

Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Group on Crimes that Affect the Environment *UNTOC framework*

- First Meeting: 30 June–2 July 2025, Vienna
- Second Meeting: 24–26 February 2026, Vienna



Introduction

This brief synthesizes the discussions and key developments from the first meeting and outlines the anticipated agenda of the forthcoming second expert meeting of the Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Group on Crimes that Affect the Environment (CAE), established under the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC).

The first meeting of the Expert Group took place from 30 June to 2 July 2025. The second meeting, to be held from 24 to 26 February 2026, will continue this work and is expected to advance draft recommendations to the UNTOC Conference of the Parties (COP) for consideration at its next session in October 2026.

IUCN is formally invited to engage in this process in an observer capacity and participates in the meetings of the Expert Group, providing technical legal expertise and policy input.

Background

UNTOC COP [Resolution 12/4](#), entitled “*Enhancing measures to prevent and combat crimes that affect the environment falling within the scope of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*,” adopted at the 12th session, mandates the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to convene an [Open-ended intergovernmental expert group on crimes that affect the environment falling within the scope of the UNTOC](#).

This is the first time an UNTOC COP Resolution has requested States to consider an additional protocol on crimes that affect the environment. It follows [Resolution 31/1](#) of the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ), which, *inter alia*, invites Member States to provide their views on possible responses, including the potential of an additional protocol to the UNTOC, to address any gaps that may exist in the current international legal framework to prevent and combat illicit trafficking in wildlife.

Mandate of the Expert Group

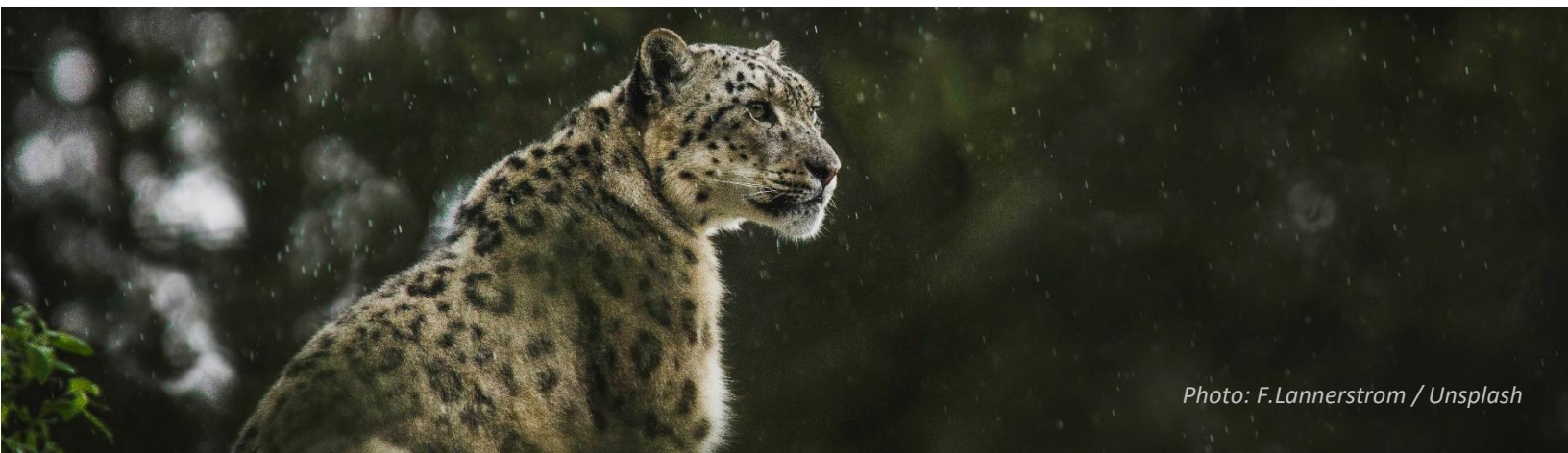
Pursuant to [Resolution 12/4](#), the mandate of the Open-ended intergovernmental expert group on crimes that affect the environment falling within the scope of UNTOC and related offences covered by the Convention is to:

- (a) Take stock of the application and collective implementation of the Organized Crime Convention in addressing such crimes;
- (b) Identify any gaps that may exist in the international legal framework and that could be addressed under the Convention to prevent and combat such crimes;
- (c) Consider possible responses relevant to those gaps, including the possibility, feasibility and merits of any additional protocol to the Organized Crime Convention.

