Economic Sciences
https://economic-sciences.com
ES (2026) 22, 5(S), 342-349 | ISSN:1505-4683

Ecocide in the Modern World: Environmental, Health, Economic and Human Rights Dimensions of War-Related Environmental Destruction

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Abstract
The concept of "ecocide" has emerged as a proposed fifth core international crime to capture severe, widespread, or long-term damage to the environment, including the harms associated with contemporary armed conflicts. Ecocide is increasingly invoked in relation to recent wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf, where attacks on industrial facilities, energy infrastructure, and ecosystems have produced large-scale pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, and long-lasting contamination. This paper traces the evolution of the ecocide concept in international legal and political debates, examines the environmental impacts of recent wars, and analyzes their health, economic, and human rights consequences. Drawing on recent scientific reviews and policy analyses, it argues that war-related environmental destruction exacerbates direct and indirect health burdens, diverts resources away from social and environmental investments, and undermines emerging human rights to a healthy environment. The paper concludes that formal recognition of ecocide, coupled with stronger protection of the environment in armed conflict, could help close accountability gaps and integrate environmental integrity into contemporary understandings of peace, security, and justice.[1]

Keywords: *Ecocide; armed conflict; environment; public health; human rights; economy*

1. Introduction

The environmental impacts of war have long been visible in scorched landscapes, contaminated rivers, and ruined cities, but only in recent decades have they begun to be framed as potential international crimes under the rubric of "ecocide". The term, first popularized during debates over the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, has been revived by legal scholars and advocates who argue that mass environmental destruction—whether in war or peace—should be prohibited alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and aggression.[2]

Contemporary conflicts have intensified these concerns, as military establishments are estimated to account for roughly 5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions even before combat begins, while active wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Tigray, Myanmar, and the Persian Gulf have generated enormous pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and toxic legacies. At the same time, public-health researchers and human-rights bodies increasingly document how these environmental harms translate into disease, displacement, economic loss, and violations of basic rights. War is now recognized as a major driver of indirect mortality, health-system collapse, and environmental injustice.[3]

This paper examines the concept of ecocide and its relevance to the modern world, focusing on the environmental consequences of recent wars and their implications for health, economies, and human rights. It first traces the evolution of ecocide in legal and policy debates, then surveys the environmental impacts of recent conflicts, and finally analyzes how these impacts intersect with public health, economic

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ES (2026) 22, 5(S), 342-349 | ISSN:1505-4683

structures, and human-rights frameworks. The aim is not only descriptive but normative: to assess whether ecocide as a legal concept offers a useful way to understand and potentially deter contemporary patterns of environmental harm.[4]

2. The Concept and Legal Evolution of Ecocide

2.1 Origins and definitions

The idea of "ecocide"—literally, the killing of ecosystems—emerged in the early 1970s when biologist Arthur Galston used the term to describe the massive defoliation caused by U.S. herbicide campaigns in Vietnam. In subsequent decades, legal scholars and activists proposed that ecocide should be recognized as an international crime, but the concept faded from major diplomatic agendas until the 2000s, when lawyer Polly Higgins and others reinvigorated efforts to give it juridical form.[5]

A key milestone came in 2021, when the Independent Expert Panel for the Legal Definition of Ecocide, convened by the Stop Ecocide Foundation, proposed a definition for inclusion in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Stop Ecocide Foundation, 2021). The panel defined ecocide as "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". The accompanying elements clarify that "wanton" denotes reckless disregard for clearly excessive environmental damage relative to anticipated benefits; "severe" refers to very serious adverse changes or harm to any element of the environment; "widespread" indicates impacts beyond a limited area or affecting entire ecosystems or large human populations; and "long-term" refers to irreversible or non-recoverable damage within a reasonable period.

Although not yet binding, this proposed definition has become a focal point for advocacy campaigns, parliamentary debates, and academic analyses, precisely because it seeks to frame environmental harm as an end in itself, not merely as a side-effect of harm to humans or property (The Guardian, 2025; Undark Magazine, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2021).[6]

2.2 Current status in international and national law

Ecocide is not currently recognized as a standalone crime in the Rome Statute (DGAP, n.d.; World Economic Forum, 2021). Under existing international criminal law, environmental damage can be prosecuted primarily as a war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(iv), which covers attacks in international armed conflict that cause "widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment" clearly excessive relative to anticipated military advantage, and as part of crimes against humanity when environmental harm forms part of a widespread or systematic attack on civilians (Just Security, 2025). Both avenues, however, have been used sparingly, and the thresholds—especially "widespread, long-term, and severe"—are interpreted restrictively.[7]

