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Southern blue criminology: rethinking ocean harmscapes in a global context

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This paper introduces southern blue criminology, a novel theoretical framework that extends traditional criminological analysis to encompass the environmental harms affecting the world's oceans, particularly from a Global South perspective. This approach critiques crime-centric analysis and expands upon the concept of "harmscapes" – areas significantly impacted by ecological damage – by integrating socio-economic and cultural contexts often overlooked by prevailing enforcement paradigms developed in the Global North. Through a critical review of existing criminological theories and maritime enforcement practices, this study highlights the inadequacies of current approaches that fail to account for the transnational and complex nature of oceanic harms. Southern blue criminology is proposed through four integrative perspectives: shifting from a crime-centric view to embracing a broader conception of ocean harmscapes; moving beyond state-centric responses to foster whole-of-society involvement including non-state actors; transcending Western-centric governance models in favor of context-dependent strategies that respect local knowledge and practices; and expanding the analytical frame from human-centric approaches to include human–nonhuman assemblages, recognizing the ocean as an active participant in ecological and social interactions. The framework aims to foster more effective and sustainable management of marine environments, proposing a shift from a punitive focus to a more comprehensive, preventive, and restorative approach. The implications of this research are significant, suggesting a transformative shift in policies to better address the intricate web of factors contributing to maritime environmental crimes and to enhance global ecological justice.

KEYWORDS

southern blue criminology, blue criminology, harmscapes, oceans, green criminology, whole-of-society, non-state, transnational maritime environmental crimes

1 Introduction

In recent years, the field of criminology has witnessed a significant paradigm shift, extending its gaze beyond traditional urban crime landscapes to the often-overlooked realm of environmental harm. This expansion has given birth to an innovative and critical sub-discipline known as “green criminology”. Pioneering the examination of crimes and harms affecting the environment, green criminology serves as a lens through which the intricate relationship between human activities and ecological degradation can be scrutinized (Brisman and South, 2018). Amongst the diverse ecosystems under threat, the world’s oceans emerge as critical sites of harm or “harmscapes”, vast yet vulnerable, facing unprecedented challenges ranging from overfishing and coral bleaching to plastic pollution and acidification.

The concept of “harmscapes”, as suggested by Berg and Shearing (2018: 75), invites us to view the oceans not just as serene expanses of blue but as dynamic arenas where various forms of environmental harm converge. From the relentless exploitation of marine life to the insidious spread of pollution, the seas bear silent witness to a multitude of transgressions against nature. These issues are complex and multifaceted, often transcending national boundaries and legal jurisdictions, making their study and regulation a formidable challenge.

Adding to this complexity is the emergence of “southern green criminology” (Goyes, 2019). This approach underscores the importance of incorporating the views and experiences of the Global South in understanding environmental crimes. It challenges the traditional, often Western-centric narratives, calling attention to the unique environmental struggles and injustices faced by territories located in the Global South. Critics might argue that the focus on southern perspectives complicates consensus building on international regulations. However, inclusivity can lead to more robust and culturally sensitive policies that are more likely to be effective and respected across different jurisdictions.

As we delve into the realm of blue criminology, an area specifically dedicated to studying crimes in marine environments, we recognize the urgent need to integrate these diverse perspectives. However, a noticeable void remains in the discourse – the absence of a dedicated approach to “southern blue criminology”. This nascent field promises to blend the insights of blue criminology with the nuanced perspectives of southern theory (Carrington et al., 2016), fostering a more inclusive and holistic understanding of how to understand and study harmscapes in maritime contexts including transnational maritime environmental crimes. Integrating insights from disciplines such as marine biology and international law can enhance our understanding of harmscapes, providing a more comprehensive approach to marine conservation and policy-making.

While southern blue criminology primarily focuses on the environmental harms impacting the oceans, it also encompasses coastal contexts, addressing the unique socio-legal issues within and beyond domestic jurisdictions. This includes recognizing the small local southern communities that are affected by environmental

harm and crime within their territorial waters, extending up to 200 nautical miles out to sea, as well as the complexities of international waters governed by international laws. This dual focus allows for a comprehensive understanding of how oceanic harms are governed across different jurisdictions, their respective legal frameworks, and the complex challenges of navigating these.

