

The Role of the Prosecutor in Preventing Environmental Crimes in West Azerbaijan Province with Regard to Global Standards

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Abstract

This study aims to explain and analyze the role of prosecutors in the criminal and non-criminal prevention of environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province, considering international standards and identifying related legal, executive, and judicial challenges. This research employed a mixed-method design (qualitative and quantitative). In the qualitative phase, the content analysis method was used to identify factors contributing to environmental crimes and the prosecutor's preventive role, based on in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, including prosecutors, heads of justice departments, and environmental officials in West Azerbaijan Province. In the quantitative phase, a survey method was applied to assess and rank the impact of identified factors and preventive strategies from the perspective of 100 judges and environmental experts. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings indicated that the most prevalent environmental crimes in the province include illegal occupation of natural resources, land grabbing and land-use change, deforestation, poor waste management, pollution of water, soil, and air resources, unauthorized mining, illegal grazing, excessive tree cutting, and greenhouse gas emissions. Among causal factors, weaknesses in supervisory and law enforcement agencies had the highest impact (72.82%), followed by deficiencies in executive interventions (71.06%), judicial inconsistencies (69.02%), and legal gaps and conflicts (47.66%). The prosecutor plays a significant role in mitigating these weaknesses through legal oversight, monitoring law enforcement, and implementing both criminal and non-criminal preventive measures. The study concludes that strengthening the prosecutor's preventive authority and adopting an integrated, multi-sectoral approach involving judicial, executive, and public cooperation are vital for reducing environmental crimes. Establishing specialized courts, increasing environmental police capacity, and enhancing public environmental awareness are recommended to align national practices with international environmental protection standards.

Keywords: Environmental crime; Crime prevention; Prosecutor; Judicial oversight; Environmental protection; West Azerbaijan Province

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1. Introduction

Environmental crimes represent one of the most critical challenges confronting societies in the twenty-first century. These crimes include illegal exploitation of natural resources, destruction of forests, water and soil pollution, wildlife trafficking, and violation of international environmental conventions. The severity of their impacts transcends national borders and threatens the ecological balance, public health, and sustainable development goals (White, 2015). Scholars have emphasized that the degradation of the environment is not merely an ecological issue but also a socio-legal phenomenon rooted in governance inefficiencies and weak enforcement of environmental law (Ghasemi, 2005; Mousavi, 2006). In Iran, like many developing countries, the inadequacy of institutional coordination and the absence of specialized criminal policies have aggravated the frequency and diversity of environmental violations (Mashhadi, 2014; Parsa & Alizadeh Najd, 2014).

The concept of environmental protection has evolved from an ethical ideal to a legal necessity, reinforced through international treaties and domestic legislation (Hirano, 2006). According to Habibi, the expansion of industrialization and the pursuit of rapid economic growth since the twentieth century have accelerated environmental degradation, forcing legal systems to recognize the environment as a collective human right (Habibi, 1997). Early works in Iran emphasized that criminal law is a vital instrument for defending public interests and environmental integrity (Ghavam, 1996). Vernier argued that the environment should be seen as a shared heritage requiring both state and individual accountability (Vernier, 1994). This dual responsibility has been echoed in international law, particularly within frameworks such as the Aarhus Convention, which underscores transparency, access to information, and citizen participation in environmental decision-making (Toth, 2010; Wates, 2005).

Public participation in environmental protection emerged as a cornerstone of environmental democracy. According to Eden, informed civic engagement strengthens compliance mechanisms and fosters accountability in policy implementation (Eden, 1996). Similarly, Reed highlighted that stakeholder participation improves environmental management outcomes by integrating scientific and local knowledge (Reed, 2008). Bryner and Lee further established that participatory policy design in environmental governance increases legitimacy and efficiency in enforcing environmental regulations (Bryner, 2001; Lee & Abbot, 2003). However, in developing contexts, participatory mechanisms often remain symbolic rather than functional due to centralized administrative structures and limited institutional transparency (Hayward, 1995; Torgerson, 2008).

