



World's Youth
for Climate
Justice

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER EARTH DAY 2026 STATEMENT

Introduction

The year 2026 finds the living world at a crossroads. Corporations and government actors are destroying ecosystems at scale, in war and in peacetime, through violence and through commerce. The law is beginning to catch up.

Youth for Ecocide Law (Y4EL) has therefore authored the following statement on the occasion of International Mother Earth's Day 2026, its central argument being: the legal recognition of ecocide is necessary, is achievable, and is not enough.

Gaza, Iran and Lebanon make plain the environmental impact of conflict, alongside growing **state-level denouncements of 'ecocide'**. Ecocide law is achievable because the International Court of Justice and the forthcoming Transition Away Conference have together opened legal and political pathways that did not exist a decade ago. And it is not enough because ecocide does not happen by accident. It is the predictable output of an economic system that treats the living world as raw material, and no crime can be adequately prosecuted while the conditions that produce it remain intact.

The law must reflect not only what we prohibit, but where we are going.

Background

No international body or legislation holds the most powerful individuals in society criminally accountable for the mass destruction of the environment. Nevertheless, the movement to change this has gained significant momentum. In 2021, an Expert Panel convened by Stop Ecocide International proposed the following definition:

'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.'

On 9 September 2024, the Pacific Island nations of Vanuatu, Samoa and Fiji formally submitted a proposal to recognise ecocide as an international crime under the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute, expanding it to include severe, irreversible environmental damage alongside the existing crimes of genocide and war crimes. A coalition of small island states, among the most vulnerable to the consequences of ecological destruction, led this effort. This is itself a profound statement about who bears the costs of a legal gap the world's most powerful nations have declined to close.

Ecocide, genocide, and war

On 27 May 2025, the Permanent Mission of the State of Palestine to the Kingdom of the Netherlands formally described the environmental destruction in Gaza as ecocide, the first time a state-level actor had explicitly used the term in relation to Gaza. In the context of the Israeli-US war against Iran, Shina Ansari, Iran's Vice President and head of Iran's Department of Environment, described strikes on oil storage facilities in Tehran as a "clear manifestation of ecocide or environmental crime."

These are not isolated uses of language. They are a recognition that war and ecocide are not separate categories.

In Gaza, this connection is documented in devastating detail. The 2025 UNEP report finds that 78% of structures in the Gaza Strip are estimated to be destroyed or damaged, and that clearing the estimated 61 million tons of debris, some of it contaminated with asbestos, industrial chemicals, and heavy metals, will itself pose long-term risks to soil, groundwater, and air. The same report finds that 97.1% of tree crops, 82.4% of annual crops, 95.1% of shrubland, and 89% of grass and fallow land has been damaged.

Palestinian economist Mazin Qumsiyeh characterises this as something more than collateral destruction. He argues that the environmental degradation is intentional, "aimed at breaking the ecosumud, the ecological steadfastness, of the Palestinian people." The destruction of crops, the manipulation of water resources, the spraying of agricultural toxins onto Gazan land are, in his framing, acts of "slow, structural violence" designed to malnourish and displace. Building on Qumsiyeh's analysis, George Monbiot (2025) argues that the aim appears to be both a landless people and a peopleless land, and that achieving this requires not only mass killing and forced displacement, but "rendering the land uninhabitable." As Monbiot puts it: alongside the crime of genocide, another great horror unfolds: ecocide.

The legal question this raises is whether these acts would meet the threshold for the proposed international crime. The existing provision in the Rome Statute, Article 8(2)(b) (iv), makes it a war crime to launch an attack knowing it will cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment that is "clearly excessive" in relation to the anticipated military advantage. No charges have ever been brought under this provision. Its threshold is prohibitively high, requiring not only that damage be widespread, long-term, and severe, but also intentional and clearly excessive.

The proposed ecocide definition is meaningfully different. It requires that acts be committed with knowledge of a substantial likelihood of severe and either widespread or long-term damage. This lower threshold is not a weakening of the law. It is an honest recognition of what the law must actually be capable of addressing.



A just transition away

Y4EL welcomes the forthcoming Transition Away Conference, hosted by Colombia and the Netherlands, which aims to identify pathways for implementing a just, orderly, and equitable transition away from fossil fuels. The conference arrives at a significant moment.

The 2025 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change is the most significant development in international climate law in years. Its unanimous adoption matters, but what matters more is its substance. As Caroline Foster (2025) has identified, the "golden thread" running through the Opinion is that States are obligated under international law to regulate the conduct of private actors. Most significantly, the ICJ held that the failure of a state to protect the climate system from greenhouse gas emissions, including through fossil fuel production, consumption, the granting of exploration licences, or the provision of subsidies, may constitute an internationally wrongful act attributable to that State (para 427).

