

Winners of the Courageous Scientists Award for Environmental und Climate Justice 2025

Ass.-Prof. Rose Abramoff, PhD – North America, United States

Rose Abramoff, a climate scientist in the United States, left the laboratory and took to the streets, accepting the loss of her professional livelihood in the process. She organises civil disobedience against those responsible for ecological collapse.



Rose Abramoff. Picture: Will Dickson

Reasons given by the jury

She brings her scientific expertise “Out of the Lab and Into the Streets,” demanding urgent climate action.

She risked and lost her position at Oak Ridge National Laboratory for joining peaceful demonstrations against fossil fuel expansion.

Despite these risks, she continues to advocate for environmental justice with integrity and determination.

Her fearless alignment of science with moral action makes her a deserving recipient of the Courageous Scientist Award 2025.

About the Winner

Dr. Rose Abramoff is an assistant professor of forest science at the University of Maine in the northeastern United States. Her research focuses on how climate change and human land use affect the land carbon cycle, particularly below ground components like plant roots and soil, combining field and laboratory measurements with modelling.

Rose dedicated herself to climate-related research because she wanted to contribute to solving the global problem of our times by “discovering truths and communicating them to policymakers, who would listen carefully to me and take appropriate action.” When she realized that despite the mounting evidence and warnings from scientists like herself, governments were not acting, she decided to chain herself to the White House fence with other scientists during the Scientist Day of Rebellion in 2022, demanding that President Biden declare a climate emergency. Her inspiration for participating in civil disobedience was climate scientist and former Director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, James Hansen, who had chained himself to the very same fence back in 2013 to protest the expansion of a crude oil pipeline.

Since then she has participated in a number of civil disobedience actions; at the American Geophysical Union annual meeting in December 2022, an association of 60,000 earth and space scientists, Rose and her fellow scientist Peter Kalmus unfurled a banner with the message, “Out of the lab & into the streets” just before the speakers joined the stage. Her employer at the time, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory fired her. Rose continues to push scientific institutions to support activism and advocacy of experts. She also helps her fellow scientists acknowledge and address their emotions around the climate crisis in order to turn grief and fear into hope.

Pictures



At the event American Geophysical Union 2022. Photo: Dwight Owens





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Olanrewaju Suraju, MR – Africa, Nigeria

Olanrewaju Suraju has placed climate justice at the centre of the struggle for civil society rights in Nigeria, risking his life in the fight against corrupt networks in the oil industry and state apparatus.



Portrait Olanrewaju Suraju

Reasons given by the Jury

Suraju has consistently demonstrated moral courage by confronting powerful interests in defense of environmental justice and public accountability, often at personal risk. His work bridges climate activism with anti-corruption efforts, highlighting the systemic links between environmental degradation and governance failures. He supports local communities in resisting environmental exploitation and demanding inclusive development. As a West African civil society leader, Suraju amplifies the voices of marginalized populations and promotes equity in climate and governance discourse.

About the winner

Olanrewaju Suraju is a prominent Nigerian human rights and environmental activist, known for his courageous work in anti-corruption, climate justice, and civic accountability. As Chairman of HEDA Resource Centre, he leads campaigns that expose environmental degradation, illicit financial flows and governance

failures across West Africa. He has played a key role in advocating for transparency in extractive industries and pushing for climate-resilient policies that protect vulnerable communities.

For Olanrewaju “courage in science means standing up for and defending evidence-based truth when it is unpopular or faces resistance or attack from powerful interests. It requires questioning established norms, advocating for ethical interrogation, and persistence in the pursuit of a cause in the face of vicissitude and personal risk.” He is no stranger to exhibiting courage having faced threats and legal intimidation for his outspoken stance against corruption and environmental injustice, notably in high-profile cases involving multinational corporations and government actors. Despite these challenges, he continues to mobilize civil society, engage international institutions, and empower grassroots movements to demand accountability and sustainability.

