



EMPOWERING
INVESTIGATIVE
JOURNALISM ON
ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME:
**Insights
from a Global
Training**

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In September-October 2025, [The UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute \(UNICRI\)](#), the [Nature Crime Alliance](#), and the [Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency \(FACT\) Coalition](#) hosted a 3-day training on investigative techniques for environmental crime journalism. The training provided a valuable opportunity to share information, resources and best practices with over 100 participating journalists from countries around the world.

The experience also provided key insights into the barriers that environmental and investigative journalists currently face – and how future initi-

atives might empower media professionals with resources and strategies to overcome these barriers. This briefing paper highlights specific challenges facing journalists and media professionals covering environmental crime today, drawing on survey responses and insights gleaned through the 2025 training workshop.

We hope that this briefing paper inspires future actions by international organizations, media companies, funders, civil society and other stakeholders to address the needs identified and to empower the vitally important work of environmental journalism.

Key takeaways

- Lack of funding for investigations and limited access to reliable data emerged as the two most pressing challenges facing journalists working on environmental crime.
- Personal safety risks and gaps in technical and investigative skills were cited as significant barriers to effective reporting.
- The survey highlights a global need for more financial and technical support for environmental crime journalism, with respondents citing a need for fellowships and grants, improved access to data, and mentorship opportunities.
- Participants also identified networking opportunities, enabling journalists to engage with experts from law enforcement and NGOs, as a key area that would support more accurate and impactful reporting on environmental crime.

Background: Journalism's role in tackling environmental crime

Environmental crime is one of the fastest-growing forms of transnational organised crime, fueling deforestation, pollution, and biodiversity loss while eroding governance and sustainable development. Despite its global scale and human impact, it remains underreported and poorly understood by the public.

Investigative journalism serves as a cornerstone of environmental accountability. It often represents the first line of exposure for crimes that governments and institutions later respond to through policy and enforcement. Journalists identify emerging threats, trace illicit financial and environmental flows, and illuminate crimes that often unfold in the shadows of the global economy. In many cases, their investigations are the starting point for policy action, revealing systemic problems long before institutions are ready to act.

Effective storytelling is central to this process. Turning evidence into compelling narratives transforms awareness into impact: *if the story is not told, accountability does not follow*. By framing complex issues in ways that resonate with the public, investigative journalists connect local realities and harms to global consequences, making environmental crime visible, relatable, and actionable.

Yet this work is risky and often carried out under pressure and in dangerous conditions. Reporters confront threats to their personal safety, disinformation campaigns, and limited institutional protection. Despite these obstacles, environmental journalists persist — driven by the belief that evidence-based storytelling can advance justice, transparency, and reform.

Strengthening investigative journalism is therefore essential to raising awareness, exposing illicit networks, and driving accountability.

Trainings

To support the efforts of journalists and media professionals working on environmental crime, the Nature Crime Alliance, hosted by the World Resources Institute, in partnership with its members UNICRI and the FACT Coalition, convened a three-day online workshop (September-October 2025) to enrich media professionals' understanding of environmental crimes, how they work, and techniques to investigate them.

More than 100 journalists and communications professionals from across the world took part in *Uncovering Environmental Crimes: Specialised Training for Journalists and Communications Professionals*, which also featured contributions from experts from the European Space Agency, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Pulitzer Center Rainforest Investigations Network, World Wide Fund for Nature UK (WWF-UK), Earth League International, International Wildlife Trust, the University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins University, Source International, and World Resources Institute (WRI).

The training built on UNICRI's long-standing work supporting journalism and strategic communications on environmental crime and aligned with the Nature Crime Alliance's Strategic Communications priority area. Through a combination

of expert lectures, case studies, and hands-on sessions, the course explored how investigative techniques can be applied to uncover crimes that harm the planet and the people who depend on it.

Insights

In order to capture a snapshot of the experience of reporting on environmental crime, the organizers developed a survey for participants in the trainings. A total of 49 participants completed the evaluation survey, representing 44.5% of the 110 participants who attended the training. The survey was anonymous and completed online.

The survey responses, combined with insights during the trainings themselves, provide a view of the current state of journalism on environmental crime, expressed here as key themes.

“ The training helped me better understand the link between environmental crime and other forms of organized crime, learn more about crime networks and money laundering, identify red flags of organized criminal activity, and gain awareness about law enforcement challenges. Also helped me place my journalism within a more global context. ”

Key Themes

1 – Limited access to data is a major barrier

Limited access to reliable data was the joint-top challenge identified by participants in the survey, with more than half reporting it as a major barrier to their work.

