

Climate justice case study: From classroom to ICJ



(AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

The Pacific Islands Students
Fighting Climate Change



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The Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling is a collaboration between The Environment and Human Rights Academy (TEHRA), News Decoder and the Young Educators European Association (YEEA).

The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognized sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

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Students should produce a report on climate impacts close to them and on affected communities



Learning objectives

1. Understand the possibilities of student voice in leveraging the law and creating change
2. Investigate the impacts and injustices of the climate crisis through case studies.

✓ GreenComp alignment:

- Systems-thinking
- Supporting fairness
- Critical thinking
- Problem framing
- Collective action

Unit guide

We recommend that you begin this class with having students watch the provided videos and have a discussion based on the provided questions. After going through the case study deeper together (via the Learn texts), have them spend time engaging with the storytelling activity, to let them relate to the concepts.

Here is the link to the **lesson slides**





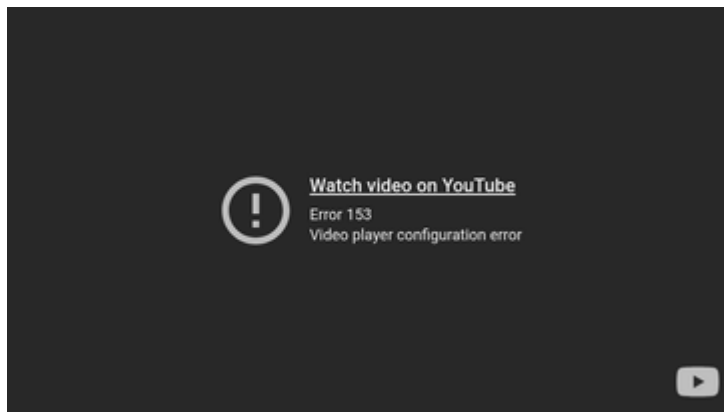
OPENING ACTIVITY

Watch and discuss

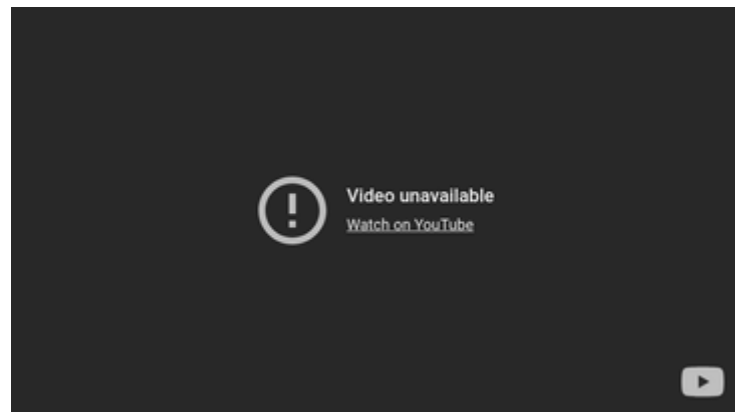
From a classroom to the world's highest court

In 2019, on the Pacific Island of Vanuatu, 27 law students sat before a professor who suggested an ambitious task. The students were told to research the most progressive legal pathways to address climate change and to propose one at the 2019 Pacific Island Leaders Forum Meeting in Tuvalu. And that they did.

Watch the below videos on what happened next.



The Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change explain their movement



ABC News Australia reports on the ICJ advisory opinion

Discuss:

- What is the perspective of young people in countries like Vanuatu according to the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC)?
- Why do you think they decided to bring their perspectives to the International Court of Justice?
- What do you think of the outcome of the ICJ's advisory opinion?
- What is climate justice?
- What do you think is the next step to ensure climate justice for people living in the Pacific?



How it started

In 2019, on the Pacific Island of Vanuatu, 27 law students sat before a professor who suggested an ambitious task.

The students were told to research the most progressive legal pathways to address climate change and to propose one at the 2019 Pacific Islands Leaders Forum Meeting in Tuvalu. And that they did.

Fast forward to 2023 - led by Vanuatu and building on the students' idea, 130 United Nations member states co-sponsored a resolution to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ). This would mean that in 2025, the ICJ would – for the first time in history – decide what nations' obligations are for their climate change commitments and what the consequences are, should these obligations not be met.