In this piece, we navigate these interconnected realms, exploring how the recognition of oceans as harmscapes within green criminology not only broadens our understanding of environmental crimes but also underscores the critical need for diverse and inclusive approaches in addressing these global challenges.

2 Criminological engagement with environmental harms

The recognition of environmental harms has significantly reshaped the landscape of criminology, expanding its purview beyond conventional crime analysis to include the complex realm of ecological injustices. This shift has led to the development of green criminology, an approach that critically examines the intersections between human behavior and environmental degradation. As this field matures, it has increasingly embraced southern perspectives, leading to the evolution of what is now recognized as southern green criminology. This adaptation acknowledges the diverse impacts of environmental harm across different global contexts, challenging the previously dominant narratives shaped by Northern viewpoints (Goyes, 2019).

More recently, the focus has extended to the blue criminology framework, which specifically addresses the unique challenges posed by marine environments (Garcia Ruiz et al., 2020). This approach emphasizes the urgent need to engage with the myriad harms inflicted upon the oceans, from illegal fishing to the dumping of toxic waste, and seeks to incorporate broader, more inclusive governance responses that are sensitive to the complexities of marine conservation and sustainability.

In this section, we will explore the development and significance of these criminological sub-disciplines, highlighting how their emergence not only broadens our understanding of environmental crimes but also pushes the boundaries of criminological research to more effectively address the pressing ecological issues of our time.

2.1 Green and southern green criminology

Green criminology critically addresses the interactions between human activity and environmental harm, expanding traditional criminology’s scope to include issues such as pollution, wildlife trafficking, and illegal waste disposal (Lynch and Long, 2022). This field advocates for a justice system that incorporates ecological justice, recognizes crimes against the environment and aims to ensure the sustainability of natural resources for future generations (White, 2008; South and Brisman, 2012). Green criminologists also promote the notion that green crimes are not victimless crimes impacting the whole-of-society and future generations (South,

2014) and offer opportunities for environmental restorative justice (Dore et al., 2022; Kamolane-Kgadima and Kathi, 2024).

As this sub-discipline develops, there is growing recognition of the global nature of green harms (Spapens et al., 2016) and the related regulatory challenges, including the social legitimacy of both the rules and the rule-makers (Hübschle, 2017; Hübschle and Shearing, forthcoming¹). However, the particular vulnerabilities and perspectives of the Global South have led to the development of southern green criminology. This approach highlights how environmental degradation disproportionately affects low- and middle-income countries, often exacerbated by historical and ongoing global inequalities (Goyes, 2019). Southern green criminology emphasizes the need to consider local contexts and the impacts of global power dynamics on environmental policies within the Global South. It critiques the predominant Western-centric approach, advocating for integrating Indigenous and local knowledge systems and addressing the structural drivers of environmental injustices (Carrington et al., 2019; Goyes, 2019). Environmental crimes committed by corporations are often overlooked and Indigenous protests are criminalized in what Weis (2019) terms “criminal selectivity”. This approach exposes systemic biases that prioritize corporate profits over environmental and public health, especially in marginalized communities (Weis, 2019). Furthermore, recent dialogues in green criminology, such as those articulated in the *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, emphasize the importance of democratizing criminological knowledge and recognizing diverse “ways of seeing” (Berger, 1973) and “ways of living” (Morizot, 2022). This includes acknowledging the unique challenges, opportunities and knowledges from regions like Africa, Asia and Latin America, where environmental exploitation, natural and mineral resource extraction have a long colonial and ongoing history (Goyes et al., 2024; Hübschle et al., 2024). These practices often impact women and girls disproportionately (Mai-Bornu, 2024).

Incorporating these perspectives not only broadens the theoretical base of green criminology but also enhances its practical relevance, advocating for policies that are both culturally and contextually sensitive. By integrating insights from key scholars and recent publications, green and southern green criminology can contribute significantly to a more equitable and effective approach to addressing global environmental challenges and contextual vagaries and global power differentials which impact on both the nature of harmscapes and governance responses in Global South contexts (Goyes, 2019).

2.2 Blue criminology

Introduced by Garcia Ruiz et al. (2020), blue criminology scholarship investigates marine-related harms by shifting the focus from traditional human-centric approaches to recognizing the intrinsic rights of the ocean – itself often a victim of harm. This approach is essential for tackling marine-related harms such as illegal fishing, pollution, and the destruction of habitats (Hutchinson, 2023).

