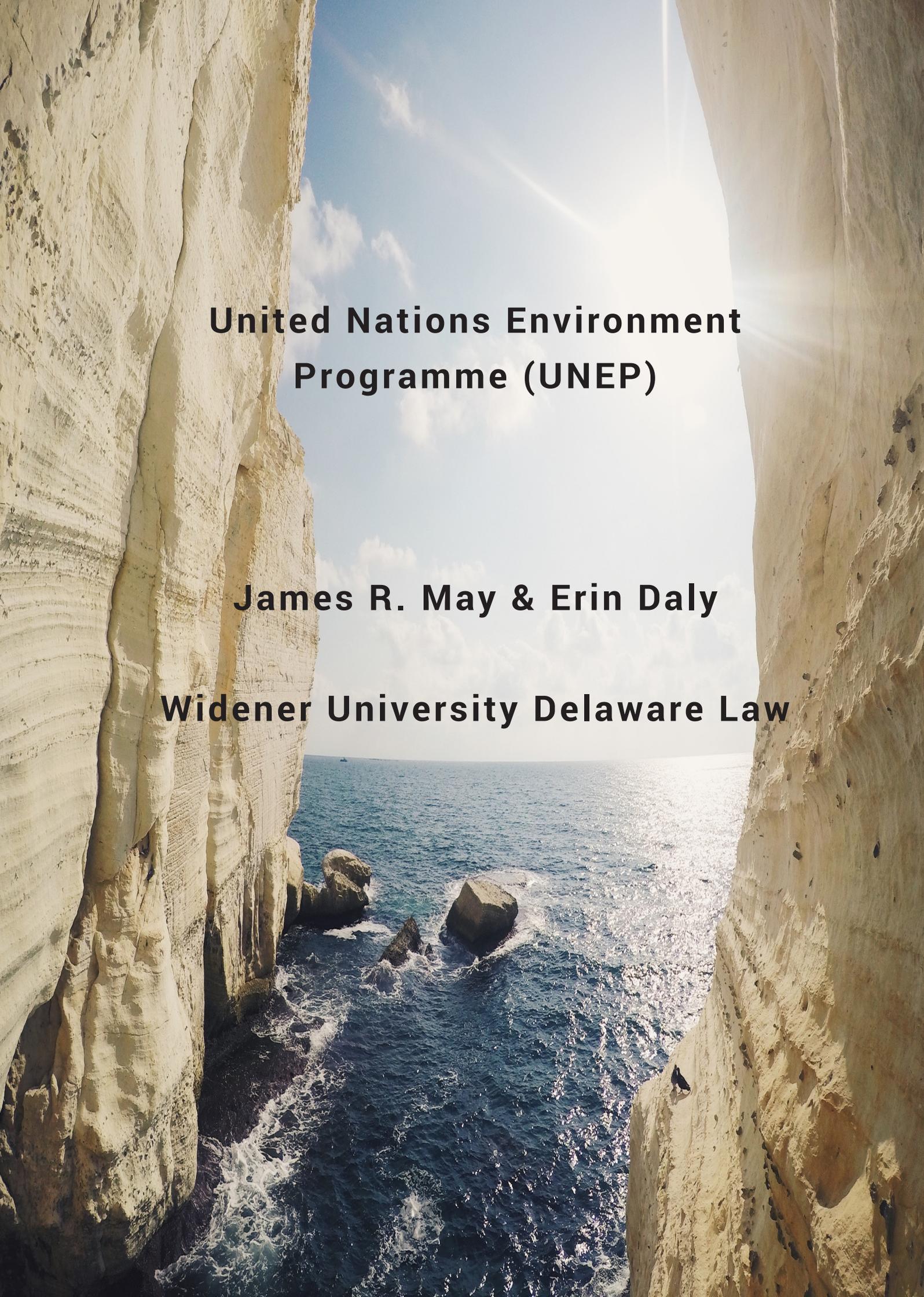


Global Judicial Handbook on Environmental Constitutionalism

2nd Edition



**United Nations Environment
Programme (UNEP)**

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
INTRODUCTION	7
ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM	11
A TAXONOMY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM	18
A. Substantive Rights	19
B. Procedural Environmental Rights	21
C. Other Aspects of Environmental Constitutionalism	22
1. Environmental Obligations, Duties and Policies	22
2. Rights to Water	22
3. Rights of Nature	23
4. Sustainability and Public Trust	23
5. Climate Change	24
6. Dignity	25
D. Subnational Environmental Constitutionalism	25
JUSTICIABILITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM	29
A. Presumptions About Justiciability	29
B. Who Can Enforce Constitutional Environmental Rights?	31
C. Who is Responsible?: Identifying the Appropriate Defendant	36
D. Timing: When is the Right Time to File a Claim?	37
E. Justiciability and Process	38
F. Affirmative Defenses	40
ADJUDICATING ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM	43
A. Challenges in Adjudicating Environmental Rights	43
1. Interpreting Constitutional Text	43
2. Identifying Breaches	47
B. Four Types of Judicial Interpretation	48
1. Independent Environmental Rights	48
2. Dependent Environmental Rights	51
3. Derivative Environmental Rights	53
4. Dormant Environmental Rights	56