Photos





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Online resources:

<https://hedang.org>

<https://www.aneej.org>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/olanrewaju-suraju-6a8bba1a/>

Dr. Elisa Privitera – Europe, Italy

Elisa Privitera uncompromisingly researches the ecological conditions in Sicilian and Canadian cities from the perspective of the poor in order to fight alongside them for fair conditions.



Porträt Elisa Privitera

Reasons given by the jury

Lizzy Privitera is a brilliant academic specializing in community environmental planning. She is a firm believer that research based on collective intelligence, collaborative work, and solidarity as ethical practices can produce meaningful and impactful knowledge. Her long and fearless engagement in Sicily working on different aspects of socio- environmental injustices, such as toxic pollution, resource appropriation and carceral institutions, in the presence of organized crime networks, and the different forms of slow and fast violence, is a testament of how action-oriented research, despite its dangers, is only way forward for transformative societal change.

About the winner

Elisa (Lizzy) Privitera engages with “climate and environmental crises through a critical, intersectional lens, while also grounding that perspective in real-world problems and collaborative efforts to envision just, actionable solutions.” Her doctoral work focused on the city of Gela in her native Sicily, a town grappling with the aftermath of a decommissioned petrochemical plant. Lizzy worked with residents to map the effects of pollution, trigger conversations around new possibilities and develop recommendations to reverse unjust trajectories of development. Just like the anti-Mafia activists who have inspired her, Lizzy does not shy away from unveiling and speaking out about unjust power relationships shaping Sicilian landscapes and contexts.

Lizzy started as a post-doctoral fellow at the Canada Excellence Research Chair Network for Equity in Sustainability Transitions on September 1st. Before that she had been a post-doctoral researcher at the Just Transitions in Action Project at the University of Toronto Scarborough, where she co-led the Listening Project, a community-based research initiative that aims to work with community partners to understand and envision equitable transitions. Specifically she is looking to understand how climate policy aimed at achieving net-zero aligns with the daily concerns and aspirations of residents in Scarborough, a diverse working class borough on the edge of Toronto. She strongly believes that courageous scientists not only generate knowledge to support fair socio-technological transitions, but to also repair past harms and to heal wounded relationships.

Photos



Activism in Catania, Sicily. Photo: Privat



Planting of a food forest in California. Photo: Privat



Community listening activities in Toronto, Canada. Photo: Privat



In the Comic strip about Gela „The Gas Capital“ by Andrea Turco, Marta Silvestre and Amina Pagnozzi

Online resources:

<https://www.utoronto.ca/labs/climateandenergy/tag/lizzy-privitera/>

<https://justtransitionsinaction.ca>

Olivia Bisa Tirko – South America, Chapra Nation, Peru

Despite threats to herself and her family, Olivia Bisa Tirko, the first woman to lead the Chapra nation, organises resistance to the exploitation of Amazonia by the oil industry, thereby preserving valuable traditional knowledge about life in the rainforest.



Olivia Bisa Tirko. Photo: Amazon Watch

Reasons given by the jury

She exemplifies extraordinary courage in leading the Chapra Nation to defend their ancestral lands despite serious threats to her and her family.

Her advocacy following the 2022 oil spill has drawn critical attention to ongoing environmental contamination in the Peruvian Amazon.

As a young woman scientist and leader, she inspires Indigenous youth and women to embrace their identity and stand up for their rights.

Her unwavering commitment to protecting her people and the rainforest embodies the spirit of the Courageous Scientist Award 2025.

About the winner

Olivia Bisa Tirko is the Indigenous leader and first female president of the Autonomous Territorial Government of the Chapra Nation in Datem del Marañón Province, Loreto, Peru. Since assuming leadership in mid-2022, she has recentred the role of women in the Peruvian Amazon in addressing social and cultural issues and as keepers of ancestral knowledge. She sees the science of

her people as “a living science that teaches how to sustain life, not how to dominate it,” which is reflected in her efforts to protect the environment and future generations from the colonial disruption of their cultural practices.

