Environmental victimology refers to the study of the social processes and institutional responses pertaining to victims of environmental crime. It is a new area of criminological concern (Hall 2013), and it can be intellectually located as a subset of ‘green criminology’, itself a relatively new development (White and Heckenberg 2014). This chapter provides a broad overview of environmental victimology and, in particular, how research in this area is engaging with both human and nonhuman environmental victims.

Students of environmental victimology face two key issues at the outset. The first issue relates to the fact that many environmentally destructive practices are quite legal (such as use of clear-felling techniques in forestry) and the law is frequently utilised to regulate but not prevent environmentally damaging activities (such as land, air and water pollution). Carbon emissions and the trading of wild animals, for example, are not in themselves criminal activities. It is only under certain conditions that they are deemed to be so. The first part of the chapter therefore discusses the differences between ‘environmental crime’ and ‘environmental harm’ and addresses the question of legality in the construction of environmental victims.

The second issue relates to who or what is being victimised and how this is construed in law as well as in popular consciousness. From the point of view of green criminology, adequate analysis of the ‘subjects’ of environmental victimisation must extend beyond just consideration of humans as victims. Accordingly, the chapter incorporates consideration of both specific matters arising from the study of human environmental victims and those that pertain specifically to the nonhuman environmental victims. Before doing this, however, it charts out some of the
key dimensions of environmental victimology as a distinctive form of analysis.

The conceptual parameters of environmental victimology

The key focus of green criminology is environmental crime. For some writers, environmental crime is defined narrowly within strict legal definitions – it is what the law says it is. For others, however, the question arises whether the focus of study should be solely that which is ‘criminal’ or legally defined or whether other actions and activities that can be argued or proven to be harmful or worthy of concern should also be embraced (Beirne and South 2007; White 2013a). In fact, for a green perspective this is fairly easy to answer if the primary aim is to engage with damage, degradation and depletion affecting the earth, environment and all species because much of this is caused by legal behaviour. Legal harms are therefore of central interest to green criminologists, as much as is formally specified illegal activity.

Specific types of harm as described in law include things such as illegal transport and dumping of toxic waste; the transportation of hazardous materials, such as ozone depleting substances; the illegal traffic in real or purported radioactive or nuclear substances; the illegal trade in flora and fauna; and illegal fishing and logging. A more expansive definition of environmental crime or harm includes transgressions that are harmful to humans, environments and nonhuman animals, regardless of legality per se and includes environmental-related harms that are facilitated by the state, as well as corporations and other powerful actors, insofar as these institutions have the capacity to shape official definitions of environmental crime in ways that allow, condone or excuse environmentally harmful practices (White 2011).

Green criminology therefore provides an umbrella under which to theorise about and critique both illegal environmental harms (i.e. environmental harms currently defined as unlawful and therefore punishable) and legal environmental harms (i.e. environmental harms currently condoned as lawful but which are nevertheless socially and ecologically harmful). How harm is conceptualised is thus partly shaped by how the legal–illegal divide is construed within specific research and analysis.

This approach to environmental harm mirrors that offered in the ‘social harm’ literature. One of the hallmarks of ‘social harm’ as a concept is that it directs writers to critically consider wider social contexts and the limitations of conventional approaches, particularly criminological, to harm (Hillyard et al. 2004; Hillyard et al. 2005; Hillyard and Tombs