

JEE honors activists who gave their life to protect nature

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Berta Cáceres Flores, a Lenca Indigenous leader from Honduras who led the movement against hydroelectric dams in the River Gualcarque, was assassinated in her home in 2016. Berta, who was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize in 2015, led numerous campaigns against illegal logging, the presence of US military bases on Lenca land, and in defense of LGBT rights (Pisa, 2017).

Yolanda Maturana, an Afro-Colombian environmentalist who denounced illegal mining and the contamination of water sources in Risaralda and Chocó in Colombia, was murdered in her home in 2018 (El Espectador, 2018). As President of the Association of Friends of Risaralda's Flora and Fauna, Yolanda had already received many death threats, and even her husband was assassinated for his environmental work in 2015.

Bienvenido Veguilla Jr., a forest ranger of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources of the Philippines, was hacked to death by illegal loggers in El Nido, Palawan (Gonzales, 2019). Palawan, the largest province in the Philippines, contains rare and expensive hardwoods that are sought out by timber poachers, and forest rangers are one of the groups most vulnerable to violent reprisals.

The second decade of the 21st century witnessed a notable increase in the assassination of environmental leaders worldwide. The most violent region in the world for those who engaged in environmental work was Latin America, and most of the victims were Indigenous people and women. The activists and the communities they represented put their lives in the line of fire to oppose the devastating consequences of irresponsible mining, logging, agribusiness, and hydroelectric projects. Global Witness, an international NGO that documents environmental and human rights abuses, reported that 2019 was the most brutal year on record against environmentalists, and the two countries with the highest number of murders were Colombia and the Philippines (Global Witness, 2020).

Very often, the environmental work of these leaders is intimately connected to their civil and human rights work. That was the case of María del Pilar Hurtado Montaña, an Afro-Colombian woman of humble origin who worked collecting recyclable materials in the town of Tierralta, Córdoba (Jacobs, 2019). One morning in 2019 she was gunned down in front of her children. María del Pilar had become the spokesperson of homeless families who had become squatters in unproductive land, and as such was viewed as a threat by right-wing paramilitary groups who are believed to have committed the atrocious crime.

Despite the despondency and anger caused by the constant intimidation, threats, disappearance and murders of environmentalists worldwide, one reason for hope in the context of Latin America is the adoption in 2018 of the Escazú Agreement (the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean), which seeks to prevent and punish attacks against environmental defenders, and to make salient that human rights cannot be enjoyed without a healthy environment. The Escazú Agreement, named after the Costa Rican city where it was signed, is the first legally-binding treaty on environmental matters in Latin America. It is worth remembering that the connection between environmental degradation and human rights was first made, at least in a multilateral fashion, at the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, but the Escazú Agreement stands out because it is the world's first treaty to seek protections for environmental defenders.

We, members of the environmental and sustainability education community, owe an immense debt of gratitude to environmental and land guardians who are the first line of defense against the destruction of nature. These brave individuals engage in vital and peaceful work to protect nature and to ensure its



integrity for future generations. Indigenous communities in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage because they tend to live in isolated regions with little communication with the outside world, often the most biodiverse places in the planet and thus highly coveted by rapacious destroyers of nature. Women, too, have been targeted disproportionately because they are at the forefront of managing and safeguarding natural resources such as water, soil and food in support of family and community integrity. Our work as environmental educators becomes more meaningful when we ensure that the lives and activism of the Berta's, Yolanda's, Bienvenido's, and María del Pilar's of the world are known large and wide.

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