This is a potentially transformative finding. For decades, States have treated fossil fuel licensing decisions as a matter of domestic economic policy, insulated from international legal scrutiny. Moreover, a study comparing the treatment of fossil fuel subsidies (which in 2017, according to a report by IRENA amounted to at least USD 447 billion) and renewable energy subsidies (which in 2017 amounted to USD 128 billion for electricity generation), found that trade law is “more permissible and lenient for subsidies for fossil fuels than for subsidies to renewable energy” (J.E. Viñuales 2022). The ICJ Advisory Opinion therefore challenges this lenient treatment of fossil fuel licensing and subsidy decisions which has endured for decades.

Y4EL also endorses the Joint Declaration of Judges Cleveland and Bhandari, who noted that given the outsized influence of fossil fuels in the fight against anthropogenic emissions, the Court could have been more forceful on these specific issues. The point is well made, and it is a reminder that Advisory Opinions are not endpoints. They are openings.

This Opinion traces back to a classroom in Vanuatu in 2019 and a campaign by the youth organization Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change. This turned into a global movement, founding World’s Youth for Climate Justice. Thus, youth fundamentally shaped the process and final instrument. That history is part of the argument for taking the present statement seriously.



Y4EL also welcomes the Inter-American Court of Human Rights Advisory Opinion on the Human Rights Obligations of States in the Context of the Climate Emergency (2025), which found that anthropogenic conduct capable of irreversibly affecting the interdependence and vital balance of the common ecosystem may constitute a fundamental, non-derogable principle of international law. Alongside the ICJ Opinion, it represents the emergence of a legal architecture that treats ecological integrity not as a preference, but as an obligation.

But naming an obligation is not the same as meeting it. Legal architecture, on its own, is not enough.

Rights of Nature, Ecocide, and the need to think beyond the market

The legal recognition of ecocide cannot be understood in isolation from the economic logic that makes it necessary. The mass destruction of the environment is not an accident. It is the predictable output of a system that treats the living world as raw material: as inputs into a growth machine that recognises no ceiling and acknowledges no limits.

This is what critical scholars and frontline communities alike call extractivism: the reduction of ecosystems, territories and living systems to their market value. And extractivism is not peripheral to the crises documented in this statement. It is their architecture. The devastation of Gaza's agricultural land, the pollution of Iran's aquifers, the fossil fuel subsidies that States are now being told by the ICJ they may no longer shelter behind: these are not isolated failures of individual actors. They are the logic of a system that needs to be transformed.

Y4EL therefore calls for a fundamental rethinking of the economic frameworks within which environmental governance operates. The degrowth movement and the Wellbeing Economy offer a concrete alternative: economies organised around human and ecological flourishing rather than GDP growth. These are not utopian proposals. They are increasingly mainstream policy positions, and they deserve the same serious engagement from the international legal community as the transition away from fossil fuels.

It is in this context that Y4EL endorses the Rights of Nature movement. The recognition that rivers, forests, and ecosystems possess inherent legal standing, the right not to be destroyed for profit, is the legal expression of a deeper claim: that the natural world is not property. Countries including Ecuador, Bolivia, and New Zealand have already translated this principle into law. Alongside the proposed crime of ecocide, Rights of Nature frameworks constitute an emerging legal architecture capable of placing the integrity of the living world beyond the reach of extractive capital. They are complementary, and of equal urgency.



The practical expression of this legal architecture is rewilding: the restoration of ecosystems to self-sustaining states, allowing natural processes to reassert themselves where extractivism and industrial agriculture have suppressed them. Where Rights of Nature names what the living world is owed, rewilding enacts it. Rewilding is more than a conservation tool. It is a form of legal and political recognition that territories have the right to recover. Restoration is an obligation, not a charitable gesture. Ecocide law, Rights of Nature, and rewilding speak the same language. One names the crime; one asserts the right; the other begins the repair.

But the question of who leads that repair, and whose knowledge, relationship with the land, and cosmovision is recognised in doing so, is one that demands its own honest reckoning.

Y4EL cautions against an approach that collapses this agenda onto Indigenous peoples and frontline defenders alone, treating them as the designated custodians of ecological wisdom, somehow inherently different from the rest of humanity. This is tokenism. It does a disservice to living Indigenous communities, whose struggles against extractivism are political and territorial, not folkloric; and it lets everyone else off the hook, as if a different relationship with the living world were only available to a particular kind of human being. Relational cosmovisions of this kind were not unique to any one people. They have existed across every continent, and across many of them, they were suppressed: by imperial expansion, by the spread of monotheisms that placed man as sovereign over creation rather than member of it, and ultimately by the colonial capitalism that carried the logic of extraction across the globe. What we are dealing with is not a "Western" or "Global" worldview versus an "Indigenous" one. We are dealing with a historically specific rupture, one produced by a particular philosophical and economic inheritance, that many different peoples forgot.

The recognition of ecocide as an international crime sits, therefore, within a much larger project: the recovery of a relationship with the living world that most of humanity has always known. Not man above nature. Not nature as a resource. But membership of a community of life, which carries with it obligations: legal, political, and moral.

That is the world we are here to build. The law must catch up. And when it does, it must reflect not only what we prohibit, but where we are going forward.

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