Iran's legal framework for environmental protection has developed gradually through both statutory and institutional reforms. The Environmental Protection Organization was among the first institutions established to enforce environmental regulations, but it faces challenges in coordination with judicial authorities and local governments (Bahreini & Mabraghi, 1997). Despite the introduction of environmental laws, including those addressing forest preservation, wildlife protection, and pollution control, enforcement has been inconsistent and fragmented (Almasi, 2009; Amini, 1999). Moreover, the imbalance between economic development policies and environmental preservation has undermined sustainability goals (Jam, 2009).

Within the criminal justice system, the prosecutor plays a pivotal role as the guardian of public rights and a key figure in environmental crime prevention (Aghaei, 2012; Goldoust Juybari, 2014). As Javan Jafari notes, prosecutors are not only responsible for prosecution but also for ensuring the enforcement of preventive measures that deter environmental violations (Javan Jafari & Seyedzadeh Sani, 2012). This includes exercising both criminal and non-criminal preventive powers, such as monitoring administrative compliance and initiating corrective actions against public or private entities that endanger environmental health (Heidarzadeh & Mozafari Zadeh, 2012).

The theoretical foundations of this role are supported by the growing field of *green criminology*, which integrates environmental, sociological, and legal perspectives to understand environmental harm as a form of social injustice (Abachi, 2016; Danesh Nari & Moradfar, 2015; Gorji Fard, 2016). Green criminology highlights the structural causes of ecological damage, including corruption, economic inequality, and weak enforcement systems (Shamele et al., 2017). The emergence of "green victimology" extends this analysis by framing both human communities and non-human species as victims of environmental harm, necessitating a justice-oriented approach (Khan Alipour et al., 2016). In Iran, the application of green

criminology remains limited, though it offers valuable frameworks for understanding the multi-level dynamics of environmental crimes (Farid & Rouzbeh, 2016).

The criminal policy of Islam, as discussed by Farid and Rouzbeh, aligns closely with preventive environmental justice through the concepts of stewardship (*khalifa*) and moral responsibility toward creation (Farid & Rouzbeh, 2016). Such principles reinforce that protection of the environment is not only a legal duty but also a moral and religious obligation. Scholars argue that combining these ethical principles with modern environmental law could enhance compliance and deterrence (Baradaran Hashemi, 2011; Behnam Dizji, 2010).

However, the Iranian criminal system faces significant challenges in addressing environmental crimes effectively. Studies show that gaps in legislation, lack of deterrent penalties, and overlapping jurisdiction among agencies hinder enforcement (Johari & Zarei, 2014; Khosroshahi et al., 2014). Weak cooperation between environmental authorities, local governments, and judicial bodies further exacerbates the problem (Zare Mahdavi & Danesh Nari, 2016). According to Mir Mohammad Sadeghi, environmental crimes should be treated as crimes against public security, demanding a coordinated and proactive legal response (Mir Mohammad Sadeghi, 2013). Yet, as Khaleghi and Rashnovadi point out, Iran's legislative policy in environmental protection remains reactive, focusing more on punishment after damage than on preventive measures (Khaleghi & Rashnovadi, 2013).

Environmental degradation in Iran has reached alarming levels in recent decades, with issues such as deforestation, water scarcity, and the drying of wetlands like Lake Urmia posing existential threats to ecosystems and livelihoods (Salimi Turkmani, 2011). The inefficiency of administrative and judicial oversight mechanisms contributes to the recurrence of these environmental crises (Bigzadeh & Afshari, 2011). Furthermore, as Chaman and colleagues argue, ineffective criminal policy in relation to wildlife and habitat protection has resulted in the steady loss of biodiversity (Chaman et al., 2013).

At the international level, the principle of environmental democracy has been reinforced by institutions such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which emphasizes participatory governance, public access to environmental information, and procedural transparency (Foti & De Silva, 2008; Hazen, 2015). Documents such as the Aarhus Convention establish that public awareness and civic oversight are essential for environmental justice (Toth, 2010; Wates, 2005). Reed and McCuin's studies confirm that participatory monitoring and stakeholder engagement improve the accountability of both private and governmental actors (McCuin, 2009; Reed, 2008).

