

THE REAL HEROES OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

Alex Soros

- *Human rights awards are an important tool* •
- *that shine a global spotlight on local struggles*

ABSTRACT

In this op-ed, Alex Soros explains the importance of human rights awards in drawing attention to the struggle of indigenous activists whose work so often goes unnoticed. He notes that aside from the simple recognition – itself an important element – the awards often create international attention, which the activist can then leverage to apply more pressure on the government and private sector. As an example, the author looks at the work of Papua New Guinea activist Paul Pavol Palosualrea and shows how receiving the Alexander Soros Foundation Award rapidly changed the course of his struggle. Soros concludes that having the resources to assist environmental defenders is accompanied by a duty to act; failing to do so is akin to being complicit in the injustices that they and their communities face.

KEYWORDS

Philanthropy | Indigenous rights | Activists | Environmental rights

When you hear the term “environmentalist”, who comes to mind? Hollywood celebrities. Philanthropists (like me). International non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In short, a small collective of interested parties that want to save the planet for generations to come. They attend conferences, fundraisers and press conferences. While they may be dedicated and at one time or another visit the communities they seek to help, they live far from the front lines of the fight to protect the environment.

These groups and individuals are not the heroes of the environmental movement. The real heroes of the environment are the indigenous peoples that have peacefully lived off their land for hundreds, even thousands of years, and who are under threat from organised criminals, multinational corporations, and other entities seeking to turn a profit off their land. Companies want to mine valuable resources from the ground, cartels want to use the land to grow, transport and harvest drugs, and rogue loggers want to cut the trees down and sell them for money, all at the expense of livelihoods of indigenous peoples living in harmony with mother earth.

Paul Pavol Palosualrea is one of these people. Paul was born and raised in the village of Mu in the District of Pomio on the island of East New Britain in Papua New Guinea. One day a little over six years ago, a subsidiary of the Malaysian logging giant Rimbunan Hijau appeared on Paul's land and began clearing virgin forest that, under the Papua New Guinea constitution, rightfully belonged to Paul and his clan. Many other indigenous communities in the area found themselves in the same situation. After fighting the company in the courts, protesting the logging operations, and advocating to local magistrates, all with the help of civil society organisations, Paul found that nothing was working. Vast areas of rainforest were being replaced with palm oil plantations. Armed with government contracts called Special Agriculture and Business Leases (SABLs, for short), manipulative legal strategies, massive balance sheets, and support from police on its payroll, the loggers kept logging. There was nothing Paul could do.

When I learned about Paul's story, I decided to give him the 2016 Alexander Soros Foundation Award for Environmental and Human Rights Activism. I started giving this award when the plight of environmental defenders first became known to me in 2012. Since then, I have given this award to activists in Liberia, Cambodia, Peru and the Democratic Republic of Congo, in addition to Papua New Guinea. My foundation continues to support environmental defenders in all of these countries.

Paul flew from Papua New Guinea to New York to accept the award at a ceremony in his honor. From New York, he travelled to Washington DC for meetings with members of both houses of congress, the State Department, USAID, and the Department of Justice. Paul told his story during each of these meetings, and various employees of the US government listened and tried to come up with ways to help.

After word about Paul's award spread late last year (media coverage regarding the award was widely disseminated across Papua New Guinea and Australia), the communities of East New

Britain island felt empowered to stand up for their rights and prevent encroachment of logging operations onto their customary land. Logging blockades appeared in various villages, which have effectively impeded logging efforts. Social media exposure of illegal logging operations and police intimidation compelled a local magistrate to speak out in parliament. This attention helped prompt the Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Peter O'Neill to publicly declare all SABLs illegal. Communities are pursuing renewed legal challenges as additional outside support becomes available to them. In short, while the struggle is far from over for this community, the tide may be turning. Paul and his fellow defenders are finally winning some battles against one of the largest logging conglomerates in the world.

Paul is one of only a handful of environmental defenders who have managed to win even one victory in the name of protecting their land. Most environmental defenders' campaigns fall on deaf ears. More than three environmental defenders were killed a week in 2015, making it deadliest year in history for environmental defenders. In Honduras, more than 120 people have died defending the environment since 2010, according to Global Witness research, making it the deadliest country for environmental defenders in the world. One of these individuals was Berta Cáceres, a Goldman Prize-winning environmental activist who was killed for protesting against the construction of a dam that would endanger the livelihood of the indigenous community. Her murder was addressed on the floor of the US House of Representatives, and in a statement by then-Secretary of State John Kerry.

If we want the environmental movement to continue to gain momentum, we are going to have to give it a face. Celebrities, politicians, philanthropists, and other large actors are not the environmental movement's heroes. The movement's heroes are those fighting on the front lines to protect their homes from industries and organisations motivated by greed. If those lucky enough with the resources do not help to recognise these true environmental defenders for their bravery, courage and sacrifice, we will not only willfully allow them to die in obscurity, but we will fail to draw the world's attention to the environmental movement. As Donald Trump continues to roll back international treaties and environmental protections, and as other world leaders follow suit, the immediate recognition of environmental defenders is more important than ever.



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A promoter of open society values, Alex Soros graduated from New York University in 2009 with a BA in history and is currently pursuing a doctorate in modern European history at the University of California, Berkeley. He sits on various boards both in the United States of America (US) and internationally including Bend the Arc, Global Witness, the Gordon Parks Foundation and Open Society Foundations. He is the founder of The Alexander Soros Foundation, an organisation promoting civil rights, social justice and education by making grants to cutting-edge organisations in the US and abroad.

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