Green Criminology and Environmental Crime in Albania: Governance Failures, Economic Impacts and EU Conditionality

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Abstract

Environmental crime represents an important form of environmental harm with ecological, economic, social, and governance implications. This study examines environmental crime through the theoretical lens of green criminology, with particular attention to global patterns and the Albanian context. Using a qualitative research design based on a structured literature review and policy-document analysis, the study synthesises peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and national legal and policy documents to examine the drivers, impacts, governance dimensions, and enforcement challenges associated with environmental crime. The literature-selection process covered publications from 2000 to 2026 and applied predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify sources for qualitative synthesis. The analysis indicates that economic development pressures, institutional fragmentation, limited monitoring capacity, and weaknesses in inter-agency coordination are recurring themes in the literature on environmental governance in Albania. Illegal logging, unauthorised construction, pollution, riverbed extraction, and pressures on protected areas are among the environmental offences and harms documented across the reviewed sources. The Vjosa–Narta case is examined as an illustrative example of the interaction between protected-area governance, development pressures, and European Union environmental conditionality. Overall, the analysis suggests that environmental crime in Albania should be examined not only through formal legal violations but also through the broader governance conditions that influence prevention, monitoring, enforcement, and environmental protection. The study contributes to green criminology by applying a harm- and governance-oriented perspective to Albania and by situating environmental governance within the country's European Union accession process.

Keywords: ***Green criminology; Environmental crime; Environmental governance; Albania; Environmental law; Illegal logging; Environmental justice; Sustainable development; Biodiversity protection***

1. Introduction

1.1 Green Criminology: Concept and Theoretical Foundations

Green criminology examines environmental crime, ecological harm, and environmental risks affecting humans, animals, and ecosystems (South & Brisman, 2013). It broadens traditional criminology beyond legally defined offences to include wider environmental harms, including lawful activities that can still cause serious ecological damage (White, 2008). Nigel South and Piers Beirne formally introduced the term green criminology in the late 1990s, establishing a distinct theoretical approach to environmental harm (Beirne & South, 2007). While environmental concerns gained global attention after the Stockholm Declaration of 1972, green criminology developed later as a response to the limitations of conventional criminology in addressing ecological destruction.

A key distinction between traditional criminology and green criminology lies in the concept of harm. Traditional criminology adopts an anthropocentric perspective focused on human victims, whereas green criminology increasingly applies an ecocentric approach that recognises ecosystems, non-human species, and the natural environment as victims of harm (White, 2011). This broader perspective includes issues such as pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, and illegal exploitation of natural resources.

Theoretical foundations of green criminology are strongly linked to environmental justice and eco-justice perspectives, which emphasise the unequal distribution of environmental harms and the intrinsic value of nature (White & Heckenberg, 2014). The field also critically examines corporate and state environmental crime, including industrial pollution, illegal resource extraction, and regulatory failures (Lynch & Stretesky, 2014). Green criminology identifies three main justice perspectives: environmental justice, ecological justice, and species justice. Environmental justice addresses the unequal distribution of environmental harm among human populations, especially vulnerable and marginalised communities that are disproportionately affected by pollution, resource depletion, and environmental degradation (Schlosberg, 2007). Ecological justice extends concern beyond humans by recognising the rights and intrinsic value of ecosystems and natural processes, arguing that environmental protection should not be based solely on human interests (White, 2013). Species justice further broadens this perspective by emphasising the moral consideration and protection of non-human animals from exploitation, cruelty, and habitat destruction (Beirne & South, 2007). Together, these perspectives illustrate the evolution of green criminology from a human-centred approach towards a more comprehensive framework that recognises the interconnected well-being of humans, animals, and ecosystems.

Overall, green criminology provides a comprehensive framework for understanding environmental harm by integrating ecological, social, and legal dimensions and by expanding criminological inquiry beyond conventional definitions of crime.

1.2 Global Dimensions of Environmental Crime

Environmental crime is widely regarded as one of the world's largest and fastest-growing illicit economies, generating an estimated USD 110–281 billion annually and ranking among the most profitable forms of transnational criminal activity (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016). Key forms include illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing (IUU fishing), hazardous waste trafficking, pollution crimes, and illegal mining (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023).

The impact of environmental crime extends across multiple economic sectors. In forestry, it drives deforestation and the loss of ecosystem services. In fisheries, illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing threatens marine biodiversity and food security. In agriculture, soil degradation, water contamination, and biodiversity loss reduce productivity and resilience to climate change (Nellemann et al., 2016; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023).

Economically, environmental crime weakens state revenues, distorts markets, and undermines sustainable development. It reduces productivity in key sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, and tourism, while increasing public expenditure on environmental restoration, law enforcement, and public health. It also discourages legitimate investment by weakening governance structures and regulatory trust (Nellemann et al., 2016).

The drivers of environmental crime are complex and interrelated. Poverty and dependence on natural resources often make illegal extraction, logging, and poaching alternative livelihood strategies in developing contexts (White, 2013). Weak governance, corruption, and limited enforcement capacity further enable illegal activities (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016). At the global level, high demand for natural resources and the involvement of organised criminal

networks continue to expand the scale and profitability of environmental crime (South & Brisman, 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023).

1.3 Causes and Drivers of Environmental Crime

1.3.1 Economic Drivers

Economic factors are major drivers of environmental crime, closely tied to profit incentives, market demand, and structural inequalities in the global economy.

Poverty also contributes to environmental crime, especially in developing contexts where communities rely on natural resources for survival. In these settings, illegal logging, poaching, and resource extraction may function as alternative livelihood strategies rather than purely criminal acts (White, 2013).

High profitability is another key driver. Environmental crimes can yield substantial gains while posing relatively low risks of detection or punishment. This imbalance makes illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, and illegal mining attractive to both individuals and organised criminal groups (INTERPOL, 2022).

Global demand for natural resources further intensifies environmental crime. Increasing consumption of timber, fish, minerals, and wildlife products creates strong international market pressures that stimulate illegal supply chains (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023).

These market dynamics often connect biodiversity-rich source countries with high-demand consumer markets.

Illegal markets also sustain environmental crime by operating across borders and often blending with legitimate supply chains, making detection and regulation difficult. Weak regulatory systems and corruption further support the growth of these illicit economies (Financial Crime Academy, 2026).

