

# TEACHING GUIDE



## ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE AND THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

**[Watch the Accompanying Captioned Video](#)**

PHOENIX  
ZONES  
INITIATIVE

# OVERVIEW

The right to health was legally recognized as a human right in 1966—twenty years after the Constitution of the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of *complete* physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”

In 2002, the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights began promoting the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, including the right to social and environmental determinants of health such as safe drinking water, nutritious food, adequate shelter, education, opportunity, and freedom from discrimination.

Almost 20 years later, on October 8, 2021, the Human Rights Council passed Resolution 48/13 recognizing the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Resolution 48/13 was passed 59 years after scientist and writer Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, which presented an ecological view of health and challenged the notion that humans are separate from nature.

At the time, Carson highlighted health threats to nonhuman animals as indicators of environmental destruction, and as a foreshadowing of what could befall humans.

Today, the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental degradation, and other existential threats plainly illustrate how the rights, health, and wellbeing of humans, other animals, plants, and the shared environment are interdependent.



# OVERVIEW

Public health perspectives increasingly emphasize links between human, animal, and environmental health.

One example is the One Health framework, which aims to promote interdisciplinary collaboration among those working in human medicine, veterinary medicine, environmental conservation, public health, and other fields.

However, in its most common applications, One Health has been criticized for being too anthropocentric and for failing to include adequate attention to human and nonhuman rights and wellbeing.

This teaching guide accompanies a captioned video recording of [Phoenix Zones Initiative's \(PZI\) 2022 Ecological Justice and the Right to Health](#) virtual panel discussion, which followed the

publication of a [special section on ecological justice and the right to health in the \*Health and Human Rights Journal\*](#).

As a member of the Harvard FXB Health and Human Rights Consortium, PZI helped publish the journal issue and sponsored the 2022 event.

The event included experts from medicine, public health, the sciences, law, and ethics, and panelists discussed

- the human and nonhuman right to health;
- One Health strengths, weaknesses, and applications; and
- aspirational and concrete solutions to existential challenges such as the climate emergency, sustainable development, and the threat of future pandemics.



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1) Discuss the interdependent nature of human, animal, and environmental rights, health, and wellbeing.
- 2) Describe how the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency have revealed problems with existing policy and regulatory frameworks governing the treatment of humans, other animals, and the environment.
- 3) Explore opportunities to pursue ethical, evidence-based interventions that advance ecological justice and the moral and legal right to health for human and nonhuman beings.

## TARGET AUDIENCE

The target audience for this learning activity includes undergraduate and graduate advocates and learners from

- public health;
- law, policy, and ethics;
- human and veterinary medicine; and
- the social and biological sciences.

## LEARNING FORMAT

This learning activity involves a combination of Socratic and didactic learning methods, case studies, and discussion, with an accompanying [captioned video](#).





# SUGGESTED TEACHING STRATEGIES

**The video is approximately 90 minutes long.**

**If you need to cover the material in a 50–75-minute class, here is a suggested strategy:**

- 1) Ask students to watch the video outside of class time, and to read at least two of the Recommended Readings (see below).
- 2) In class, break the students into small groups and assign each group specific items from the Discussion Questions. Additionally, instruct each group to create a new question of their own.
- 3) Come back together as a class, and have each small group lead the discussion on their assigned questions and pose the new question to the others. Encourage students to integrate what they learned from the assigned reading into the discussion.
- 4) Once the discussion has concluded, assign a reflective essay in which students imagine a future in which the principles of ecological justice and the right to health as outlined in the video and readings are embedded within public policies, institutions, and practices.

