

## Ecocide and Genocide

We have seen our human capability to respond to almost impossible challenges. Sometimes the courageous response begins with one person.

I will tell you about Raphael Lemkin. He was a Polish Jew, born in 1900. As a young boy he was horrified by learning about ethno-religious persecution, particularly the slaughter of more than a million Armenians during World War I.

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939, he was able to flee to the United States. He tried unsuccessfully to find safety for his extended family – but 49 members of that family perished during the Holocaust.

Lemkin was deeply troubled that there was no word to describe the killing of an entire group of people. There were words, of course, to describe the killing of an individual – homicide, suicide, fratricide. But there was no word for the intentional extermination of an entire people.

He was a brilliant linguist – and he coined a new word. He took the Greek root *genos*, meaning tribe or group or people, and the Latin verb *cidere*, meaning to kill, and he put them together – genocide, meaning *to kill a people*.

Once he had the word, he wanted to prevent and punish this crime. He wrote the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, ratified 76 years ago by the UN.

The word was first used by prosecutor Ben Ferencz at the Nuremberg Trial of 22 people accused of murdering a million Jews. It was the biggest murder trial in world history – ever. Nearly every defendant was found guilty.

Lemkin devoted his life to trying to punish and prevent this crime of genocide.

In 1970, Professor Arthur Galston, a biologist at Yale University, used a new word – *ecocide*.  
Ecocide means *to destroy the environment*.

The root *eco* comes from the Greek *oikos*, meaning home.

And *cide*, from *cidere*, means to kill.

Galston used this word, *ecocide*, for the devastation that the US caused by spraying 20 million gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the Vietnam War.

Agent Orange defoliated the jungle and caused cancers, neurological disease, and birth defects in at least 3 million people.

*Ecocide* means killing one's home – and that's what we're doing. We see it every day. Droughts, floods, fires, hurricanes, melting icecaps and rising seas, dead coral reefs and extinct animals and botanical species – we are killing our home, the world described so beautifully in the first chapter of Genesis.

Galston advocated for an international agreement to ban *ecocide*. He defined ecocide as “devastation and destruction which aim at damaging or destroying the ecology of geographic areas *to the detriment of all life, whether human, animal, or plant.*”

Stop Ecocide International works with leaders around the world to make *ecocide* an international crime. This is now becoming a reality.

The International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands is the most important court in the world. It prosecutes accused perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. *Ecocide* would be added to these four crimes to become the fifth international human rights crime.

On September 9, 2024, leaders of three island nations that are at risk of disappearing under rising seas submitted a proposal to the ICC to make *ecocide* the fifth crime. It's a simple process: the 125 state parties of the Court would vote on the resolution. The United States is not a party to this Court. The word 'ecocide' is seldom heard in the United States.

Countries around the world, including the European Parliament, have made *ecocide* a crime in their domestic statutes, **but there must be a global commitment to solve this global crisis.**

On August 28, 2023, the UN affirmed that children can sue nations over climate destruction. This followed a lawsuit brought by young people in Montana against the state. We are seeing a patchwork of cases in the US. We need an international framework.

Criminalizing ecocide internationally can

- deter malfeasance,
- punish perpetrators,
- highlight individuals and entities taking positive action, and
- encourage activities to mitigate and prevent lower-level damage.

Ecocide can also be prosecuted as an element of the other four atrocity crimes, and more countries are likely to add it to their own national laws. Support for an international ecocide law is endorsed by public figures including Jane Goodall and Pope Francis.

The human consequence of *ecocide* is violence.

Since 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense has been warning that the climate crisis is a 'threat multiplier' of violence. In 2021, the DoD warned, "There is significant interaction between conflict and climate change." The United Nations has been warning us since 2004.

The single greatest stressor is the lack of water. Expanding deserts will produce conflict and will displace 700 million people by 2050. Scarce water in Sudan's Darfur region led to the first genocide of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Years of droughts in Rwanda, and drought-induced hunger, fueled Rwanda's genocide in 1994.

Women and girls, children, the sick, and the elderly are disproportionately affected, often left behind in a climate catastrophe.

Climate refugees have no legal protection. They are not included in any of the three United Nations refugee conventions – which the US has not even ratified.

We must hold perpetrators responsible for killing our home – just like we hold perpetrators responsible for genocide, for killing a people.

**The time is now:** to share this message, to encourage passage of the word 'ecocide' at municipal, state, and organizational levels, and to be inspired by advocates like Raphael Lemkin and Arthur Galston.