

CALL TO ACTION

The Health of Our Planet, the Health of Our People: A Nurse's Call to Action

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Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and the Philippines have a common unfortunate reputation: they are among the most dangerous places globally for environmental activists (Greenfield, 2022). Over two-thirds of the documented murders of environmentalists around the world took place in these countries, a disturbing trend that highlights not just the dire danger ecological activists work under but also the more pervasive systemic threat to our public health and the integrity of our natural environments.

Environmental sustainability cannot sensibly be addressed without paying tribute to the violence, harassment, and repression inflicted upon those who protect our natural environment. The 2016 murder of Berta Cáceres, an Indigenous Lenca activist in Honduras who fought against the building of a hydroelectric dam on the sacred Gualcarque River, is a stark reminder of the cost paid by many for environmental protection (Lakhani, 2020). In Brazil, environmental activists like Dorothy Stang, José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva, Maria do Espírito Santo, and Valdemar Oliveira Barbosa were killed for fighting illegal logging and for defense of land rights (de Sainte Croix, 2011; Rocha, 2005; Watts, 2013). The Philippines has martyrs too. Macli-ing Dulag, a Butbut tribe leader in Kalinga, bravely fought against the building of a huge dam along the Chico River. His murder by the military under Martial Law did not stifle his cause, but energized public protest and continues to motivate environmental activism (Bantayog ng mga Bayani Foundation, 2023). More recently, the arrest in 2023 of young environmental activists Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro for opposing reclamation projects in Manila Bay are recent examples of the persistent harassment of those who resist environmentally harmful development (Gozum, 2023).

These instances are not random occurrences but symptoms of a larger trend where the ones who risk speaking for the environment meet violence and repression. The health implications at the population level are far-reaching. Environmental degradation, driven by irresponsible industrialization and natural resource exploitation, contributes to negative health impacts, especially for the poor and vulnerable. Contaminated water, polluted air, and biodiversity loss underpinning a spectrum of health problems, from respiratory diseases to malnutrition, is facilitated by the silencing of activists. The silencing of activists not only continues environmental damage but also widens health disparities.

Here, nurses are summoned not merely as practitioners of healthcare but as guardians of global health. Our job goes beyond the bedside; we are educators, champions, and community leaders well situated to heighten the linkage between ecological health and human wellness. Through raising awareness, backing policy that is green-friendly, and engaging in cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral endeavors, nurses are poised to lead the charge towards environmental justice.

Sustainability requires more than isolated acts of environmentalism. As much as tree planting, recycling, and energy conservation are important deeds, they fall short when measured against the structural changes wrought by corporate deforestation and industrial pollution. These large-scale forces require a collective action. Nurses, through their professional associations, educational institutions, and community activism, can be powerful leaders in that collective action.

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Schools, especially, have an important part to play. They need to actively combat the demonization of activism. Activism is not terrorism; it is active citizenship. It is a moral and democratic act of defiance against injustice and exploitation. Educators and students alike must defend the integrity of environmental activism and establish safe spaces for discussion, questioning, and empowerment.

The magic of education in transforming cannot be exaggerated. If sustainability and environmental consciousness are infused in early learning, children become adults who are mindful of their ecological duties. Incorporating climate literacy and ecological ethics into nursing education not only enhances professional skills but also develops a generation of nurses well-equipped to address the multifaceted health impacts of climate change.

Environmental activism is not a crime; it is a force that is necessary for betterment in society and the environment (Voorhees, 2022). It is through activism that important issues are raised and public pressure mounts on policymakers to act. For example, the anti-Chico River Dam project campaign, which initially started by a few Indigenous leaders, progressively transformed into a national campaign that successfully put an end to the project (Göransson, 2022). This win not only saved the environment but also safeguarded the health and means of survival of the local communities who relied on the river.

Crushing activism has catastrophic effects. Poisoned water results in the spread of cholera and dysentery. Forest destruction reduces plant diversity, such as plants essential for medicine, and elevates the likelihood of zoonotic spillovers. Poisonous air worsens asthma and cardiovascular disease. These effects disproportionately affect the poor and the vulnerable, aggravating already-existing disparities in health.

Nurses, being usually the initial point of contact in healthcare, are first-hand witnesses of these disparities. We both have a responsibility and the ability to act. Making environmental health part of nursing practice takes many shapes: patient education, health promotion efforts, policy advocacy, and involvement in environmental impact statements. Nurses can also join forces with environmental protectors by providing their voices for campaigns, providing health insights for public discourse, and organizing support for legislation that defends both communities and ecosystems.

In addition, nurses can be great supporters of environmentalists. Through their expertise, experience, and credibility in communities, they can assist in changing the perception of the public and creating wider support for environmental action. This initiative by healthcare workers to complement environmental supporters is vital in the struggle for a healthier, more sustainable world.

The climate crisis is a health crisis. Ecosystem destruction is not a strictly environmental issue; it's an existential threat to human life itself. Our earth's health cannot be separated from the health of our citizens. As nurses, we are obligated to protect them both. Environmental degradation, as expressed through dirty air, dirty water, warming temperatures, and loss of biodiversity, has immediate impacts on the health of patients and communities, especially the most at-risk populations. The fight for environmental sustainability is a fight for public health. It is an intersectoral and interdisciplinary call to action that requires an all-hands-on-deck approach to defend both the planet and people.

Nurses, as respected healthcare professionals and patient advocates for well-being, have an important role in this struggle. Our work is not just at the bedside. We need to give voice to environmental activism, encourage sustainable living, and teach our communities about the irrevocable connection between planetary and human health. By standing today, we assure that the world that future generations will inherit is not only habitable but flourishing.

This is our call to action. We can not keep silent. We need to tap our knowledge, empathy, and our combined power to fight for a healthier, more equitable, and sustainable world. The future of public health is at stake, and so is the future of our planet.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Christine Caila C. Tambalo and **Christian Jude S. Castillo** are student nurses from the College of Nursing at the University of the Cordilleras (UC). In 2024, they participated in UC's "Green Is In" competition, which centered on the theme "Environmental Sustainability: Exploring the Role of Education in Promoting Environmental Awareness and Actions to Achieve SDG 13 – Climate Action." Their entry reflected a strong commitment to integrating environmental consciousness within the nursing profession. They were mentored by **Gilbert D. Bernardino Jr.**, an assistant professor at the College of Nursing, who served as their coach throughout the competition.

A nurse is a professional who is educated in the scientific knowledge, skills and philosophy of nursing, and regulated to practice nursing based on established standards of practice and ethical codes. Nurses enhance health literacy, promote health, prevent illness, protect patient safety, alleviate suffering, facilitate recovery and adaptation, and uphold dignity throughout life and at end of life. They work autonomously and collaboratively across settings to improve health, through advocacy, evidence-informed decision-making, and culturally safe, therapeutic relationships. Nurses provide people-centred, compassionate clinical and social care, manage services, enhance health systems, advance public and population health, and foster safe and sustainable environments. Nurses lead, educate, research, advocate, innovate and shape policy to improve health outcomes.

(ICN, 2025)