

# **It IS risky being green: A global analysis of crimes against environmental activists, researchers and journalists.**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Environmental activists, scholars and journalists perform an invaluable role in bringing to light the many challenges that our ecosystems face. Civil society organizations often lobby governments to impose stricter environmental regulations on polluters, create training and capacity building programmes to educate society about global environmental change, and pressure industries to reduce their resource consumption, improve their performance and reduce their negative impact on ecosystems. Environmental journalists investigate many challenging issues, generating stories about illegal logging, river pollution, climatic change and environmental injustice, among many other important topics. One would expect that these important activities would be valued and protected. Academics and research scholars study environmental phenomena and the causes of ecosystem degradation, urban pollution and climatic change. These researchers engage in public scholarship to inform the public of the environmental risks our society faces nowadays. However, in recent years, we've witnessed a staggering increase in number of crimes against environmental activists. These concerns, coupled with anecdotal evidence of violence against environmental journalists have increasingly worried academics, wondering if these attacks have followed a similar trend. In this paper, I systematically analyze global trends in crimes against environmental activists, academics and journalists. Using an innovative dataset of killings of activists, as well as longitudinal media scans, and a database of Twitter API content, I investigate potential factors that have led to the rise in crimes against environmental activists, journalists and academics. I posit that covering the environment may be a potentially high risk factor for journalists, a profession already under siege. I also probe whether environmental scholars have also faced risks of violence. Moreover, I also explore which issue areas have become potentially lethal for environmental activists.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Environmental activism has been an important component of modern global environmental governance, and has been gaining popularity in the past 30 years. Without ecologically-focused non-governmental organizations (ENGOS), it would be practically impossible for governments to exert enough pressure on non-compliant, polluting industries. Civil society organizations have a very important role to play in the environmental regulatory governance system, because they participate in local governing councils, lobby against irresponsible resource appropriators, and establish training and educational programmes for children, young adults and the general public. These capacity-building programmes are aimed at teaching individuals how to protect our shared environment.

While there are some reasonable and legitimate criticisms of environmental NGOs and their role in the global environmental governance system, their activities are important and necessary to provide checks and balances on irresponsible (or incapable) governments and polluting (or resource-appropriating) industries. However important their role, it's become increasingly challenging for civil society organizations to continue doing their job given the increased risk they face.

This is, to my understanding, the first scholarly and systematic analysis of environmental activist killings available in the literature. There are other tangentially related bodies of scholarship that have looked at how environmental activists are framed as terrorists (the eco-terrorism literature), and a few case study-treatments of specific instances of persecution of environmental activists. There is a bit of work tracking environmental killings, but it's not systematic nor does it provide any insight into the challenges facing activists<sup>1</sup>.

However, I have not found before any systematic analysis of which issues have been more visible in the media, and how this may have affected the likelihood of an environmental activist receiving an attempt on his or her life. I consider this study part of a larger research agenda on the role of civil society in influencing global and domestic environmental politics<sup>2</sup>.

This research is particularly fascinating (and worrisome) considering recent, highly visible assassinations of environmental activists. Bertha Caceres, a world-renowned

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<sup>1</sup> See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental\\_killings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_killings)

<sup>2</sup> One of my most well known lines of research is the study of transnational environmental activism in North America, and how Mexican, Canadian and American environmental NGOs build transnational coalitions to influence domestic politics in the North American region. See Pacheco-Vega (2005, 2015).

environmentalist and the 2015 recipient of the Goldman whose activism stopped the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam in Honduras. Cáceres' assassination<sup>3</sup> appears to have turned the tide in a society that had apparently previously ignored the plight of eco-warriors, or ecological activists.

## METHODOLOGY

I exploit an innovative report on environmental activist killings produced by Global Witness<sup>4</sup>, and complement this dataset by undertaking a global media scan to generate a proximate measure (an index, if you will) of killing visibility<sup>5</sup>.

