

Protecting Earth Rights and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Towards an International Crime of Ecocide

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ABSTRACT

Anthropogenic climate change is one of the grimmest consequences of remorseless exploitation of natural resources to sustain global production and consumption patterns that undermine planetary boundaries. Acknowledging that indigenous peoples are among the vulnerable and dispossessed populations that will be most affected by adverse impacts of climate change, this article seeks to draw attention to the international legal framework which aims to criminalize ecocide, stressing that its promulgation will have important positive consequences for indigenous peoples suffering from the negative effects of climate change and other ecocides. Given that the goals of indigenous climate movements and indigenous environmental movements coincide with what the proposed international law of ecocide strives to achieve, I conclude by suggesting that an alliance between the two movements would be an important step towards the realization of a law of ecocide with an international scope.

KEYWORDS: climate change, ecocide, cultural ecocide, rights of indigenous peoples, international law of ecocide, Ecocide Act, ecological justice

Introduction

Global production and consumption patterns require intensive exploitation of nature along with industrialization of human relationships to nature. As there is an inherent contradiction between capitalism and nature, in capitalist societies “the environment exists not as a place with inherent boundaries within which human beings must live together with earth’s other species, but as a realm to be exploited in a process of growing economic expansion” (Magdoff & Foster, 2010, p. 8). Consequently, constant drive to enhance production to increase the accumulation of capital is resulting in human-caused ecocides and grave human rights violations around the world.

Anthropogenic climate change is one of the grimmest consequences of remorseless exploitation of natural resources to sustain global production and consumption patterns that undermine planetary boundaries. Being

a problem that is global in nature, the future of humanity is inextricably linked to climate change (White, 2011a, p. 13). Impacts of anthropogenic climate change have already started to cause environmental and social problems that threaten ecological sustainability and jeopardize human security and livelihoods. Climate-induced migration, social conflicts, struggles over food and natural resources, increasing number of transnational environmental crimes are some of the socio-economic consequences of global climate change that will have dramatic impacts on humanity. However, as White (2011b) underlines, “the effects of climate change, while felt by everyone, are not the same for everyone” (p. 39). In other words, certain populations are more sensitive to the effects of climate change and they will suffer more. Despite being amongst those who have engaged the least in environmentally destructive activities that contribute to the warming of

the Earth (Nuttall, 2009), indigenous peoples are among the most vulnerable to climate change, and are “already being impacted as so-called frontline communities” (Powless, 2012, p. 411).

Indigenous populations face unique exposures to climate change due to their close relationship with land and natural resources (Ford, 2012, p. 1260). In addition to this, changing climate is magnifying already existing problems that indigenous communities experience such as poverty, land loss, and environmental degradation (Nuttall, 2009). Shortages of food supplies, rising temperatures, and changes in the water content of streams are some of the challenges that climate change poses to the wellbeing of indigenous populations all around the world. Increasing physical, mental, and emotional health problems due to exposure to environmental hazards and pollution are also common among local communities. Cultural disturbances associated with the loss of traditions are among the detrimental consequences of environmental and climate variability (Durkalec, Furgal, Skinner & Sheldon, 2015). Yet another environmental injustice that is inflicted upon indigenous populations is related with land grabbing by state or private agencies. Land grabbing is driven by both the direct impacts of global warming and the policy responses to climate change (White & Heckenberg, 2011, p. 91). Carbon emission trading policies, natural resource extraction, and the drive to secure new lands for food production results in the loss of indigenous control over homelands.

Depending on their biocultural niche, indigenous peoples face varied environmental and social problems associated with the impacts of climate change. For instance, in North America, the melting of ice poses a serious threat to the biodiversity and the livelihood of local communities. In addition to loss of wild-

life, animal behavior and migration patterns negatively affect the livelihood of indigenous hunters (Alexander et al., 2011). In Australia, indigenous peoples suffer from rising temperatures, dust storms, and heat stress, whereas communities in the Kalahari face drastic socio-economic and environmental impacts of increasing drought on food production (Ford, 2012). It is clear that climate change is reshaping physical, biological, and social systems of indigenous communities the world over (Alexander et al., 2011, p. 477).

An International Crime of Ecocide

Having given a brief overview of some of the major impacts of climate change on indigenous peoples, it should be noted that the aim of this article is not to present regional impacts of changing climate. There are exhaustive scientific studies (see, for example, Green et al., 2010; Sakakibara, 2008; Mustonen, 2005) that document the adverse impacts of climate change on indigenous populations. Instead, acknowledging that indigenous peoples are among the vulnerable and dispossessed populations that will be most affected by adverse impacts of climate change, this article seeks to draw attention to the international legal framework which aims to criminalize ecocide, stressing that its promulgation will have important positive consequences for indigenous peoples suffering from the negative effects of climate change and other ecocides.