Overall, economic drivers demonstrate that environmental crime is not only a result of local poverty but also a consequence of global market structures and profit-driven incentives.

1.3.2 Governance and Institutional Weaknesses

Governance and institutional weaknesses are widely recognised as central drivers of environmental crime, as they shape the effectiveness of environmental regulation, enforcement capacity, and accountability mechanisms. Recent research highlights that environmental harm is often not only the result of illegal activities but also of systemic governance failures embedded within institutional structures (Chigbu et al., 2025; Shetty & Saxena, 2025).

Weak enforcement and monitoring capacity are central concerns. Environmental governance systems often face limited resources, fragmented authority, and poor inter-agency coordination. These shortcomings create enforcement gaps that allow environmental crimes to continue despite formal legal frameworks (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016). As highlighted in recent governance literature, such fragmentation and "hollowing out" of enforcement mechanisms are common features of transboundary environmental governance systems (Chigbu et al., 2025; Shetty & Saxena, 2025).

Corruption further undermines institutional effectiveness by enabling illegal activities such as unlawful resource extraction, fraudulent permitting, and regulatory evasion. This weakens transparency and accountability, reducing public trust in environmental governance structures (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016). In many cases, corruption interacts with weak institutions to create regulatory capture, where powerful actors benefit from weak enforcement regimes.

Institutional fragmentation and lack of coordination across governance levels also contribute significantly to environmental crime. Environmental regulation often involves multiple actors operating at local, national, and international levels, yet poor integration leads to overlapping mandates and enforcement inefficiencies. This creates governance vacuums that are frequently exploited by illegal actors (Chigbu et al., 2025).

In addition, inadequate monitoring systems, particularly in remote or resource-rich regions, limit the ability of states to detect and respond to environmental offences. Weak surveillance infrastructure, limited data capacity, and poor inter-agency communication further reduce enforcement effectiveness (INTERPOL, 2022).

Overall, governance and institutional weaknesses create enabling conditions for environmental crime by weakening enforcement, increasing corruption risks, and limiting institutional coordination. Strengthening governance capacity, transparency, and cross-sectoral cooperation is therefore essential for reducing environmental harm and improving environmental justice outcomes.

1.3.3 Globalisation and Organised Crime

Globalisation has significantly expanded environmental crime by easing the cross-border movement of goods, capital, and information. As global markets have become more interconnected, environmental crimes have shifted from largely local activities into transnational enterprises operating through complex international networks (White & Heckenberg, 2014). Green criminology, therefore, situates environmental harm within a global context, recognising that such crimes often cross-national boundaries and involve multiple actors across legal and illegal markets (Sollund, 2021).

A key consequence of globalisation is the emergence of transnational organised criminal networks involved in the illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources. Organised crime groups increasingly diversify into environmental crime markets due to the high profitability of activities such as illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, illegal fishing, and illicit mining, often facing lower risks than traditional forms of organised crime (Van Uhm & Siegel, 2019) .

These networks span multiple jurisdictions, exploiting variations in legislation, enforcement capacity, and governance systems to extract, transport, and distribute illegally obtained resources. International illegal trade is central to environmental crime. Rising global demand for timber, wildlife products, minerals, and marine resources encourages illicit supply chains linking resource-rich regions to consumer markets worldwide. These chains often depend on corruption, document fraud, and weak border controls, making detection and enforcement especially difficult (INTERPOL, 2022; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023). Moreover, environmental crime increasingly converges with other forms of serious and organised crime, demonstrating how illegal environmental markets have become embedded within broader transnational criminal economies (Van Uhm & Nijman, 2022).

In recent years, green criminology has also expanded its focus to include climate crime as an emerging category of environmental harm. Climate crime encompasses activities that contribute directly or indirectly to climate change, including emissions fraud, manipulation of carbon trading schemes, unlawful greenhouse gas emissions, and environmentally harmful fossil fuel extraction practices (Kramer, 2013). Although many climate-related harms may not always violate existing criminal laws, green criminologists argue that they can generate extensive ecological, economic, and social consequences on a global scale. Corporate and state actors are increasingly scrutinised for practices that contribute to climate change while avoiding accountability, thereby raising important questions concerning environmental governance, responsibility, and justice (Lynch & Stretesky, 2014).

From a green criminological perspective, globalisation has expanded both the scale and profitability of environmental crime while revealing weaknesses in national governance and international regulation. Effective responses, therefore, require stronger international cooperation, transnational enforcement, and coordinated action to disrupt organised criminal networks in global environmental markets (Sollund, 2021; White, 2011).

Table 1: Major Types of Environmental Crime and Their Environmental and Economic Impacts

Environmental Crime	Environmental Impact	Economic Impact
Illegal logging	Deforestation, habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and increased carbon emissions (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016)	Loss of timber revenue, reduced ecosystem services, and decreased forest-based livelihoods (Nellemann et al., 2016)
Wildlife trafficking	Species decline, biodiversity loss, and ecosystem imbalance (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023)	Reduced ecotourism revenue, loss of natural capital, and increased conservation costs(United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023)
Illegal fishing	Overexploitation of fish stocks, marine biodiversity loss, and ecosystem disruption	Reduced fisheries income, food insecurity, and economic losses for coastal communities
Pollution (industrial, agricultural, and hazardous waste)	Air, water, and soil contamination; ecosystem degradation; and public health risks	Increased healthcare expenditures, environmental remediation costs, and reduced agricultural productivity
Illegal mining	Land degradation, water contamination, deforestation, and habitat destruction	Loss of state revenue, reduced agricultural output, and costly environmental restoration
Waste trafficking	Soil and water pollution, toxic exposure, and long-term ecological damage	Waste management costs, public health expenses, and losses in local economic development
Climate-related environmental harm	Greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, extreme weather events, and ecosystem disruption	Infrastructure damage, reduced productivity, adaptation costs, and increased disaster-related expenditures

Source: Author compilation

1.4 Environmental and Economic Consequences

Environmental crime and environmental degradation have substantial consequences for ecosystems, economic development, and human well-being. Environmentally, they contribute to deforestation, soil degradation, water pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change, reducing the capacity of ecosystems to provide essential services and support sustainable livelihoods (Institute for Environmental Research and Education, 2025; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Since 1990, approximately 489 million hectares of forest have been lost globally due to deforestation, highlighting the scale of environmental degradation worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2025).

