
Environmental Guide Through Legal Regulations: Navigating Through the Complexity of Legal Regulations

Nenad Bingulac and Livija Panić Miletić

Faculty of Law for Commerce and Judiciary in Novi Sad, Serbia

Article Information*

Review Article • UDC: 502/504:340.134

Volume: 22, Issue: 1, pages: 1–11

Received: January 15, 2025 • Accepted: April 14, 2025

<https://doi.org/10.51738/kpolisa.2025.1r.001>

Author Note

Nenad Bingulac  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1187-7054>

Livija Panić Miletić  <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1100-9519>

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Corresponding author: Nenad Bingulac

E-mail: nbingulac@pravni-fakultet.info

* Cite (APA): Bingulac, N., & Panić Miletić, L. (2025). Environmental Guide Through Legal Regulations: Navigating Through the Complexity of Legal Regulations. *Kultura polisa*, 22(1), 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.51738/kpolisa.2025.1r.001>



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Environmental Guide Through Legal Regulations: Navigating Through the Complexity of Legal Regulations

Abstract

The issue of ecology and the activities that are important for it for several decades is an ever-current issue that is sometimes perceived lightly. This paper examines the impact of legal legislation and environmental awareness on the effective implementation of environmental protection measures in the Republic of Serbia. It is hypothesized that a deeper understanding of environmental legal regulations contributes to a better reaction of institutions to environmental challenges. The analysis highlights the importance of the legal regulation and institutional framework, including the Criminal Code and relevant sectoral laws, that define environmental crime. In this paper, he points out the inconsistency between different state authorities in the fight against environmental crime, through examples of ineffective communication and coordination. A specific incident illustrates the need for a systematic approach, improving education and harmonizing legal norms. The goal is to raise awareness of environmental issues, both on an individual and global level, thus contributing to a more sustainable relationship between man and nature. And finally, this work can be seen as a unique ecological guide through legal regulations.

Keywords: Environment, environmental awareness, legislation, environmental crime, crime, compliance of institutions, coordination, efficiency

Introduction

Strengthening environmental awareness and legal literacy through a structured approach to legislation contributes to a more efficient application of environmental protection measures.

In modern society, the issue of environmental protection is gaining more and more importance. People's awareness of the importance of protecting the environment that immediately surrounds us and in which we live is gradually growing. Of course, nature itself, in its own way, "tried" to draw our attention in several ways to the fact that we, as a civilization, have seriously failed the test of preserving the planet. Everyday floods, droughts, the complete extinction of certain species and the conversion of fertile areas into deserts are just some of the drastic changes that are happening around the world. States and the international community respond to these challenges through the adoption of numerous high-quality laws and international conventions. However, the key challenge, according to the author, lies in harmonizing the work of institutions, environmental challenges and current legal regulations. How the Republic of Serbia faced this problem and how we can further improve and coordinate efforts in environmental protection as a country, represents the basic idea of this work.

The hypothesis of this paper presents an analysis and understanding of the complexity of environmental legal regulations that enable effective navigation within the regulatory system. Understanding the basic laws, with a special emphasis on criminal law aspects, in the context of this complex regulation and numerous institutions participating in the fight against environmental crime, can provide key guidelines for concrete steps that would practically contribute to the implementation of

environmental policies. This claim rests on the assumption that better knowledge of legal instruments enables more efficient management of environmental challenges, thus encouraging a more sustainable relationship between man and nature.

The goal of this work is to raise awareness of this entire issue, while the indirect goal of this work is to actualize the importance of environmental issues not only on a personal level but also on a global level.

Environment and ecology: symbiosis of nature and science

Environmental protection is indispensable for the survival of the human species, given our natural origin and deep connection with nature. For centuries, as a civilization, we have been consuming natural resources without bothering to renew them. Consequently, the idea of environmental law as a special branch of law arose relatively recently, only in the seventies of the twentieth century (Viga, Gajinov, 2011:15). In the Republic of Serbia, the first systemic law regulating the field of environmental protection was adopted in 1991 (Law on Environmental Protection). From then on, legal theory recognized the necessity of legal regulation of this area of human life and environmental law became an independent branch of law that includes a wide range of principles and legal rules that regulate the relationship of man to the entire living and non-living environment, as well as their mutual interaction. (Viga, Gajinov, 2011:20).