Why This Matters

Crimes that affect the environment — including wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, illegal mining, waste trafficking and serious pollution — are among the fastest-growing forms of transnational organised crime. It is the world’s fourth largest and most profitable criminal activity, growing by 5-7% annually (Interpol and UNEP). These crimes undermine biodiversity, fuel corruption, disrupt sustainable development, and endanger the lives and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and environmental defenders.

Strengthening international cooperation and legal frameworks is therefore essential to ensure effective prevention, enforcement and access to justice. Addressing environmental crime through the UNTOC framework offers an opportunity to enhance cross-border cooperation, strengthen accountability, and close legal gaps exploited by organised criminal networks.



First Meeting of the Expert Group

30 June – 2 July 2025, Vienna

The [first meeting](#) convened over 250 experts from governments and international organizations, around discussions on:

A. Stocktaking: National Experiences and Best Practices

Experts exchanged information on national efforts to combat environmental crimes, noting that these crimes:

- fall within the scope of organized criminal activity more often than previously recognized;
- are linked with corruption, financial crime and other illicit markets;
- remain unevenly criminalized and inconsistently prosecuted across jurisdictions.

It was also stressed that uneven criminalization and low penalties prevent environmental offences from qualifying as “serious crimes” under Article 2(b) UNTOC, limiting access to international cooperation tools such as mutual legal assistance, extradition, and joint investigations.

B. Identifying Legal Gaps

Several gaps in the international legal framework were highlighted, *inter alia*:

- Lack of harmonized definitions for environmental crimes.
- Insufficient or inconsistent criminalization under national law to classify certain environmental crimes as “serious crimes” under UNTOC.
- Limited mechanisms for international cooperation, including mutual legal assistance, extradition, and joint investigations.
- Weak liability provisions for legal persons benefiting from environmental crimes.
- Absence of frameworks for environmental restoration, remediation, or reparation.
- Fragmentation between *lex specialis* multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and UNTOC, leave significant enforcement gaps.

C. Exploring Responses: The Case for a New Legal Instrument

Experts exchanged considered options for addressing these gaps, including the possibility of amending the text of the UNTOC and developing an *instrumentum novum* – namely, an additional protocol to UNTOC on crimes that affect the environment.

Key elements proposed for such a protocol or legal instrument include:

- Comprehensive and flexible definitions and defining the scope of crimes that affect the environment, including wildlife trafficking, forest crimes, fisheries crimes, illegal mining, waste trafficking, and pollution;
- Robust *corporate liability* and supply chain transparency obligations;
- Enhanced international cooperation through mutual legal assistance, joint investigations, extradition, and real-time data sharing;
- Provisions to trace, freeze, seize, and confiscate criminal proceeds (*proceeds of crime doctrine*);
- Safeguards for environmental defenders, and local communities;
- Mechanisms for environmental remediation, restorative justice, and compensation for victims;
- Alignment with existing MEAs to ensure complementarity and avoiding duplication;
- A robust, independent review mechanism to monitor implementation, remedying the absence of compliance monitoring under UNTOC.

Second Meeting of the Expert Group

24–26 February 2026, Vienna

According to the [Provisional Agenda](#) of the [second meeting](#), delegates will:

▪ Deepen the Stocktaking (*Agenda Item 2*)

States will continue evaluating how UNTOC tools are or could be applied to crimes that affect the environment.