The economic impacts are equally significant. Environmental harm reduces productivity in agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and tourism by degrading the natural resources on which these sectors depend (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

Soil degradation and water pollution lower agricultural yields, while biodiversity loss weakens ecosystem resilience and threatens food security (Institute for Environmental Research and Education, 2025). Environmental crime also imposes substantial costs on governments through environmental restoration, pollution control, healthcare expenditure, and enforcement activities. Furthermore, the illegal exploitation of natural resources reduces public revenues, distorts markets, and undermines sustainable economic development (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

The consequences extend beyond economic losses to broader social and environmental challenges. Environmental degradation contributes to climate change and increases pressure on food systems, particularly in communities that depend heavily on natural resources (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Pollution also represents a major public health burden; according to the World Health Organization, air pollution was responsible for approximately 6.7 million deaths worldwide in 2019 (World Health Organization, 2024).

Overall, the environmental and economic consequences of environmental crime demonstrate the close interconnection between ecosystem protection, economic stability, public health, and sustainable development.

1.5 Environmental Crime in Albania

Albania represents an important case for examining environmental crime because of its post-socialist transition, rapid economic development, and increasing pressure on natural resources. Following the transition from a centrally planned economy, the country has experienced accelerated urbanisation, tourism expansion, and increased pressure on forests, rivers, and coastal ecosystems, while environmental governance institutions have faced challenges in monitoring and managing these pressures (REC Albania, 2025; United Nations Environment Programme, 2000).

Key drivers of environmental pressure include illegal construction, unsustainable tourism development, and weak enforcement of spatial planning regulations, particularly in coastal and protected areas. Rapid urban expansion has contributed to land-use conflicts and the loss of green spaces, while development activities have frequently proceeded without adequate environmental compliance (REC Albania, 2025).

The literature and institutional reports reviewed in this study identify several forms of environmental crime and environmental harm in Albania, including illegal logging, unauthorised construction, air, water and soil pollution, riverbed extraction, pressures on protected areas, wildfires, and wildlife trafficking (REC Albania, 2025). Among these, illegal logging remains one of the most persistent offences, contributing significantly to forest degradation and habitat loss (Kryeziu, 2026a).

Available evidence also points to persistent challenges in environmental enforcement. Reports and assessments indicate that environmental violations are identified through administrative and monitoring mechanisms, while prosecution and judicial outcomes may remain limited in comparison with the number of recorded violations (European Commission, 2025; Kryeziu, 2026a; REC Albania, 2025). These observations should be interpreted in the context of limitations in the availability and consistency of environmental-crime data in Albania.

Taken together, the reviewed literature indicates an interaction between development pressures, institutional capacity, regulatory implementation, and environmental harm. Rather than treating these factors as evidence of a single causal relationship, this study analyses them as recurring themes within the literature on environmental governance and environmental crime in Albania.

1.6 Albanian Legal and Institutional Framework

Albania has developed a relatively comprehensive legal and institutional framework for environmental protection, particularly in the context of EU integration and alignment with international environmental standards. The framework is primarily based on environmental legislation that regulates the protection, conservation, and sustainable use of natural resources, alongside institutions responsible for enforcement and monitoring (Korita & Gashi, 2026).

Key legal instruments include Law No. 10431/2011 on Environmental Protection (Republic of Albania, 2011a), Law No. 81/2017 on Protected Areas (Republic of Albania, 2017), Law No. 57/2020 on Forests (Republic of Albania, 2020), Law No. 9587/2006 on Biodiversity Protection (Republic of Albania, 2006), and Law No. 10440/2011 on Environmental Impact Assessment (Republic of Albania, 2011b). These laws collectively establish the regulatory foundation for environmental governance, covering pollution control, resource management, conservation of ecosystems, and assessment of environmental impacts.

The institutional framework includes the Ministry of Tourism and Environment as the main policymaking body, the National Environment Agency responsible for monitoring and reporting, and the National Agency of Protected Areas overseeing the management of protected ecosystems. Enforcement is further supported by environmental inspectorates, the State Police, customs authorities, and prosecutorial and judicial institutions responsible for investigating and sanctioning environmental offences.

Despite the existence of this legal and institutional structure, challenges remain in terms of enforcement capacity, inter-institutional coordination, and effective implementation of environmental legislation.

1.7 Study Aim and Research Significance

This study aims to examine environmental crime through the theoretical lens of green criminology, with a particular focus on its environmental, economic, and governance dimensions. It adopts a multidimensional approach that moves beyond conventional definitions of crime to include broader forms of environmental harm.

Specifically, the study analyses the economic impacts of environmental crime, particularly its effects on key sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and tourism, as well as its broader implications for sustainable development. It also evaluates the governance and institutional framework in Albania, assessing the effectiveness of existing legal and regulatory mechanisms in addressing environmental crime.

In addition, the study examines enforcement gaps and institutional challenges, including issues related to corruption, weak monitoring systems, and limited inter-agency coordination. These factors are considered critical in understanding the persistence of environmental crime in transitional and developing contexts.

By integrating theoretical and country-specific analysis, the study identifies key institutional and structural weaknesses that hinder effective environmental governance in Albania. In doing so, it contributes to the broader academic literature on transitional environmental governance and green criminology, particularly in relation to post-socialist and developing country contexts.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it applies the theoretical framework of green criminology to the Albanian context, a setting that remains underrepresented within the broader environmental crime literature. While green criminology has increasingly examined environmental harms in developed and emerging economies, it has paid limited attention to post-socialist countries in Southeast Europe, particularly Albania. Second, the study establishes a link between environmental crime, environmental governance, and Albania's European Union accession process, with particular emphasis on the requirements of Chapter 27 (Environment and Climate Change). In doing so, it highlights how environmental crime can influence compliance with EU environmental standards and governance reforms. Third, the study conceptualises environmental crime in Albania not merely as a problem of legal enforcement, but as a broader governance challenge shaped by institutional capacity, environmental justice concerns, regulatory effectiveness, and competing development pressures. By integrating criminological, environmental, and governance perspectives, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of environmental crime in transitional societies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining a structured literature review with policy-document analysis. The review was designed to identify and synthesise the main theoretical, legal, institutional, and governance dimensions of environmental crime rather than to estimate the prevalence or overall volume of environmental crime in Albania. Academic literature was considered alongside institutional reports from organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the European Commission, together with relevant Albanian legislation and policy documents.