Numerous professional works on the issue of the concept of environmental law subsume the following: "Environmental law is a dynamic and complex legal discipline characterized by multidisciplinary, a special subject and method of study, as well as specific principles" (Drenovak-Ivanović, 2021:18).

The connection between environmental law, the environment, numerous regulations and institutions forms a complex network that regulates the relationship between man and nature. Within this network, environmental law plays a key role by setting the norms and principles that should guide environmental protection. Sanctioning of violations of measures from this area is in the domain of criminal law - substantive, procedural and enforceable criminal law, economic offenses (Viga, Gajinov, 2011:20). Numerous regulations often face the challenge of non-compliance, and institutional capacities are not always optimally used.

The focus of this paper is the criminal law protection of the environment, which represents the last line of defense in this area, because it is prevention that is of key importance. As a secondary goal of the law, it is raising preventive awareness about environmental protection. Precisely because of the aforementioned, it is necessary to pay attention to this issue by looking at the jurisdiction of the prosecution, criminal law regulations, pointing out the institutions responsible for the implementation of environmental protection, with reference to the basic laws and authorities that apply them in the Republic of Serbia.

Legislative and institutional frameworks in the fight against environmental crime

The Republic of Serbia has regulated environmental crime with a broad legislative framework. The scope of the Public Prosecutor's Offices in the Republic of Serbia (hereinafter referred to as the Public Prosecutor's Office) includes primarily dealing with criminal offenses from the Criminal Code, but this chapter will highlight the number of other laws and criminal offenses incriminated in them, which are of great importance for the fight against environmental crime, which we believe are rarely applied.

Undoubtedly, the first starting point of any normative analysis must be the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, which guarantees that everyone has the right to a healthy environment and timely and complete information about its condition (Constitution of the Republic of Serbia).

The Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia in chapter twenty-four, as a consequence of the aforementioned provisions of the Constitution, defines environmental protection as its protective object. The criminal acts included in this chapter of the Criminal Code are numerous, specifically there are 18 of them and they are:

Environmental pollution, Article 260, Failure to take measures to protect the environment, Article 261, Illegal construction and commissioning of facilities and installations that pollute the environment, Article 262, Damage to facilities and devices for environmental protection, Article 263, Damage to the environment, Article 264, Destruction, damage, export abroad and import into Serbia of protected natural goods, Article 265, Import of dangerous substances into Serbia and unauthorized processing, disposal and storage of dangerous substances, Article 266, Illegal construction of nuclear facilities, Article 267, Violation of the right to information on the state of the environment, Article 268, Killing and abuse of animals, Article 269, Transmission of infectious diseases in animals and plants, Article 270, Negligent provision of veterinary care, Article 271, Production of harmful means for treating animals, Article 272, Contamination of food and water for Feeding animals, Article 273, Deforestation, Article 274, Forest theft, Article 275, Illegal hunting, Article 276, Illegal fishing, Article 277.

Apart from the Criminal Code, quite a number of other laws also deal with the criminalization of criminal offenses in the field of environmental protection. So we have:

- Water Act: Unauthorized filling and use of reservoirs, art. 209 and Damages during the exploitation of river sediments, art. 210.
- Law on mining and geological research: Criminal acts incriminated in the provisions of articles 177, 178, 179.
- Law on Plant Health: Criminal act incriminated in the provisions of Article 9.
- Law on means of plant protection: Criminal act incriminated in the provisions of art. 78.
- Law on Veterinary Medicine: Criminal act incriminated in the provisions of Article 154.
- Law on maritime navigation: Pollution of the marine environment, art. 194.
- Law on Genetically Modified Organisms: Criminal act incriminated in the provisions of Article 154.