Beyond the ICC, a small but growing number of states have introduced ecocide-type offenses in national law. Countries including Vietnam, Ukraine, and Ecuador criminalize large-scale environmental destruction, sometimes explicitly using the term "ecocide," while several European parliaments have debated adding ecocide to domestic criminal codes.[8] At the same time, human-rights jurisprudence increasingly recognizes links between environmental degradation and violations of rights to life, health, culture, and, more recently, a clean and healthy environment, as reflected in the United Nations General Assembly's 2022 recognition of that right.[9]

Recent scholarship has also proposed embedding environmental harm directly into the emerging treaty on crimes against humanity, for example by adding an enumerated act covering "widespread, long-lasting, or severe destruction of the natural environment as the means of destruction, damage, or injury to any civilian population" Proponents argue that such a provision would close gaps in accountability and acknowledge that large-scale environmental destruction often constitutes an attack on human communities as much as on ecosystems.[10]

3. Ecocide and the Modern World: Why the Concept Matters

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ES (2026) 22, 5(S), 342-349 | ISSN:1505-4683

3.1 Environmental crisis and militarism

The relevance of ecocide today is shaped by overlapping crises: accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss, and a historically high number of armed conflicts. In 2023, global military spending reached roughly 2.44 trillion U.S. dollars, while militaries are estimated to account for around 5.5% of global greenhouse-gas emissions—if treated as a single country, the military sector would be the world's fourth-largest emitter. At the same time, there were around 59 active conflicts, the highest number since the Second World War, with many internationalized and fought with increasingly destructive weaponry.[11]

The environmental footprint of militaries begins long before combat, encompassing resource extraction for weapons and infrastructure, fuel consumption for training and operations, and pollution from manufacturing, testing, and waste disposal (CEOBS, 2025)[12]. High-intensity conflicts then amplify these impacts through targeted attacks on industrial plants, energy facilities, and water infrastructure, as well as through the destruction of forests, agricultural land, and urban ecosystems.[13] This convergence of militarism and ecological crisis provides the backdrop against which ecocide debates unfold.[14]

3.2 Normative and political significance

Ecocide as a concept does more than describe environmental damage; it frames such damage as a matter of peace, security, and justice. Advocates argue that criminalizing ecocide at the international level would recognize the intrinsic value of the environment, strengthen deterrence and accountability, and bridge environmental law and human-rights law.[15]

First, recognition would treat severe and widespread environmental damage as a wrong even when immediate human casualties are limited. Second, it would target decision-makers—political leaders, corporate executives, and military commanders—who authorize or enable environmentally catastrophic actions, rather than focusing only on direct perpetrators. Third, it would reflect the growing understanding that environmental destruction often entails systematic violations of basic rights to life, health, food, and culture.[16]

Critics worry that drafting an ecocide crime with sufficient precision is difficult, that it could politicize environmental disputes, or that it might duplicate or complicate existing legal regimes. Nonetheless, the intensifying environmental toll of contemporary wars has generated renewed momentum behind the ecocide agenda, making the concept highly relevant to current policy debates.[17]

4. Environmental Consequences of Recent Wars on countries

4.1 Ukraine

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has been described by observers as a potential "ecocide" because of its widespread and multi-layered environmental impacts. In the first twelve months of the war, greenhouse-gas emissions associated with military operations, fires, and reconstruction-related activities were estimated at around 120 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent, comparable to the annual emissions of Belgium. A separate analysis found that the first three years of the conflict generated approximately 230 million tonnes of CO_2e, roughly matching the annual emissions of several Central European states combined.[18]

Attacks on factories, agro-industrial facilities, and water and sewage infrastructure have released pollutants into air, soil, and water, while shelling and wildfires have damaged forests and protected areas. One third of Ukraine's protected areas have reportedly been affected by military activity, and more than two million hectares of forest have been destroyed or degraded by conflict-linked fires. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam has been described as the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl, draining most of the reservoir, flooding vast areas of farmland, and disrupting irrigation on hundreds of thousands of hectares.