The analysis followed a thematic content approach organised around four analytical categories: (1) drivers of environmental crime and environmental harm; (2) environmental and economic impacts; (3) legal and institutional frameworks; and (4) enforcement and governance gaps. The findings from the literature review were subsequently integrated with the policy-document analysis to examine how these themes relate to environmental governance in Albania.

2.2 Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources. These comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and book chapters, reports published by international and regional organisations, national legislation, and relevant Albanian policy and institutional documents. Institutional sources included publications from UNEP, UNODC, INTERPOL, OECD, OSCE, WWF, and the European Commission, while national sources included Albanian environmental legislation and policy documents relevant to environmental protection, protected areas, environmental impact assessment, forests, and environmental enforcement.

Academic literature was primarily used to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundations of green criminology and environmental governance, whereas institutional reports and national legal and policy documents were used to contextualise environmental crime and governance challenges in Albania. The different source types were considered according to their relevance, institutional or academic credibility, and contribution to the analytical framework.

2.3 Literature Search Strategy

A structured literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect. The search covered publications published between 2000 and 2026. The principal search terms included “environmental crime,” “green criminology,” “environmental governance,” “illegal logging,” “wildlife trafficking,” and “Albania environmental law.” Additional combinations of these terms were used where necessary to identify literature addressing environmental enforcement, protected areas, resource extraction, pollution, and environmental governance in Albania and comparable transitional contexts.

The search was restricted to English-language publications and sources considered relevant to the study objectives. Academic publications were supplemented with institutional reports and national legal and policy documents identified through the websites and document repositories of relevant international organisations and Albanian institutions. The search results were subsequently screened according to the selection process and eligibility criteria described below.

2.3.1 Literature Selection Process

A structured literature selection process was applied to ensure transparency and methodological consistency. The initial database search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar for publications published between 2000 and 2026. Retrieved records were screened for relevance through title and abstract assessment, followed, where appropriate, by full-text evaluation. Duplicate records and sources that did not meet the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were excluded. The final qualitative synthesis comprised 42 sources, including peer-reviewed academic publications, academic books and book chapters, institutional reports, national legislation, and relevant policy and institutional documents. Because the original database-export counts and duplicate-removal records were not retained in the final dataset, numerical counts for the intermediate screening stages are not reported. This

approach avoids reconstructing unsupported search-stage counts while reporting the verifiable final number of sources included in the qualitative synthesis.

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Sources were included when they addressed one or more of the study's analytical themes: environmental crime, green criminology, environmental governance, environmental harm, environmental enforcement, or relevant legal and policy frameworks. Both theoretical and empirical academic studies were considered. Institutional reports were included when they were published by recognised international, regional, or national institutions and provided relevant evidence or policy information. National legislation and policy documents were included where they were directly relevant to environmental protection, environmental enforcement, protected-area governance, or Albania's alignment with European Union environmental standards.

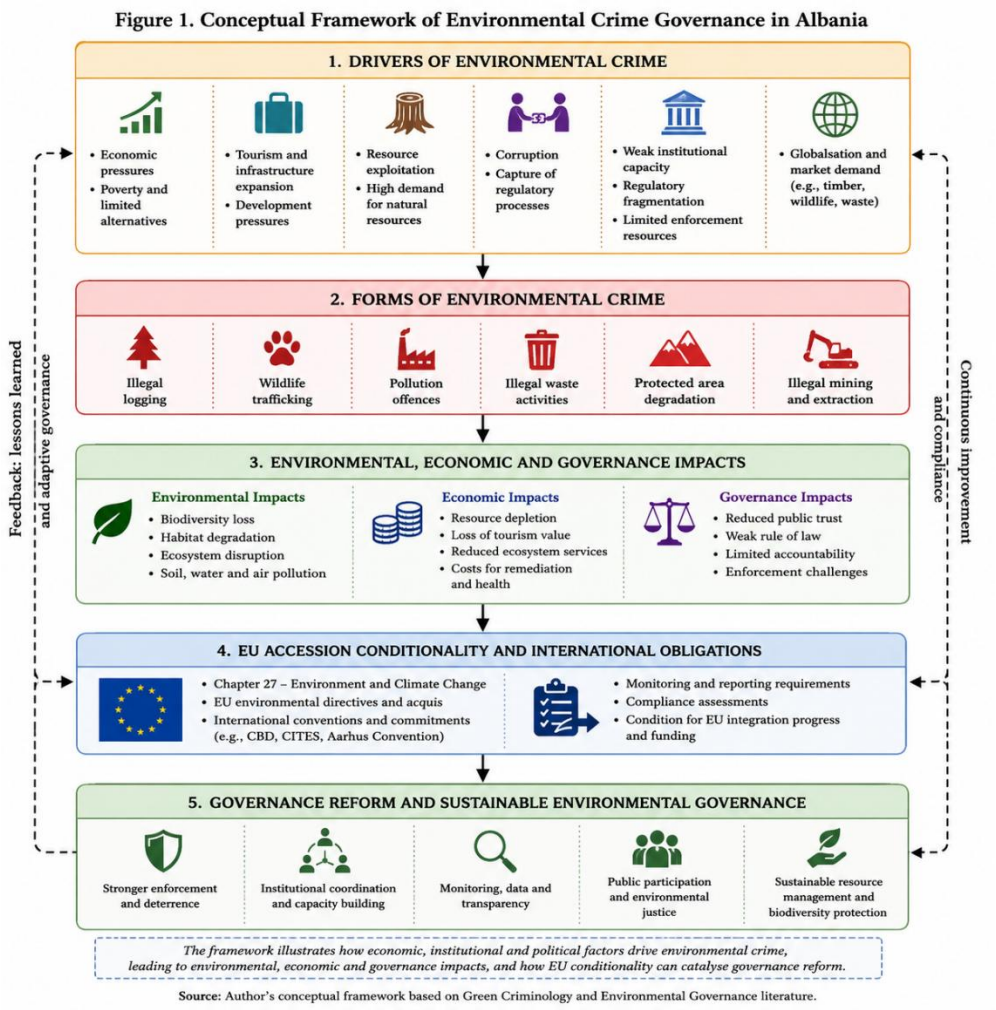
Sources were excluded when they were unrelated to the research questions, duplicated another record, lacked sufficient relevance to environmental crime or environmental governance, or did not provide an identifiable academic, institutional, legal, or policy basis for inclusion. The selection criteria were applied during title and abstract screening and, where necessary, during full-text assessment.

