



Centre for Law and the Environment, UCC

Law and the Environment 2026

22nd Annual Conference

Thursday, 23 April 2026

Consolidation in Environmental Law

Call for Papers

The 22nd edition of the annual *Law and the Environment Conference* at University College Cork (UCC) will focus on the question of whether environmental law has reached a level of maturity where codification of this extensive corpus of principles, rules and standards is now required in order to ensure its internal coherence. A measure of normative consolidation could promote effective integration of simultaneously applicable regulatory controls and thereby assist realisation of what are, as yet, often aspirational environmental rights and entitlements. However, consolidation might also provide an opportunity for rowing back on environmental controls. It is important that actors involved in legal protection of the environment should take a moment to perform a “stock-take” of the ever-expanding corpus of applicable controls, rights, duties and principles to identify duplication, inconsistency, inefficiency, and opportunities for rationalisation, whilst watching out for environmentally regressive legal developments.

Whereas the rapid expansion of environmental law in the past twenty or thirty years might present a risk of regulatory fragmentation, many recent developments might instead be expected to exert a consolidating effect. In Irish law, the Planning and Development Act 2024 represents a significant consolidation of a previously disjointed planning code, while the tentative emergence of new human or constitutional rights relating to the environment might have a harmonising effect across a range of regulatory frameworks. A range of measures at the EU level seek to promote unity and coherence across this broad field of regulatory activity, including the 2024 Nature Restoration Regulation, the 2024 Environmental Crime Directive and, more generally, the EU ‘Green Deal’ and ‘Fit for 55’ legislative package. In terms of treaties, the Aarhus Convention and Escazú Agreement represent regional codification of horizontally applicable procedural environmental rights, which may come in time to be unified further by the emerging discourse on “rights of nature”.

Domestic, EU and international courts also play a role in the incremental consolidation of environmental law frameworks. For example, the 2025 decision of the Irish High Court in the *Coolglass* case might be understood as an attempt to integrate climate and human rights objectives into the planning code. Likewise, the 2015 CJEU judgment in the *Bund* case might be regarded as an attempt to reconcile project authorisation requirements with the objectives

of the EU Water Framework Directive. At the international level, the International Court of Justice's recent Advisory Opinion on *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change* promotes an interpretation of conventional climate obligations informed by relevant customary rules, human rights obligations and the objectives of multilateral environmental agreements. Indeed, the recent succession of climate-related Advisory Opinions handed down by international courts tends to portray the piecemeal tableau of international climate, environmental and human rights law as a coherent global governance framework.

Further, continuing improvement in scientific understanding of environmental causal relationships and of complex ecological dynamics and vulnerabilities contributes to interlinkage amongst regulatory environmental regimes. Increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for incorporating scientific evidence into legislative, administrative and judicial processes for the elaboration, implementation, interpretation and application of environmental law inevitably produce interactive legal frameworks, reflecting the interconnectedness of environmental resources, sectoral activities and problems.

This year's conference therefore seeks to highlight and explore the phenomenon of consolidation in environmental law in whatever form and by whatever means it might occur. The conference organisers welcome proposals for papers / presentations reflecting upon such ongoing "consolidation". Possible topics might include, *inter alia*:

- The growing significance of horizontally applicable procedural environmental rights;
- Evolving human and/or constitutional environmental or climate-related rights;
- The growing role of advisory opinions in international environmental law;
- Broad emerging frameworks for nature restoration, circularity, environmental crime, corporate sustainability, *etc*;
- Implications of the new Planning and Development Act 2024;
- The role of scientific evidence in environmental law processes; or
- Setbacks in the codification of environmental norms (e.g. the Global Plastics ILBI).

Notwithstanding the tentative suggestions above, the *Law and the Environment Conference* will aim, as always, to be as open and inclusive as possible. Therefore, proposals will be welcomed on any topic relating, even indirectly, to the broad theme of legal "consolidation".

In addition, the Conference Programme will, as usual, include the well-established specialist sessions covering contemporary developments in such areas as:

- *Climate & Energy Law*;
- *Nature & Biodiversity Law*;
- *Land-Use / Planning Law*;
- *Marine, Fisheries & Aquaculture Law*;
- *Corporate Environmental Law*;
- *Heritage Protection Law*;
- *Disaster Risk Governance*; and/or
- *Environmental Compliance, Enforcement & Liability*.

Proposals for papers / presentations should be forwarded as soon as possible (and before the deadline of **27th February 2025**) to the Conference Convenor, Prof Owen McIntyre, at:

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