



An Analytical Study of Organized Environmental Crime and Illegal Natural Resource Exploitation

Dr. Diksha

Assistant Professor, Juris College of Law, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, UP.

Corresponding Author Email: chaurasiyadiksha1213@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

The deterioration of the environment is no longer a matter of regulation; it is the result of conscious, profitable and criminal activities. This paper looks at organized environmental crime and illegal natural-resource exploitation as a new legal issue that falls under the umbrella of environment, criminal and financial crime law enforcement. It questions whether there are existing statutory and institutional structures (both international and Indian) that can be used to target the organizers, financiers and the corporate beneficiaries of resource plunder, instead of just the extractor at the field level. This study uses a doctrinal, analytical and comparative approach and examines statutes, constitutional provisions, judicial cases, treaties and institutional reports. It concludes that environmental crimes are under-criminalized as organized crime that the sanctions for these crimes are not commensurate with the benefits gained, and that financial-investigation tools are not widely used to investigate resource crime. The analysis claims that a policy approach focused on the “ordinary” nature of an environmental violation will systematically underestimate the transnational and networked nature of environmental crime. The paper proposes that the categories of aggravated offences be defined for organized environmental crime, asset confiscation mechanisms and proceeds-of-crime be integrated, specialized investigation units be established, and UNTOC and UNCAC be better operationalized against resource-linked criminality.

Keywords: *organized environmental crime; illegal natural-resource exploitation; transnational crime; environmental criminal liability; asset confiscation.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Environmental destruction was often treated as an unfortunate consequence of development, managed by permits, fines and clean-up orders rather than the machinery of criminal justice. That assumption has

aged badly. These activities illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, unauthorized mining and sand extraction and illegal fishing -provide profit streams comparable to more traditional illicit markets, while a rising literature has begun documenting the scale of the losses as well as its most evident consequences. This evidence suggests that the annual value of environmental crime is among the world's very largest categories of transnational organized crime. For one thing, scale compels a reclassification: what would superficially appear to indicate diffuse pollution or dispersed poaching theatre is far too often little more than the visible edifice of organized enterprise hungry for every resource they can extract.

The connection between organized crime and environmental crimes is not accidental. As with narcotics or arms, every bit of data shows that criminal networks flock to natural resources because they are in high demand and high value but relatively low risk. Timber, minerals, endangered species and sand from riverbeds can be washed into legal supply chains with considerably less risk (the penalties tend to be low when they even arrive at all) than for contraband without a legitimate market. Scientists of the "environmental crime continuum" have demonstrated that these crimes almost never occur in isolation; they overlap with corruption, fraud, money laundering, tax evasion and sometimes violence. Extraction is as much a governance problem where the state is weak or officials are available for purchase. It is this combination of the law, which gives value and scarcity which creates a lucrative market, that makes natural resources targets. A logging ban increases the cost of protected timber, a mining moratorium increases the price of illegally mined ore, CITES listing similarly raises the black-market value of a species. An enforcement deficit can turn prohibition from conservation into a price signal to criminals. India is a perfect example of this trend. Unglamorous as it is, riverbed sand an essential raw material for construction has birthed entrenched local mafias, violence against officials and journalists, and chronic non-compliance with regulations.

The legal and institutional impairments are structural rather than incidental. Environmental statutes typically speak of compliance and how an individual may violate the law, rather than organized criminality. Enforcement is disparate between ministries, boards, and police forces that hardly ever communicate. Further, financial-investigation tools, so vital to breaking down other forms of organized crime almost never seem to be used in tackling resource crimes. The outcome is a system that sometimes penalizes the excavator operator but leaves in place the financing and beneficiary arrangements. Herein lies the research problem. A substantial literature examines environmental crime through criminology or through environmental policy, and a separate literature examines organized crime and financial enforcement. What remains comparatively thin is doctrinal legal analysis treating illegal natural-resource exploitation *as* organized crime and testing whether environmental, criminal, and financial law together deliver an adequate response. This gap matters because the choice of legal frame determines the tools available: a pollution frame yields fines; an organized-crime frame yields conspiracy liability, asset forfeiture, and international cooperation.