2.5 Analytical Framework

The analysis combines thematic content analysis with policy analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns across the reviewed literature and documents, including economic and development pressures, governance weaknesses, institutional fragmentation, environmental and economic impacts, and enforcement challenges. Policy analysis was used to examine Albania's legal and institutional structures and their relationship to environmental protection, enforcement, and European Union environmental requirements.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework guiding the analysis. The framework links economic, institutional, and governance-related drivers with forms of environmental crime and environmental harm, including illegal logging, wildlife trafficking, pollution, illegal waste activities, unauthorised development, and resource extraction. These activities are associated with environmental, economic, and governance impacts, which in turn generate regulatory and institutional responses through national legislation, enforcement mechanisms, and European Union environmental conditionality.

The framework also incorporates governance reforms, including improved enforcement capacity, institutional coordination, transparency, monitoring, and public participation. Within this structure, the Vjosa–Narta case is used as an illustrative case through which the relationship between development pressures, protected-area governance, environmental assessment, and EU environmental conditionality can be examined. The case is therefore not treated as representative of all environmental crime in Albania or as a legally adjudicated environmental-crime case. Instead, it provides a concrete example of the broader governance relationships represented in the conceptual framework. The analytical model is grounded in green criminology and environmental governance literature and provides the structure through which the global literature and Albania-specific evidence are interpreted.



Source: Author compilation

2.6 Limitations

This study is based exclusively on secondary sources and does not include primary fieldwork, interviews, surveys, or direct observation. Consequently, the findings depend on the availability, quality, scope, and reporting practices of the existing academic and institutional literature. The availability of Albania-specific environmental-crime data is also uneven, and different sources may use different definitions, reporting periods, and classification systems.

These limitations are particularly relevant when interpreting statements concerning the prevalence of environmental crime, enforcement effectiveness, and judicial outcomes. Accordingly, the study does not attempt to estimate the actual prevalence of environmental crime in Albania. Instead, it identifies patterns and recurring governance issues documented across the reviewed sources and interprets these findings within the framework of green criminology and environmental governance. The qualitative nature of the analysis also means that the findings should be understood as an evidence-informed synthesis rather than as causal estimates or nationally representative measurements.

3. Results

3.1 Environmental Crime: Global Trends and Economic Impacts

3.1.1 Main categories of environmental crime

The reviewed literature identifies three recurring structural patterns in global discussions of environmental crime.

The first concerns offences associated with the extraction and exploitation of natural resources, particularly illegal logging, illegal fishing, and illegal mining. These activities are frequently discussed in contexts where valuable natural resources create strong economic incentives for extraction and where regulatory oversight and enforcement capacity may be limited.

The second concerns the transnational organisation of wildlife trafficking. The literature describes wildlife trafficking as involving supply chains that connect source areas with transit locations and consumer markets. These networks may involve specialised intermediaries, cross-border logistics, corruption, and sustained market demand (INTERPOL, 2022; White & Heckenberg, 2014).

The third concerns the relationship between environmental crime and governance conditions. Across the literature, weak institutions, limited monitoring capacity, corruption risks, and fragmented enforcement are repeatedly identified as factors that may facilitate environmental crime or reduce the effectiveness of regulatory responses. These findings support a governance-oriented interpretation of environmental crime in which institutional conditions are considered alongside ecological and economic drivers.

Together, these themes indicate that environmental crime is associated with resource exploitation, transnational economic networks, and the institutional conditions under which environmental regulation is implemented.

3.1.2 Ecological and economic impact pathways

The analysis identifies two interconnected impact pathways: ecological degradation and socio-economic loss.

Ecologically, environmental crime produces cumulative and reinforcing damage to ecosystems. The main impacts include biodiversity loss, deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and depletion of natural capital. These processes reduce ecosystem resilience and weaken long-term environmental functionality (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022).

Economically, environmental crime generates both direct and indirect losses. Direct impacts include reduced state revenue, resource depletion, and costs associated with environmental restoration. Indirect impacts arise through reduced tourism attractiveness, weakened investor confidence, and increased public health burdens. Collectively, these effects position environmental crime as a structural barrier to sustainable development rather than a discrete enforcement issue (Nellemann et al., 2016).

A third and increasingly evident pattern is the **unequal distribution of harm**, where vulnerable and resource-dependent communities experience disproportionately high ecological and economic burdens. This reinforces environmental justice concerns and deepens socio-economic inequalities (Schlosberg, 2007; White, 2013)

3.1.3 Organised crime and globalisation

A recurring finding in the literature is the increasing integration of environmental crime within transnational organised criminal networks. Globalisation has facilitated the expansion of illicit environmental markets by improving transportation, communication, and access to international trade routes. Consequently, environmental crime has evolved from predominantly localised activities into globally interconnected criminal enterprises (P. D. Van Uhm & Siegel, 2019).

The literature indicates that organised criminal groups are increasingly attracted to environmental crime because of its high profitability and relatively low risk of detection and prosecution compared with other forms of organised crime. Illegal wildlife trafficking, illegal logging, and illegal mining frequently involve corruption, money laundering, document fraud, and cross-border criminal cooperation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime & World Wildlife Fund, 2023).

These findings suggest that traditional environmental regulation alone is insufficient. Effective responses require integrated approaches combining environmental governance, criminal justice mechanisms, financial crime investigations, and international cooperation. From a green criminological perspective, environmental crime therefore reflects broader structural dynamics associated with globalisation, market demand, and uneven governance capacities across states (South & Brisman, 2022).

3.2 Environmental Crime and Governance in Albania

3.2.1 Overview of Environmental Crime Patterns in Albania

The reviewed literature and institutional reports identify multiple forms of environmental crime and environmental harm in Albania, including illegal logging, unauthorised construction, riverbed extraction, air and water pollution, pressures on protected areas, wildfires, and wildlife trafficking (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2023; REC Albania, 2025).

Recent reporting shows that Albania has experienced a **significant long-term decline in forest resources**, with forest volume decreasing by approximately **32% over the past two decades**, despite nominal forest coverage of around **36–40% of national territory** (European Union, 2026; TEMA, 2024). This decline is attributed to unsustainable logging practices, arson, weak monitoring, and land-use pressure.