Iranian scholars have also explored the relationship between environmental governance and participatory criminal policy, noting that effective prevention depends on multi-actor collaboration (Alinejad, 2016). Parsa and Alizadeh Najd emphasize that criminal law must evolve to address complex and transboundary environmental threats through coordinated inter-institutional strategies (Parsa & Alizadeh Najd, 2014). Similarly, Tahhanpour and Tahhan's analysis of international law suggests that the criminalization of environmental destruction must reflect global standards and ensure accountability for both natural and legal persons (Tahhanpour, 2010).

From a comparative perspective, Iranian legal frameworks can benefit from global experiences in integrating environmental democracy into criminal policy (Bryner, 2001; Hirano, 2006). Research by Mousavi and Ghasemi underscores that the evolution of international environmental law, particularly through conventions and jurisprudence, offers valuable precedents for strengthening domestic environmental justice mechanisms (Ghasemi, 2005; Mousavi, 2006). The works of Jam and Almasi have further emphasized that democratizing environmental law through inclusive policy design can enhance enforcement and long-term sustainability (Almasi, 2009; Jam, 2009).

The prosecutor's role within this framework is indispensable. As Goldoust Juybari asserts, the prosecutor represents the community's interests and ensures the observance of environmental rights (Goldoust Juybari, 2014). Aghaei and Javan Jafari both emphasize that the prosecutor's authority extends beyond punitive measures to encompass preventive, supervisory, and educational interventions (Aghaei, 2012; Javan Jafari & Seyedzadeh Sani, 2012). Through active engagement with environmental institutions, prosecutors can promote compliance with environmental standards, oversee administrative

performance, and intervene legally in cases of ecological harm (Heidarzadeh & Mozafari Zadeh, 2012; Johari & Zarei, 2014).

Moreover, the success of environmental crime prevention depends on integrating a participatory, transparent, and evidence-based approach into the justice system (Eden, 1996; Torgerson, 2008). The literature suggests that the synergy between legal deterrence, public accountability, and environmental education creates a resilient foundation for sustainable governance (Foti & De Silva, 2008; Wates, 2005). Building upon these principles, environmental justice requires that prosecutors operate not only as enforcers of law but also as facilitators of environmental stewardship (White, 2015; Zare Mahdavi & Danesh Nari, 2016).

In this context, the present study seeks to examine and explain the role of the prosecutor in the criminal and non-criminal prevention of environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province, with special attention to international standards, legal challenges, and institutional mechanisms aimed at enhancing environmental governance in Iran.

2. Methodology

This research adopted a mixed-method design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the prosecutor's role in preventing environmental crimes. The qualitative phase was exploratory in nature and employed qualitative content analysis to identify factors contributing to the occurrence of environmental crimes as well as the preventive functions and capacities of prosecutors in this context. The qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews conducted in a conversational format with 10 key informants, including prosecutors, heads of justice departments, and directors of environmental and natural resources organizations in West Azerbaijan Province. The selection of participants was based on purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant professional and institutional experience could contribute to identifying key legal, administrative, and judicial aspects of environmental crime prevention. The qualitative phase of the study was carried out from the summer to the autumn of 2022. Building on the findings from the qualitative stage, the quantitative phase was designed as a sequential explanatory survey study aimed at generalizing and quantifying the identified factors. In this stage, the statistical population included all judges and experts related to environmental protection in West Azerbaijan Province, totaling 100 participants. The quantitative phase was conducted from October to December 2022.

In the qualitative phase, data collection was carried out through interview protocols developed based on the inductive strategy of qualitative inquiry. Interview questions were designed around the “what,” “why,” and “how” of environmental crimes and preventive interventions by the prosecutor's office. The interviews were conducted in person and recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were also taken to capture contextual and nonverbal information. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new categories or insights emerged from additional interviews. In the quantitative phase, a structured questionnaire was developed based on the themes and categories derived from qualitative findings. The instrument aimed to measure the perceived impact and prioritization of each identified factor influencing environmental crimes as well as the effectiveness of preventive strategies. The questionnaire used a Likert-type scale to assess participants' views, and its validity was confirmed through expert review, while reliability was tested using internal consistency measures before full deployment.