Ecocide refers to “the extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of ecosystem(s) of a given territory, whether by human agency or by other causes, to such an extent that peaceful enjoyment by the inhabitants of that territory has been severely diminished” (Higgins, Short & South, 2012, p. 4). Global initiatives to make ecocide an international crime along with crimes against peace promotes the wellbeing of people and the planet. Although the

efforts to criminalize ecocide date back to the 1970s, the issue gained widespread recognition and support in recent years. Inclusion of ecocide into the Rome Statute¹ as one of the crimes against peace was extensively discussed between 1985 and 1996. However, the final version of the Statute only included ecocide as a crime in times of war. In April 2010, environmental activist and barrister Polly Higgins submitted a proposal to the International Law Commission of the United Nations for the amendment of the Rome Statute, advocating the recognition of mass environmental destruction and damage as an international crime and a crime of strict liability committed by legal or natural persons. Following the submission of the proposal, Higgins and several other lawyers created a draft Ecocide Act that outlines the guiding principles of an international law of ecocide. The draft Act urges the condemnation of ecocide and views it as a crime against humanity, nature, and future generations.

As White (2009) points out, “those who determine and shape law are very often those whose activities need to be criminalized for the sake of planetary well-being” (p. 47). Operating in today’s neoliberal societies, state and corporate actors are responsible for most of the ecological and social harms and injustices (Kramer & Michalowski, 2012). These harms may result from negligence or unlawful practices of corporations as well as partnerships between corporations and state agents (Ruggiero & South, 2010, p. 247). If the international law of ecocide is promulgated, heads of states, top-decision makers, heads of corporations and agencies will have the burden of responsibility to prevent the risk of and actual extensive dam-

age to ecosystems. If they fail to do so, those who are responsible will be held accountable and sentenced to a term of imprisonment upon their conviction. This means that transnational corporations who commit ecocide will not be able to escape the grave environmental and social consequences of their activities by simply paying a fine. Consequently, enactment of a law of ecocide would guarantee the protection of livelihoods and traditions of indigenous communities by prohibiting environmentally destructive activities that damage indigenous peoples’ local environment. Furthermore, the proposed law of ecocide imposes international and transboundary duty of care on governments to provide help and assistance to those facing naturally occurring ecocides and catastrophic events. Thus, the legal duty of care put into place by this law will ensure that indigenous territories facing ecocide will receive proper assistance.

The draft Ecocide Act seeks to eradicate catastrophic impacts that environmental destruction has on indigenous peoples’ social, cultural, physical, and economic wellbeing. In addition to this, the Act urges the recognition of the crime of cultural ecocide “where the right to cultural life by indigenous communities has been severely diminished by the acts of a person, company, organization, partnership, or any other legal entity that causes or fails to prevent extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of cultural life of the inhabitants of a territory” (Ecocide Act, n.d., section 7). If adopted, states and corporations that commit acts that severely diminish indigenous peoples’ right to cultural life will be guilty of the crime of cultural ecocide. It should be remembered that in many cases, ecocide leads to cultural damage and destruction (Higgins, Short & South, 2013). Consequently, ecocide can have a genocidal impact for indigenous peoples who still retain a cultural attachment to land

¹ The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court established the International Criminal Court which has jurisdiction over suspected perpetrators of four international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes and crime of aggression.

(Crook & Short, 2014). To explore the above-mentioned argument, I will briefly outline two major environmentally destructive projects which could be considered examples of environmental and cultural ecocide.

Exploitation of tar sands for oil production in the Northern Alberta region of Canada has led to severe ecological destruction. Indigenous peoples are among the first to suffer from excessively damaging impacts of this ecocide. Firstly, indigenous communities have been driven from their lands due to a large-scale industrialization of territories that belong to indigenous peoples. Secondly, pollution resulting from destructive energy-intensive processes used for oil production have severely affected social, physical, and wellbeing of communities. High levels of rare cancers, increasing substance abuse problems, and suicide rates are a few of the long-term consequences of this project (“Tar Sands”, n.d.). Lastly, cultural disturbances, the loss of tradition and livelihoods due to not being able to hunt and fish as a result of increasing pollution are among the problems that indigenous populations have been facing since the beginning of this ecocide.

