



Reducing the mental health toll on environmental human rights defenders

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Abstract: Environmental rights defenders have been recognised as human rights defenders. This mitigates the costly daily price of being frontline against environmental destruction, which regularly results in a disproportionate toll on mental health and in loss of lives.

What can a regular person do to tilt the balance in shouldering the disproportionate burden that could crush those ‘[risking](#) on their today for our tomorrow’ a daily basis? The phrase, coined in 2017 by the first United Nations Independent Expert on human rights and the environment, remains strikingly descriptive of the [global reality](#) less than a decade later.

[John Knox](#) captured the complexity of this far from homogeneous category:

They come from diverse backgrounds and work in diverse ways. Whereas some are lawyers or journalists, many are ‘ordinary people living in remote villages,

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forests or mountains, who may not even be aware that they are acting as environmental human rights defenders.

A category that despite its apparent homogeneity, disproportionately consists of indigenous people and traditional communities 'whose lands and ways of life are [threatened](#) by large projects such as dams, logging, mining or oil extraction'. Frontliners who kept protecting our shared planet without any basic protections for themselves - until less than a decade ago.

Two criteria define this category. First, their pivotal work in safeguarding the environment upon which the enjoyment of all other human rights depends, including but not limited to the rights to health, food, water or housing and ultimately the right to life. Second, the 'rewards' for this work of paramount importance, paid in unquantified and unqualified bills to mental health, resulting from systematic harassment and outright violence.

'The destruction of the Earth's environment is the human rights challenge of our times' ([Desmond Tutu](#))

With global temperatures expected to hit 3 degrees this century according to a 2020 UNEP [Emissions Gap report](#), double the agreed 1.5 ambition reductions in the [Paris Agreement](#), the recognition of 'the right to a healthy environment' as a human right in 2021, by means of a [report](#) from the UN Special Rapporteur David Boyd, formalised the realities in over 80 percent of the member states.

Only in 2019 has the obvious been recognised as a breakthrough moment for environmental justice though, when the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted by consensus a [landmark resolution](#) on 'the contribution of environmental human rights defenders to the enjoyment of human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development'.

Moreover, two decades have passed from the UN [Declaration](#) on Human Rights Defenders in 1998 to the [Escazú Agreement](#) in 2018, which is the first legally binding regional treaty to protect the rights of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs). In between, multiple UN Special Rapporteurs had kept [referencing](#) land, indigenous rights and the environment as HRDs thematic work.

The road to recognition was half a century long. It took from the 1970s to now, for the concept of environmental rights defenders (ERDs) to emerge and gain formal recognition in relevant human rights fora. Whereas the exact birth date is too fuzzy to pin down to one particular declaration or resolution, consensus has it that it ties back to the 1992 [Rio Earth Summit](#). In particular, principle 10 of the [Rio Declaration](#) would enshrine environmental rights as procedural rights, whereby access to information, public participation and access to justice formed the core of the very activities which would gradually get the concept of ERDs to assimilate with the present concept of [EHRDs](#).

Fast forward to 2016 and the UN General Assembly (GA) [defined](#) EHRDs as

individuals and groups who, in their personal or professional capacity and in a

peaceful manner, strive to protect and promote human rights relating to the environment, including water, air, land, flora and fauna.

This explicit acknowledgement became the sole reference in the field ever since.

‘There are no human rights on a dead planet’ (Kumi Naidoo)

Who qualifies as EHRD matters for understanding who gets protected when similar mental health consequences as in human rights work wreck those suffering from ‘invisible trauma’. This ranges all the way from compassion fatigue to chronic stress, burnout, survival guilt, trauma, isolation, moral injury, in/direct PTSD and suicidal ideation in not few extreme cases.

With environmental activism claiming over [2000 lives](#) over the past decade, EHRDs make up for the highest rate of killings among HRDs, with [Latin America](#) leading the way. This may explain why five of the forty-five UN thematic Special Rapporteurs hold mandates protecting environmental work as human rights work, with skyrocketing milestones within the past five years.

[The numbers](#) keep increasingly reflecting [Knox’ findings](#) that

for their tireless work in empowering communities and protecting ecosystems, environmental defenders are killed in startling numbers; and (...) for everyone killed, there are 20 to 100 others harassed, unlawfully and lawfully arrested, and sued for defamation, amongst other intimidations.

Essentially, environmental defenders first made the object of human rights protection for the UN Special Rapporteur on [toxics and human rights](#) as of 1995 and for the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of [indigenous people](#) as of 2001. A case in point, they did not make the object of the traditional mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on [human rights defenders](#), which dates back to 2000, from the start, but they got incorporated steadily and gradually.

Additionally, 2022 saw [Michel Forst](#), former UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs, inaugurating the mandate of UN Special Rapporteur for environmental defenders under the [Aarhus Convention](#). He has since undertaken numerous [country visits](#) calling out [ubiquitous abuses](#) and also recently put out draft [state guidelines](#) for the lawful treatment of ERDs.

Furthermore, it was also only one year ago that the most recent mandate was created to operationalise the right to a healthy environment as a human right: in 2024 [Astrid Puentes Riaño](#) became the first UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to a [clean, healthy and sustainable](#) environment. It is worth also noting that the function of the UN Special Rapporteur on [climate change](#) only dates back to 2021.

Looking forward

What can a regular person do to tilt the balance in shouldering the disproportionate burden that could crush those ‘[risking](#) their today for our tomorrow’ on a daily basis? As a healthy and clean environment is a reasonable concern and goal for the vast majority,

it makes sense for every person to use every leverage in their respective geographies to defend it.

This includes scrutinising personal actions with problematic environmental footprint, as much as demanding political action for the systemic intricacies of a crisis that goes [beyond individual solutions](#), in a time when the talk gets increasingly rockier to walk, with EHRDs becoming targets of [unprecedented state repression](#) in most established human rights regimes.

So far in 2025, [Elisa Morgera](#), UN Special Rapporteur on climate change has dedicated two open calls for input and expert consultations to the protection of EHRDs in the context of a [fossil fuels-based economy](#) as well as human rights in the life cycle of [renewable energy and critical minerals](#). In addition, the current UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs [Mary Lawlor](#) herself has chosen to focus on [climate change and a just transition](#).

The more EHRDs there are, and comprehensively protected, starting with [mental health care](#), the lesser the price that each must pay for protecting our shared future. Extinguishing the fire entertained by plundering and depleting Planet Earth of its last resources, which ought to be kept in the ground, under looming global climate catastrophe, is [everyone's business](#).