

‘A powerful solution’: activists push to make ecocide an international crime

Movement aims to make the mass damage and destruction of ecosystems a prosecutable, international crime against peace



US Stop Ecocide proponent Julia Jackson, center and in sunglasses, demonstrates in New York City on Friday. Photograph: Courtesy of Julia Jackson via Getty

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Mon 26 Sep 2022 06.00 BST

California winemaker Julia Jackson has long grasped the threats posed by the ongoing global climate change crisis, from more intense wildfires and hurricanes to rising sea levels. But for her, those ideas crossed over from the abstract to the tangible when her **home was razed** by the Kincadee wildfire that devastated her native Sonoma county in 2019.

“I lost everything – all my belongings,” Jackson said. “It shook me to my core.”

But Jackson didn’t just use the resources she’s accumulated through her second-generation proprietorship of the US’s ninth-largest wine company, Jackson Family Wines, to rebuild her life following that disaster. She’s since

signed on to lead the US chapter of a global movement to make the mass damage and destruction of ecosystems a prosecutable, international crime against peace known as ecocide.

Jackson and her compatriots in **Stop Ecocide** spent the last week in New York City, meeting with dignitaries participating in Climate Week events as well as the United Nations general assembly. They also marched from Foley Square to Battery Park in Manhattan in one of 450 strike demonstrations planned worldwide on 23 September as part of the **Fridays for Future** movement, which demands climate reparations and justice.

Among other things, they urged voters to cast ballots in the US's upcoming midterm elections in favor of candidates who are against things like deforestation and want to limit greenhouse gas emissions, which are some of the factors contributing to global warming and its effects: longer-lasting wildfires, more potent hurricanes and coastal erosion.

Yet topping the group's list of demands was for countries across the world to recognize ecocide as an offense against peace – carrying fines and even prison time – through the UN's international criminal court.

Jackson was quick to point out recently that Stop Ecocide doesn't want to see everyday, working-class car drivers or frequent airline passengers be charged as international criminals and hauled into the same court which prosecutes genocide and wartime atrocities. They just want an ecocide charge to be an arrow in the quiver of those trying to rein in government-level policymakers whose agendas are exacerbating the climate crisis.

As others have done over the years, Jackson – who also leads the climate-focused non-profit Grounded – singled out the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, as an ideal candidate to be prosecuted for ecocide because of the accelerated rate at which the Amazon rainforest has been destroyed under his administration.

Bolsonaro, among other things, has eliminated environmental protection programs meant to shield the Amazon, which absorbs greenhouse gases and is an important line of defense against global warming. He has also sought to open

Indigenous reservations – along with other protected lands – to mining and agricultural business ventures, exacerbating harmful emissions.

“It’s not chopping down one tree” that ecocide would aim to criminalize, Jackson said. “It’s severe mass destruction of the Earth.”

There are hurdles, including procedural ones, for the movement to overcome. Two-thirds of the countries recognizing the UN’s international criminal court would need to approve adding ecocide as an offense.

That translates to a total of more than 80 countries whose approval is required, and even then nations opposed to ratifying it could limit its enforcement over their territories and citizens.

Nonetheless, Jackson **estimates** about two dozen countries at this point have expressed a recorded interest in the concept of classifying ecocide as an international crime, including the United Kingdom, Spain, Iceland, France, Mexico and Chile.

She hopes the movement’s momentum only continues building from there, especially after the last week.

As the executive director of the global Stop Ecocide movement, Jojo Mehta, put it in a statement: “We have to ... prevent mass damage and destruction of the living world ... by recognizing it as the crime we all know it to be.

“Ecocide law is a powerful solution to protect nature, climate and our future while providing a guiding legal framework for positive change.”