Another project that has ecocidal consequences is the Belo Monte Dam that is currently under construction on the Xingu River in Brazil. Home to 25,000 indigenous peoples and countless animal and plant species, Xingu River is a reflection of Brazil’s cultural and biological diversity (“Brazil’s Belo Monte Dam”, n.d.). However, the dam project is threatening biological diversity of Xingu basin as well as the integrity of indigenous territories, culture, and traditional life styles. The project has already caused substantial environmental and social damage in the area. Recently, the Brazilian government authorized the operating license of the dam, allowing the dam’s reservoirs to be filled. In addition to pristine ecosystems that the Xingu River hosts,

livelihoods of thousands of indigenous peoples who depend on the river and forest for their survival will be destroyed with the completion of the project. As the river is closed by the dam, the agricultural production, fish stocks, and water quality will be adversely impacted whereas increasing deforestation will lead loss of wildlife and biodiversity (International Rivers, 2012). Furthermore, indigenous peoples who depend on their land for spiritual wellbeing will be relocated away from their ancestral homeland (“Belo Monte Dam”, n.d.). Indigenous communities fear the possibility of the installment of more dams to ensure the efficiency of the Belo Monte dam during dry seasons (Karambelas, 2015).

It is safe to conclude that both projects have caused severe damage to an entire landscape, destroying habitats and ecosystems, putting the inhabitants of those territories at risk of injury and death and resulting in serious environmental, social, and ecological injustices. In addition to loss of livelihoods and emerging health problems, these projects have undermined and diminished the right to cultural life by indigenous communities living in the area. In the long term, industrialization of indigenous territories coupled with environmental damage and the loss of culture and identity may have genocidal impact on indigenous populations living in the territories where these projects are carried out. Further contributing to climate change, the negative environmental impacts of such projects transcend the borders of the project site and threaten the whole biosphere—a challenge for all of humanity. Currently, there is no legally binding international law for the prosecution of such practices that lead to environmental and cultural ecocide. Adoption of an international law of ecocide would provide the support of law to those who are impacted from adverse effects of such projects and help fight against environmental and ecological

injustices.

To show what a law of ecocide could achieve in practice, a mock ecocide trial was carried out in the Supreme Court of England and Wales in 2011, with evidence based on publicly available documents, a real jury, and a prominent legal team. The draft Ecocide Act was used at the mock trial where fictional bosses were put on trial for their corporations' destructive practices that led to the exploitation of tar sands in Northern Alberta in Canada for oil production and the major oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As outlined in the Ecocide Act, "the right to life is a universal right and where a person, company, organization, partnership, or any other legal entity causes or fails to prevent extensive damage to, destruction of or loss of human and or non-human life of the inhabitants of a territory is guilty of the crime of ecocide" (Ecocide Act, n.d., section 6). The jury unanimously found the CEOs of the oil companies operating in tar sands guilty of the crime of ecocide, whereas they returned a not guilty verdict for the CEO of the company that caused the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Such a verdict would have transformative consequences for human and non-human inhabitants of Northern Alberta if an international law of ecocide were already put into place.

It is possible to add examples of nuclear and oil spills, as well as fossil fuel and natural resource extraction projects, to the list of potential ecocides that have affected indigenous populations. In most of these cases, the origin of social and environmental injustice against indigenous communities relates to the natural resources found beneath their territories (Lynch & Stretesky, 2011, p. 115). Capitalist projects targeting indigenous lands exploit natural resources of these lands and contribute directly to further climate change, environmental destruction, and social injustice. The monetary values of capitalism are in direct

contradiction with indigenous peoples' perception of land and its natural resources. Capitalist logic dictates exploitation of nature to the point of depletion, whereas indigenous communities have a cultural and spiritual connection with the land. Ecocide can be a method of cultural genocide when indigenous peoples who have a physical and cultural connection to their land are dispossessed from their lands due to expansionist land grabbing driven by global production and consumption patterns (Crook & Short, 2014, p. 313). Thus, promulgation of the proposed law of ecocide would have important implications for the rights and protection of cultural integrity of indigenous peoples in light of the fact that neither the 1948 Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (otherwise known as the Genocide Convention) nor the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) prohibits cultural genocide. It should be noted that during the discussions which led to the creation of the Genocide Convention, Raphael Lemkin, the Polish jurist who coined the term genocide, urged the prohibition of the destruction of the cultural pattern of a nation or ethnic group (Higgins, Short & South, 2013). However, despite being included in draft versions, cultural genocide ultimately was removed from the final version. Similarly, while the draft version of the UNDRIP included ethnocide and cultural ecocide, the final version excluded these concepts.