This is why analysing the problem in a legal context is not merely academic. The frame determines who gets prosecuted, what we seize, if we can even get inside your cross-border networks. This paper contends that all frameworks domestic and international alike remain structurally defective not only by their continued defining of systemic environmental degradation as a regulatory failure and not organized, often transnational, crime but also by the effective separation of financial & organized-journalistic machinery from environmental enforcement. This paper's scope is intentionally doctrinal and comparative. It conceptualizes structured environmental crimes, analyzes its primary categories, scrutinizes the international and Indian legal frameworks, appraises the judicial response, identifies the corruption and illicit-financial-flow perspectives then addresses enforcement gaps, comparative lessons and reform. There is no attempt at empirical fieldwork; its assertions rely on statutes, judgments, treaties and publicly available documentation of institutions.

2. Conceptualizing Organized Environmental Crime and Illegal Natural Resource Exploitation:

Definitional clarity is oddly elusive here: "environmental crime" has not evolved into a stable category of the law, but instead serves as an umbrella for conduct that can be found across dozens of statutes. In broad terms, it covers acts which infringe upon norms for protection of environment and cause or endangers ecological damage. Green criminologists go further, severing the antinomy between anthropocentric (harm to human interests) and eco centric and bio centric (harm to ecosystems, non-human life in its own right) designations that have real doctrinal bite, as most legal systems only criminalize the former. Not every environmental wrong is a crime, and not every environmental crime is organized. It helps to separate a graded set of concepts. *Environmental harm* is the broadest: any adverse ecological impact, lawful or not. *Environmental violation* denotes breach of a regulatory standard, often attracting civil or administrative consequences. *Environmental offence* is conducting the law specifically penalizes. *Organized environmental crime* narrows further offences committed by structured groups acting in concert for profit, with division of labour and continuity over time. *Transnational environmental crime* adds a cross-border dimension, whether in the commission of the offence, the movement of resources, or the laundering of proceeds. Collapsing these categories, as public discourse often does, obscures the fact that different responses are warranted at each level.

The features of the organized variant are typical. It is not just hierarchical, it is network based; local extractors, transporters, corrupt officials, brokers and end-buyers form loose chains where no single node necessarily needs to survive for the whole system to remain resilient. High profit, low detection risk, only encountering a regulatory vulnerability by design rather than by accident. Importantly these networks are glocal local ensconced in local extraction sites while equilibrating to global markets, which enables their exploitation of jurisdictional seams. What distinguishes organized environmental crime from an ordinary offence is convergence. Illicit extraction is sustained by corruption of licensing and enforcement officials, by fraudulent permits and falsified transport documents, by shell companies that legitimize proceeds, and

by laundering that severs the resource from its criminal origin. Empirical criminological work now treats environmental offences as sitting on a continuum with other serious crimes rather than as an isolated category. The conceptual payoff is significant: if the offence is genuinely organized, then targeting only the extractor is not merely under-inclusive, it is structurally ineffective.

3. Major Forms of Illegal Natural Resource Exploitation

They are distinct enough that to treat them alike would be a doctrinal mistake; each resource falls under a different legal regime, and the structure of criminalization is accordingly different.

3.1 Illegal Mining and Mineral Extraction

Illegal mining, illegal as in extraction without a lease, over and above the permitted limit or in violation of environmental clearance is mini to mega scale plunder. They come at an environmental cost including the loss of forests, aquifers and river systems. The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 provides the regulatory backbone in India but enforcement has always been lax especially where illegality enriches state level political economies. A case in point is the Karnataka iron-ore episode, which showed that mafia networks, with the complicity of state machinery, are highly adept at capturing mining, smuggling ore with forged documents across international frontiers. Intermediaries, transporters and corporate purchasers that make the enterprise viable are rarely held accountable.

3.2 Illegal Logging and Timber Trafficking

There is much depends in timber crime on papers. Illegally harvested wood is "laundered" by means of forged harvesting permits, false species declarations and fraudulent certificates of origin and incorporated into legal supply chains. Corruption provides enabling mechanisms within forest administration and licensing, with networks that often span borders washing the timber through its origins as effectively as its proceeds. Documentary fraud (the point of susceptibility and, by definition, the area in which enforcement would hit hardest if only it had the financial means and forensic capacities at its disposal).

3.3 Wildlife Trafficking and Biodiversity Crimes

CITES is an international agreement that regulates cross-border trade in listed species through a permit system and the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 governs poaching & illegal wildlife trade domestically in India. A profitable trade, it has become increasingly professionalized trafficking networks often overlap with those of organized crime groups and, in some areas, armed groups. Wildlife crime lays bare a chronic vulnerability: CITES regulates international trade but depends entirely on domestic implementation, meaning enforcement is only as strong as the weakest national link.