The aforementioned laws, together with the Criminal Code, form the main basis for the criminal law protection of the environment in the work of Public Prosecutor's Offices.

However, they are not all relevant regulations, nor are they unified in a way that would enable their consistent and effective application in the work of all institutions of the Republic of Serbia responsible for combating various forms of environmental crime.

It is very important to note that the majority of criminal law norms in this area are of a blanket nature. This means that for a proper understanding of the protective object of the criminal offense, the norm of other, basic laws that regulate this area must also be incorporated. The framework for environmental protection in Serbia is provided by the Law on Environmental Protection, together with its amendments, as well as the Law on Environmental Impact Assessment and the Law on Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment. The Law on Integrated Prevention and Control of Environmental Pollution is very important.

In addition to these basic regulations, the environmental legislation of Serbia also contains a number of sectoral laws dealing with the protection of water, air, soil, nature, noise, ionizing and non-ionizing radiation, as well as waste and hazardous materials management (Drenovak-Ivanović, 2018:15). In the aforementioned laws, in the penal provisions, misdemeanor liability and liability for economic offense are foreseen.

It should be noted that certain parts of the conventions, such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, etc. have been ratified and incorporated into our legal system, while also a large number of very important conventions are still "pending" to be implemented in the positive legislation of the Republic of Serbia.

Nothing is simpler when the fight against environmental crime is approached from the position of the institutions responsible for solving it. In this paper, the work of the court will not be analyzed, but the emphasis is on the three state services that are the first in the sequence of reactions when a criminal offense is committed.

Criminal offenses in the field of environmental crime are under the jurisdiction of the prosecutor's offices on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. There is no doubt that the creation of a special unit for combating environmental crime at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the RS contributed to the work of the PPO on the prosecution of perpetrators of crimes in this sphere. The unit for combating environmental crime and environmental protection started its work on April 1, 2022. It is part of the Criminal Police Administration and has three departments: 1. Department for combating crime against biodiversity, 2. Department for combating crime in the field of waste and hazardous materials management, 3. Department for protection and combating crime against the environment from damage, pollution and other harmful effects. Specifically, at the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, the Police Department of Subotica, there is the aforementioned unit, the so-called environmental unit, the Group for Suppression of Environmental Crime and Environmental Protection.

On the other hand, institutionally, apart from competent prosecutors, courts and police, a very serious scope of competence in the field of environmental protection is given to competent inspections. The umbrella law, the Law on State Administration (2018) states at the very beginning that state administration consists of ministries, administrative bodies within ministries and special organizations – state administration bodies.

Accordingly, in the Republic of Serbia, according to the Law on Ministries (2023), there is a Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, which includes:

1. Veterinary Administration: veterinary inspection and border veterinary inspection, 2. Forestry Administration: forestry and hunting inspection, 3. Agricultural Land Administration: agricultural inspection, 4. Plant Protection Administration: phytosanitary inspection and border phytosanitary inspection
5. Administration for Agrarian Payments, 6. Republic Directorate for Water: Water Inspection and 7. Directorate for National Reference Laboratories.

It is also necessary to point out the Environmental Protection Inspection at the Ministry of Environmental Protection. This inspection enabled access to very important sources of information in a very transparent and simple way by viewing their electronic website. First, it is the List of valid regulations in the field of environmental protection (2017), secondly, the Table of Competencies (2017) of this Inspection.

To specify. Although they belong to Ministries of different jurisdictions, the Law on Inspection Supervision (2018) applies to all inspections, where Article 1 regulates the content, types, forms and procedure of inspection supervision, powers and obligations of participants in inspection supervision and other issues of importance for inspection supervision. The work of all the aforementioned inspections is of essential importance for the efficient functioning of both the police and the prosecutor's office. Inspectors represent professionally trained staff, with specific knowledge and skills that are crucial for working in the field, whether it is about crimes or misdemeanors. They are often the first, or together with the police, to come into contact with environmental incidents, and the further course of investigation and action depends to a large extent on their skills and judgment, in accordance with legal provisions. However, their work is not adequately coordinated with prosecutors offices and the police, so the available resources are often not used, or it is not even known what resources are available to prosecutors, police and inspectors, due to the lack of a systematic approach to environmental incidents.