¹ Hübschle, A., and Shearing, C. (forthcoming). *Governing wildlife security: Towards pragmatic conservation* (London: Routledge).

A blue criminology approach also acknowledges the differential use and application of legislation, and the inadequacies of international law response to ocean harms given the jurisdictional and fragmented nature of state and global responses, and the broader issues of social injustice and inequality that underpin these harms (Brisman et al., 2018; Bueger and Edmunds, 2020; Garcia Ruiz et al., 2020).

For example, the application of blue criminology in combating illegal waste dumping in international waters showcases its potential to influence international marine law and policy. However, the fragmented nature of state and global responses, as well as the jurisdictional complexities, often impede the effective implementation of these innovative legal concepts. The solution suggested is a move to recognize “ecocide” as a crime to address ocean harms, coupled with preventative, sustainable and inclusive governance solutions to ocean harms, recognizing too that a one-size-fits-all response is not appropriate (Bueger and Edmunds, 2020; Garcia Ruiz et al., 2020). We seek to extend this framing and advocate a “southern blue criminology” approach where particular emphasis is laid on recognizing the contextual differences in North and South spaces where, for instance, a shift to governing-through-ecocide or sustainable practices still raises significant governance challenges not always considered in Northern contexts given the often unique socio-material risks faced in southern contexts. We ultimately consider what principles could inform contextually-relevant governance responses to ocean harmscapes in southern contexts.

3 Towards a southern blue criminology

As we delve deeper into the intricate web of environmental issues plaguing our oceans, it becomes increasingly clear that a one-size-fits-all approach falls short in addressing the myriad challenges these vast harmscapes present. Particularly, the integration of southern perspectives – those stemming from the Global South – is crucial in understanding and effectively responding to the complexity of oceanic harms. These regions, often most affected by environmental degradation, offer unique insights that can lead to more resilient and sustainable outcomes.

The ocean, as a harmscape, is not just a victim of environmental degradation but also a complex, dynamic system that influences and is influenced by human activities. From overfishing to the trafficking of underwater cultural heritage trafficking (Browne and Raff, 2022), the actions that harm the ocean also have profound repercussions on coastal communities, many of which are located in the Global South (Bennett et al., 2023). These communities often depend on the ocean for their livelihoods, food security, and cultural identity. Thus, harm to the ocean is not just an environmental issue; it’s an issue of social justice and equity.

Traditional law enforcement approaches, often designed in and for well-capacitated and trained law enforcement agencies located in the North, are ill-equipped to deal with the transnational and multifaceted nature of maritime environmental crimes (Holley and Shearing, 2016). These approaches usually emphasize regulation and punishment, overlooking the underlying socio-economic factors that drive such crimes (Abdurrachman et al., 2021). For instance, in the case of illegal

fishing, law enforcement might focus on penalizing the fishers, many of whom are from impoverished backgrounds and are driven by necessity, rather than addressing the larger systemic issues like the lack of sustainable livelihood options, systemic inequality or the role of international fishing conglomerates (Auld and Feris, 2022).

A poignant illustration of the limitations of conventional law enforcement can be seen in the handling of transnational maritime environmental crimes. These crimes, such as illegal dumping of hazardous waste or oil spills, often occur across multiple jurisdictions, making enforcement and accountability challenging. The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill, for example, had far-reaching consequences that transcended national boundaries, affecting marine life, ecosystems, and coastal communities across the Gulf of Mexico (Murawski et al., 2021). The response to such disasters often highlights the gaps in international regulatory frameworks and the inadequacy of existing legal instruments in addressing the complex interplay of ecological, economic, and social impacts (Awewomom et al., 2024).

This brings us to the need for a “southern blue criminology” approach. Such an approach would incorporate the perspectives and experiences of the Global South, recognizing the unique challenges and needs of these regions. It would advocate for a more holistic understanding of maritime environmental crimes, one that considers not just the legal and regulatory aspects but also the socio-economic and cultural dimensions. By doing so, southern blue criminology could contribute to more effective, equitable, and sustainable solutions to the myriad problems facing our ocean harmscapes. This reorientation towards a southern blue criminology not only enhances our understanding of marine environmental issues and maritime harms but also encourages the adoption of governance frameworks that are more attuned to the varied and complex realities of different regions.