Data analysis was conducted in two complementary stages. In the qualitative stage, the collected interview data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis following an inductive coding approach. This involved open, axial, and selective coding to extract key themes, subcategories, and core categories related to the causes of environmental crimes and the prosecutor's preventive role. The coding process was iterative and involved constant comparison to ensure conceptual coherence and theoretical validity. For the quantitative stage, descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the responses, while inferential tests were applied to examine the significance and ranking of causal factors influencing environmental crimes. The integration of findings from both phases enabled a deeper interpretation of the data and provided a triangulated understanding of how prosecutors can contribute effectively to crime prevention within environmental governance frameworks.

3. Findings and Results

The results of this study revealed that the main factors influencing the occurrence of environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province are rooted in four core categories: legal ambiguities and gaps, weaknesses in executive agencies, deficiencies in monitoring and law enforcement agencies, and judicial inconsistencies and inefficiencies. The prosecutor, as a key actor endowed with legal and supervisory authority, can play a crucial role in mitigating these weaknesses and preventing environmental crimes through both criminal and non-criminal interventions.

The descriptive findings demonstrated that the average impact of legal contradictions and gaps on environmental crimes was 47.66% (SD = 12.73), with a minimum influence of 41.67% and a maximum of 81.67%. The average impact of weaknesses in executive agencies' interventions was 71.06% (SD = 11.41), ranging from 42.40% to 88%. The average impact of deficiencies in monitoring and law enforcement interventions was 72.82% (SD = 11.18), with the lowest value of 58% and the highest of 92%. Additionally, the average impact of weaknesses and contradictions in judicial actions and procedures was 69.02% (SD = 13.22), varying between 46.67% and 89.88%. Finally, the perceived role of the prosecutor in environmental crime prevention averaged 68.04% (SD = 16.82), with responses ranging from 25% to 86.67%.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of factors influencing environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province

Factors influencing environmental crimes	Mean (%)	Standard Deviation	Minimum (%)	Maximum (%)
Legal contradictions and gaps	47.66	12.73	41.67	81.67
Weakness in executive interventions	71.06	11.41	42.40	88.00
Weakness in monitoring and enforcement interventions	72.82	11.18	58.00	92.00
Weakness and inconsistencies in judicial procedures	69.02	13.22	46.67	89.88
Prosecutor's preventive role	68.04	16.82	25.00	86.67

The analysis of variance across these categories indicated that the most influential factor in the occurrence of environmental crimes was the weakness of monitoring and enforcement bodies, followed by the inefficiency of executive institutions, the inconsistencies in judicial procedures, and finally, the presence of legal ambiguities and gaps. This prioritization highlights that the operational and oversight deficiencies of relevant institutions have a more pronounced role than legislative shortcomings.

Table 2. Ranking of major factors contributing to environmental crimes

Rank	Factor Category	Relative Influence (%)
1	Weakness in monitoring and enforcement agencies	72.82
2	Weakness in executive interventions	71.06
3	Weakness and contradictions in judicial procedures	69.02
4	Legal contradictions and gaps	47.66

Inferential findings identified the most common environmental crimes in the region as illegal occupation of natural resources, land grabbing and unauthorized land-use change, deforestation and destruction of rangelands, inadequate waste management, pollution of water, soil, and air, unauthorized extraction of sand and gravel, illegal grazing, excessive tree cutting, and greenhouse gas emissions. These findings demonstrate the multidimensional nature of environmental crimes, involving both individual and institutional offenders.

