

United Nations Environment Programme
Global Sacrifice Zones



JACKRABBIT MUN VII

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CO-HEAD CHAIR LETTERS

Hello Delegates!

My name is Alina and I'll be one of your co-head chairs for this committee! I'm a senior here at Poly in the PACE program. This is my second year being in Model UN and I've loved every second of it. Being behind the scenes and doing research for you guys is definitely one of my favorite parts :) MUN has allowed me to really step outside of my comfort zone and make amazing friends and if this is your first committee, I hope it does the same for you. My goal is to make sure debate is fun yet diverse, as this topic covers so many subtopics.

In my free time, I love going to coffee shops and finding new places to explore all over SoCal. I'm also an avid junk journaler and Stardew Valley player (highly recommend if you're a cozy game lover). At school, I'm involved in our Green Team and an intern at Californians for Justice!

If there is one piece of advice I can send with you into this committee, it is to be confident in your ability and your research. Whether that is during a mod speech or speaking to other delegates during unmod, you got this! I'm super excited to meet you!

Sincerely,

Alina Jean-Baptiste

UNEP | Co-Head Chair

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CO-HEAD CHAIR LETTERS

Hello delegates!

My name is Daniel, and I'm going to be your co-chair for the UNEP Global Sacrifice Zones committee. I'm a senior here at Poly High School and this is my third year being involved in Model UN. In the past, I've vice-chaired a couple rooms and co-chaired at our school's BunnyMUN for middle school delegates.

Some of the activities I'm involved with at Poly are Orphan Assistance Fundraising Club, Poly Global Fund, and the swim team. Aside from that, I spend a lot of time doing things like going on road trips with my friends and watching movies. Movies are a big part of my life, I'm planning to major in film once I go to college next year.

Overall, I'm super excited to be your co-chair and I'm even more excited to see what you guys can do.

Sincerely,

Daniel Ramirez

UNEP | Co-Head Chair

ramirezdaniel6643@gmail.com



POSITION PAPER GUIDELINES

- Position Papers are due at 11:59 PM on **Sunday, May 18th**.
- Delegates **must** submit position papers to be eligible for **research AND committee awards**.
- Position Papers will be submitted through a google form:
 - <https://forms.gle/jkenWafGEAL6hJay9>
- At the top of each paper, include your character/country name, first and last name, school name, and appropriate committee.
 - United States
 - First Last
 - School Name
 - UNEP
- Papers should be submitted as a PDF file
 - Please name the file [Committee_Country]
 - Ex. **UNEP_United States**
- Papers should be minimum 1-2 pages in length with an additional Works Cited page in MLA format
- Papers should be single-spaced in Times New Roman 12 pt. font and include no pictures or graphics
- Please include the following sections for each committee topic:
 - Background & UN Involvement
 - Position of your Country
 - Possible Solutions

If you have any questions or concerns, please email one of your chairs.



COMMITTEE DESCRIPTION

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the leading global authority on the environment. UNEP's mission is to inspire, inform, and enable nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. For over 50 years, UNEP has worked with governments, civil society, the private sector and UN entities to address humanity's most pressing environmental challenges—from restoring the ozone layer to protecting the world's seas and promoting a green, inclusive economy. UNEP is driving transformational change by drilling down on the root causes of the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss and pollution. UNEP's work is focused on helping countries transition to low-carbon and resource-efficient economies, strengthening environmental governance and law, safeguarding ecosystems, and providing evidence-based data to inform policy decisions. Through cutting-edge science, coordination and advocacy, UNEP supports its 193 Member States to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and live in harmony with nature. And this work has never been more critical.



TOPIC SYNOPSIS

Since the term was coined, environmental advocates have raised alarm over the growing frequency of global sacrifice zones—regions that have been permanently impaired by environmental damage or economic disinvestment. These areas, disproportionately located in low-income regions and marginalized communities, endure environmental degradation caused by industries such as mining, oil, drilling, and hazardous waste disposal. The term “sacrifice zone” highlights the systemic trade-offs where profits and industrial development are prioritized over communities' health, rights, and sustainability.

For instance, communities in the Niger Delta face severe health and economic challenges due to decades of oil spills. Similarly, in Chile's Atacama Desert, lithium mining for renewable energy technologies has drained vital water resources, threatening the survival of Indigenous populations. Global sacrifice zones intersect critical global topics, including humanitarian issues, environmental conservation, and environmental justice. Delegates will have the opportunity to explore their nations' policies, work with other delegates, and propose solutions to balance industrial demands with human and environmental health protection.