REMEDIES	59
A. State Obligations under the International Law Framework.	59
B. The Range of Remedies	61
1. Preventing Further Environmental Harm.	61
2. Injunctions.	61
3. Damages	68
4. Compliance Orders	69
5. Imprisonment	70
C. Challenges to Enforcement	71
ENVIRONMENTAL DIGNITY RIGHTS	74
A. Dignity Rights	74
B. Dignity and the Environment	75
C. Dignity Rights and Environmental Constitutionalism	76
D. Bringing Dignity Rights into Environmental Constitutionalism	77
1. Defining the cause of action	77
2. Standing	78
3. Remedies	79
ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM AND CLIMATE JUSTICE	81
A. Climate Justice	81
B. Express Constitutional Provisions Addressing Climate Change	83
C. Climate Constitutionalism and Justice in the Courts	84
CONCLUSION: JUDICIAL ENGAGEMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSTITUTIONALISM	88

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We hope that you find this to be a useful resource, and invite your comments and suggestions for improvement (jrmay@widener.edu, edaly@widener.edu).

-James R. May & Erin Daly

Introduction



INTRODUCTION

Courts matter. They are essential to the rule of law. Without courts, laws can be disregarded, executive officials left unchecked, and people left without recourse. And the environment and the human connection to it can suffer. Judges stand in the breach. That said, judges can hardly on their own cause wholesale transformation of domestic environmental policy. In many countries, constitutional and apex courts have spoken seldom if at all about environmental constitutionalism. And yet, it is our contention that even these episodic assertions are important because they are indicative of a growing worldwide awareness of the potential of environmental constitutionalism. The mere fact that courts are focusing on the constitutional dimensions of environmental issues makes it more likely that environmental awareness will seep into the cultural consciousness for present and future generations. In environmental constitutionalism, a little goes a long way.

This Handbook is designed to provide jurists with an overview of environmental constitutionalism: we address what it is, the peculiar practical and procedural issues it presents, and how courts from around the globe have engaged it. Environmental constitutionalism is a relatively recent phenomenon at the confluence of constitutional law, international law, human rights, and environmental law. It embodies the recognition that the environment is a proper subject for protection in constitutional texts and for vindication by constitutional courts worldwide. Environmental constitutionalism offers one way to engage environmental challenges that fall beyond the grasp of other legal constructs. It can be coalescent, merging governmental structures and individual rights approaches to further individual and collective norms and policies. It can be used to protect local concerns -- such as access to fresh food, water or air -- or global concerns like biodiversity and climate change that share elements of both human rights and environmental protection.

Environmental constitutionalism is variable, encompassing substantive rights, procedural rights, directive policies, reciprocal duties, or combinations of these and other qualities. Some aspects are fairly common. For example, about one-half of the countries of the world expressly or impliedly recognize a constitutional right to a quality environment. About the same number impart a corresponding duty on individuals to protect the environment.

Some provisions are quite specific, such as those that provide for rights of nature, or rights to potable water or other natural resources. Some are more ephemeral, recognizing trust responsibilities over natural resources or toward future generations, or addressing related subjects like sustainability or climate change. Some recognize environmental stewardship as a matter of national policy.

While most constitutional provisions addressing environmental concerns are narrative, some incorporate numerical outcomes, such as maintaining a percentage of prescribed tree cover, as in Bhutan (60 percent) and Kenya (10 percent).

There is also an uptick in provisions that are designed to afford special process rights in environmental matters. Environmental procedural rights normally involve requirements for environmental assessment, access to information, or rights to petition or participate. Such rights help to keep countervailing substantive rights vital. A constitutional guarantee to a

beneficial environment may be more likely to take root when stakeholders have the right to receive free and timely information, participate in deliberations, and judicially challenge environmental decisionmaking. Procedural environmental constitutionalism is also important in its own right, and can be as or more efficacious than substantive environmental rights if courts are more comfortable ordering procedural rather than substantive remedies.

Environmental constitutionalism is playing an important role in recognizing the human rights implications of environmental degradation and climate disruption; to that extent, it has the capacity to address the sorts of environmental problems felt most acutely by those often ignored or underserved by existing legal structures. International treaties, principles and custom do little to advance environmental rights at the local and subsidiary level. There is as of yet no global environmental rights treaty. Moreover, multilateral and bi-lateral treaties that address environmental concerns are often of limited if any utility to individuals. And while domestic statutory and regulatory laws affording environmental protection and resource conservation are quite advanced in many nations, these laws seldom aim to advance environmental rights or environmentally-related social rights. In addition, while international human rights regimes most nearly approach the notion that individuals have a fundamental right to a quality environment, they are also often out of reach to individuals who would gain from the recognition of environmental rights at the constitutional level. Environmental constitutionalism can help to bridge the gaps left by these other legal regimes.

Some countries, like Brazil, France, and South Africa, incorporate most or all of environmental constitutionalism, while others eschew it entirely. And, in some countries, it exists almost entirely as a result of judicial action. The variety of provisions, aiming to protect different aspects of the environment with a range of scaffolding and enforcement mechanisms, attests to the growth of environmental constitutionalism throughout the world in number and in relevance.

Environmental constitutionalism is growing at the subnational level too, filling gaps in federal systems. Most prominently by states in the Americas in general, and Brazil in particular, subnational governments around the globe have seen fit to constitutionalize substantive and procedural environmental rights, environmental duties, and sustainable development for present and future generations, often with much more specificity and enforceability than provided in national constitutions. Subnational environmental constitutionalism can

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