From the qualitative phase, thematic analysis yielded four central categories encompassing 16 subcategories. The first category, *legal contradictions and gaps*, included subthemes such as disproportionate punishments, legal ambiguities, lack of enforcement guarantees, and deficiencies in the actions of judicial officers. The second category, *weaknesses in executive institutions*, incorporated structural inefficiencies, lack of coordination with international organizations, corruption and rent-seeking, non-recognition of citizens' participatory rights, and non-enforcement of environmental laws by responsible institutions. The third category, *weaknesses in monitoring and law enforcement*, involved inadequate facilities and equipment, lack of organizational policies for handling environmental crimes, and insufficient supervision. The fourth category, *judicial inconsistencies*, covered delayed proceedings, weak legal literacy among judicial staff, lack of a unified criminal policy, and the non-deterrent nature of punishments.

Table 3. Main categories and subcategories identified in qualitative analysis

Main Category	Subcategories Identified
Legal contradictions and gaps	Disproportionate punishment, ambiguity in environmental legislation, lack of legal enforcement guarantees, gaps in judicial oversight
Weaknesses in executive institutions	Structural inefficiency, poor inter-organizational coordination, corruption and rent-seeking, lack of citizen participation, non-enforcement of environmental laws
Weaknesses in monitoring and enforcement	Lack of facilities and equipment, absence of specialized organizational policies, weak monitoring and reporting systems
Judicial inconsistencies and inefficiencies	Delayed proceedings, weak legal competence, fragmented criminal policies, non-deterrent sentencing

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings indicates that preventive efforts led by prosecutors can be significantly enhanced through targeted reforms in institutional coordination, judicial specialization, and policy coherence. Prosecutors' proactive engagement in both regulatory and social preventive measures—such as supervising environmental enforcement, initiating public education programs, and recommending legislative reforms—could meaningfully curb environmental violations. The study ultimately emphasizes that systemic collaboration between the judiciary, executive bodies, and civil society, under the leadership of the prosecutor's office, is essential for achieving sustainable and effective prevention of environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study confirmed that the major causes of environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province stem from institutional weaknesses, legal ambiguities, and ineffective judicial mechanisms. Among the four primary dimensions identified—legal gaps and contradictions, weaknesses in executive institutions, deficiencies in monitoring and enforcement, and judicial inefficiencies—the results showed that failures in monitoring and enforcement agencies had the greatest impact, followed by executive inadequacies, judicial inconsistencies, and finally, legislative gaps. This hierarchy reflects the multifaceted nature of environmental crime, where prevention depends not only on lawmaking but also on enforcement efficiency and institutional coordination. The study also found that the prosecutor, as a representative of public interest and a legal authority endowed with preventive and supervisory powers, plays a pivotal role in addressing these weaknesses. By exercising both criminal and non-criminal preventive measures, the prosecutor can intervene at multiple levels—administrative, judicial, and social—to reduce the occurrence of environmental crimes (Aghaei, 2012; Goldoust Juybari, 2014).

The predominance of enforcement-related weaknesses over legislative ones is consistent with prior research in Iran and abroad. Similar to the current results, studies by Khosroshahi and colleagues emphasize that participatory criminal policy in environmental governance is often hindered by limited enforcement capabilities and inter-agency fragmentation (Khosroshahi et al., 2014). Johari also identified a lack of institutional synergy between prosecutors, environmental authorities, and local administrative bodies as a primary barrier to effective prevention (Johari & Zarei, 2014). These findings corroborate the argument that the practical application of environmental laws is more crucial than their mere existence. The literature on environmental criminology asserts that legal systems with sufficient sanctions but weak enforcement mechanisms inevitably fail to achieve deterrence (Ghasemi, 2005; Mousavi, 2006).

The qualitative findings of this research also highlighted specific manifestations of these institutional failures, including inadequate environmental monitoring systems, lack of organizational policies for handling environmental offenses, and insufficient equipment for law enforcement personnel. Similar results were observed by Farid and Rouzbeh, who noted that the lack of professional training among law enforcement officials, coupled with limited prosecutorial oversight, results in inconsistent handling of environmental cases (Farid & Rouzbeh, 2016). Moreover, research by Behnam Dizji found that the absence of specialized courts and judges with environmental expertise leads to delays and inconsistencies in judicial proceedings (Behnam Dizji, 2010). The present study reinforces these findings by showing that delayed judicial responses and fragmented procedures significantly contribute to the persistence of environmental violations.