3.4 Illegal Fishing and Marine Resource Exploitation

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing threatens stocks and distorts markets and often involves transshipment operations among flag-of-convenience vessels and laundering of catch through legal processors. However, both attack and enforcement are problematic as attacking ships is difficult at high seas and vessels can easily change their identity or flag state. The connection between illegal, unreported

and unregulated (IUU) fishing and trafficking more broadly illustrates the transnational nature of resource crime.

3.5 Illegal Sand, Water and Other Extraction

Sand mining is perhaps the clearest Indian illustration of organized, locally rooted resource crime. Riverbed sand is extracted often at night, often violently in defiance of clearance requirements, causing riverbank erosion, water-table depletion, and habitat loss. The Ministry's own guidelines acknowledge the governance challenge, and scholarship documents entrenched "sand mafias" operating with political and administrative protection. Groundwater over-extraction presents an analogous but distinct problem, governed by a patchier regulatory regime. The legal lesson is that low-value, high-volume resources can sustain criminal networks every bit as organized as those trading high-value species.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework Governing Environmental Crime

4.1 International Legal Framework

There is no single treaty that encompasses environmental crime; instead, it has drawn from international instruments designed for other purposes. Most importantly, the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), 2000. UNTOC does not in and of itself state a definition for the crime of environmental crime, however where an environmental offence is serious, transnational and undertaken by an organized criminal group UNTOC acts as a framework on important issues such as criminalization of participation, money laundering, extradition and mutual legal assistance. The United Nations has expressly recognized UNTOC as an important framework for preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment. The analytical caution is important: UNTOC's value lies in *application by extension*, not in a bespoke environmental offence.

The UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), 2003. Why it matters: Corruption is the connective tissue of resource crime providing fraudulent permits and neutralizing enforcement. CITES is the specialized regime on endangered species as mentioned above it governs trade and relies on domestic enforcement. In addition to binding treaties, a soft-law architecture is developing: UN General Assembly Resolution 76/185 (2021) on "Preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment" calls upon states to enhance legislation and enforcement in relation to trafficking in wildlife, timber, minerals and waste, and related money laundering, following up on the Kyoto Declaration adopted at the Fourteenth UN Crime Congress. Institutional actors UNODC, UNEP, and INTERPOL provide operational coordination and empirical evaluations that construct the problem. The enduring constraint is the enforcement: the international layer sets norms and enables cooperation but criminalising and prosecuting remain in national systems, whose capabilities vary enormously.

4.2 Indian Legal Framework

India's constitutional foundation is robust. Judicial enactment has broadened the scope of Article 21 to incorporate a right to healthy environment, while Article 48A obliges the State to protect and improve the environment; and Article 51A(g) places a constitutional duty on citizens for protecting the natural

environment. The statutory landscape is dense: pollution control is anchored in the Environment (Protection) Act 1986, Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981; forest diversion is governed by Indian Forest Act, 1927; and the forest-conservation statute now retitled the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 following the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023 govern forest diversion; the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, as strengthened by its 2022 amendment aligning it more closely with CITES, governs species protection and the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, governs mineral extraction. Biodiversity is addressed by the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, as amended in 2023. The key point is that these are, in substance, regulatory statutes. Penalties are often small, and offenses constructed between solo inaction not unaided activity. Two underused instruments could help fill that gap. Numerous environmental offences are scheduled predicates under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, making proceeds-of-crime action possible—yet we rarely see financial investigation of resource crime. The Indian Penal Code has provisions against conspiracy and cheating that could impact networks but are rarely used for environmental offences. The general criminal law, now the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 (effective from 1 July 2024), of course supplies these. While the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 had established an adjudicatory forum catering to cases of environmental concerns, its focus is largely civil and remedial in nature as opposed to criminal. Such a mismatch in enforcement and design has long been noted by Indian environmental scholarship.

5. Judicial Approach to Environmental and Resource Crimes

Indian courts have been the most dynamic actor in environmental protection, frequently outpacing the legislature, but their tools are predominantly civil and constitutional, which is itself analytically significant.

In *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (the Oleum Gas Leak case), the issue was the liability standard for hazardous enterprises. The Court fashioned the principle of **absolute liability**, holding that an enterprise engaged in hazardous activity is strictly and absolutely liable for resulting harm, without the exceptions available under *Rylands v. Fletcher*. Its significance for resource crime is doctrinal reach on the civil side; its limitation is that it addresses compensation, not the dismantling of criminal networks.

Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India concerned tannery pollution. The Court read the **precautionary principle** and **polluter-pays principle** into Indian law as facets of sustainable development and Article 21. These principles are foundational, yet they operate through remediation and cost-internalization rather than criminal deterrence useful against a polluting factory, far less so against a mobile, deniable extraction network.

In *M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath*, the Court applied the **public trust doctrine**, holding that the State holds natural resources in trust for the public and cannot abdicate that responsibility to private interests. The doctrine supplies a powerful normative frame for resource protection, but it is again invoked to void unlawful allocations rather than to prosecute organized exploitation.

The mining and sand cases move closer to the organized-crime dimension. *Deepak Kumar v. State of Haryana* held that even minor-mineral extraction, including riverbed sand, requires prior environmental clearance closing a loophole that had licensed unregulated sand mining across states. *Samaj Parivartana Samudaya v. State of Karnataka* confronted large-scale illegal iron-ore mining, where the Court ordered suspension, categorized leases by degree of illegality, and directed rehabilitation an implicit acknowledgment of systemic, networked criminality. *Goa Foundation v. Union of India* similarly cancelled mining leases granted in breach of law. And *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India* extended forest-protection law to the dictionary meaning of "forest," expanding the protective net well beyond notified forests.

Its interventions are overwhelmingly civil, restitutionary, and administrative: cancellation, remediation, monitoring committees. What courts cannot easily supply is the criminal-justice apparatus conspiracy prosecutions, asset confiscation, financial tracing needed to actually break organized networks. Judicial activism has, in a sense, compensated for legislative and prosecutorial weakness while leaving the core enforcement deficit intact.

6. Organized Criminal Networks, Corruption and Illicit Financial Flows

The organizational reality of resource crime explains why enforcement so often misfires. Not simple hierarchies, but layered networks: local extractors and labourers at the base; transporters and brokers one level above them; corrupt officials giving permits, protection and forewarning at a higher level still; financiers and corporate buyers that seldom handle the resource anchored in an oligopoly apex. Often legitimate enterprises integrate into the chain by buying washed timber, ore, or catch and thus fulfilling the crime with money. Corruption is the lubricant at every level fake clearances, paid off inspectors, post-dated leases. The proceeds are then hidden using a combination of shell companies, false invoicing and layering, so that by the time value is returned to the beneficiary it has all the appearance of legal income. In some cases, the exploitation of resources funds armed groups in a way that can further complicate and deepen the security dimension. The "glocal" model enables networks to impose on weak jurisdictions, transporting the resource across borders before cooperation can react.

The analytical conclusion is unavoidable. Prosecuting the person operating the machinery, while leaving financiers and beneficiaries untouched, treats a symptom. That is because its profit centre and its organisational intelligence are never disturbed, the network itself just regenerates. Only asset tracing, confiscation and other "business strategy" type approaches will engage the actors for which the crime actually exists.

7. Enforcement Challenges and Institutional Gaps

Before there is an effort problem, there is a design problem with the enforcement deficit. There is also jurisdictional fragmentation: environment ministries, forest departments, pollution boards and revenue authorities all deal with pieces of the problem but few are coordinating efforts, leaving no one owning it from one end to the other. The investigators do not always have specialization in environmental-crime

and forensic capacity for numbers, and financial investigation of resource offences is almost non-existent, separating enforcement from the one strategy that gets to organizers. Prosecution suffers accordingly. Establishing that *organized* criminality has occurred through agreement, continuity, and structure requires investigative complexity far beyond any of the agencies charged with environmental enforcement, where corruption in law enforcement only dulls the response. Cross-border cooperation is slow and under-resourced compared to the pace of transnational networks. Supply chains remain unmonitored and once these resources are laundered, they hit respectable markets without comment. In areas of low fines, deterrence is ineffective and a dispassionate enterprise merely quantifies the occasional penalty as part of its cost of doing business. Not itself available in reliable, disaggregated form, data on environmental prosecution and conviction is scarce, limiting evidence-based reform, and should moderate any authoritative statements about conviction rates.

8. Critical Analysis: Why Existing Legal Frameworks Remain Inadequate

The central argument can now be stated directly: the frameworks fail not because individual laws are absent but because the *architecture* misclassifies the problem.