The first part of the paper, where I analyze killings of environmental activists, sets the framework for an extension to the challenges facing environmental journalist and ecological researchers in an increasingly violent world. Much like leaders and members of civil society organizations that engage in activism in high-risk areas, journalists have been targeted for speaking truth to power. This phenomenon has been less visible than the killing of activists, but it is equally troublesome. Press freedom is an important component of a democratic society, and when journalists who follow a relatively unpopular topic (the environment) are also targeted and killed, silencing these voices creates a huge negative impact, not only because

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/world/americas/honduras-arrests-4-men-in-killing-of-berta-caceres.html> Cáceres' killing sparked an outpour of rage and anger throughout social media and traditional media outlets covered it heavily.

<sup>4</sup> Report can be downloaded in English here

[https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18482/On\\_Dangerous\\_Ground.pdf](https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18482/On_Dangerous_Ground.pdf) and in Spanish here [https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18483/En\\_Terreno\\_Peligroso.pdf](https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18483/En_Terreno_Peligroso.pdf) Global Witness' press release shows a spatial analysis of killings <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/dangerous-ground/>

<sup>5</sup> This paper intended to use both, but due to personal circumstances, for now I have only been able to use global results from the first database.

environmental protectors will be less likely to raise the issue and lobby against governments, but also because it becomes an issue of “reporting or surviving”<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, given the degree of violence that journalists and activists have been facing, it’s not difficult to extend this analysis to potential risks that environmental researchers may be facing, particularly in light of recent news about hacking and harassment that public health scholars had been facing<sup>7</sup>.

In the paper, I argue that it’s hard to extricate the killings of environmental activists from those assassinations associated with the work of eco-journalists because they’re often linked with one another. For example, Revkin reported in 2012 about the killing of a Cambodian journalist that was following and exposing rampant illegal logging in Cambodia<sup>8</sup>. Linkages with the work of environmental scholars are much harder to trace, however.

For the second part of the paper I will then expand the analysis by zeroing in to Mexico, and following the assassinations (executed or attempted) of environmental activists within the Mexican territory through a media scan. In a third component of the analysis, I will also track systematically the fate of journalists who have followed these activists and their own survival. This is important to study, because if killings of environmental activists become more visible thanks to the work of journalists, their own safety may be compromised. For example, anecdotally, a recently gunned-down journalist, Miroslava Breach, was following the case of Indigenous people’s displacements from the Chihuahua Sierra Madre. If there is a correlation between killings of activists and assassinations of journalists, it would mark a potential risk

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<sup>6</sup> This is already the case with journalists who follow and report on crime, drug trafficking organizations and policies associated with this field, but it is quite concerning that an issue area that could be perceived as relatively tame has become also a minefield for journalists. See [https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/when-journalists-are-dying-to-expose-environmental-plunder/?\\_r=0](https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/17/when-journalists-are-dying-to-expose-environmental-plunder/?_r=0) for an in-depth journalistic account of the killings of environmental journalists.

<sup>7</sup> A highly-publicized report about the hacking of Dr. Simon Barquera’s smartphone, showed that the soft drinks industry may be already in cahoots with the Mexican government to ensure that sales of soda continue at the alarmingly high pace that they have sustained so far. Mexico is the top consumer of Coca-Cola worldwide. Barquera is a public health researcher and he has been actively lobbying for the implementation of a soda tax. See: [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/technology/hack-mexico-soda-tax-advocates.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/technology/hack-mexico-soda-tax-advocates.html?_r=0)

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://dotearth.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/another-murder-on-the-resource-frontier-this-time-a-journalist-in-cambodia/>

factor for anyone engaging in these activities, and would most likely deter any individual intending to enter this field. The same implication would apply to environmental researchers.

I will also conduct a longitudinal analysis of media scan to track peaks and lows in issue salience from 2015 through early 2017. While this analysis is only focused on environmental activist killings, I can also trace environmental journalists. Finally, I will use Twitter's Search function and exploit the API to download tweets related to a case study, the Bertha Caceres killing, to assess points at which issue visibility peaked and where it weaned. This is important for any study that examines high-impact events. A future extension of this work would focus on various case studies, or using big-data, text-as-data web scrapping and parsing methods to grab and analyze all tweets related to environmentally-related killings.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