Data-driven journalism is transforming how environmental crimes are uncovered and communicated. Scientific evidence — ranging from pollution measurements to satellite imagery — provides the precision and credibility needed to substantiate complex investigations. By combining field

reporting with environmental science, journalists can move beyond anecdotal accounts to produce verifiable, actionable findings that withstand scrutiny.

Access to reliable data on contamination, deforestation, and illegal resource extraction can shift public perception, inform policy debates, and strengthen judicial outcomes. Yet access to trustworthy data remains uneven. Journalists frequently encounter obstacles such as corporate secrecy, paywalled research, and limited familiarity with scientific methods or tools.

Building capacity to collect, interpret, and communicate scientific data is therefore critical. Participants emphasised practical approaches — from verifying peer-reviewed studies to using low-cost citizen-science instruments such as handheld analysers and rapid test kits — to document environmental harm and visualise its human impact. Digital platforms like [Global Forest Watch](#) are also expanding journalists' reach, offering real-time satellite monitoring and contextual datasets that reveal patterns of deforestation, illegal mining, and other environmental crimes.

Developing partnerships between scientists, civil society organizations, and media can ensure rigor and accessibility. Credible data serves as both shield and amplifier — protecting journalists through verification and amplifying their stories through evidence.

“ One of the main challenges in conducting investigative journalism on environmental issues is accessing territories or remote areas where these crimes usually occur... One of the biggest challenges is obtaining high-resolution imagery in regions such as Latin America and other parts of the Global South, where it is often scarce and very costly. ”

2 – Funding is a key challenge

Lack of funding for investigations was the other joint-top concern reported by respondents to the survey. Fellowships, residencies and grants were cited as the number one type of support that respondents feel could make the biggest difference to their work.

Several initiatives support journalism on environmental crimes, such as the [Pulitzer Center's Rainforest Investigations Network](#), which funds one-year fellowships enabling journalists to report on deforestation across the Amazon, the Congo Basin, and Southeast Asia. [Mongabay](#) and the [World Resources Institute](#) are also partnering to support environmental crime reporting in a range of contexts.

These initiatives have shown the value of supporting journalism on environmental crime. Yet they are relatively small in scale, with limited places available each year. The survey suggests that demand continues to outstrip the opportunities currently available to journalists seeking support to expose environmental crime around the world.

3 – High concern around personal safety

Risks to personal safety were ranked as the third most significant challenge facing environmental journalists in the survey. Given the high number of journalists who have lost their lives while reporting on environmental issues, this concern is understandable. A 2024 [UNEP report](#) listed environmental journalism as the second most dangerous form of journalism after war reporting, highlighting the very real risks involved.

Approximately 40% of respondents stressed the need for more safety and digital security training to help to mitigate these risks.

4 – Mixed picture on law enforcement engagement

Responses revealed a limited degree of structured cooperation between investigative journalists and law enforcement agencies. Forty-seven per cent of respondents reported no collaboration with enforcement, while 43% occasionally and informally. Only 10% reported ongoing and structured engagement.

Given the obvious contribution journalism can make to uncovering environmental crime and

collecting information and evidence that can support law enforcement investigations, this represents an ongoing missed opportunity. Journalists also report frustration that their investigations do not have the impact they had hoped for at the law enforcement level.

One area in particular where journalists' efforts can be of unique value to law enforcement operations is transnational crime. While environmental crime is inherently transnational, successful cross-border prosecutions remain rare. This reflects not only limited capacity but deep structural obstacles in how enforcement systems operate. Fragmented coordination, cumbersome procedures, and corruption combine to allow criminal networks to exploit jurisdictional gaps with near impunity. In this context, investigative journalism plays a crucial bridging role. By uncovering cross-border linkages that law enforcement agencies overlook or cannot pursue, journalists help map the full architecture of environmental crime, from illegal extraction to money laundering and political protection.

Reported barriers preventing closer collaboration between journalists and law enforcement include a lack of institutional trust, fear of retaliation, and differing professional cultures. These findings confirm that journalists and enforcement agencies often operate in parallel silos, despite shared objectives. Participants expressed interest in frameworks that facilitate dialogue with law enforcement while safeguarding editorial independence.