▪ Refine the Identification of Gaps (*Agenda Item 3*)

Discussions will further analyze gaps in national and international frameworks, including criminalization gaps, conceptual and definitional divergences, cooperation limitations, procedural and institutional shortcomings.

▪ Consider Possible Responses (*Agenda Item 4*)

Delegations will discuss potential measures under existing UNTOC provisions, opportunities to strengthen domestic implementation, feasibility and merits of an additional protocol, and forms of guidance or recommended practices that the COP may endorse.

▪ Prepare Draft Recommendations (*Agenda Item 6*)

[Recommendations](#), under discussion, where consensus is reached, will be forwarded to the UNTOC COP next session in October 2026, for possible endorsement and next steps, including potential intersessional work, in accordance with Resolution 12/4.

IUCN's Engagement

IUCN and its [World Commission on Environmental Law \(WCEL\)](#) are closely following and actively engaging in the Expert Group process on crimes that affect the environment under UNTOC.

IUCN actively engaged in the first meeting of the Expert Group in 2025, contributing technical [legal analysis](#) and policy perspectives to support discussions on gaps in the current international framework. IUCN will also participate in the second meeting, continuing to provide legal expertise and engage constructively with States and partners as deliberations advance.

Through this process, IUCN aims to support international and national efforts to strengthen legal frameworks to address crimes that affect the environment by:

- Supporting enhanced implementation of UNTOC and other relevant international agreements, and contribute constructively to discussions on the possible development of new legal instruments;
- Providing legal and technical expertise to help ensure that biodiversity protection, ecosystem integrity, and sustainable development considerations are appropriately reflected in any proposed framework or recommendations emerging from the Expert Group;
- Advocating for nature and biodiversity protection to be central in the efforts of strengthening legal frameworks and international cooperation;
- Promoting coherent and harmonized legal definitions and approaches to environmental crime, facilitating international cooperation, mutual legal assistance, extradition, and joint investigations;
- Encouraging strengthened, rights-based governance, enforcement and capacity-building measures that enable States to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute environmental crimes effectively;
- Promoting justice, rights-based safeguards and effective protection measures for environmental defenders, Indigenous Peoples, local communities and other vulnerable groups within the broader UNTOC framework;

- Engaging with States, UNODC and other partners to promote strong, coherent frameworks and to support a coordinated, multilateral response to crimes that affect the environment.

Through its sustained engagement in this important process, IUCN seeks to ensure that global responses to environmental crime are legally robust, biodiversity-centred, and grounded in principles of justice and sustainable development.

IUCN Policy Foundations

IUCN's engagement in this process builds on IUCN's longstanding commitment to addressing environmental crimes, as set out in numerous Resolutions and Recommendations adopted by its Members. Most recently, the [2025 World Conservation Congress](#) adopted IUCN 2026-2029 Programme and several Resolutions reinforcing this mandate, including:

- ✓ [Resolution 8.033 – Port State measures regarding illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing](#)
- ✓ [Resolution 8.048 – Crimes that Affect the Environment \(CAE\)](#)
- ✓ [Resolution 8.057 – Addressing wildlife trafficking and the management of seized or confiscated live wild animals](#)
- ✓ [Resolution 8.060 – Recognising the crime of ecocide to protect nature](#)
- ✓ [Resolution 8.082 – Urgent action to prevent illegal succulent plant trade](#)

These build upon other Resolutions calling for treating organized crime impacting the environment as a serious crime (Resolution [8.048](#) and [7.038](#)), combat wildlife trafficking (Resolutions [7.040](#), [7.047](#), [7.054](#), [7.059](#), [7.090](#) and [7.103](#)), strengthen mechanisms to fight environmental crime (Resolutions [6.070](#) and [6.076](#)), including during armed conflicts (Resolutions [8.064](#), [7.042](#) and [4.097](#)), and incorporate human rights perspectives (Resolution [7.115](#) and [6.025](#)).

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