BACKGROUND

ORIGIN & HISTORY

The concept of a global sacrifice zone was first proposed in a 1973 report written by the National Academy of Sciences. The report was a response to growing concerns about the effects of strip mining on the ecosystem, a form of mining in which ore is



abstracted from the surface of the Earth using an open pit. The National Academy of Sciences laid out the concept that certain regions were so damaged by pollution and other harmful practices that it was only possible to rehabilitate the rest of the country by sacrificing the most

affected areas. The report sparked a public outcry over the irreversible damage that pollution could do, laying a path for the environmental justice movement in the ensuing decades. The issue was federally recognized in the United States in 2004 by the Environmental Protection Agency. The organization issued a public report vowing to help work towards equality for every community. As the term “sacrifice zone” gained more attention, its meaning evolved. It came to be understood as a way of describing any region that was exploited for profit or resources at the cost of the environment or the health of the people living there. A few examples of exploitative industrial practices are burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and the dumping of waste.



ECONOMIC & POLITICAL CONTEXT

Sacrifice zones have a close relationship with the economy. Their existence inherently stems from a prioritization of big corporate profits over the living conditions of the people who live within exploited neighborhoods. The side-effects of this can be seen as the property values of housing within sacrifice zones drop every year as the environment worsens. These regions also tend to receive less funding from local and state governments as they are viewed as economically unsustainable. Hence, sacrifice zones typically exist in low-income areas with little investment in public amenities such as healthcare, education, and/or infrastructure. The lack of resources present in these communities also often leads to lowered work productivity, creating a cycle of poverty that feeds into itself.

In the past, politicians have come under scrutiny for their willingness to sacrifice entire ecosystems for industry. It has become abundantly clear that sacrifice zones have been all but neglected by the American presidencies of the modern era. President Barack Obama was accused of letting the Gulf of Mexico become a sacrifice zone for oil drilling and fossil fuel development, widespread petitions and letters expressing concern were sent to the White House before President Joe Biden approved Project Willow to produce as many as 180,000 barrels of oil per day in Alaska, and just recently President Donald Trump was criticized for expanding liquefied natural gas projects. Although President Biden took steps to address



the issue by passing his Justice40 Initiative which channeled 40 percent of relevant federal investments into funding for marginalized communities affected by pollution, President Trump has publicly dismissed the plan as unnecessary and may seek to revoke it. Globally, the United Nations has addressed the issue by passing resolutions that target the most polluted areas internationally. There is no better example of this than the UNEA-6 Resolutions which seek to regulate the long and ambitious arms of industry. These resolutions also lay out more sustainable practices for waste and chemical management.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The impact an environment experiences depends on the source of the pollution. Countries like Brazil and regions like Southeast Asia experience some of the most deforestation in the world. They suffer from an increased abundance of greenhouse gases and a loss of biodiversity. Greenhouse gasses are also released from the burning of coal which most affects countries like India and China as they have what is often described as the worst air quality globally.

Oil drilling is responsible for destroying habitats and releasing toxic chemicals into groundwater. Oil is especially harmful because it releases greenhouse gasses that contribute to global warming when it is burned, and it can destroy ecosystems when it is spilled. One of the most well-documented incidents occurred in



the Gulf of Mexico, where 3.19 million barrels of oil were spilled into the Atlantic Ocean, causing organ damage so detrimental to the populations of marine life in the gulf that the species are still not recovered in the present.

Although fracking is concentrated in a few countries, it has recently received significant global attention. This way of extracting oil from shale rock has side effects that include: water and air contamination, earthquakes, soil erosion, and the release of carcinogens like benzene.

HUMAN RIGHTS & SOCIAL IMPACTS

As the conversation around sacrifice zones has developed, the concern has evolved away from what was, initially, a public health concern towards a human rights issue. Living in a sacrifice zone has shown itself again and again to have a profound effect on the well-being of residents. The probability of contracting a deadly or life-altering condition like cancer, asthma, or organ damage goes up significantly for those living in sacrificed regions. This is even more alarming as adequate healthcare is often difficult to come by in said regions. As the virus ravaged the world, it was the people who were exposed to large amounts of pollution that were at high risk for dying of the coronavirus. In addition, individuals who live in sacrifice zones are often relocated or forced to move out of their homes for their and their families' well-being. The question is often posed of whether this is humane, where these families go, and how this can be prevented.

Sacrifice zones are disproportionately located in minority neighborhoods, raising concern that governments are more willing to sacrifice a neighborhood if it is dominated by people of a marginalized ethnicity or identity. Some accuse corporations of targeting low-income communities of color for mining or drilling, as these areas



often lack the political influence or resources to take action against the harmful practices. At the heart of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals is the idea of “leaving no one behind”. However, through the evidence presented above, it is clear that groups are being left behind because of discrimination, exclusion, power inequities, and more. Across the world are poorly implemented laws and policies, inefficient and improper use of financial resources, and policy gaps that continue to fuel environmental injustices. Achieving environmental justice for all, is essential for eliminating poverty, rehabilitating sacrifice zones, and ensuring no one is left behind.

