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[The Promise Institute for Human Rights](#) at UCLA School of Law

**\*\*\*PRESS RELEASE\*\*\***

**INTERNATIONAL LEGAL EXPERTS EXPLAIN NEW ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION LAW WITH GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS**

In the midst of anthropogenic climate change, mass deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pervasive plastic pollution, thousands are calling for human-caused destruction of the environment to be made an international crime. The Promise Institute for Human Rights at UCLA School of Law last week gathered leading international legal experts to help explain the global implications of a new environmental protection law: ecocide.

Ecocide, which sounds like “genocide” for good reason, is a proposed new international crime which would be the first of its kind to ever center the natural world in peacetime. Those seeking to prosecute widespread or long-term environmental damage before have often run into challenges because the existing legal framework requires *people* be impacted, which means habitats, species, complex and interconnected ecosystems - indeed the planet as a whole - have been largely ignored in the realm of international crimes.

Ecocide law is a remarkable shift in legal thinking because it criminalizes 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. For these purposes, wanton means reckless disregard for the damage.

Ecocide law’s framework was influenced both by Indigenous philosophies, which emphasize the earth’s protection as a human responsibility, but also by international development frameworks. The need for reasonable human development in ecological systems is taken into account and not subject to prosecution under the ecocide definition. As Promise Institute Executive Director and co-author of ecocide law Kate Mackintosh pointed out, ecocide law’s framework is realistic and friendly to ethical businesses, and is not punitive to responsible development. It is, rather, a way to hold individual leaders and decision makers with significant power responsible for wanton

acts, and in doing so will help change the decision making and risk assessment which has so often left the public, the marginalized, and the poorest holding the bag for severe environmental harm. It also has the power to balance the scales for those businesses who find they are undermined by aggressive competitors who stoop to heavy pollution, etc, as a way to edge others out.

Charles Jalloh, member of the UN International Law Commission and a co-author of the ecocide law, related that Winston Churchill observed in 1941, “We are in the presence of a crime without a name” when describing the violence being committed against Jews in Europe. The violations he recognized would become known as genocide. Naming ecocide and taking action to protect against and ensure accountability for it as was done in the case of genocide, is a foundational mandate facing the global humanity.

As Richard Dicker, longtime head of Human Rights Watch’s International Justice Program noted, there is an important role for civil society to play in ecocide law’s next steps. From individual advocacy, to the power of organizations in work such as policy change and narrative shifting, it is civil society organizations whose efforts will help overcome entrenched barriers to ecocide law’s adoption.

“It makes sense, on a moral and intuitive level, that because the effects of severe environmental damage often cross international borders, accountability for them should do the same,” said Kate Mackintosh.

As the worldwide pressure mounts for ecocide law to be added to the list of international crimes (to sit alongside genocide, crimes of aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity), with backers from the Pope to Greta Thunberg and UN Secretary-General António Guterres, and with a number of grassroots organizations pushing for domestic adoption in municipal and state laws, ecocide law may be the beginning of the legal environmental reform we’ve needed for generations.

The Promise Institute for Human Rights is the innovative home for human rights at UCLA, combining focus areas like the environment, accountability and human rights to help generate global impact like that seen with ecocide law’s campaign. Speakers at last week’s event included Richard Dicker of Human Rights Watch, Charles Jalloh of Florida International University, Ambassador Christian Wenaweser, Promise Institute Executive Director Kate Mackintosh, and Dr. Beth Van Schaack moderating.

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