In addition, the war has heightened risks of nuclear and chemical contamination. Russian attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant and other nuclear-related infrastructure raise the specter of radiation releases, while damage to mines and industrial waste storage ponds has increased the risk

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that toxic heavy metals and other substances could leach into groundwater and rivers.[19]

4.2 Gaza

The environmental devastation in Gaza resulting from Israeli military operations has been described by the United Nations Environment Programme as "unprecedented," with potentially irreversible damage to ecosystems and biodiversity; World Health Organization [WHO], 2026). Preliminary assessments suggest that nearly half of all tree cover and farmland in Gaza has been destroyed, including orchards and olive groves that provided both livelihoods and ecological services. United Nations and allied analyses estimate that more than 39 million tonnes of rubble—much of it contaminated with asbestos, heavy metals, and unexploded ordnance—now blanket the territory, posing long-term health and environmental hazards.[20]

Water and sanitation systems have largely collapsed. Damage to wastewater treatment plants and pumping stations has led to the daily discharge of large volumes of untreated sewage into coastal waters and aquifers, contaminating beaches, soils, and groundwater. Solid-waste management has also broken down, forcing many displaced families to burn garbage and cut surviving trees for fuel, which further degrades air quality and exacerbates deforestation.[21]

A public-health editorial synthesizing United Nations data concludes that more than 90% of Gaza's physical infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed, with enormous implications for both human health and environmental recovery. The author warns of future harms from unexploded ordnance, white phosphorus residues, contaminated agricultural soils, and the psychological and physical trauma associated with prolonged exposure to such conditions.

4.3 Yemen, Tigray, Myanmar, and the Persian Gulf

Other recent conflicts illustrate additional pathways by which war can amount to environmental devastation. In Yemen, Saudi-led airstrikes on water-related infrastructure between 2015 and 2017 contributed to one of the largest cholera outbreaks in modern history, with more than 1.2 million suspected cases and over 3,000 deaths in the first six months. Attacks on water systems and agricultural infrastructure also undermined food security, helping produce severe acute malnutrition among hundreds of thousands of children.[22]

In Ethiopia's Tigray region, a multi-year war reversed decades of land-restoration efforts, as forests were cut for fuel by displaced communities and soldiers, agricultural infrastructure was destroyed, and conservation projects collapsed. Satellite imagery shows extensive deforestation, while millions continue to face hunger in a context where environmental recovery is likely to take many years.[23]

Since Myanmar's 2021 coup, weakened environmental oversight and the proliferation of armed actors have facilitated accelerated resource looting, including logging, jade extraction, and gold mining using mercury, which pollutes rivers and soils. This "extractive war economy" both finances ongoing violence and displaces marginalized communities, coupling environmental destruction with human-rights violations.

The recent escalation of conflict involving Iran and the Persian Gulf has also had significant environmental consequences. Analysts have mapped numerous incidents threatening ecosystems and human health, including bombings of refineries, gas fields, and petrochemical plants, which release complex mixtures of toxic substances and greenhouse gases. Oil spills, refinery fires, and attacks on maritime infrastructure have generated marine pollution and air contamination, with risks of acid rain, respiratory disease, and long-term ecological harm to coastal habitats such as mangroves.[24]

5. Health Consequences of War-Related Environmental Damage

5.1 Direct and indirect health impacts

War's health impacts are both direct—injuries and deaths from weapons—and indirect, arising from damage to civilian infrastructure, environmental contamination, and forced displacement. A comprehensive review of health, human rights, and

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environment in armed conflict estimates that indirect deaths due to war between 1990 and 2017 totaled roughly 29.4 million, far exceeding direct battle deaths, largely because of malnutrition, infectious diseases, and non-communicable disease exacerbations linked to damaged health systems and degraded environments.[25]

Environmental damage amplifies these indirect effects. Explosions and fires release particulate matter, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, volatile organic compounds, and heavy metals, contributing to acute and chronic respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Incendiary weapons such as white phosphorus not only cause severe burns but can ignite large-scale fires, contributing to deforestation and further air pollution.

In Gaza, prolonged bombardment has filled the air with dust, smoke, and chemical residue from munitions, while the destruction of infrastructure forces residents to burn low-grade fuels and waste for cooking and heating, creating additional toxic exposures. In Ukraine and the Persian Gulf, attacks on oil refineries and fuel depots have produced plumes of smoke containing complex hydrocarbon mixtures and fine particles, particularly dangerous for people with pre-existing respiratory or cardiovascular conditions.[26]

5.2 Water, sanitation, and infectious disease

Damage to water and sanitation systems is a central mechanism linking environmental destruction to health. In Yemen, airstrikes on water infrastructure and waste-treatment facilities contributed directly to catastrophic cholera outbreaks, as people were forced to rely on contaminated water sources. In Gaza, the loss of wastewater treatment and the discharge of untreated sewage into the sea and aquifers pose serious risks of diarrhoeal disease, hepatitis, and other water-borne infections, especially among children living in crowded shelters with limited hygiene.[27]

Public-health researchers emphasize that attacks on environmental infrastructure—water plants, sewage systems, and power grids—should be understood as attacks on health, because they create conditions for epidemics and undermine basic determinants of wellbeing. When combined with weakened health systems, shortages of medications, and displacement into overcrowded camps, these environmental disruptions produce long-term health burdens that continue long after hostilities subside.