Moving Forward

For the last two decades, indigenous peoples have organized as non-state actors to convince governments and intergovernmental organizations to treat climate change as a human-rights issue (Powless, 2012). They take part in official negotiations hosted by the United Nations, as well as alternative forums

organized by civil society groups. Some of these gatherings have even led to the creation of important texts such as the Cochabamba Agreement². The indigenous climate movement demands the recognition of indigenous rights by pointing out the erosion of the sovereignty of indigenous populations as a result of the development of a capitalist system heavily dependent upon resource extraction and fossil fuels (Powless, 2012, p. 419). However, despite the adoption of the UNDRIP, “indigenous peoples continue to be denied their rights and are subjected to climate injustice” (Green & Raygorodetsky, 2010, p. 239). For instance, recent demonstrations by indigenous peoples at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (otherwise known as the COP21) underlined the indispensability of including indigenous rights in the text of the Paris Accord. In the final text, mentions of indigenous peoples and their rights remained in the legally non-binding preamble.

The goals of indigenous climate movements and indigenous environmental movements coincide with what the proposed international law of ecocide strives to achieve. If ecocide becomes a fifth crime against peace, indigenous peoples’ right to cultural life and the well-being of the ecosystems they live in would be protected by legally binding, international legislation. Moreover, parallel to indigenous peoples’ demands for the recognition of Earth rights, ecocide law acknowledges and aims to protect non-human right to life, rights of nature, and the rights of future generations. There is no doubt that the promulgation of such a law will have serious implications for how states and transnational corporations operate. Due to its legally binding nature and

international scope, a law of ecocide could become a powerful disincentive for companies and states that engage in ecologically destructive projects. If this law were adopted, “global warming and climate change would become, not just an environmental problem, but also an international crime” (Kramer & Michalowski, 2012, p. 72). Overall, as Higgins (2012) points out, as it was the case for genocide, what was once the norm becomes an exception upon its criminalization. In other words, if ecocide were made a crime against peace, mass environmental damage would become the exception instead of merely the ‘cost of doing business’.

In light of the discussions above, I argue that collective action is the most appropriate and effective response for eradicating ecological destruction and its negative impacts on people and the planet. With considerable support from governments, scholars, and the public, making ecocide an international crime was actually on the international agenda until the adoption of a final version of the Draft Code of Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind, which later became the Rome Statute. While finalizing the Draft Code, the International Law Commission discussed the possible inclusion of offences, which cause serious damage to the environment in times of peace and drafted Article 26. However, wording of the draft Article 26 met with objection from several governments and was consequently removed from the final version (Gauger, Pouye Rabatel-Fernel, Kulbicki, Short and Higgins, 2013). Regardless of this outcome, ten countries have chosen to incorporate the crime of ecocide into their national penal codes.³ Consequently, one can conclude that “ecocide was recognized as a crime which the international community had deemed to be so

² Cochabamba People’s Agreement was a resolution adopted in World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth which took place in Bolivia between 19 and 22 April 2010.

³ These countries are Vietnam, Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Armenia and Georgia.

serious that it was included in the Draft Code of Crimes Against the Peace and Security of Mankind” as well as national penal codes of several countries (Gauger et al., 2013, p. 12).

Despite political reluctance, promulgation of an international law of ecocide is possible with strong global awareness and support, given the current status of the climate crisis. What is needed first is one State Party to propose an amendment to the Rome Statute to introduce the crime of ecocide as the fifth international crime against peace. Following this achievement, strong transnational cooperation and effective campaigning will be indispensable to convince two-thirds of the States’ Parties to adopt the proposed amendment which would prohibit crimes against nature and its inhabitants. Once an international law of ecocide is put into place, states could pass laws to incorporate the crime of ecocide into their national legislation and the International Criminal Court (ICC) could become the court of last resort in cases where a national court is unable or unwilling to prosecute. As a penalty, the ICC could impose a prison sentence in addition to a fine or a forfeiture of proceeds, property, and assets (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998, art.77). As a complementary sentencing mechanism, the Ecocide Act advocates restorative justice processes in addition to or substitution of imprisonment. According to Section 19, “where a defendant pleads or is found guilty, the court must remand the case in order that the victim(s) shall be offered the opportunity to participate in a process of restorative justice involving contact between the offender and any representatives of those affected by the offence” (Ecocide Act, n.d.). There is also a growing discussion about the establishment of a more suitable tribunal to prosecute those who commit the crime of ecocide. An International Criminal Court of the Environment and

Health or an International Court for the Environment are among the proposed institutions.

To conclude, I suggest that an alliance between indigenous environmental and climate movements would be an important step towards the realization of a law of ecocide with an international scope. Increasing research and scientific publication, exchanging knowledge, launching global campaigns, organizing conferences and events at executive levels are among the ways that the two movements can collaborate with transnational initiatives that want to make ecocide an international crime. Such cooperation will empower both movements and their lobbying power for their common endeavor to pursue ecological and social justice.

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Cite this Article as:

Tekayak, D. (2016) Protecting Earth Rights and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: Towards and International Crime of Ecocide. *Fourth World Journal*, 14(2) 5-13.