# Pacific nations lead push to recognise ecocide as international crime



The recognition of ecocide as a crime under international law has gained momentum in recent years, reflecting an urgent call to hold those responsible for environmental destruction accountable. Historically, the devastation of the natural world has often been sidelined in discussions of military conflict, with acts of destruction—from the Romans salting the fields of Carthage to the burning of Kuwait's oilfields—generally viewed through a human-centric lens. While the legal frameworks have, until now, focused on human rights and wartime atrocities, the advocacy for acknowledging ecocide seeks to address the environmental toll that such actions inflict on ecosystems and communities alike.

The term "ecocide" was coined in the 1970s by biologist Arthur Galston, who described the large-scale environmental damage caused by Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. Although it garnered attention at various environmental summits over the decades, it faded from the discourse until the early 2000s when barrister Polly Higgins revitalised the concept. She defined ecocide as “the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory” that severely diminishes the peaceful enjoyment of its inhabitants. Campaigners are pushing for ecocide to be included as a fifth crime under the Rome Statute, which currently outlines genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression as major international offences.

Interestingly, there exists a provision in the Rome Statute concerning environmental destruction, albeit an obscure one. Article 8(2)(b)(iv) defines a war crime as “intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment.” However, this provision has yet to be invoked in court, potentially due to its high evidentiary threshold requiring intentionality and significant damage. The push to formally recognise ecocide aims to lower this threshold, allowing for accountability not just in wartime but also for corporate and state actions causing environmental damage under various circumstances.

Recent developments indicate a growing global recognition of the need for stronger environmental protections. In September 2024, Vanuatu, supported by Fiji and Samoa, proposed to amend the Rome Statute to include ecocide as an international crime. This initiative underscores a collective effort among Pacific Island nations that face severe threats from climate change and environmental degradation. Efforts are also ongoing at the European level, with Belgium becoming the first country to formally recognise ecocide as an international-level crime in February 2024. The European Union has similarly taken steps, reinforcing its Environmental Crime Directive to address severe environmental harms comparable to ecocide.

A significant boost to these efforts came in March 2024, when the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Court launched a public consultation focused on prosecuting environmental crimes within the existing legal frameworks. While this initiative does not introduce a new crime, it highlights the ICC’s focus on utilising present laws to increase accountability for environmental damage.

Despite this progress, the path to establishing ecocide as a recognised crime faces several challenges. Public understanding remains a critical obstacle, as many still grapple with the implications of environmental harm not just for ecosystems but for human health and prosperity. Advocates, like Jojo Mehta from Stop Ecocide International, argue that creating a legal framework for ecocide would not only establish accountability but also provide a vital tool during conflicts to address wartime environmental damage comprehensively.

The growing recognition of ecocide reflects an evolving understanding of justice that includes the environment. While significant strides have been made, the outcome of ongoing campaigns and international discussions will ultimately determine whether actions harming the earth will finally be regarded with the seriousness they warrant under international law. This movement towards legal recognition marks a crucial step in acknowledging that the fight against environmental destruction is intrinsically linked to the protection of human rights and the fostering of sustainable futures for all communities worldwide.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.stopecocide.earth/2024/mass-destruction-of-nature-reaches-international-criminal-court-icc-as-pacific-island-states-propose-recognition-of-ecocide-as-international-crime), [[5]](https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/937229/belgium-becomes-first-in-eu-to-recognise-ecocide-as-international-level-crime-tbtb)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/office-prosecutor-launches-public-consultation-new-policy-initiative-advance-accountability-0), [[6]](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06108/environmental-crimes-deal-on-new-offences-and-reinforced-sanctions), [[7]](https://www.stopecocide.earth/breaking-news-2023/agreement-reached-eu-to-criminalise-severe-environmental-harms-comparable-to-ecocide)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law), [[5]](https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/937229/belgium-becomes-first-in-eu-to-recognise-ecocide-as-international-level-crime-tbtb)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/may/28/what-is-ecocide-and-could-it-become-a-under-international-law> - This article explores the concept of ecocide, defined as extensive environmental damage comparable to genocide against people. It traces its origins to the 1970s, highlighting its revival by barrister Polly Higgins in the 2000s. The piece discusses the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC) and outlines four international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. The article examines the challenges in prosecuting environmental destruction under existing laws and the ongoing global campaign to recognise ecocide as a fifth crime under international law.
3. <https://www.stopecocide.earth/2024/mass-destruction-of-nature-reaches-international-criminal-court-icc-as-pacific-island-states-propose-recognition-of-ecocide-as-international-crime> - In September 2024, Vanuatu, along with Fiji and Samoa, formally proposed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to recognise ecocide as an international crime. This proposal aims to amend the Rome Statute, which currently includes genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression. The article highlights the significance of this move, noting that if successful, ecocide would become the fifth recognised international crime, reflecting a growing global commitment to environmental protection.
4. <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/office-prosecutor-launches-public-consultation-new-policy-initiative-advance-accountability-0> - In March 2024, the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) launched a public consultation on the use of existing crimes in the Rome Statute to prosecute environmental crimes. This initiative aims to advance accountability for severe environmental harm by exploring how current legal frameworks can be applied to such cases, potentially paving the way for future prosecutions related to environmental destruction.
5. <https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/937229/belgium-becomes-first-in-eu-to-recognise-ecocide-as-international-level-crime-tbtb> - In February 2024, the Belgian Federal Parliament voted in favour of a new penal code that includes ecocide as an international-level crime. This legislative change makes Belgium the first European country to recognise ecocide as a crime, marking a significant step towards holding individuals and corporations accountable for severe environmental damage.
6. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230929IPR06108/environmental-crimes-deal-on-new-offences-and-reinforced-sanctions> - In November 2023, the European Union added sanctions for crimes comparable to ecocide into the EU Environmental Crime Directive. This development reflects the EU's commitment to addressing severe environmental harm and aligns with ongoing efforts to criminalise ecocide at both national and international levels.
7. <https://www.stopecocide.earth/breaking-news-2023/agreement-reached-eu-to-criminalise-severe-environmental-harms-comparable-to-ecocide> - In November 2023, the European Union reached an agreement to criminalise severe environmental harms comparable to ecocide. This agreement is the result of over a decade of campaigning by various organisations and institutions, marking a significant step towards recognising ecocide as an international crime.