Green fraud, discovery of environmental crime

The Republic of According to the officially available information of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of Serbia - in the mentioned year, still under the name of the Republic Public Prosecutor's Office of the RS (2023), according to the Annual Report on the Work of Public Prosecutor's Offices for the year 2022, 1652 persons were reported for crimes against the environment, the previous year 1477 persons , which indicates a small increase in the number of registered persons.

But, when you look at the number of reported crimes and the number of people, comparing 2021 and 2022, the situation is not the best.

Out of 18 prescribed criminal acts, 12 were reported, and there is also a colorful picture. Thus, we have the largest number of reported persons for the criminal offense of Forest Theft, Article 275 of the CC, as many as 1,187 (in 2021, 938 persons), followed by the criminal offense of Animal Abuse and Torture from Article 269 of the CC, with 129 persons reported (in 2021, year 187 persons). Next in number are the criminal offense of Illegal hunting, Article 276 of the CC, with 96 persons reported (in 2021, 109 persons), and the criminal offense of Deforestation, under Article 274 of the CC, with 68 persons reported (in 2021, 36 persons). We have a relatively identical number of reported persons for the following crimes: Illegal fishing, Article 277 of the CC (2022-26 persons, 2021-27 persons), Environmental pollution, Article 260 of the CC (2022-20 persons, 2021-25 persons), Failure to take measures to protect the environment, Article 261 of the CC (2022-18 persons, 2021-17 persons), Contamination of food and water for consumption, i.e. animal feeding, Article 273 of the CC (2022-3 persons, 2021-2 faces). However, there are criminal acts where the number of reported persons has increased or decreased, if we compare the year 2021-2022. For the criminal offense of bringing dangerous substances into Serbia and illegal processing, disposal and storage of dangerous substances, article 266 CC (2022-67 persons, 2021-5 persons), Environmental damage article 264 CC (2022-20 persons, 2021 -6 persons), Destruction, damage, export abroad and introduction into Serbia of protected natural property, Article 265 CC (2022-16 persons, 2021-8 persons). But the most drastic picture of the number of persons reported in 2022 is for the criminal offense of Violation of the right to information on the state of the environment from Article 268 of the Criminal Code, where 96 persons were reported in 2021, and 2 persons in 2022.

We emphasize that the following criminal acts are completely outside the reporting zone: Illegal construction and commissioning of facilities and facilities that pollute the environment, Article 262 of the CC, Damage to facilities and devices for environmental protection, Article 263 of the CC, Unauthorized construction of nuclear facilities, Article 267 of the CC, Transmission of infectious diseases in animals and plants, Article 270 of the CC, Unconscionable provision of veterinary assistance, Article 271 of the CC and Production of harmful means for treating animals, Article 272 of the CC.

Coordination and efficiency: the key to the solution

The problem of multi-authority work on environmental crime can be defined as a lack of coordination, synchronization and effective cooperation between different authorities and institutions that are responsible for solving environmental crimes. This lack can lead to a number of problems, including overlapping jurisdictions, lack of information sharing, inconsistent strategies and lack of effective mechanisms for joint action. As a final result, there is an insufficient reaction to environmental crimes, a lack of legal responsibility for environmental damages. It is important to investigate and understand the causes of this problem in order to identify opportunities for improving cooperation between authorities and improving the effectiveness of the fight against environmental crime.

For the sake of better and more efficient work on the problem of environmental crime, it is necessary to change the ways of communication between the competent authorities, but above all to work on the techniques of quick and efficient action when the disputed event is observed, because the evidence, bearing in mind the really great specificity of this crime, is sometimes difficult to save e.g. what to do with a fish caught by a person in poaching, where to store a potentially poisoned bird until an expert examination is carried out, how to take a sample from the soil that is contaminated with poisonous liquids, bearing in mind the high absorption of the soil, etc.