From a legislative perspective, the results revealed that contradictions and ambiguities in environmental laws remain substantial challenges, though less influential than enforcement deficiencies. Many participants highlighted outdated penalties

and the absence of coherent legislative frameworks. Studies by Khaleghi and Rashnovadi found similar weaknesses in Iran's environmental legal system, where penalties are insufficiently deterrent and often fail to address corporate liability (Khaleghi & Rashnovadi, 2013). Parsa and Alizadeh Najd also emphasized that Iranian criminal law has not yet achieved structural alignment with international environmental standards, leading to a lack of consistency in the prosecution of environmental offenses (Parsa & Alizadeh Najd, 2014). The persistence of such gaps weakens both prevention and rehabilitation efforts, suggesting that criminal policy reforms must focus on legislative modernization and the adoption of clear procedural guidelines.

The results further showed that the most frequent environmental crimes in West Azerbaijan Province include illegal occupation of natural resources, land grabbing, deforestation, and pollution of water and soil resources. These findings are consistent with earlier research by Salimi Turkmani, who highlighted the degradation of Lake Urmia as a direct consequence of industrial mismanagement, illegal land use, and inadequate governmental oversight (Salimi Turkmani, 2011). Similarly, Eftekhari's examination of environmental offenses in Iran found that unauthorized mining and pollution by industrial units are among the most common forms of ecological harm (Eftekhari, 2005). These parallels indicate that the environmental crimes observed in this study are not isolated phenomena but symptomatic of systemic governance failures across multiple provinces.

The findings regarding the prosecutor's role revealed that the majority of participants recognized the prosecutor's potential as a preventive authority capable of bridging institutional gaps. This aligns with Goldoust Juybari's assertion that prosecutors serve as the public's representative in upholding environmental rights, enabling them to initiate corrective measures even before a crime occurs (Goldoust Juybari, 2014). Aghaei also underlined that the prosecutor's duties extend beyond criminal prosecution to proactive engagement in public education, institutional oversight, and inter-agency collaboration (Aghaei, 2012). These findings suggest that the prosecutor's preventive function can act as an institutional integrator, harmonizing fragmented enforcement efforts.

This interpretation finds support in green criminology, which emphasizes structural reform and moral accountability as central to environmental justice (Abachi, 2016; Danesh Nari & Moradfar, 2015; Gorji Fard, 2016). The concept of "green victimology," proposed by Shamele and colleagues, complements this view by recognizing environmental degradation as both a social and ecological harm, extending the notion of victimhood to communities and ecosystems (Shamele et al., 2017). The present study's emphasis on institutional cooperation reflects this holistic understanding, underscoring that environmental protection requires coordination between the judiciary, executive bodies, and civil society (Khan Alipour et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the importance of participatory criminal policy emerged as a key theme in interpreting the results. The respondents stressed that citizen participation, public reporting, and local environmental activism could enhance prosecutorial oversight and reduce environmental offenses. This observation is supported by studies that describe the role of public participation as a cornerstone of environmental democracy (Eden, 1996; Wates, 2005). Foti and De Silva demonstrated that transparent participatory processes significantly strengthen accountability and reduce ecological harm (Foti & De Silva, 2008). Likewise, Reed's comprehensive review found that active stakeholder engagement improves both compliance and legitimacy in environmental management (Reed, 2008). These parallels confirm that strengthening public access to environmental information and supporting grassroots initiatives could reinforce preventive mechanisms in Iran's environmental governance.

From an international law perspective, the findings of this study resonate with the global principles articulated in the Aarhus Convention, which guarantees the right to environmental information and citizen participation in decision-making (Lee & Abbot, 2003; Toth, 2010). As Bryner and Hayward argue, democratizing environmental policy through participatory instruments creates more sustainable and legitimate governance models (Bryner, 2001; Hayward, 1995). In this regard, Iran's approach could be strengthened by institutionalizing participatory channels within the judicial framework, particularly under the supervision of the prosecutor's office.