- First, environmental statutes are generally drafted in terms of regulatory compliance rather than organized criminality. They do not have, or hardly ever use, the conceptual tools criminal conspiracy, organized-group liability, aggravated offences to get to a network instead of an individual. An offence that is worded as failure to obtain a clearance cannot, by its own terms, catch the whole enterprise behind the failure.
- Second, because there is no relation between the penalties and the profits of crime. If the fine is just a small proportion of the gain, then sanction is just another cost of doing business. Deterrence requires the expectation of cost to outweigh profit, and few schedules currently satisfy that threshold.
- Third, the law goes after what is already a wrongly targeted actor. Field-level perpetrators can be prosecuted and replaced; by contrast, organizers, financiers, and corporate beneficiaries cannot simply be prosecuted under environmental law nor are they regularly pursued through financial law. Corporate criminal liability for environmental offences is still doctrinally slight and practically underdeveloped.
- Fourth, the proceeds-of-crime and confiscation are available under the scheduled of environmental crime in the PMLA but almost never instituted against resource crime maintaining that profit motive. International cooperation instruments, in turn, rely on domestic capacity often absent.
- Fifth, and most critically for India, environmental regulation is siloed from organized-crime enforcement which itself is siloed from financial crime investigation. On the enforcement side, however, reverse engineering this integration away from its primary utility resource, corruption, laundering, market yields no institutional counterpart. The jury is in on the mining and sand jurisprudence, the convergence literature, and even the underuse of financial tools: these

frameworks are poor because they decline to face up to serious exploitation as what it is first organized crime; second latently (and mostly) transnational crime.

9. Comparative / International Perspective

Comparison is useful less for ranking than for isolating specific transferable lessons. The EU gives a conveniently more recent example. Directive (EU) 2024/1203 (11 April 2024), replaced the 2008 Environmental Crime Directive, expanded the catalogue of offences from nine to twenty and notably introduced “qualified offences” similar to ecocide, which carry greater sanctions where conduct causes serious or widespread environmental damage. It also establishes minimum levels of punishment and improves cooperation between member states, as the previous Directive had been criticized on sanctions and cross-border coordination. The take away for India is that there should be an aggravated-offence tier which stamps the punishment of crime on degree of seriousness and organized nature of wrong doing. The United States demonstrates the power of borrowing enforcement architecture from organized-crime and financial law. The Lacey Act makes trafficking in illegally sourced wildlife, and since it's 2008 expansion plants and timber, a crime with due-diligence pressure on the entire supply chain, not just the poacher. In other words, US use of money-laundering and racketeering tools against environmental criminals finds analogs in the US willingness to deploy them around the world; India lacks this integration. Comparative literature also suggests, where environmental crime's diffuse harm makes victims difficult to identify, the EU long had its own "missing victim" problem that undermined political and prosecutorial will. The transferable lessons for India are powerful: statutory recognition of aggravated organized environmental offences; routine linkage between environmental enforcement and financial investigation; supply-chain due-diligence obligations, and real inter-agency architecture rather than fragmented jurisdiction.

11. Conclusion

The problem this paper sought to explore is whether or not serious environmental exploitation is the organized crime it is often. But on the evidence the answer is no. Illegal mining, logging, wildlife trafficking, Illegal Unreported Unregulated fishing and sand extraction are more and more the business of structured, profit-driven networks that intersect with corruption, fraud and money laundering, and are often trans-border in nature, yet are regulated on the basis of compliance by individuals. The lack of is structural. Environmental law provides standards and civil remedies; the judiciary has constructed a wonderful structure of principle; but neither provides the criminal-justice and financial-enforcement tools needed to break networks. There are no penalties based on profit, there's no financial investigation, there are little corporate penalties, and enforcement is scattered among agencies that take a different approach to integration than their opponents do. Both the diagnosis and the direction of travel are borne out by the comparative material the EU's aggravated-offence approach and the US melding of financial and organized-crime tools make a clear diagnosis. The last argument is thus one of reclassification. However, it is not enough to use the language of pollution and permits to face serious environmental exploitation,

but it is necessary, above all, to use the language of environmental law, criminal law, financial investigation and international cooperation, aimed at the organizers, the financiers and the beneficiaries in whose name the crime is committed.

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Cite this Article:

Dr. Diksha, "An Analytical Study of Organized Environmental Crime and Illegal Natural Resource Exploitation", *Naveen International Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences (NIJMS)*, ISSN: 3048-9423 (Online), Volume 2, Issue 6, pp. 32-44, June-July 2026.

Journal URL: <https://nijms.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71126/nijms.v2i5.140>



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