

World Commission on Environmental Law (WCEL)

Draft Mandate 2026–2029

1. Mission

The mission of WCEL is to strengthen the environmental rule of law guaranteeing the conservation of the integrity and diversity of nature. Any use of natural resources should be equitable, inclusive, just, ecologically sustainable and respect human rights in line with IUCN's objectives.

Environmental law is a crucial lever in generating transformative change. WCEL will work to enhance the development and strengthen the implementation of environmental law and policy, including through best practices and inter-sectoral strategies for effective legal design, compliance and enforcement. WCEL will promote the environmental rule of law globally, particularly in countries that seek to improve their law, jurisprudence and governance systems. WCEL aims to strengthen the capacity of governments, the judiciary, prosecutors, legislators, law schools and other stakeholders as they develop and implement environmental law.

2. Vision

The vision of WCEL is a just society living in harmony with nature in a culture of peace and a rejection of war. In such society, nature is valued, conserved, restored and wisely used, while maintaining ecosystems and their services, and sustaining a healthy planet delivering benefits essential for all people and species. This vision is achieved through *inter alia* the environmental rule of law and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, with vital environmental stewardship systems at all levels of governance, including Indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society, children and youth, women, academia and businesses, and working toward ecological sustainability.

In the urgent global, regional and national transformation towards living in harmony with nature, WCEL is the world's leading network for the exchange of legal knowledge, expertise and best legal practices on the environment. WCEL supports global collaboration on furthering international and national environmental law and the environmental rule of law, involving all regions and levels of government, academia and civil society.

3. Goals

The goal of WCEL is to inform, influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to employ the environmental rule of law for preventing harm to, conserving, restoring, recovering and sustaining nature, and assuring that uses of natural resources are equitable and ecologically sustainable, through:

- a) advancing local, national, regional and international laws, administrative instruments and customary norms that support the environmental rule of law, that are grounded in environmental ethics and foster ecological sustainability through:
 - 1) reforming and developing incentives for environmental responsibility by eliminating perverse incentives and creating positive incentives;
 - 2) reforming sectoral and segmented decision- and law-making to promote integration and mainstreaming of nature values across issues and across sectors and jurisdictions;
 - 3) raising awareness on environmental law and jurisprudence to IUCN, its membership and the broader community;
 - 4) taking a pro-active, pre-emptive and precautionary approach to regulatory and management institutions and businesses to promote Nature-based Solutions, monitor their outcomes, and to avoid, mitigate and remedy the deterioration of nature;

- 5) developing legal expertise for resilient social and ecological systems in the face of uncertainty, rapid change and complexity to deliver decisions that are environmentally robust in a wide range of scenarios; and
 - 6) developing legal instruments and strategies, such as rights-based approaches, to promote the appropriate recognition of gender equality, women's empowerment, youth, gender-responsive approaches and rights of nature, and the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples and Local communities, as well as addressing global inequalities and recognising the principle of intergenerational equity.
- b) conducting and promoting education and research to strengthen the environmental rule of law and undertaking widespread capacity-building to enable governments and stakeholders to actively participate in effective environmental governance at all levels;
 - c) supporting the effective implementation of environmental laws through institutions that respect the environmental rule of law and ensure effective compliance and enforcement;
 - d) providing a world forum for the development and integration of environmental law into all aspects and levels of governance;
 - e) creating and promoting partnerships to support development, implementation and enforcement of environmental rule of law and extending professional and expert networks dedicated to the environmental rule of law; and
 - f) support the interpretation of the IUCN's statutes and regulations as necessary.