Southern blue criminology, while primarily focused on marine environments, also recognizes the interconnectedness of land-based bodies of water such as rivers, streams, and lakes. These freshwater systems are integral to the health of coastal and ocean communities, as they often serve as conduits for pollutants and other environmental harms that eventually impact marine ecosystems. This holistic approach ensures that environmental harms conducted “on-land” are acknowledged for their downstream effects on coastal and oceanic environments, thereby fostering more comprehensive and effective conservation strategies.

What exactly would inform a southern blue criminology approach that differentiates and/or extends beyond current framings? We have developed four principles or underlying premises which could inform appropriate practices – in other words, rather than advocate for a prescriptive set of “best practices” we propose particular “ways of thinking” or sensibilities which need to be present to engage with the complexities of ocean harmscapes in diverse Global South contexts (Berg and Shearing, 2011: 27).

3.1 From crime-centric to ocean harmscapes

A crime-centric or crime-only sensibility with respect to ocean harmscapes may crowd out innovative alternatives and longer-term solutions; it may ignore harms which are not criminalized (or subject to

international criminal law) yet are devastating in impact; it presumes that there exists a capable law enforcement body, state apparatus or “functional equivalent” (Loader and Walker, 2007: 31) to identify and prosecute ocean “crime”, which may not be the case; it may presume a dichotomy between “victim” and “offender” when we know that oceans may be both the source and recipient of harms; and given this, its main governance tactic of blaming and punishing may do nothing to mitigate future climate change-related harmscapes (Berg and Shearing, 2018). Finally, it may buy into the very global disparities that a harm-based approach seeks to mitigate – through for instance, criminalizing the most vulnerable but ignoring the global power dynamics that underpin the existence and nature of ocean harms (Hübschle and Shearing, 2025). In this way the “crime-izing” ocean harms may end up being more harmful (Berg and Shearing, 2018). This is not to say that legal or criminal governance are never appropriate, only that it should be considered on a case-by-case basis in relation to context – not because it is the default solution informed by a normative global agenda. Shifting to a harm-centric sensibility, allows “crime-izing” harms to be one of the many solutions available to mitigate and resolve harmscapes. By reflecting on ocean harms through the lens of a “harmscapes” approach we challenge these often narrow conceptions within criminology which favor a focus on discrete harmful events (crimes) which impact humans and which invite and favor law enforcement and state-centric solutions. A harmscapes approach recognizes the complexity, temporality, and the contextual vagaries of ocean harms – oceans as both the sources and recipients of harm, harms as also involving long-term planetary implications, and necessarily transcending human-centric ideas of sovereign boundaries. They invite reconsideration of spatiality, as oceans both inhabit local, everyday spaces of human engagement (local fishing practices, for instance) but also planetary spaces impacting on human survival (global human dependency on oceans as a source of oxygen, for instance).

A “harmscapes” approach thus invites us to move beyond narrow framings by recognizing the convergence of old harms (e.g. overfishing) and more contemporary, climate change-related harms (e.g. ocean acidification and warming); the fact that harms may transcend fixed “temporal, spatial and conceptual boundaries”; and which invite us to reconsider governance responses accordingly – particularly the need to shift from human-to-human, institution-centric, and blame- or punishment-centered approaches to the bigger issues underpinning the proliferation of ocean harms (Berg and Shearing, 2018: 75). These bigger issues – which constitute a convergence of both social and environmental or socio-material risks – invite innovative responses that don’t neatly align with any single institution or any singular governance technology or practice but require a “whole-of-society” response (Berg and Shearing, 2011).

