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Uncovering Environmental Crimes in Tropical Ecosystems



From May 2 to 4, 2024, UNESCO held the **31st World Press Freedom Day Conference (WPFDF)** to promote the right to freedom of expression, recognize the media, and advocate for its independence and pluralism. This year, the event highlighted the importance of environmental journalism and freedom of expression in the context of the current global environmental crisis. **Internews, through its project Together for Conservation, participated with a panel titled “Uncovering Environmental Crimes in Tropical Ecosystems.”**

This panel had the participation of sixty people and highlighted the findings of investigations by environmental reporters who covered the largest areas of remaining tropical forests in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Amazon), and shared the challenges they faced in

covering transnational environmental crimes. These crimes increasingly link to other illicit activities, such as drug trafficking, intensifying their impact on indigenous peoples and local communities living in tropical forests. **Through this panel, the Together for Conservation project aimed to make an impact at a global journalism event, promoting the relevance of preventing environmental crime through the journalists and mediawho attended the conference.**

Together for Conservation





*“The Together for Conservation. project supported journalists in developing stories on environmental crime in the Amazon. The journalists conducted a risk analysis. In addition, through mentoring, they determined if it was necessary to change the angle of the story and worked with the analysis of the story’s coverage protocol. **Together for Conservation encouraged the creation of networks to discuss the risks faced in the region, learning from each other. This collaboration between different actors allowed for reliable sources, debates, and access to data.** An example of this collaboration was the “Dirty Gold” report, developed by Ojo Público in five countries: Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.”*

Sigrid Vásconez, Program Manager, Together for Conservation.

Speakers:

Dr. Isabelle Schlapfer.

Research Manager within the Impact and Learning Team at Internews.

Karla Mendes.

An award-winning Brazilian journalist working as a Rio de Janeiro-based investigative reporter for Mongabay and a fellow of the Pulitzer Center’s Rainforest Investigations Network.

Sigrid Vásconez.

Project Manager for Conservando Juntos Project [Together for Conservation] at Internews.

Sam Schramski.

Editor for Special Projects for the Earth Journalism Network (EJN), where he focuses on collaborative reporting projects, data journalism and online learning efforts.

Jeanne Bourgault. Moderador.

Moderator. President, and CEO of Internews. She is an expert on the role of information and media in developing, conflict and post-conflict, and fragile countries, media for democracy, mis- and disinformation, women’s media leadership, information technology, and participatory community development



Summary:

Based on lessons from the field, project implementation, like Together for Conservation, Rainforest Investigations Network and the findings from *Covering the Planet*¹, panel participants shared reporting lessons from journalists and communicators in these regions and provided recommendations to counter mis/disinformation. **This discourse amplified the importance for journalists and communicators to continue to serve as watchdogs, to maintain accountability for decision makers and actors who commit environmental crimes, and to safeguard the public’s access to critical information.** As they highlighted, journalists covering environmental crimes encounter threats, attacks, physical and psychological violence, and even legal challenges.

Panelists emphasized that collaborative approaches across countries and regions are essential to adapt to rapidly changing local contexts in the Amazon.

The Together for Conservation project members shared insights on how support for journalists enables them to access sources, knowledge, tools, and a broad network of peers with whom they can exchange stories and tips. The Together for Conservation project manager highlighted efforts to support journalists’ security while investigating their stories in the field, emphasizing the development of risk analyses and security protocols. The Earth Journalism Network also showcased its work in Asia and the ways they have transferred lessons learned to the region, fostering participatory and listening processes to better understand the context.

Participants also stressed that without the financial support, mentoring, and accompaniment of these types of projects, their efforts to bring visibility to these environmental crimes and realities would be impossible.

¹ This study is a collaboration between Internews’ Earth Journalism Network and Deakin University and will be published in June 2024.

Environmental journalists data:



Women investigating environmental issues **face threats and are urged to quit** because of the risks involved.



39%*

report that they have faced threats.



56%*

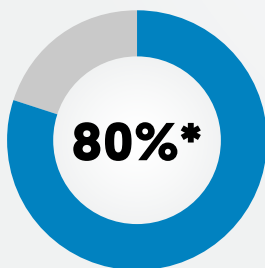
of the **journalists threatened** say it occurred because **they intended to publish their stories.**



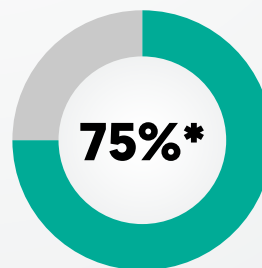
39%*

admit to **self-censoring** when reporting on **environmental issues.**

Projects like Pulitzer Center's Rainforest Investigations Network and Together for Conservation provide journalists with support for sources, data, editorial guidance, access to tools, financial assistance, and a broad network of contacts that facilitate this process.



cited the **need for more funding as a key element** to increase their capacity to **report on environment and climate change.**



mentioned the need for **in- person training and workshops.**

* Results of the Covering The Planet study.