5.3 Nutrition, chronic disease, and mental health

Environmental damage also undermines food security by destroying farmland, irrigation systems, and fisheries, contributing to malnutrition and associated morbidity. In conflict-affected regions, farmers often lose access to land because of landmines, unexploded ordnance, or soil contamination, while climate-sensitive ecosystems become more fragile due to deforestation and pollution.

Non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer worsen in such settings because medications, diagnostic services, and continuity of care are disrupted. Surveys in war-torn Ukraine, for example, have found substantial barriers to accessing healthcare, with many people unable to obtain essential medications for chronic conditions. Environmental exposures—from burned industrial sites, contaminated water, or radiation risks—can further increase long-term NCD burdens, though these effects may only become fully visible years after conflicts end.[28]

Mental-health impacts are equally profound. Exposure to environmental devastation—flattened neighborhoods, polluted rivers, dead forests—compounds trauma, dislocation, and loss (Levy, 2025). Studies show high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety among civilian survivors of war, with intergenerational consequences for children growing up amid environmental ruin and insecurity.

6. Economic Implications of Ecocidal Harm

6.1 Direct costs of environmental damage and reconstruction

Environmental destruction carries enormous economic costs. In Ukraine, the value of environmental damage—including pollution, forest loss, and contamination of air, soil, and water—has been estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, with some assessments placing it above 50–57 billion

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U.S. dollars during the early stages of the war. Rehabilitating damaged ecosystems, decontaminating soils, cleaning up industrial sites, and restoring critical infrastructure require long-term investments that many conflict-affected states struggle to mobilize.[29]

In Gaza, UNEP and other analyses suggest that environmental remediation and reconstruction will need decades and massive funding, given the scale of rubble and contamination. Demining alone can cost several euros per square meter, and restoring heavily degraded lands can cost tens of thousands of euros per hectare when soil decontamination and active reforestation are required. Such expenditures divert scarce resources from education, health, and social protection, entrenching cycles of underdevelopment and instability.[30]

6.2 Opportunity costs of militarization

Beyond direct damage, war and militarization entail large opportunity costs. Global military expenditures—about 2.44 trillion dollars in 2023—far exceed investments in conservation and ecosystem restoration, which UNEP estimates at roughly 220 billion dollars, a ratio of about one to twelve. Analysts note that the first 204 billion dollars spent by the United States on the Iraq War could have financed dramatic reductions in global hunger and funded essential medicines, clean water, sanitation, and childhood immunizations for several years in low-income countries.[31]

The diversion of public funds toward arms reduces fiscal space for climate adaptation, renewable-energy transitions, and public-health systems, thereby weakening societies' capacity to cope with environmental and health shocks. Evidence from Costa Rica—a country that abolished its military in 1948 and has since invested heavily in social services and environmental protection—illustrates the potential benefits of demilitarization; it now has among the highest life expectancies in Latin America and comparatively high standards of living relative to regional peers.

When wars trigger energy crises, as seen in the fallout from conflicts in Ukraine and the Persian Gulf, economies often double down on fossil-fuel production or delay decarbonization efforts, increasing long-term climate risks and locking in carbon-intensive infrastructure. Ecocide debates thus intersect with critiques of global political economy, highlighting how military and fossil-fuel complexes reinforce each other to sustain environmentally destructive trajectories.[32]

7. Ecocide, Human Rights, and Justice

7.1 Environmental destruction as a human-rights issue

Modern human-rights law increasingly recognizes that environmental harm can violate fundamental rights to life, health, food, water, housing, cultural integrity, and self-determination. Regional bodies in Africa, Europe, and the Americas have held states responsible for environmental degradation that disproportionately harms marginalized communities, and courts have begun to frame access to a healthy environment as a justiciable right. In 2022, the UN General Assembly affirmed the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, consolidating a growing body of national and international norms linking environmental integrity to human dignity.[33]

