

## **The Gateway to Environmental Law**

### **A Capacity Building Partnership between UNEP, IUCN and FAO**

#### **In brief:**

ECOLEX is designed to provide the most comprehensive information resource on national and international environmental law available in one location. Using the power of today's information technologies in the long term will assist users worldwide to obtain comprehensive information on environmental law using technology such as the Internet, email, as well as through a variety of products such as CD-ROM and classical technology such as hard copy publications. This user-friendly service is designed to meet the needs of governments, parliamentarians, the judiciary, legal practitioners, NGOs, academic institutions, researchers, international and regional cooperation agencies and other users especially in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

Developed through partnership among UNEP, IUCN and FAO, ECOLEX today already provides, through the Internet, environmental law information regarding treaties, national legislation, European Union instruments, court decisions, soft-law and law and policy literature.

The goals of this project are to:

1. Provide a single site source of comprehensive information on environmental law, i.e.: treaties, national legislation, European Union instruments, court decisions, soft-law and law and policy literature.
2. Provide global access to environmental law information in an efficient and cost-effective manner, especially to users in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.
3. Increase knowledge of and build capacity on environmental law at the local, national and regional levels.
4. Develop links with the private sector to expand ECOLEX products.
5. Build alliances and conclude partnership and other agreements with future associates.

## What is ECOLEX?

**ECOLEX** is a comprehensive, internet-based information service on environmental law and policy (including natural resource management) operated jointly by UNEP, IUCN and FAO.

It combines the environmental law information holdings of the partner organizations including databases on:

- multilateral and bilateral treaties
- national legislation
- European Union legal instruments
- judicial decisions
- soft law and other internationally non-binding policy instruments and technical guidance
- law and policy literature

**ECOLEX** covers a whole range of environmental subjects, such as: Air, Climate, Flora, Fauna, Fishing, Hunting, Hazardous Substances, Land Use, Noise, Protected Areas, Soil, Waste, and Water, as well as Food and Agriculture.

The information source provides bibliographic and analytical information and links to full text documents in as far as they are presently available to ECOLEX partners in electronic form. Currently most full texts of treaties are available through UNEP, while full texts of national legislation are available through FAOLEX ([faolex.fao.org/faolex](http://faolex.fao.org/faolex)). They are progressively being integrated into ECOLEX.

**ECOLEX** entries permit not only finding useful references to single data bases as indicated above, but also to implementation of treaties in national legislation, and to significant literature commenting on treaties or national legislation.

**ECOLEX** is easily accessible, user-friendly, available worldwide and free of charge.

## Why ECOLEX?

Environmental law has, over the past thirty years, become a recognised legal discipline, and a major tool for the achievement of environment and natural resources management, in the context of sustainable development. Within this field, there has been a significant growth in multilateral and bilateral agreements, national legislation, international "soft law" documents, and law and policy literature, as well as related jurisprudence and court decisions. While many of these instruments and documents were prepared by governments and other policy makers in the developed world, increasing development in environmental law can now be observed in developing countries and countries in economic transition. Taken together, this pool of global, regional and national instruments constitutes the sum of control, incentive and remedial mechanisms that govern the relationships between humans and the environment. It also represents a large reservoir of knowledge on the legal tools and mechanisms so far used in the world for environmental conservation and management.

Yet, much of this wealth of information is difficult to access, even for those whose profession it is to develop and implement national legal mechanisms in the field. There are two causes for this difficulty; first, there is limited knowledge about the existence and location of this information. Second, even when this information is available, access is limited. This is particularly the case for governments and civil societies in developing countries and countries with economies in

transition, where government officials, practitioners, environmental managers, non-profit institutions and academia lack easy access to the legal information they need for developing the necessary legal tools to promote environmental management.

The need for such services is illustrated in the constantly growing number and variety of requests for data, and for assistance to locate information on specific environmental law topics, which UNEP, IUCN and FAO receive from governments, academia, and the private sector, including NGOs and members of the public.

### **Why UNEP, IUCN and FAO?**

IUCN Environmental Law Centre (ELC) located in Bonn, Germany created in the sixties an all encompassing information system on environmental law (ELIS). ELIS evolved into a large set of references to treaties, national legislation, soft law and legal literature, linked to documents held in the libraries of the ELC for the IUCN Environmental Law Programme.

UNEP, because of various mandates from its Governing Council, collected over the years a sizeable number of international and national legal instruments and produced electronic versions of them for publication.

To join forces and combine the strength of both organisations therefore made eminent sense, and this was mandated by the Governing Council of UNEP in 1995, as well as by the UNEP Montevideo Programme III (para. 8(f)).

Meanwhile, FAO had developed FAOLEX, a data bank of references to national legislation, primarily in developing countries, linked to an increasing number of electronic versions of their texts.

FAO was therefore invited to join the ECOLEX discussions, and the three organisations soon decided to enlarge the ECOLEX partnership, with the goal of merging FAOLEX into ECOLEX.

The resulting combined information resource is the largest available on environmental law globally, with over hundred thousand references to relevant documents already being available on the web.

### **What for: ECOLEX and capacity building**

Access to information on environmental matters is a critical element of capacity building, especially for developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

**Information supplements manpower.** Developing countries often lack legal research facilities and environmental law experts. Access to information considerably assists persons in these countries in researching and teaching environmental law, and in building personal capacity.

**Information saves time.** The availability of existing laws, treaties and literature allows countries to distil the best environmental law information worldwide which will assist in developing and ensuring better implementation of legislation and also in dealing with transboundary issues.

**Information saves money.** Countries seeking to formulate or amend their legislation can profit from knowing about existing legislation and legal techniques established by countries that have faced similar challenges.

Access to information is a form of development assistance and supports sustainable development: it provides developing countries with the data needed to make their own choices and benefit from experience elsewhere.

### **What next: stepwise further development for ECOLEX**

ECOLEX must be maintained, refined and further developed with a view to serving the end users as efficiently as possible.

Further partnerships must also be built, and ECOLEX is a registered WSSD Type 2 Partnership Initiative. In this context, the long-term objectives of ECOLEX in building capacity worldwide are as follows:

- Maintain, refine and develop the present environmental law database and its related information and resources;
- Present this data in a user-friendly format, facilitating searches for references and full texts through the development of multilingual retrieval possibilities (English, French, Spanish);
- Provide global access to the database in an efficient and cost-effective manner;
- Address the special needs and access problems of users in developing countries and countries with economies in transition;
- Develop a distributed network of associates, at regional and national level;
- Develop special ECOLEX products and services aimed at increasing knowledge and building capacity in environmental law at the local, national and regional levels;
- Expand the consortium of partners of ECOLEX and conclude appropriate formal arrangements memorialising these relationships;

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**Visit the ECOLEX pilot website at <http://www.ecolex.org/>**