as economic or developmental, systematically undermine the viability of human communities. Recognizing this parallel challenges the claim that ecocide requires direct lethal force and strengthens the case for treating foreseeable ecosystem destruction as part of the broader landscape of mass atrocity crimes.

Patterns of Ecocidal Violence

The literature linking genocide and ecocide identifies multiple ways in which environmental destruction and mass violence intersect. These overlaps emerge across historical and contemporary cases, revealing patterns where ecological violence is both a driver and a tool of group destruction.

(1) Weaponized Environmental Destruction

In genocidal and mass-violence contexts, environmental destruction is often central to political and military strategies of subjugation or group harm, which is why many states now frame environmental protection as a human security issue. A landmark example is the US use of Agent Orange in Vietnam (1961–1971), where deliberate destruction of vegetation and crops advanced military aims while causing severe food insecurity and long-term health impacts.⁸ Similar dynamics appeared in the US-led War on Drugs, where aerial fumigation of coca plants in Colombia degraded ecosystems, harmed biodiversity, and undermined local livelihoods, revealing the convergence of environmental destruction and political violence.⁹ Current debates highlight Ukraine, where 108 NGOs at the Fifth UN Environment Assembly condemned Russia’s invasion for creating severe environmental risks; Ukraine has since criminalized ecocide, defining it as large-scale destruction of flora, fauna, or essential natural resources.¹⁰ Research on Gaza likewise shows how soil salinization, destruction of water infrastructure, and loss of farmland interact with the erosion of Palestinian knowledge systems and identities as part of broader violence.¹¹ Across these cases, ecological devastation functions both as a consequence and a tool of systematic violence, harming environments and the communities that depend on them.

(2) Slow Violence and Structural Erasure

Ecocide often unfolds not through dramatic events but through gradual, normalized processes that degrade ecosystems and displace communities. Industrial expansion, climate impacts, and extractive economies steadily undermine the social and ecological systems that sustain livelihoods. These forms of slow violence are rooted in political and economic structures, hierarchies, exploitation, and militarized resource control. Treating environmental harm as accidental or apolitical obscures these drivers and allows destructive practices to continue. Landscapes may appear intact while communities, cultures, and ecological relationships have been erased, turning territories into sacrifice

zones for extractive development or exclusionary conservation. Such erasure is frequently hidden behind narratives of progress and sustainability.¹²

(3) Resource Control, Colonial Legacies, and Violence against Defenders

Control over land and resources has long been central to domination. Scholarship on settler colonial genocide and ecocide links genocide to colonialism and environmental destruction, arguing that large-scale extractive development under capitalist political economies can function as a structural driver of mass harm. This analytical framing differs from narrower legal definitions of genocide that hinge on particular protected groups and demonstrable intent. Historically, a precedent is the extermination of bison in North America, used to starve Indigenous communities and force land cessions, exemplifying how ecological destruction has long served genocidal strategies. Today, large-scale energy, mining, and infrastructure megaprojects continue to degrade Indigenous lands, undermine community survival, and suppress resistance through legal, economic, and physical coercion, including policing and militarized enforcement. Across regions, such projects are experienced not as development initiatives but as instruments of population control and territorial restructuring.¹³ Violence against environmental and land defenders is integral to this system. Killings, criminalization, and intimidation silence opposition, dismantle traditional stewardship practices, and open territories to extractive industries. This violence not only accelerates ecological destruction but also eliminates key custodians of ecosystems and collective rights.¹⁴

Lessons Learned for Confronting Political and Environmental Violence

International juridification is slow, selectively applied, and its very idea contested by populist narratives that frame international law as a global conspiracy. In practice, genocide has been conclusively adjudicated by international or UN-backed courts in only three judicial contexts: Rwanda, Bosnia, and Cambodia. In Cambodia, the crimes were

Box 2: Key Policy Takeaways

- **National governments should strengthen domestic enforcement mechanisms**, including criminal, civil, and administrative tools, to address severe environmental harm.
- **Early-warning and risk-assessment bodies should develop tools to identify ecocidal patterns** and integrate environmental indicators into mass atrocity and conflict risk assessments.
- **States, parties, and international legal institutions should support debates on ICC reform**, including efforts to expand jurisdiction, clarify thresholds for environmental crimes, and address gaps in corporate accountability.
- **Governments at all levels and international organizations should support and protect environmental defenders** through legal safeguards, rapid response mechanisms, and robust monitoring of reprisals.
- **Peacebuilding, humanitarian, and policy actors should integrate slow violence into risk assessments**, ensuring that cumulative, structural, and non-dramatic harms are captured in policy design and humanitarian early warning systems.

committed in the 1970s, yet the final judgment was delivered only in 2022, and the verdicts were politicized and framed as a foreign intrusion.¹⁵ If recognition and legitimacy depended solely on such rulings, many genocides in history, including many acknowledged by the UN in political resolutions but never adjudicated in court, would have gone unnamed while they were being committed. At the same time, the very fact that an international court is conducting an investigation represents an extraordinarily significant and historic development in deterring future crimes, punishing perpetrators, and recognizing victims. The lesson for ecocide is that recognition and response should not wait for verdicts but work towards them. Scholars and policy experts have a responsibility to assess situations as they unfold, measure them against established legal and factual criteria, and warn when patterns of destruction emerge.

Furthermore, criminal law alone cannot dismantle the political and economic systems that drive such violence. Nevertheless, it can form part of a broader set of political, legal, and normative tools that, in a time of climate crisis, mass extinction, and a biospheric emergency threatening the foundations of life, may prove vital for protecting and restoring the natural world. As with genocide, denial in the face of ecocide risks paralyzing action precisely when both legal recognition and the political courage to name the crimes are most urgently needed. In conclusion, attempts to criminalize ecocide must be understood, practiced, and defended as part of a broader effort to reframe human-nature relationships, including shifts in responsibility, governance, and relations with ecosystems and nonhuman life.

About TraCe

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMFTR-funded regional research center “Transformations of Political Violence” (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives. More information: www.trace-center.de/en // www.linkedin.com/company/trace-violence // bsky.app/profile/trace-center.de

V.i.S.d.P. & Layout: Tina Cramer, Press and Public Relations (PRIF/TraCe), Darmstädter Landstrasse 112, 60598 Frankfurt a. M., Germany, trace-transfer@prif.org Phone (069) 959104-0, Design: Anja Feix.

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Authors

Verena Lasso Mena (she/her) is a PhD Researcher and Research Associate in International Relations at the Institute of Political Science, Technical University of Darmstadt and at TraCe. Her research focuses on political violence in environmental and climate-related conflicts, with particular attention to contexts of natural resource extraction. She aims to deepen understanding of the drivers of violent transformation and to develop strategies for prevention and mitigation. Contact: lassomena@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

Markus Lederer (he/him) is Professor of Political Science with a focus on International Relations at Technical University Darmstadt and Principal Investigator at TraCe. His research focuses on institutional and geopolitical questions of global climate politics as well as on violence around ecological change. Current projects analyze the international architecture of the Paris Agreement and the UNFCCC, resulting in lock-in effects of multi-level institutional change in emerging economies (particularly India and Indonesia), the politics of tropical forest protection, the geopolitics of renewable energy, climate change, and biodiversity, as well as the role of more radical environmental social movements. Contact: lederer@pg.tu-darmstadt.de

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