4. Objectives

WCEL will pursue its objectives in coordination with the integrated programme of activities adopted by the World Conservation Congress in the IUCN Programme 2025–2029 and the 20-year Strategic Vision, and in cooperation with IUCN Members and other components of the Union, through the Commission members, specialist groups and task forces, and in partnership with relevant international entities, particularly the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and other expert environmental law organisations, law schools, associations of judges and environmental prosecutors, as well as judicial institutes, academies and schools, in order to:

- a) promote the 2016 World Declaration on Environmental Rule of Law, the 2018 Brasília Declaration of Judges on Water Justice, the 2024 ITLOS Advisory Opinion on climate change and other advisory opinions from international courts reflecting IUCN's position, other ethical and innovative legal instruments, legislation, and judicial decisions useful to promote the environmental rule of law, to fight crimes that affect the environment, ~~al-crimes~~ including wildlife trafficking and ecocide, to address climate change and its negative impacts, to prevent damage to biodiversity, addressing land and soil degradation, to conserve and restore nature, to prevent pollution and address its impacts, and to achieve environmental sustainability;
- b) build knowledge and apply legal, scientific, technical and other capacity in all regions and at all levels to enable governments and decision-makers to draft, enact, implement and enforce environmental law in an effective manner;
- c) work closely with the Secretariats of relevant conventions and agreements that protect and conserve nature to support the further complementary development, implementation and enforcement of those conventions and agreements;
- d) build capacity and educate governmental officials, including judges and public prosecutors, legislators and stakeholders at all levels on furthering the environmental rule of law, by applying environmental law and policy, improving access to information and justice, and facilitating public participation in environmental decision-making to ensure that natural resources are managed equitably and sustainably;
- e) engage with Members, National and Regional Committees, and WCEL members to create, as appropriate, new and strengthen existing expert environmental law networks;

- f) collaborate with all IUCN Commissions on relevant issues of environmental law; and
- g) collaborate with other components of the Union and Secretariat, especially the IUCN Centre for Policy and Law and the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law, and partner institutions, including UNEP, the International Network for Environmental Compliance and Enforcement (INECE), the Global Judicial Institute on the Environment, the Global Institute of Prosecutors for the Environment, and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), to provide education, information and knowledge on law and governance necessary to achieve ecological sustainability.

5. Priorities

WCEL will implement its objectives through its priorities that further the IUCN Programme 2025–2029 and the 20-year Strategic Vision. WCEL's objectives will be implemented in an integrated way through its work and strategic plans, expert membership, specialist groups, its network of collaborating centres of environmental law, the IUCN Policy and Law Centre, the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law, the Union's Regional and National Committees and Offices, and other professional partnerships, as well as with UN institutions pursuant to the Union's UN observer status. Other partners include GLOBE International, INECE, the International Association of Judges, the European Union Forum of Judges for the Environment, the Global Judicial Institute on the Environment, the Forest and Communities Initiative, the Global Institute of Prosecutors for the Environment, the International Association for Water Law, the International Law Association, and regional societies of environmental law.

WCEL will address the following priorities, contingent on the availability of financial resources and through the voluntary contributions of expertise by its members and partners, in order to:

- a) Strengthen WCEL specialist groups and task forces – WCEL will enhance the effectiveness of its specialist groups with particular emphasis on:
 - 1) priority legal themes corresponding to the IUCN Programme 2026–2029 areas;
 - 2) cross-cutting themes such as the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, environmental ethics, human rights, rights of nature, Nature-based Solutions, One Health, Indigenous peoples, local communities, protected areas, Antarctic polar governance, crimes that affect the environment, compliance and enforcement of environmental laws, sound environmental adjudication, access to justice in environmental matters, protection of whistle-blowers and environmental defenders, environmental justice, and national and international financial institutions, and requests made by the World Conservation Congress in relevant resolutions.
- b) Promote the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law – WCEL will promote and collaborate closely with the Academy as the world's leading network of academic institutions and universities engaged in the research and teaching of environmental law.
- c) Collaborate with centres of environmental law – WCEL will continue to recognise, promote and collaborate with centres, institutes of environmental law and other partners in building coordinated information, research, learning and capacity-building programmes on the legal aspects of biodiversity.
- d) Knowledge, capacity-building and technical assistance – WCEL will collaborate with all components of the Union, especially its Members, its Commissions, Regional Offices, the Centre for Policy and Law, and other partners, including UNEP, Convention Secretariats, INECE, the Global Judicial Institute on the Environment, and the Global Institute of Prosecutors for the Environment to develop international agreements and national legislation, and implementation programmes, particularly in less-developed countries and regions affected by conflicts.
- e) Promote 'good governance' and the environmental rule of law – WCEL will work with IUCN Members, IUCN Commissions, UN institutions, governments and other stakeholders to encourage and promote 'good governance' and institutions to respect the environmental rule of

law, with special focus on effective compliance with and enforcement of international and local legislation for the protection of nature.