CASE STUDIES

➤ Villa Inflamable, Argentina

“Villa Inflamable” or Flammable is located on the southeastern border of Buenos Aires, adjacent to one of the largest petrochemical compounds in the country. The name of the town originates from 1984 when an oil ship exploded in a nearby canal. In this neighborhood, around 6,000 people are exposed to industrial pollution in homes built upon soil contaminated with toxic waste. Specifically, around 50% of children suffer from lead poisoning. While an environmental clean-up plan has been established, there are little visible results. According to the National Children’s Defense Office, “there is no remedy possible” and relocation is the only solution.

➤ Kabwe, Zambia

Kabwe, the capital of the Zambian Central Province, was founded in 1966 when lead and zinc deposits were discovered. Home to over 288,598 people, Kabwe’s history with lead and zinc mining. Although the mine is now closed, dust from it blows into villages, contaminating the air and groundwater. In 2014, a report showed children’s blood lead levels to be elevated despite closed mines. A class action lawsuit was



launched against Anglo American, the owner of the mine, however, nothing has yet to be done.

➤ **Martinique and Guadeloupe**

Martinique and Guadeloupe, both French territories and Caribbean islands, were contaminated with the chemical pesticide ‘chlordecone’ in the 1990s. The pesticide, used for banana farming across the islands, contaminated nearly 90% of people in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Additionally, although the pesticide was banned in France in 1990, it was allowed to be used in Martinique and Guadeloupe up until 1993. The chemical has been linked to prostate cancer, for which Martinique and Guadeloupe are among the highest in the world, as well as stomach and pancreatic cancer. A criminal investigation was brought to Paris to look into the use of chlordecone, however, officials say its true effects were too long ago to look into, ignoring the lasting effects the pesticide has had on the population.

PAST ACTIONS & FUTURE CHALLENGES

Over the past few decades, numerous countries have implemented technology and policy-based solutions to combat the rising issue of sacrifice zones. In 1980, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) established the Superfund program to clean up hazardous waste sites. Using initiatives like bioremediation, chemical neutralization, and soil vapor extraction, the Superfund program saw extensive soil remediation efforts in Love Canal, New York, one of their first sites. Former coal and mining regions, such as the Lusatia region in Germany, have been converted into renewable energy hubs with solar and wind farms. In South Africa, bioremediation efforts have helped combat acid mine drainage in abandoned gold mines. These mine rehabilitation projects demonstrate the second life sacrifice zones hold.



In 1989, the Basel Convention on Hazardous Waste was held in Switzerland in response to the discovery that hazardous waste was being imported into Africa and other parts of the developing world from abroad. This treaty restricts this action from taking place by wealthier, developed nations. In addition to the Basel Convention, in 2013 the Minamata Convention on Mercury was agreed upon after the fifth session. The treaty included a ban on new mercury mines, the phase-out of existing ones, and the phase-out and phase-down of mercury in use in a large number of products and processes. This would lessen mercury usage in mining and industrial processes, reducing contamination in sacrifice zones in South America and Africa.

Despite great technological advancements and policy interventions, significant challenges remain in addressing global sacrifice zones. Many governments, particularly in resource-dependent economies, continue to struggle to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability. There tends to be weak enforcement of environmental regulations, corporate lobbying, and the ability of multinational companies to relocate operations to nations with less environmental regulations. In addition, while some sacrifice zones are recoverable, some areas may take decades or centuries to recover or are not recoverable at all. Despite new technologies, restoring areas like Chernobyl or the Citarum River in Indonesia to pre-industrial conditions may be impossible. Lastly, as renewable energy expands to combat climate change, the expansion of lithium, cobalt, and rare earth mineral mining for batteries and other tech is creating new sacrifice zones. As climate change advances, conditions for the creation of sacrifice zones are becoming greater, and more and more challenges present themselves.



UNITED NATIONS INVOLVEMENT

UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT: JUNE 1972 STOCKHOLM

The 1972 World Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm was the first ever world conference to make the environment a global issue. The convention led to the creation of the Stockholm Declaration, a series of 26 principles that place environmental issues at the forefront of international concerns and laid out a



foundation for environmental justice. Some of these principles include the right to an environment of quality and the responsibility of humans to protect and

improve the environment for present and future generations. Principle 6 addresses the discharge of toxic substances and other substances that release heat, arguing they must be halted in order to ensure that serious or irreversible damage is not inflicted upon ecosystems. The declaration also includes an Action Plan that addresses three main categories; Global Environmental Assessment Programme, environmental management activities, and international measures to support assessment and management activities. While much of the Stockholm Declaration may not exactly apply today, it sets up the foundation upon which environmental justice stands. The Stockholm Declaration especially highlights where the world has failed in terms of the protection of our environment.



UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted a historic resolution, recognizing, for the first time globally, the human right to a sustainable environment. However in 2022, during the 49th session of the UN Human Rights Council, David Boyd, the special rapporteur on human rights and the environment, urged the UNHRC to take action against human rights violations. In his report, Boyd presented that each

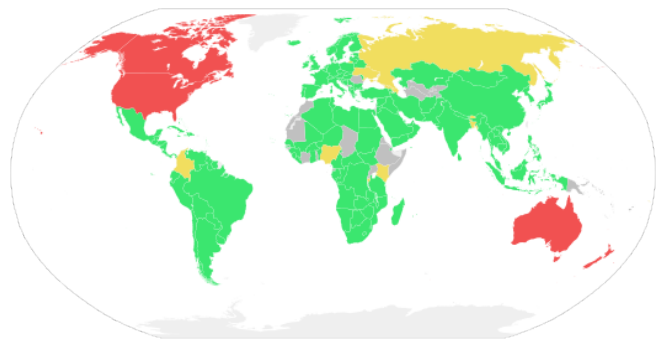


year, pollution and toxic substances cause at least 9 million premature deaths, aligning with the root cause and direct effects of sacrifice zones. These substances raise the risks of cancer, heart disease, stroke, and more. The UNHRC is the main intergovernmental body within the UN that is

responsible for human rights. Made up of forty-seven member states, the HRC holds forums in which it creates recommendations on the human rights violations they discuss. Despite the report, the world has yet to see suggestions for how to combat the ever-rising threat of sacrifice zones across the globe.

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

In 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). This framework was voted in with a majority of 143 states in favor, 4 against, and 7 abstentions. The UNDRIP is



the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of Indigenous people, establishing the minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of Indigenous people. The document recognizes the historical injustices against Indigenous peoples and the urgency to uphold Indigenous cultural and traditional practices. The UNDRIP also argues that upholding and respecting Indigenous culture and tradition contributes to sustainable development and the proper management of the environment. The document supports Indigenous peoples' participation in decisions that will affect their lives as well as their right to remain distinct and to pursue their ideas of social and economic development.



BLOC POSITIONS

Developed Bloc (Western Bloc)

Countries in this bloc often benefit from the extraction of resources and cheap labor from sacrifice zones. These countries often argue for sustainable development or technological innovation as solutions but often avoid addressing the root causes of sacrifice zones. Many of these countries find economic growth through trade agreements and resource extraction from these places. It is in their best interest to find surface-level solutions that advance the economic growth of their states. This bloc emphasizes the role of private sector innovation when it comes to addressing climate change, favoring voluntary commitments over legally binding regulations.

Industrializing Nations (Developing Bloc)

Emerging economies assert their right to economic growth arguing that they should not face the same restrictions as high-polluting nations. They often acknowledge the need for sustainable development but claim it must come with significant financial and technological support from developed nations, this attitude is often used towards sacrifice zones as well. These nations oppose carbon taxes or trade penalties that could hinder their economic growth and advocate for solutions that recognize the different capacities of different nations. They often want funding that allows them to go green without sacrificing their financial goals.

Resource-Dependent Nations

Countries in this bloc have economies heavily dependent on fossil fuel exports and defend their continued production of oil, coal, and gas as essential to their



national economies. To these nations, sacrifice zones are a means of economic survival and equitable development. While some of these nations support investment into green initiatives they strongly oppose any measure that could force an abrupt end to fossil fuel production. They might argue that energy security and economic diversification should be prioritized over policy shifts that could destabilize global markets. These nations also might oppose trade restrictions or penalties aimed at fossil fuel exports.

Climate-Vulnerable Nations

Small island developing states, least developed countries, and other climate-vulnerable nations demand immediate global action to address sacrifice zones, as they disproportionately suffer the effects of climate change. These nations argue that industrialized countries should be held responsible for environmental damage and provide substantial reparations to damaged communities. They call for legally binding agreements, debt relief for affected countries, and direct financial assistance for climate adaptation. They also support a stronger international framework to hold major polluters liable for the destruction of ecosystems and the displacement of communities.

Environmental Progressives

Countries that have positioned themselves as leaders in environmental policy push for global action to eliminate sacrifice zones and enforce accountability. They support legally binding agreements to phase out environmentally damaging industries and promote green investments, especially in developing countries. These countries also advocate for a legal framework that holds multinational corporations accountable



for the destruction of ecosystems and ensuring they contribute to remediation efforts. They also emphasize the importance of climate justice. Their policies often include bans on harmful industries, incentives for sustainable development, and diplomatic pressure on nations failing to shift toward greener practices.



QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What responsibilities do states and corporations have toward communities in sacrifice zones?
2. How can international bodies better enforce environmental and human rights laws?
3. What strategies can be used to empower affected communities?
4. How can the UN expand its efforts in order to prevent the expansion of global sacrifice zones?
5. What responsibilities do states have toward displaced peoples? How can they accommodate their needs effectively?



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