One of the first steps should be making a list of basic steps. These lists of basic steps should be prepared for the competent inspection services in particular, and especially for the police and the prosecution. They would contain all the necessary steps when investigating potential acts that threaten the environment as a whole. It is also necessary to list the largest part of criminal acts in the field of environmental crime, and the biggest offenses from basic laws (besides the Criminal Code) that deal with environmental protection, on a separate document, and perhaps in the aforementioned List of Basic Steps. These lists of criminal acts and misdemeanors should only be a basic framework for the qualification of the actual act found on the ground, by no means the final list that includes all criminal acts or all misdemeanors.

Perhaps the most important thing that should be worked on in the future is to create a Database of all available technical resources, experts in relevant fields, expert laboratories, a directory with contact information of services working under all competent ministries involved in environmental protection, zoos or other institutions where animals that were the subject of a criminal offense could be kept, i.e. where soil, water and other evidence collected in the investigation would be adequately stored.

Then, it is necessary to continuously educate all participants in the process of fighting environmental crime. At the same time, we should by no means exclude the technologies that are also available, numerous applications that are used, for example. Great application that can provide

information on environmental parameters at any time, an overview of landfills, the latest news in the field of ecology, etc., or Aarhus centers that are an important source of information in environmental protection.

And finally, compile and maintain a database of punishments imposed for criminal offenses against the environment, which would include a brief statement of the criminal offense, which would be an excellent guide for uniform judicial practice in the field of environmental crime in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.

Conclusion

The Roman saying "Deeds, not words" is still very relevant today, especially when it comes to environmental protection. The existing legal and institutional frameworks in Serbia provide a basis for action, not just words on paper. However, one of the main challenges in the fight to preserve the environment is the human factor. In the legal system, environmental crimes are often ignored or minimized, and individuals who try to solve them are perceived as over-committed or unsuccessful in their efforts.

Nevertheless, awareness of the necessity of preserving nature is growing, and it is supported by numerous new technologies and platforms that provide quality information in the field of ecology. Although this process is slow, it exists, and we are witnessing numerous drastic natural events that remind us more and more often of the importance of preserving the environment.

Now is the key moment for institutions to strengthen mutual cooperation, modernize and systematize their activities in order to advance efforts in the protection of nature and the environment. In this way, we will lay the foundations for a future in which harmony between man and nature will be essential for survival.

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Ekološki vodič kroz pravne propise: Navigacija kroz kompleksnost zakonske regulative

Nenad Bingulac i Livija Panić Miletić

Pravni fakultet za privredu i pravosuđe u Novom Sadu, Srbija

Sažetak

Pitanje ekologije i aktivnosti koje su od značaja za nju više decenija unazad predstavlja uvek aktuelno pitanje koje se nekada olako percipira. U ovom radu istražuje se uticaj pravne legislative i ekološke osvešćenosti na efikasnu primenu mera zaštite životne sredine u Republici Srbiji. Postavlja se hipoteza da dublje razumevanje ekoloških pravnih propisa doprinosi boljoj reakciji institucija na ekološke izazove. U analizi se naglašava važnost zakonske regulative i institucionalnog okvira, uključujući Krivični zakon i relevantne sektorske zakone, koji definišu ekološki kriminal. U ovom radu ukazuje na neusklađenost između različitih državnih organa u borbi protiv ekološkog kriminala, kroz primere neefikasne komunikacije i koordinacije. Kroz konkretan incident ilustruje se potreba za sistematskim pristupom, unapređenjem edukacije i usklađivanjem zakonskih normi. Cilj je podizanje svesti o ekološkim pitanjima, kako na individualnom, tako i na globalnom nivou, čime se doprinosi održivijem odnosu između čoveka i prirode. I na kraju, ovaj rad se može sagledavati i kao jedinstveni ekološki vodič kroz pravne propise.

Ključne reči: Životna sredina, ekološka osvešćenost, zakonska regulativa, ekološki kriminal, krivično delo, usklađenost rada institucija, koordinacija, efikasnost