- f) Support the Judiciary – WCEL will continue to work with the judiciary and other relevant judicial institutions, both international and national, including judicial institutes and associations of judges, to strengthen the Global Judicial Institute on the Environment, to build capacity in the judiciary to provide access to justice, to effectively adjudicate environmental issues, to apply and enforce environmental law, to provide legal reference services and information databanks – including ECOLEX, the Judicial Environmental Portal and InforMEA, and to promote the development and study of environmental jurisprudence.
- g) Promote programmatic synergies among MEAs – WCEL will work with the Secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements in support of more coherent implementation, especially at the national level, governments and stakeholders, and with other conventions, agreements and processes to identify and promote synergies among them and IUCN's mission and Programme.
- h) Strengthen the legal foundations of conventions – WCEL will study and undertake efforts to most effectively enhance the implementation and elaboration of multilateral environmental agreements and conventions related to natural resources and environmental concerns, and provide expertise and capacity-building for strengthening national focal points, national implementation laws, including, for example, efforts to implement commitments, such as those under the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the BBNJ Agreement, and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.
- i) Study and advance the conceptual development of environmental law – WCEL will research the application of new or emerging international and national legal and governance instruments and principles.
- j) Sustainable Development Goals – WCEL will study and undertake efforts with key partners to promote the implementation and strengthen the legal aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

6. Expected results

WCEL's mission, objectives and priorities will contribute to achieving the 20-year strategic vision, the IUCN Programme 2026–2029 and to the three topline objectives: “scaling up action that protects and restores species and ecosystems in a fair and inclusive manner; intensifying the focus of IUCN on the nature-climate nexus for mutually beneficial solutions for the planet; promoting justice, equity and rights, through IUCN's conservation actions to address biodiversity loss and the causes and impacts of climate change, demonstrating that effective conservation is a vehicle for achieving social justice outcomes, and understanding that equity and justice are a cornerstone of sustainable conservation.” Some of the results will be of an intangible nature, difficult to measure in quantifiable terms. However, WCEL expects that by 2029, it will have measurably contributed to:

- a) the integration of environmental law knowledge with the scientific and policy expertise of the IUCN Secretariat and the other IUCN Commissions;
- b) the enhanced collaboration with the Secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements in support of strengthened implementation of the different and relevant multilateral environmental agreements;
- c) the development and dissemination of environmental law expertise and networks worldwide;
- d) the development of knowledge and expertise of environmental courts and tribunals through new and strengthened institutions, including the Global Judicial Institute for the Environment;
- e) the continued growth of the Early Career Group;
- f) the annual colloquia and other programmes of the IUCN Academy of Environmental Law;

- g) the 5th and 6th World Environmental Law Congresses;
- h) the mainstreaming of the Union's effective use of environmental law in its Programme;
- i) the increase in diversity and levels of membership, particularly in countries or regions with few or no members; and
- j) the development of a communication and networking strategy, especially designed for and targeted to the legal profession.

7. Structure

The Commission is led by the Commission Chair, elected by the IUCN membership, and a Deputy Chair, appointed by the IUCN Council on the recommendation of the Commission Chair. The Steering Committee is also appointed by the IUCN Council on the recommendation of the Chair in accordance with the IUCN Statutes and Regulations. The Steering Committee assists the Chair and Deputy Chair in setting the strategic direction and providing oversight of the activities of the Commission. The Commission will work on different topics and aspects through its specialist groups and task forces. In the composition of its Steering Committee, Specialist Groups and Task Force Chairs, the Commission will work to ensure regional and country diversity, as well as a commitment to gender balance and opportunities for engagement of early career members.

8. Membership

Membership of WCEL is a fundamental part of its organisation. WCEL members have a demonstrated commitment to, and strong interest or practice in, environmental law, ethics and the legal protection of nature. Currently, the membership is global, with a significant number of members coming from less developed countries. In the expansion of membership, equitable participation in terms of nationality, gender and age as well as professional background are considered.