Illegal logging is repeatedly identified in the available Albanian literature and reporting as an important environmental offence, particularly in relation to forest degradation and habitat loss (Kryeziu, 2026a; REC Albania, 2025). Forest degradation is further reinforced by field-level evidence indicating that **illegal logging remains the dominant environmental offence**, often exceeding other categories such as pollution and illegal construction. In the regional studies reviewed for the period 2019–2023, illegal logging accounted for up to 53–82% of recorded environmental offences in the respective study areas (Kryeziu, 2026a)**.** This finding should be interpreted as evidence from the reported regional datasets rather than as an estimate of the national prevalence of environmental crime in Albania. River ecosystems are similarly affected by uncontrolled extraction and weak enforcement of spatial planning, further exacerbating ecological vulnerability (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; REC Albania, 2025).

The reviewed evidence documents environmental crime across multiple regions and indicates persistent challenges in enforcement, including a gap between recorded violations and judicial outcomes (European Commission, 2024; Kryeziu, 2026a).

Overall, the evidence reviewed indicates that environmental crime and environmental harm in Albania occur across several sectors and are repeatedly discussed in relation to institutional capacity, monitoring, regulatory implementation, and development pressures. However, because available data are incomplete and inconsistently reported, the findings should not be interpreted as a comprehensive measurement of the national prevalence of environmental crime.

3.2.2 Governance Failures and Institutional Enforcement Gaps

The reviewed evidence identifies institutional fragmentation and capacity constraints as recurring issues in Albania's environmental governance. Environmental responsibilities are distributed among inspectorates, local authorities, law-enforcement bodies, and prosecutorial structures. Institutional reports and governance assessments describe challenges related to coordination, monitoring, information exchange, and enforcement capacity (European Commission, 2024; REC Albania, 2025).

Available evidence also indicates that environmental violations are frequently addressed through administrative procedures, while prosecution and judicial outcomes constitute a smaller component of the overall enforcement response (Kryeziu, 2026a; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2023). This pattern may limit the consistency and deterrent capacity of environmental enforcement, although the available sources do not permit a direct quantitative assessment of deterrence.

Resource constraints and limited technical capacity have also been identified as barriers to effective environmental governance. In addition, governance assessments have raised concerns regarding planning processes, regulatory implementation, and institutional coordination (European Commission, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). These findings support the interpretation that environmental enforcement in Albania is influenced not only by the existence of formal legal provisions but also by the institutional capacity available to implement them.

3.2.3 Legal Framework and Implementation Gaps

Albania has established a relatively comprehensive environmental legal framework, including Law No. 10431/2011 on Environmental Protection and Law No. 81/2017 on Protected Areas. In formal terms, this framework demonstrates

alignment with EU environmental governance principles and accession requirements (Republic of Albania, 2011a, 2017).

However, the reviewed governance assessments identify an implementation gap between formal regulatory provisions and their practical application. The European Commission has reported continuing challenges concerning environmental enforcement capacity, strategic planning, and environmental impact assessment, while other assessments similarly identify weaknesses in institutional coordination and implementation (European Commission, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023; REC Albania, 2025).

The reviewed sources identify several recurring implementation challenges:

- weak institutional coordination
- limited monitoring capacity
- inconsistent application of environmental impact assessments
- minimal public participation in decision-making processes

Taken together, these findings indicate that the existence of a formal legal framework does not necessarily ensure consistent implementation or enforcement. The evidence therefore points to an implementation gap rather than demonstrating that the legal framework itself is ineffective.

Recent legislative developments concerning protected areas have also generated debate regarding the consistency of development policies with environmental protection objectives and European Union environmental standards (European Commission, 2024; Shehu, 2026). These developments illustrate the broader tension identified in the analytical framework between economic development priorities, regulatory implementation, and environmental protection.

3.2.4 EU Environmental Conditionality and the Vjosa–Narta Case

A key dimension of Albania's environmental governance is the relationship between domestic environmental policy and European Union accession requirements, particularly under Chapter 27 on Environment and Climate Change (Duraku & Nasufi, 2023).

Within this context, protected-area governance provides an important area in which environmental protection, development policy, regulatory implementation, and EU conditionality intersect.

The Vjosa–Narta Protected Landscape provides an illustrative example of these interactions. European-level discussions and reporting have raised concerns regarding development activities in protected areas, including the Vjosa–Narta area, and have emphasised the need for Albania to ensure consistency between development decisions, environmental legislation, environmental assessment procedures, and European Union environmental standards (European Commission, 2025; Kryeziu, 2026b; Shehu, 2026). The case is relevant to the analytical framework because it connects several of the dimensions identified in Figure 1. Development and tourism pressures represent economic and policy drivers; the protected-area context represents an environmental-governance dimension; environmental impact assessment and permitting represent regulatory mechanisms; and the response of European institutions illustrates the role of EU environmental conditionality. The case therefore provides a concrete example of how development priorities and environmental protection objectives may come into tension within a broader governance system. The European Parliament's position should be distinguished from a legally binding domestic enforcement decision. Rather, it represents a political and institutional component of the EU accession process and reflects concerns regarding environmental governance and compliance with EU standards (European Commission, 2025). Civil society organisations and environmental groups have likewise raised concerns regarding biodiversity and ecosystem impacts associated with development pressures in the Vjosa–Narta area (Diaz, 2026; Shehu, 2026).

The Vjosa–Narta case is therefore used in this study as an illustrative governance case rather than as a legally adjudicated case of environmental crime. Its analytical value lies in demonstrating how environmental protection, development pressures, regulatory implementation, and EU conditionality intersect within Albania's environmental governance framework.

3.2.5 Environmental Crime Enforcement and Penalty System

Environmental enforcement in Albania involves administrative, civil, and criminal mechanisms, with responsibilities distributed among environmental inspectorates, the State Police, prosecutorial authorities, and other relevant institutions according to the nature and severity of the offence.

The reviewed evidence indicates that administrative measures, including fines and suspension of activities,

constitute an important component of environmental enforcement, while criminal prosecution represents a more limited component of the documented enforcement response (Kryeziu, 2026a; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2023; REC Albania, 2025)

Available reports also describe cases in which environmental violations are addressed through administrative procedures rather than resulting in criminal judicial proceedings (European Commission, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

This pattern indicates a distinction between the existence of formal criminal provisions and the way environmental violations are processed in practice.

