

International Conference

ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME: CURRENT AND EMERGING THREATS

Rome, 29-30 October 2012

Welcome Remarks

**Mrs. Elizabeth Verville,
President
UNICRI Board of Trustees**

Welcome

In my role as President of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, I wish to welcome the authorities, the representatives of the international institutions, civil society and the distinguished experts to this international Conference on *Environmental Crime: Current and Emerging Threats*, co-organised by UNICRI with the United Nations Environment Programme and the Ministry for the Environment of Italy. I wish to thank the representatives of the UNEP and of the Ministry for the Environment for having worked closely with us to make this conference possible.

I wish to also thank the Director of the Food and Agriculture Organisation, Mr. José Graziano Da Silva for kindly hosting our conference inside these beautiful FAO premises in Rome.

Finally, let me express our gratitude to our long-term partner, the Compagnia di San Paolo, for encouraging and sustaining UNICRI in its crime prevention and criminal justice activities for more than a decade, and for their support which made this conference possible.

Focus of the Conference

The focus of this international conference is to address the current and emerging threats posed by the environmental crime.

The well-being of human society is intrinsically linked to the state of our natural systems. As noted by the World Economic Forum in its 2012 assessment of global risks, environmental global risks are of high concern, from natural disasters such as extreme weather and geomagnetic storms, to human-made disasters such as irremediable pollution and species overexploitation. These risks have the potential to destabilize both economies and societies, trigger geopolitical conflict and devastate the Earth's vital resources and its inhabitants. Environmental crime and its links with other forms of crime constitute a serious threat to sustainable development, peace and security. Environment crime undermines prosperity, security and human rights.

Besides the careless exploitation of the natural environment, environmental crimes take the form of illegal trade in protected species; smuggling of ozone depleting

substances; illicit trade in hazardous waste; illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing; and illegal logging and trade in timber. Such crimes often fail to prompt the required response from governments and the law enforcement community, as they are often perceived as ‘victimless’ crimes. For most countries, combating environmental crime is not currently a priority and often remains overlooked and poorly understood, despite the actual and potential scale and consequences.

In reality, such crimes affect all of society and all of Nature. Transgressions against humans, animals and plants, and specific environments are associated with harms, injuries, degradations and suffering of many kinds. Moreover, criminal activities affecting the environment have evolved to become a serious form of transnational organized crime with links to other crimes associated with high levels of violence and corruption.

The involvement of organized criminal groups acting across borders is one of many factors that have favoured the considerable expansion of environmental crimes in recent years. Led by vast financial gains and facilitated by a low risk of detection and scarce conviction rates, criminal networks and organized criminal groups are becoming increasingly interested in such illicit transnational activities.

The level of organization needed for these crimes indicates a link with other serious offences, including theft, fraud, corruption, drugs and human trafficking, counterfeiting, firearms smuggling, and money laundering, several of which have been substantiated by investigations. Environmental crimes therefore today represent an emerging form of transnational organized crime requiring more in-depth analysis and better-coordinated responses at national, regional and international levels, requiring a global response to prevent and combat environmental crime.

Current and emerging forms of environmental crimes, that we are facing today all over the world, speak to an urgent need to assess the growing threat of environmental crime to the overall health, peace and security of humanity.

Underdeveloped legal frameworks, weak law enforcement and poor prosecutorial and judicial practices, as well as a lack of understanding of the different factors that drive environmental crime, have led to the critical situation we are in today. Preventing, deterring and detecting environmental crimes require determination, time and consistency, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the underlying causes and drivers of such criminal behaviour. To address this phenomenon requires a strong and coordinated action by the International Community.

On 26 July 2012, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations adopted resolution 2012/19 entitled “Strengthening international cooperation in combating transnational organized crime in all its forms and manifestations”. In paragraph 12 the Council “Invites the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute to continue to conduct, in consultation with Member States and in cooperation with other competent international entities, research on different forms of transnational organized crime”.

For these reasons, UNICRI has joined forces with UNEP and the Ministry for the Environment of Italy and convened high level experts from around the world to participate in and contribute to the discussions of this international conference.

The objective of the conference is to serve as a platform for relevant institutions and experts to discuss how to move forward and address these issues in a more effective and efficient way. This collective effort will be encapsulated in expert recommendations that will be brought together in the form of an action plan. This action plan will be discussed in the final plenary session of the conference, which will address potential future actions at national, regional and international levels.

We trust that together we can contribute to the development of a new global agenda on environmental crime and justice, and collectively build a way forward on these important and urgent issues. .

Role of UNICRI in countering environmental crime

The outputs of your joint discussions and recommendations will then be brought by UNICRI to the attention of Member States on the occasion of the next session of the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice in April 2013, which will focus its thematic discussion on "The challenge posed by emerging forms of crime that have a significant impact on the environment and ways to deal with it effectively".

Being a United Nations research institute, UNICRI is mandated to assist intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental organizations in formulating and implementing improved policies in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice. For over two decades UNICRI has been actively involved in the field of environmental crimes research and training and, since 1991, it has built a very strong international network of experts, including all of you present here today and many others worldwide. The Institute is at the forefront of research in environmental law, especially in exploring the limits and potentials of applying criminal law in addressing environmental crime.

The initial focus of UNICRI was to review sanctioning strategies and sustained development, followed by efforts to assess the application of criminal law per se, and the implementation of the international environmental conventions. In 1997 UNICRI started to study crimes against the environment and their transnational nature. An international conference was held in Rome in 1997 followed by other initiatives such as the regional workshop convened in Samoa, on criminal law and its administration in international environment conventions, organized by UNICRI, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the South Pacific Regional Environmental Programme.

These activities have complemented the research on environmental crime reflected in the Institute's 2009 publication *Eco-Crime and Justice: Essays on Environmental Crime* and contributed to the design of a broader programme on environmental crime, initiated in 2012. In addition, to increase the awareness of the threat of environmental crime, and to enhance understanding of the dynamics of environmental crime, the Institute is mapping the international incidents involving trafficking and dumping of hazardous and e-waste, based on international reports and open source data, to be

consolidated in a study entitled “Countering illegal trafficking and dumping of hazardous and e-waste”.

UNICRI is ready to continue assisting Member States and international stakeholders in evidence-based policy-making in the field of environmental crime and justice, and serve as a facilitator to forge alliances between national governments, NGOs, and leading researchers in the field, as well as with entities within the UN system.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate my gratitude to the experts and participants for your willingness to share your long-standing expertise in our common aim of making this world a better place.