Another dimension illuminated by the findings concerns the intersection of Islamic criminal policy and environmental protection. Farid and Rouzbeh argued that Islamic law supports preventive environmental justice through the principles of stewardship (*khalifa*) and prohibition of harm (*la darar wa la dirar*), both of which are consistent with modern green criminology (Farid & Rouzbeh, 2016). This perspective aligns with Behnam Dizji's and Baradaran Hashemi's economic interpretations of environmental liability, which advocate for stricter penalties to internalize environmental costs (Baradaran

Hashemi, 2011; Behnam Dizji, 2010). These findings affirm that integrating ethical and legal principles could strengthen deterrence and promote environmental accountability.

Moreover, the present study's results indicate that while Iran's legal framework for environmental protection is conceptually comprehensive, it remains practically fragmented. Scholars such as Mashhadi and Almasi have noted that this fragmentation results from the absence of coherent national environmental strategies and the lack of specialized judicial structures (Almasi, 2009; Mashhadi, 2014). The current study's findings reinforce this interpretation by demonstrating that judicial inefficiencies—particularly the absence of environmental courts and trained judges—directly impede the effective adjudication of environmental crimes.

In line with earlier research, the study also highlighted the role of environmental education and public awareness in reducing crime rates. Bahreini and Mabraghi emphasized that long-term prevention depends on integrating environmental education into national curricula and professional training (Bahreini & Mabraghi, 1997). Amini also argued that empowering civil society and NGOs fosters collective responsibility for environmental protection (Amini, 1999). These insights are particularly relevant to the current study's finding that preventive success depends on cross-sectoral cooperation and public involvement, guided by the prosecutor's oversight.

In conclusion, the results of this research align with both national and international findings emphasizing that effective prevention of environmental crimes requires a multi-layered approach involving legislative clarity, institutional coordination, and public participation. The prosecutor's office, as a central legal actor, is strategically positioned to unify these efforts. Strengthening prosecutorial capacity, enhancing inter-agency collaboration, and reforming legal frameworks can collectively improve Iran's environmental criminal policy, bringing it closer to global standards of environmental democracy (White, 2015; Zare Mahdavi & Danesh Nari, 2016).

This study was conducted within a specific geographical and institutional context, focusing solely on West Azerbaijan Province. While the province presents a representative case of environmental governance challenges in Iran, regional variations in administrative practices and ecological conditions may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data from judges and environmental experts may have introduced subjective bias, particularly in evaluating institutional performance. The qualitative interviews, although comprehensive, involved a relatively small sample size, which may not capture the full diversity of perspectives among prosecutors and enforcement officials nationwide. Furthermore, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality between institutional weaknesses and environmental crime trends.

Future studies should expand the geographical scope to include other provinces with distinct ecological and legal challenges, such as Khuzestan, Mazandaran, and Sistan and Baluchestan. Comparative studies between provinces could reveal variations in prosecutorial practices and inter-agency coordination. Researchers could also employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of policy reforms on environmental crime reduction. Incorporating mixed quantitative-qualitative approaches with larger sample sizes would enhance the robustness of results. Additionally, exploring the integration of digital monitoring technologies and AI-based environmental surveillance systems could open new pathways for preventive legal action. Future research may also benefit from international comparative analyses examining how prosecutors in other jurisdictions—particularly in countries adhering to the Aarhus Convention—exercise preventive authority in environmental protection.

To improve environmental crime prevention in Iran, it is essential to strengthen the prosecutor's institutional capacity through continuous training on environmental law and international standards. Establishing specialized environmental courts and dedicated prosecutorial units can enhance the consistency and speed of judicial processes. Collaboration between the judiciary, environmental organizations, and civil society should be formalized through joint committees and memoranda of understanding. Moreover, enhancing inter-agency data sharing and implementing transparent monitoring mechanisms will foster accountability. Public education campaigns and community-based reporting systems should be developed to encourage citizen participation in environmental monitoring. Finally, revising environmental legislation to include proportional penalties, corporate liability, and restorative justice measures can ensure that prevention, rather than punishment alone, becomes the core strategy of environmental governance.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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