The evidence should not be interpreted as demonstrating a single cause for limited prosecution outcomes. Rather, the reviewed sources associate enforcement challenges with institutional capacity, coordination, monitoring, reporting, and implementation constraints. These findings are consistent with the broader analytical framework, in which environmental enforcement outcomes are understood as being shaped by institutional and governance conditions.

3.2.6 Integrated Synthesis of Albania Case Findings

The Albanian evidence reviewed in this study indicates an interaction between economic development pressures, institutional fragmentation, regulatory implementation, and environmental enforcement.

The main findings can be summarised as follows:

1. The reviewed literature documents multiple forms of environmental crime and environmental harm in Albania, including illegal logging, unauthorised construction, pollution, riverbed extraction, and pressures on protected areas.
2. Illegal logging is repeatedly identified in available regional and institutional sources as an important category of recorded environmental offences.
3. Environmental enforcement is characterised in the reviewed sources by a combination of administrative, regulatory, and criminal mechanisms, with administrative responses representing an important component of the documented enforcement process.
4. Albania has an established environmental legal and institutional framework, but the reviewed assessments identify challenges in implementation, monitoring, coordination, and enforcement capacity.
5. Development pressures and protected-area governance create recurring tensions between economic objectives and environmental protection requirements.
6. The Vjosa–Narta case illustrates how these tensions intersect with European Union environmental conditionality and accession requirements.
7. The available evidence therefore supports interpreting environmental crime as a governance issue in addition to a matter of formal legal compliance.
8. Overall, the findings do not establish a single causal explanation for environmental crime in Albania. Rather, they indicate that environmental harm and enforcement outcomes are associated with interacting economic, institutional, regulatory, and governance conditions documented across the reviewed literature and policy sources.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that environmental crime in Albania reflects broader global patterns identified within the green criminology literature. Similar to many transitional and developing countries, environmental offences in Albania are driven by a complex interaction of economic incentives, governance weaknesses, institutional fragmentation, and development pressures. These findings support previous research suggesting that environmental crime cannot be understood solely through legal definitions of crime but must also be analysed as a broader form of environmental harm affecting ecosystems, biodiversity, and human well-being (South & Brisman, 2022; White, 2013)

A central issue identified in this study is the persistent gap between environmental legislation and enforcement outcomes. Although Albania has developed a relatively comprehensive environmental legal framework aligned with European Union standards, implementation remains inconsistent. Comparable governance challenges have been widely documented in post-socialist and developing contexts, where limited administrative capacity, political influence, and resource constraints undermine effective enforcement (European Commission, 2024; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). From a green criminological perspective, this gap can be interpreted as a form of

structural facilitation of environmental harm, where institutional weaknesses enable environmentally damaging practices despite formal legal prohibitions.

The Albanian case further highlights that environmental crime is strongly shaped by governance architecture. Fragmented institutional responsibilities, weak inter-agency coordination, and limited monitoring capacity reduce the overall deterrent effect of environmental regulation. This aligns with international literature showing that environmental harm is more likely to persist in governance systems characterised by regulatory fragmentation and weak accountability mechanisms (INTERPOL, 2022; Nellemann et al., 2016). Consequently, strengthening institutional cooperation and enforcement capacity should be considered a priority for reducing environmental harm.

A comparative perspective further suggests that many of the governance challenges identified in Albania are not unique but are shared across other Western Balkan transition economies. Similar patterns have been documented in Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, where environmental governance is often constrained by limited institutional capacity, fragmented regulatory responsibilities, insufficient enforcement resources, and competing development priorities. Across these countries, environmental protection objectives frequently intersect with pressures for infrastructure expansion, energy development, tourism growth, and natural resource exploitation. Moreover, the process of European Union accession has created strong incentives for legislative harmonisation with the EU environmental acquis, yet implementation and enforcement have often lagged behind formal legal reforms. Studies from the Western Balkans indicate that protected area management, illegal resource extraction, pollution control, and biodiversity conservation continue to face significant governance challenges despite substantial regulatory progress. The Albanian experience, therefore, reflects broader regional dynamics in which environmental harm emerges not solely from individual illegal acts but from structural governance weaknesses that reduce the effectiveness of environmental regulation and oversight. This comparison reinforces the argument that environmental crime should be understood within a wider framework of institutional capacity, governance quality, and environmental policy implementation across transitional political and economic systems.

The Vjosa–Narta case provides a concrete illustration of the analytical framework developed in this study. It brings together development pressures, protected-area governance, environmental assessment, regulatory implementation, and European Union environmental conditionality. The case is not presented as evidence that a legally defined environmental crime has been established. Instead, it demonstrates how environmental governance conflicts can emerge when infrastructure and tourism objectives intersect with biodiversity protection and EU environmental requirements. Its relevance to the present study therefore lies in illustrating the governance relationships through which environmental harm, regulatory decisions, and institutional accountability are negotiated.

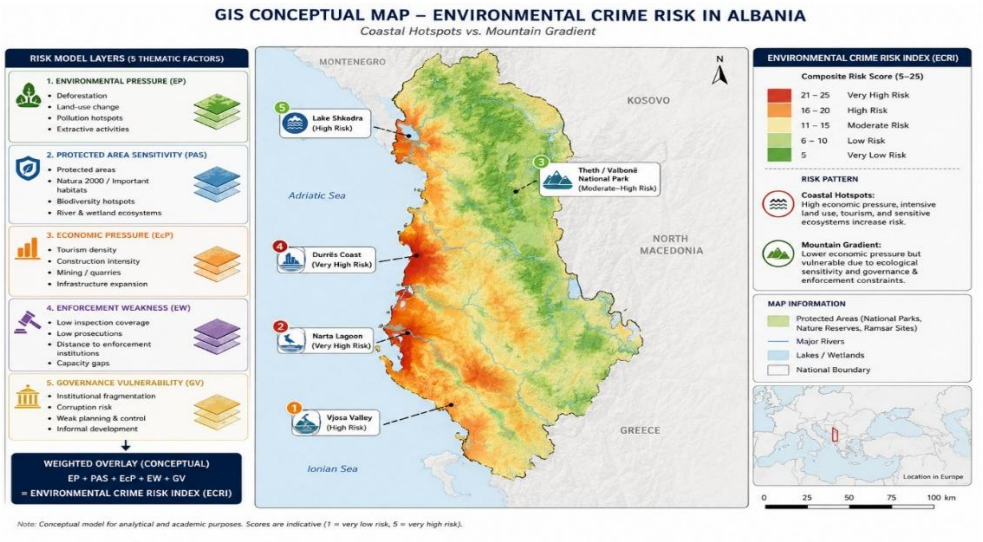


Figure 2: GIS Conceptual MAP- Environmental Crime Risk in Albania.
Source: Author compilation