5 – Crime convergence as an emerging theme

Environmental crime is no longer a niche issue - it has become a lucrative pillar of transnational organised crime. It offers low risk and high reward, exploiting weak regulation, limited enforcement, and corruption at multiple levels. From illegal mining and logging to wildlife trafficking and waste dumping, these activities are deeply intertwined with other serious offenses, including money laundering, human smuggling, and drug trafficking.

This convergence of criminal activities represents a new frontier for both journalism and law enforcement. The same networks involved in wildlife trafficking may also finance illicit mining or launder profits through the legal economy. Environmental destruction often serves as either a direct business model or a byproduct of other criminal

enterprises. As awareness of crime convergence grows, journalists have an opportunity to tackle environmental crime stories from perspectives that extend beyond their environmental impact.

Investigating this convergence requires an understanding of overlapping markets and hidden financial flows. It also requires exposing the corruption that enables these networks to operate with impunity. By uncovering how environmental crime intersects with broader criminal economies, journalists and researchers can help shift policy responses from isolated enforcement actions to integrated strategies addressing entire criminal ecosystems.

“ Today’s workshop motivated me to explore other sources of satellite imagery and continue seeking partnerships to strengthen our investigations. ”

Recommendations

It is clear that funding is a major challenge facing environmental crime reporting. In a world where seismic shifts are taking place across aid, development and philanthropy – placing financial pressures on most sectors involved in fighting environmental crime – bridging this funding gap will require renewed efforts to raise awareness of the critical role of journalism in exposing these crimes.

Based on the key themes that emerged through the training and associated survey, UNICRI, the FACT Coalition and the Nature Crime Alliance have identified several recommendations beyond funding that could improve the state of environmental crime journalism and increase its impact.

1. Establish an environmental crime data platform

The lack of access to data cited by respondents could be addressed through the creation of a centralized platform that consolidates existing data sources relevant to environmental crime journalism. Several respondents reported limited

awareness of existing open-source, free platforms that provide relevant data and imagery. An index that collates all such resources would close this knowledge gap and boost journalists' capacity to conduct investigations.

However, this would not solve broader structural challenges, including the prevalence of pay-

walled data and the limited publication of relevant information by law enforcement and regulatory authorities. Addressing these gaps will require wider efforts to promote open-access data and greater transparency across institutions.

Illustrative example: Investigating environmental crime in restricted contexts

A case study in Myanmar highlighted how journalists can document environmental crimes in highly restricted and high-risk contexts where physical access is limited. By combining satellite imagery, open-source data, and financial and trade analysis, the reporting demonstrated how deforestation and resource extraction can be investigated remotely, while also revealing links between environmental harm, conflict dynamics, and illicit economies. The case illustrated how technical evidence, when paired with clear storytelling, can bring visibility to environmental crimes that would otherwise remain hidden.

2. Develop guidelines to improve collaboration between journalism and law enforcement

The barriers that prevent journalists from collaborating more closely with law enforcement identified by the survey could be lowered by developing best practices for cooperation between these two key stakeholders.

Guidelines that help journalists align the evidence they gather with information assessment frameworks used by law enforcement agencies – thus making this information more actionable for law enforcement purposes – could increase the impact of environmental journalism.

3. Establish a cross-sector network for information exchanges

There was strong support among respondents for networking opportunities with experts from law enforcement, civil society organisations, and finance. Creating a network to enable this engagement in a more structured way would enrich journalists' understanding of environmental crimes, particularly in areas such as crime convergence. Building stronger working relationships across this network could also raise awareness of the value of journalism in tackling environmental crime, potentially leading to funding opportunities and the creation of new fellowships and mentoring schemes.

“ Today, covering environmental crime is more important than ever. It is essential to investigate these crimes comprehensively, taking into account crime convergence. It is also crucial to follow the money – examining the companies and individuals involved – and to promote beneficial ownership disclosure. ”



About UNICRI

The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) is mandated to support countries in preventing crime and strengthening justice systems through applied research, training, capacity-building and innovation.



About the Nature Crime Alliance

The Nature Crime Alliance is a multi-sector network that aims to increase political will, mobilise financial commitment, and bolster operational capacity to fight environmental crime. The Alliance Secretariat is hosted by the World Resources Institute.



About the FACT Coalition

The Financial Accountability and Corporate Transparency (FACT) Coalition is a non-partisan alliance of civil society organisations working to combat corruption, money laundering, and illicit.