**If you need to cover the material over more than one teaching session, here are some suggested strategies:**

- 1) Ask students to watch a portion of the video (or the entire video) during one session, and facilitate discussion in the next session(s), guided by the Discussion Questions and the Recommended Reading. Consider facilitating discussion using a mixture of small-group and class discussion.
- 2) Ask students to read the Recommended Reading in advance, and then, in class, ask them to watch selected portions of the video that correspond most with the Recommended Reading. Consider facilitating discussion using a mixture of small-group and class discussion.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the central themes of the Ecological Justice and the Right to Health panel discussion?
- 2 What do rights and ecological justice mean to you? How do your everyday decisions influence the prospects for ecological justice in your community and globally?
- 3 What does health mean to you? What are some determinants of health? What does the right to health mean to you, and how can you recognize the right to health for others?
- 4 Describe the general relationship between rights, health, and justice. Provide some specific examples of the relationship between human and nonhuman rights, health, and ecological justice.
- 5 Throughout the discussion, the moderator and panelists referred to the interdependent nature of human, animal, and environmental rights, health, and wellbeing. What were some examples they provided? Did these examples resonate with you? Why or why not?
- 6 The moderator and panelists referred to the One Health framework. Describe the One Health framework and its strengths and limitations. How does a Just One Health approach address any limitations of a One Health approach?
- 7 How do the costs of preventive interventions that address the interconnected health and wellbeing of humans, other animals, and the environment compare with the costs associated with interconnected problems such as the COVID-19 pandemic?





# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 8 The panelists discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency illustrate problems with regulatory frameworks that govern the treatment of humans, other animals, and the environment. Describe these problems, and potential solutions that avoid the exploitation of humans, other animals, and the environment.
- 9 How could changes in policy regarding food, research, education, employment, social services, infrastructure, and other sectors better address the right to health for human and nonhuman beings?
- 10 How have the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the right to health for human and nonhuman beings?
- 11 Some of the panelists discussed the importance of collective action. What are some examples of collective action, and how do concepts like moral agency influence whether an individual entity has a moral obligation to engage in collective action?
- 12 What are our moral obligations to each other (including nonhuman animals) to ensure a right to health and ecological justice?
- 13 The panelists discussed the tension between their values and the values of the systems that they are working within. Did that discussion resonate with you? Why or why not?
- 14 How did the panelists' experiences and areas of expertise shape their perspectives and how they delivered their comments?
- 15 What were your reactions to some of the stories and examples that panelists shared? Discuss any aspects of the panel that surprised you. Have you changed your attitudes, opinions, or behaviors since watching and/or listening to the panel? If so, how?
- 16 How can you—as students—advance human and nonhuman rights to health and ecological justice at home, school, and work? What support can faculty offer? What systemic changes are needed?

# RECOMMENDED READING

(listed in the order the speakers spoke in the video recording)

Ferdowsian, Hope R. "Ecological Justice and the Right to Health: An Introduction." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 1-5.

MacDonald, Mia. "Emerging from COVID-19: A New, Rights-Based Relationship with the Nonhuman World?" *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 13-20.

Winders, Delcianna J., and Elan Abrell. "Slaughterhouse Workers, Animals, and the Environment: The Need for a Rights-Centered Regulatory Framework in the United States that Recognizes Interconnected Interests." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 21-33.

Sellars, Laurie, Kimberly Bernotas, and Jeff Sebo. "One Health, COVID-19, and a Right to Health for Human and Nonhuman Animals." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 35-47.

Johnson, L. Syd M. "Shifting the Moral Burden: Expanding Moral Status and Moral Agency." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 63-73.



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Beyond One Health to Just One Health." Phoenix Zones Initiative.

Bhakuni, Himani. "Beyond Anthropocentrism: Health Rights and Ecological Justice." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 7-11.

Ferdowsian, Hope. *Phoenix Zones: Where Strength Is Born and Resilience Lives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Utyasheva, Leah, and Lovleen Bhullar. "Human Rights Perspective on Pesticide Exposure and Poisoning in Children: A Case Study of India." *Health and Human Rights Journal* 23, no. 2 (December 2021): 49-61.

Find out more about Phoenix Zones Initiative and our efforts to ensure ecological justice and the right to health for all.

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