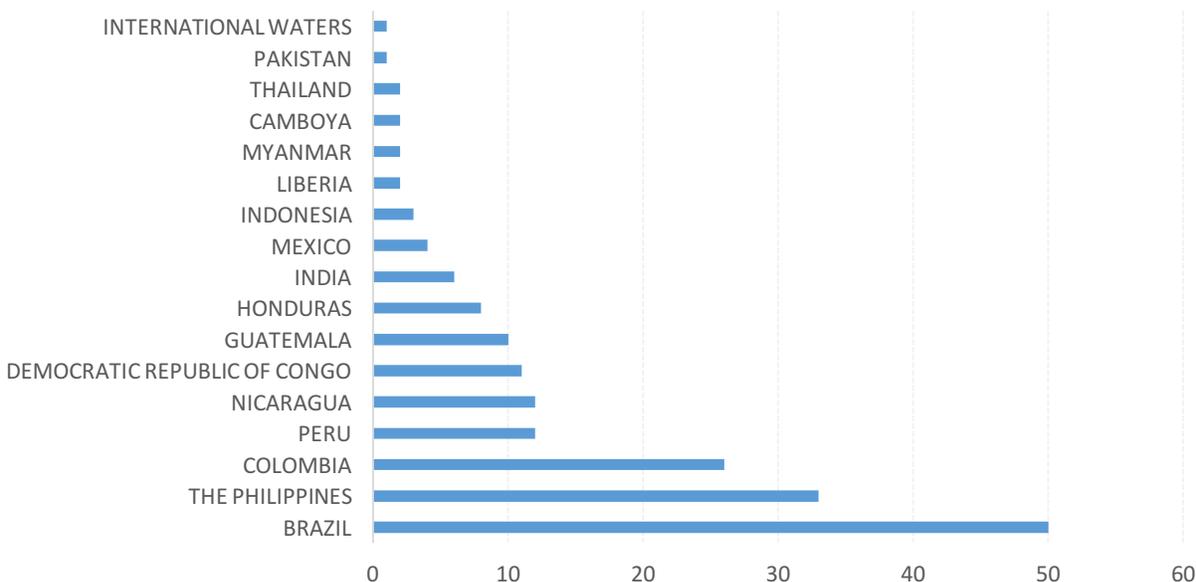
For the analytical framework of the paper, I aim to use agenda-setting theory to examine issue salience and relevance. While I haven't yet fully developed this idea, I believe that we can use agenda-setting theory to trace those environmental issues that become more salient in the public agenda and then cross-link with those activists who have been murdered.

## **DATA AND ANALYSIS**

For the first part of the paper, I focused on the Global Witness dataset. Contrary to what I expected, the full database isn't freely available. I used the published results from the report to reconstruct components of the dataset. I then followed stories associated with the results through a media scan. Somewhat not surprisingly, Brazil is the top country for killings of environmental activists. This could be inferred from the richness in natural resources that has been under siege for quite sometime. There's a lot of illegal logging activity in Brazil, and it's quite concerning that the vast majority of killings in Brazil, from the Global Witness report, indicates that there is military or police intervention<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The full report is available here: [https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18482/On\\_Dangerous\\_Ground.pdf](https://www.globalwitness.org/documents/18482/On_Dangerous_Ground.pdf)



**Figure 1. Killings of environmental activist by country (2015 data, N=185. Source: Global Witness Report.)**

While Brazil, Colombia and the Philippines remain the top 3 countries for killings of environmental activists, the fact that there are at least 4 documented cases in Mexico for 2015 is a cause not only for pause but also for worry. The recent killing of Isidro Baldenegro Lopez (a Tarahumara indigenous activist dedicated to protecting pine and oak forests in the Sierra Madre de Mexico) also raised the alarm, given that Baldenegro Lopez had (like Berta Caceres) won the Goldman Environmental Prize before, in 2005<sup>10</sup>.

One of the biggest challenges to understanding the potential risks that environmental activists, journalists and scholars face is that there is an absolute dearth of data. It's incredibly hard to evaluate whether protecting the environment is a risk factor for reporters, researchers and civil society organization leaders and militants, because we lack enough data. Without the full dataset and codebook, it's hard to predict where are more activists being killed, and which environmental issue can be associated with it.