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the usefulness of green criminology for analysing environmental harm beyond narrowly defined legal offences. Traditional criminological approaches generally focus on conduct formally defined as criminal, whereas green criminology also considers broader forms of ecological harm and the social, institutional, and political conditions through which such harm occurs. This perspective is particularly relevant to Albania because the reviewed evidence shows that environmental pressures may arise through interactions among development policies, regulatory implementation, institutional capacity, and environmental protection. The findings therefore support a harm- and governance-oriented interpretation of environmental crime while recognising the distinction between legally established offences and broader environmental harms.

Overall, the findings indicate that environmental crime and environmental harm in Albania cannot be examined solely through the existence of formal legal provisions. The evidence reviewed in this study points to the importance of institutional capacity, coordination, monitoring, regulatory implementation, transparency, and public participation in shaping environmental governance outcomes. Addressing environmental harm therefore requires attention to both enforcement mechanisms and the wider governance conditions within which environmental decisions are made.

4.1 Implications for Green Criminology Theory

The findings of this study support the relevance of a broader harm-based perspective within green criminology. Although environmental crime in Albania is frequently discussed in terms of legal compliance and regulatory enforcement, the reviewed literature also draws attention to the wider ecological and social consequences associated with environmental degradation and governance failures.

From an environmental justice perspective, environmental harm may have particularly important implications for communities that depend on natural resources for livelihoods and well-being (Schlosberg, 2007). In contexts where environmental monitoring, participation, or enforcement is limited, communities may have fewer opportunities to influence decisions affecting local environmental conditions. These issues provide an important interpretive dimension to the analysis, although the present study does not include primary community-level data.

The findings also support consideration of ecological justice. Environmental harms such as illegal logging, habitat degradation, pollution, and unsustainable resource exploitation may affect ecosystem integrity and resilience in addition to producing direct human impacts. Green criminology provides a framework for considering these ecological consequences alongside conventional legal definitions of crime.

A related dimension concerns species justice and biodiversity protection. Habitat degradation and biodiversity loss may affect non-human species independently of their direct economic value to humans. Within the Albanian context, this perspective is particularly relevant to protected and ecologically sensitive areas.

Taken together, the Albanian case illustrates how environmental crime and environmental harm can be examined through interconnected dimensions of environmental justice, ecological justice, and species justice (Schlosberg, 2007). The study therefore extends the application of green criminological concepts to a transitional governance context while recognising that the present conclusions are based on secondary evidence rather than primary measurements of environmental harm.

5. Conclusions

This study examined environmental crime through the theoretical perspective of green criminology, with particular attention to global patterns, environmental and economic impacts, governance challenges, and the Albanian context. Using a qualitative synthesis of academic literature, institutional reports, and national legal and policy documents, the study identified recurring relationships between environmental harm, resource exploitation, development pressures, institutional capacity, regulatory implementation, and enforcement.

For Albania, the reviewed evidence documents several forms of environmental crime and environmental harm, including illegal logging, unauthorised construction, pollution, riverbed extraction, and pressures on protected areas. Illegal logging is repeatedly identified in available regional and institutional sources as an important category of recorded environmental offences. However, the available evidence is heterogeneous and incompletely reported; therefore, the study does not attempt to estimate the national prevalence of environmental crime.

A central finding is the distinction between Albania's formal environmental legal framework and its practical implementation. The country has established legislation addressing environmental protection, protected areas, forests, biodiversity, and environmental impact assessment. Nevertheless, the reviewed institutional assessments identify

continuing challenges related to monitoring, coordination, planning, environmental assessment, and enforcement capacity. These findings indicate that environmental governance outcomes depend not only on formal legal provisions but also on the institutional capacity to implement and enforce them.

The Vjosa–Narta case provides an illustrative example of this relationship. It demonstrates how development and tourism pressures, protected-area governance, environmental assessment, biodiversity protection, and European Union environmental conditionality may intersect. The case is not treated as a legally adjudicated example of environmental crime; rather, it illustrates the broader governance tensions identified in the analytical framework.

From a green criminological perspective, the findings support an approach that considers environmental crime together with wider forms of ecological harm. Such an approach is particularly relevant where environmentally harmful outcomes may arise through interactions among legal, administrative, economic, and institutional processes.

Several policy implications follow from the analysis. Strengthening specialised environmental enforcement and prosecution capacity, improving inter-agency coordination, and enhancing monitoring and reporting systems could support more consistent implementation of environmental regulations. A comprehensive environmental-crime database could also improve the availability and comparability of evidence. Greater use of geospatial technologies, including GIS and remote sensing, could support monitoring of illegal logging, unauthorised construction, riverbed extraction, and other environmentally harmful activities. Continued alignment of protected-area governance and environmental impact assessment procedures with European Union environmental standards may further support environmental protection and accession-related objectives. Finally, strengthening public participation and community engagement may improve transparency and accountability in environmental decision-making.

Future research should complement the present qualitative synthesis with primary empirical evidence, including interviews with environmental institutions, law-enforcement bodies, local authorities, judicial actors, and civil society organisations. Quantitative analysis of environmental offences, administrative sanctions, prosecutions, and judicial outcomes would also help assess the scale and distribution of environmental crime and provide a stronger empirical basis for evaluating enforcement effectiveness in Albania.

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6.1 AI Use Statement

The authors declare that artificial intelligence tools were used during the preparation of this manuscript for language editing, grammar correction, improvement of sentence structure, and enhancement of academic clarity. Artificial intelligence tools were not used to generate or interpret research data, perform statistical analyses, or determine the scientific conclusions. The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

Abbreviation	Full Term
EIA	Environmental Impact Assessment
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GIS	Geographic Information System
INTERPOL	International Criminal Police Organization
IUU Fishing	Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
REC Albania	Resource Environmental Center Albania
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

Abbreviation	Full Term
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WHO	World Health Organization
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

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