3.2 From state-centric to whole-of-society

Related to this point, a harm-centric sensibility requires a broader toolbox than only crime-izing responses, it may require a range of governing entities to contribute the right responses (tools) to an ocean harmscape, including state and non-state entities – the private sector, communities, individuals, and so forth. A whole-of-society response simply requires that harms be treated with appropriate solutions and include those best placed to solve or mitigate ocean harms. It means

finding solutions for and aligning resources to the context and nuances of that problem rather than starting off with an already-resourced solution (e.g. the criminal justice system) and trying to apply it to all ocean harms (e.g. law enforcement or crime-centric governance responses) (Berg and Shearing, 2011). By normatively favoring, usually monocentric, solutions, alternative governance options are crowded out and the contextual realities and (state) governance deficits of, for instance, Global South spaces, are disregarded. Whole-of-society, or polycentric governance solutions recognize that the center of authority may shift – dependent on the entity best placed to deal with the harm – that it may not always or normatively be the state that resolves ocean harmscapes, particularly when the state is complicit, weak, absent, illegitimate and/or ineffective, which may be the case, dependent on context (Berg and Shearing, 2020). The importance of context is thus an obvious point, but yet normative and universal solutions still prevail.

3.3 From Western-centric to context-dependent

Context matters, yet it is widely acknowledged that certain knowledges and governance goals predominate (such as a crime-centric approach to harms), sometimes to the detriment of alternative perspectives – hence the renewed focus on southern perspectives. In relation to ocean harmscapes, in many Global South contexts where plural governance dominates, there may be far more reliance on the non-state, yet prevailing global normative ideals of “good governance” tends to pathologize the non-state (especially the private sector) and thus close off solutions which may cater better to the public good than state-centric and Western-centric ideals (Berg and Shearing, 2018, 2020). Universally accepted solutions or goals (such as the Sustainable Development Goals) may or may not account for flexible governance solutions – usually preferring state or institutional solutions – they do not necessarily acknowledge the contextual realities and importance of fluid, informal, hybrid systems of governance and varied forms of authority, as well as the diverse knowledge and capacities that these systems may bring to bear to ocean harmscapes (Watson et al., 2024). The critique here is that while SDGs aim to address broad global challenges like those outlined in SDG 14, “Life Below Water,” they may not fully incorporate the nuances of local governance systems, particularly in the Global South (Menton et al., 2020). This oversight can hinder the effectiveness of interventions designed to conserve and sustainably use marine resources. Community-led initiatives in these regions, which utilize traditional practices and local ecological knowledge (Loch and Riechers, 2021), exemplify the potential of alternative governance models that are often more adaptable and locally relevant than top-down, formal structures.

3.4 From human-centric to human–nonhuman assemblages

Finally, consideration has to be made of the ocean itself as a nonhuman “actant” (borrowing from Bruno Latour’s terminology).

Sensibilities on the ocean have evolved over time – for instance a prevailing sensibility is that the ocean is a (bottomless) resource, “an inexhaustible warehouse”, and an entity to be controlled and demarcated through boundaries and borders accordingly (Shearing, 2015: 256). More recently the sensibility has shifted to that of an entity which has its own rights (Garcia Ruiz et al., 2020). However, the ocean should be regarded as an entity which has actant properties in recognition of its place within assemblages of human–nonhuman engagement and the recognition of the intertwining of socio-material sensibilities. In other words, it is to recognize the “entanglement” of the ocean to all beings/species on earth “in a complex set of assemblages” thereby necessitating a move past a purely human-centric framing of the ocean as a human resource (Harrington and Shearing, 2017: 17, 20; Brisman and South, 2018; White, 2011). This shift in sensibility has governance implications where monocentric, crime-centric responses undermine the interconnectedness and complexities of human–ocean engagement at a local and planetary scale.

4 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the exploration of “southern blue criminology” underscores a pressing need to reconceptualize how we approach oceanic harms. By integrating insights from southern and green criminology perspectives, this emerging field emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diverse and complex governance landscapes that characterize the Global South. Traditional Western-centric and state-focused strategies often fall short in addressing the multifaceted nature of ocean harmscapes, including transnational maritime environmental crimes, that transcend national borders and cultural contexts. By advocating for a more inclusive understanding that values non-state actors, informal governance, and hybrid systems, southern blue criminology calls for a broader, more adaptable framework. This approach not only aims to mitigate the immediate impacts of environmental crimes but also seeks to foster long-term sustainable relationships between human communities and the marine environments upon which they depend. As we move forward, embracing these varied perspectives will be crucial in developing effective, equitable, and culturally resonant responses to the pressing environmental challenges facing our oceans today. This paradigm shift towards a more integrated and context-sensitive criminology can lead to more effective governance and a deeper respect for the interconnectedness of human and non-human systems in our global ecology.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

AH: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JB: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft.

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