War-related environmental destruction often involves deliberate or reckless acts that foreseeably deprive civilian populations of the conditions necessary for these rights. The draining of Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes under Saddam Hussein, which destroyed a unique ecosystem and displaced hundreds of thousands of Marsh Arabs, is one historical example frequently cited as an environmental crime with clear human-rights dimensions. Contemporary attacks on dams, nuclear plants, agricultural systems, and urban infrastructure in Ukraine and Gaza similarly threaten large civilian populations with long-term suffering, including through displacement, contamination, and loss of livelihoods.[34]

7.3 Toward environmental harm as a core international crime

Scholars and advocates argue that recognizing ecocide or environmental destruction as a core international crime would align international criminal law with these human-rights developments (Higgins, 2010; Just Security, 2025; Stop Ecocide Foundation, 2021). One approach center on

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ES (2026) 22, 5(S), 342-349 | ISSN:1505-4683

adopting ecocide as a fifth core crime under the Rome Statute, using the 2021 expert definition as a starting point; another focuses on adding a specific environmental-harm provision to the new treaty on crimes against humanity.[35]

Proponents contend that explicit criminalization would clarify that massive environmental harm can constitute a crime even in peacetime, not only during armed conflict, and would signal that attacks on the environment can be attacks on human communities when they deprive populations of water, food, or habitable land. It could also provide a legal basis for prosecuting corporate and state actors whose decisions lead to severe environmental damage, whether through warfare, extractive projects, or negligent industrial operations.[36]

Opponents raise concerns about legal certainty, politicization, and enforceability, questioning how thresholds of "severe," "widespread," or "long-term" damage should be defined and measured. Yet public-health and human-rights researchers emphasize that environmental harms are already producing casualties and suffering at scales comparable to, or exceeding, those of more traditional international crimes, and that failing to address them undermines the credibility of international justice.

Conclusion

The evidence from recent wars suggests that large-scale environmental destruction is not a peripheral side-effect of armed conflict but a central dimension of its human cost. Emissions from military operations and post-war reconstruction accelerate climate change; attacks on industrial facilities, energy infrastructure, and water systems produce long-term pollution and ecological degradation; and these harms, in turn, exacerbate disease, displacement, poverty, and rights violations.

Ecocide as a concept offers an integrative framework for understanding this nexus. It focuses attention on the cumulative, systemic nature of environmental harms, rather than isolated incidents, and highlights the responsibility of those who plan, authorize, or profit from actions that they know are likely to cause severe and widespread damage. It also encourages thinking beyond the temporal boundaries of particular conflicts, recognizing that toxic legacies, greenhouse-gas emissions, and biodiversity loss can harm future generations in ways that traditional legal categories may struggle to capture.

At the same time, ecocide debates raise important questions about thresholds, causality, and equity. How "severe," "widespread," or "long-term" harm should be defined, how to attribute responsibility for diffuse harms, and how to avoid disproportionately targeting actors from certain regions or sectors while ignoring others remain contested issues. These challenges point to the need for careful drafting, robust scientific input, and inclusive global negotiations.

The modern resurgence of ecocide as a legal and political concept reflects mounting concern that existing frameworks do not adequately capture or deter the environmental devastation associated with wars and other large-scale human activities. Recent conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Yemen, Tigray, Myanmar, and the Persian Gulf illustrate how warfare can generate massive greenhouse-gas emissions, deforestation, pollution, and toxic legacies, with cascading effects on public health, economies, and human rights.

Public-health research shows that indirect deaths and illnesses linked to environmental damage—through malnutrition, infectious diseases, chronic conditions, and mental-health disorders—often exceed battle fatalities, while economic analyses highlight the immense costs of environmental remediation and the opportunity costs of militarized spending. Human-rights bodies, meanwhile, increasingly recognize the right to a healthy environment and the ways in which environmental harm can constitute an attack on civilian populations.

Recognizing ecocide as an international crime, or more broadly integrating environmental harm into the core architecture of international criminal and human-rights law, would not by itself end wars or environmental destruction. It could, however, help realign legal and moral priorities by affirming that the deliberate or reckless devastation of the natural

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ES (2026) 22, 5(S), 342-349 | ISSN:1505-4683

world—especially when it imperils human communities—belongs among the gravest offenses of our time. Doing so would acknowledge that the protection of ecosystems, human health, economic security, and fundamental rights are inseparable in an era of intertwined ecological and geopolitical crises.

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