However, the report presented by Global Witness does provide some basic trends. Others, it would be relatively easy to surmise. For example, in Mexico three of the main issues remain in the environmental activist discourse: the negative impacts of Canadian mining in

<sup>10</sup> Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2017/01/18/asesinato-ambientalista-en-mexico-isidro-baldenegro-berta-caceres/>

indigenous communities<sup>11</sup>, illegal logging and deforestation in the Sierra Madre, and anti-water dam projects' activists<sup>12</sup>.

The salience of environmental activist killings increased around 2009, when journalist Angelica Enciso called attention to the fact that there had been already 5 murders associated with activism focused on ecological issues<sup>13</sup>. But it's not been until 2017 that we've seen an actual emphasis on the risks that environmental activists are currently facing. What's even more worrisome is that we seem to need focusing events (aka key milestones) to force us to think about these risks.

For the second component of the paper (environmental journalists), it was much harder to get information than for environmental activists. I used the 2016 Reporters without Frontiers Round Up of Journalists Killed Worldwide<sup>14</sup>. I also reviewed the RSF report<sup>15</sup> "Environmental Journalism in an Increasingly Hostile Climate". Data from RSF indicate that in 2015 two environmental journalists were killed, with a total of 5 killings in India, Cambodia and Philippines in the past 5 years. A total of 4 deaths between 2012 and 2014 occurred in Cambodia. 11 cases of attempts against environmental journalists' lives were registered in Peru, Ecuador and Guatemala.

One of the most important linkages that we must make is the connection between environmental research, journalism and activism. Specifically, we ought to recognize that activists on the front line face huge risks to their safety, but along the same line, so do reporters who speak truth to power and who highlight the challenges facing civil society organizations focused on environmental protection. The Philippines, Indonesia, Russia and Cambodia are all

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<sup>11</sup> Mariano Abarca, an activist who confronted the Canadian mining company Blackfire was murdered on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009. See: <http://movimientom4.org/2014/11/a-5-anos-del-asesinato-de-mariano-abarca-por-su-resistencia-contra-la-minera-blackfire-demandamos-justicia/>

<sup>12</sup> Towards the beginning of August of 2013, Noe Salomon Vazquez Ortiz, an environmental activist who led an anti-dam movement was assassinated in Veracruz days before he launched a national congress focused on stopping the construction of new water dams in Mexico. See: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/08/03/politica/012n1pol> Vázquez Ortiz opposed the El Naranjal and Bandera Blanca projects to be sited in the Zongolica region.

<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/12/31/sociedad/025n1soc>

<sup>14</sup> The report can be downloaded here: <https://rsf.org/en/news/2016-round-74-journalists-killed-worldwide>

<sup>15</sup> See: <https://rsf.org/en/news/environmental-journalism-increasingly-hostile-climate>

countries where doing ecologically-focused reporting is dangerous<sup>16</sup>. Nevertheless, as I've outlined above, reporters in Mexico who also cover environmental issues may also face the same kind of risks, if not worse. As RSF itself has indicated, being a reporter in Mexico is dangerous enough, being an environmental journalist may increase the risk even more.

## **PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The implications of my analysis are worrisome and concerning for anybody conducting activities to protect our shared environment. Be it environmental journalists, activists or researchers, defending our ecosystems has become a dangerous activity, one that puts lives at risk and that has the potential to become less attractive to individuals who might otherwise contribute to a very noble cause.

The largest challenge I see to understanding patterns of violence against activists, journalists and academics is the lack of systematic data gathering. Because these events gain salience only when a major report comes out (like the Global Witness one), it is hard to continue tracking these attacks. Moreover, given the lack of a coherent codebook for all instances of violence against environmental activists, journalists and academics, it is hard to determine whether an attack was motivated by the specific issue at hand (environmental protection) or whether there were other incentives.

While doing this kind of research is somewhat grim, it is also quite necessary. Doing a systematic analysis may help us shed some light on possible patterns (e.g. specific environmental issues that are more salient and relevant). It is also important to discern geographical areas where these risks may be heightened. For example, given how important water access is for mining and other types of industrial activity, protesters against dams may also be targeted more frequently. This preliminary analysis allows me to map a research agenda that would strengthen our understanding of the challenges facing environmental journalists, activists and reporters.

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<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.voanews.com/a/report-calls-cambodia-deadliest-country-environmental-reporting/3095928.html>