"We chose to agitate for an ICJ ruling because it was the most ambitious on our list. And in the face of an existential threat to our people, ambition is what we need," wrote Cynthia Houniuihi, a Solomon Islander and president of the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Against Climate Change¹.



(AP Photo/Nariman El-Mofty)



(AP Photo/Annika Hammerschlag)

Houniuihi grew up in the Solomon Islands, where the hand of climate change has a firm grasp.

"Climate change is not a dinner-table conversation for my people – we do not have that luxury. It is what we lie awake worrying about at night," she wrote.

"Climate change is the deaths of our people, whose losses we feel; it is lost possessions and homes, swept away by storms; it is wanting to move back to our childhood homes, but knowing they will be flooded in a matter of years; it is the threat of losing the places that our identities are tied to."

The Pacific Islands have contributed very little to climate change – less than 0.01% of global CO₂ emissions² – but are among the most vulnerable to its effects. Sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events are stealing people's homes and livelihoods.

"It is heartbreaking that the journey towards solutions on the international level does not reflect the pace at which sea-level rise, intense rainfalls and storms are hitting my islands and my people," wrote Houniuihi.



The ICJ's advisory opinion

On 23 July 2025, the ICJ unanimously affirmed that:

The commitments from states at yearly COPs are not just political in character – they are also legal.

This means that states are legally as well as politically bound to submit climate change pledges, or 'nationally determined contributions', under the Paris Agreement, which is an international treaty on climate change.

The court declared that international climate law is an integrated system of rules extending beyond the treaties.

States now have an obligation to prevent significant environmental harm and cooperate in good faith to protect the environment.

These obligations are owed by all states to each other, even if they have not signed a treaty.

The Court also reasoned that pledges submitted to the Paris Agreement must represent 'the highest possible ambition.'

Emerging from the legal principle of equity, state climate commitments are subject to the principle of common but differentiated responsibility based on respective capabilities (CBDR-RC).

This means: Each country must act, but richer and more polluting countries should do more, while poorer countries should do what they can according to their resources.



(AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

The Court reasoned that CBDR-RC is an interpretative guide: when more than one reading of a state's obligations under international law is legitimate, historic contributions to climate change may become relevant.

The ICJ framed the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a pre-condition of other human rights.

Taken together, the binding character of agreements emerging from COPs, the legal duties imposed by international law generally, and this recognition of environmental rights serve to limit the freedom of states to carry on with business as usual.

In the future, this means that acts of carbon-intensive countries – such as promoting fossil fuels, especially at scale – might be challenged before the ICJ.

This is a testament to the power of transformative education – not to teach the world as it is, but to imagine what it could and should be, and to equip young people with the tools to shape it. This is the law standing with the climate vulnerable, and the future rising from classrooms, communities, and acts of creative defiance.



Storytelling

Do you have a story like the Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change that you could tell the world?

Youth have a great power to trigger change, as witnessed throughout history. Many powerful movements started with youth standing up for their rights, justice, and speaking out to protect people and the planet.

From the student protests of 1968 across Europe to today's climate marches led by Fridays for Future, young voices have challenged powerful systems and brought global attention to urgent issues.

Youth often have the courage, creativity, and energy to lead movements and inspire others to act.

The Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change is just one inspiring example that is directly connected to climate change and climate injustice.

You – like the Pacific Islands students – are now being prompted to research the most progressive solutions to address climate change,



Your task: find a justice story

Start by brainstorming (alone or in groups) what climate injustices are taking place in your country or region.

In its advisory opinion responding to States' request, the ICJ framed the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a pre-condition of other human rights.

Research the impacts of climate change on the environment in your country or region, and find out what groups of people are being mostly affected.

Make a short report – as a video fit for social media, a news article, a radio piece, or documentary – on your findings.

In your report, answer these questions:

What are the impacts on the environment? Who is being mostly affected by this? Could this be a breach of human rights, according to the ICJ? Who could you interview about this to learn more?

Endnotes

1. Houniuihi, C (2023): Why I'm leading Pacific Islands students in the fight on climate change <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-01751-1>
2. Our World in Data, available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/CO2-emissions#:~:text=In%201950%20the%20world%20emitted,yet%20to%20reach%20their%20peak.>



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