Olivia has demanded remediation for oil spills, which have contaminated water sources that sustained fishing livelihoods and food supplies for her community. She has also successfully stopped the state-owned Petroperu from attracting financing from international banks to expand an oil field during their most recent bid attempt in May of this year, working closely with other Indigenous leaders and international campaigners.

For Olivia, “courage in science is the ability to uphold truth and knowledge in the face of fear, violence, and imposition. It is having the strength to continue observing, researching, speaking, and acting, even when doing so puts one’s life at risk.” She has been included on national lists of Indigenous defenders under serious threat, with the safety of her and her two young children in grave jeopardy.

Photos:







Cynthia Houniuhi, LLM – Oceania, Pacific Islands

Cynthia Houniuhi, together with the student organisation Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change, fought for and won a binding legal obligation for states to prevent climate damage and protect human rights at the International Court of Justice.



Porträt Cynthia Houniuhi

Reasons given by the jury

Cynthia delivered a formal submission on climate change and human rights to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) during its public hearings on climate change - In July this year the ICJ's advisory opinion for the first time gives the Pacific and all vulnerable communities a legal mechanism to hold states accountable and to demand climate action.

Cynthia and her team have built a model of intergenerational, cultural, and gender-diverse leadership, combining ancestral wisdom with legal innovation – this is exactly what the Courage Prize is aiming at.

About the winner

In 2019, a young Solomon Islander named Cynthia Houniuhi sat with 26 classmates at the University of the South Pacific, dreaming of justice as vast as the ocean that connects their islands. They were law students from across the Pacific – atolls, highlands and coastlines already whispering warnings of the rising tide. Their shared concern grew to a movement - Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC) - born of saltwater, courage and kinship.

Their vision reached far beyond their shores: to ask the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to declare what duties nations hold to protect our planet, and what consequences they face when they fail. It was a bold, almost impossible dream, yet deeply Pacific in spirit. As Cynthia wrote, “courage means pursuing a path that might advance your cause, even when the odds are against you.”

Guided by their lecturer Justin Rose, the students turned to Vanuatu, which carried their call to the world. Since then, the current began to flow. Cynthia and her peers crossed continents, speaking not as victims but as guardians of the ocean, urging governments to stand with them. Their persistence moved 132 countries to co-sponsor a UN General Assembly resolution asking the ICJ two questions: What are states’ legal obligations to confront climate change? What happens, in law, if they do not?

In December 2024, Cynthia stood before the Court in The Hague, carrying the voice of Fanalei, her people’s land, now slipping beneath the waves. “Without our land, our bodies and memories are severed from the relationships that define who we are,” she said. When the ICJ ruled in July 2025 that climate-impacted peoples have the right to seek justice and compensation, it was more than a verdict. It was the Pacific - steadfast, sovereign and unbroken - rising to be heard!

Tolu Muliaina (representing Cynthia at the award ceremony)

Tolu is an educator at the University of the South Pacific, where he nurtures young minds and champions the causes of social justice, cultural preservation, and environmental sustainability. A passionate activist, he was among the founding 27 law students of the Pacific Islands Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC) in 2019 - giving voice to Pacific communities in the global fight against climate change. Through his work, Tolu blends education and activism, inspiring a new generation to protect the Pacific’s vibrant heritage and its fragile ecosystems.

Photos





Asia – No award in 2025, but two winners in 2026

The Courageous Scientists Award is meant to honour and draw attention to researchers dedicated to protecting the earth and its inhabitants, even in the face of significant personal risk.

In Asia, the Scientific Advisory Board offered the prize to two researchers from two different countries. Both were grateful but declined the prize. The risk was too great; the attention it would bring could endanger them and their work, as well as the wider cause. That is a stark reminder that researching the pressing problems of our times is not without danger.

Consequently, we will finance two awards for Asia in 2026.