



## Statement to the 2nd UN Ocean Conference Lisbon, June/July 2022

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues:

We know that billions of people depend upon healthy oceans for food and that multiple millions in coastal communities depend upon them for their livelihoods. We know how much ocean ecosystems contribute to climate stability and how the delicate balance of acidity can affect that contribution.

We also know that severe collateral damage of industrial activities, some of which already breaches existing regulation, continues to affect marine ecosystems with impunity, and that new extractive projects are being planned which will further threaten these ecosystems.

We would suggest that this situation results from the deeply ingrained mindset we have developed over centuries in our globally prevalent systems, of separating ourselves from the living world upon which we depend for our food, our water, the air we breathe... we simply take these things for granted and treat them as an infinite bank of resources, continuing to inflict levels of destruction which directly affect the future of millions of species including our own.

We all know you can't apply for a licence to kill people for your new business. It would be both criminal, and criminally insane. But we don't recoil in the same way from destroying nature. And we should, for very practical reasons. Removal of carbon sinks and keystone species (e.g. via illegal fishing, poaching and trafficking) as well as severe marine pollution all exacerbate ecosystem collapse and climate change.

Existing international law governing the marine environment, as set out in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, focuses as much or more on rights of

economic exploitation as it does on enforceable protective measures, and so criminal law could make a crucial difference here.

Making “ecocide” - severe and either widespread or long-term harm to nature - a crime could provide the legal guardrail to steer us back from the precipice by setting a clear outer boundary to deter, prevent and sanction the worst threats to ecosystems and endangered keystone species.

Moreover, putting this kind of outer boundary framework in place also serves to stimulate strategic change in the right direction, something that has hitherto been proving very difficult.


We are witnessing a rising frustration at all levels with the failure to actually **implement** the multilateral environmental agreements and pledges which already exist. The correct criminal law parameters can act as a kind of creative constraint, provoking the urgent new thinking and innovation we already know is needed.

All of this helps to explain the swelling demand for international recognition of ecocide, now coming from voices as diverse as the [global youth movement](#) and the [global investment community](#), along with faith groups, lawyers, academics, NGOs and politicians.

An important milestone was passed in 2021, when an independent panel of legal experts from around the world, convened by our Foundation, reached consensus on a [legal definition of “ecocide”](#) as a proposed international crime. The core text is concise and balanced: *“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.”*

This definition has gained significant political traction around the world, and [individual states](#) are also now considering recognition of ecocide; indeed, discussion of it is on public record at parliamentary and/or government level in no fewer than [23 states](#) which are parties to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The most recent country to join this number is Kenya, co-host of the present Ocean Conference, as announced in the plenary this week, with a proposal to create an offence of ecocide.

This conversation is only set to grow. We strongly encourage both states and the private sector to take ecocide law extremely seriously, as a strategic preventive framework that has huge potential to help us make the changes we so desperately need to, in order to survive and thrive on our planetary home.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal line extending to the right.

**Jojo Mehta**

Co-Founder & Executive Director

Stop Ecocide International