



The Snakes and Ladders of seeking environmental justice

Photo: Mark Ollis, Kathleen Edie and Doreen Goldie
Credit: University of Dundee

Introduction: A play by the Environmental Justice Network

Imagine you are a resident in Scotland. You decide to go for a walk to get some fresh air, some exercise or just some peace and quiet. The walk takes you along a nearby river, across some fields, or through your local woodland. Yet what should be a pleasant outing is spoiled by a wretched odour, and you begin to notice disturbing signs of pollution. You decide to report it to your local authority, believing they will address the problem.

Unfortunately, it is often not that simple. People trying to navigate Scotland's environmental laws and regulations describe it like a game of ...

Snakes and Ladders.

A game where you follow a fixed route, sometimes moving forward, sometimes falling back. Often you find yourself going in circles, not knowing whether it's possible to reach your end goal - to protect your health and the environment.

This problem has become increasingly apparent in the work of ERCS's law service, which has received over 700 enquiries from members of the public in just five years, and in turn led to the establishment of the Environmental Justice Network - a group of community campaigners from across Scotland who are pushing for better regulation and stronger enforcement to prevent environmental harm.

In May 2026, the network spoke at the Congress of Nations and States: 'Mass atrocities, environmental degradation and communities' rights conference', hosted by the University of Dundee and the University of Stirling.

Three members of the network - Kathleen Edie, Doreen Goldie, and Mark Ollis - have spoken about their experiences time and time again. But sometimes talking doesn't get the story across well enough ...

This led to our play - The Snakes and Ladders of seeking environmental justice.

Kathleen, Doreen, Mark and Cornell (ERCS Rights Officer)

Act 1: Our players

Doreen

Doreen, a community councillor, hears from the Avonbridge and Standburn community and others around Scotland that sewage sludge, containing toxic chemicals, is being spread on agricultural land, resulting in foul odours.



Sewage sludge



Sewage debris on the River Almond

Kathleen

Kathleen and other local residents can not swim in the nearby river, the River Almond, because it is consistently polluted by sewage and is full of sewage debris.

Mark

Mark discovers that a quarry dealing with toxic incinerator ash has inadequate controls and is polluting the local burns and woodland, Cullaloe Forest.



Incinerator ash in Cullaloe Forest

All three report their concerns to the relevant authorities. The system of environmental laws, regulations and procedures designed to protect Scotland's environment seems relatively straightforward, until they start and are thrown into the ...

Snakes and Ladders-style game.

Act 2: The game

Making progress



Our players spend a lot of time researching the options open to them and take action, including:

- Reporting to local authorities, public bodies and regulators, including SEPA, Scottish Water, NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland
- Submitting Freedom Of Information requests
- Gathering local support
- Gathering support from different experts
- Contacting local councillors and MSPs

With each step forward, they move up a branch (ladder)

Hitting walls and falling back

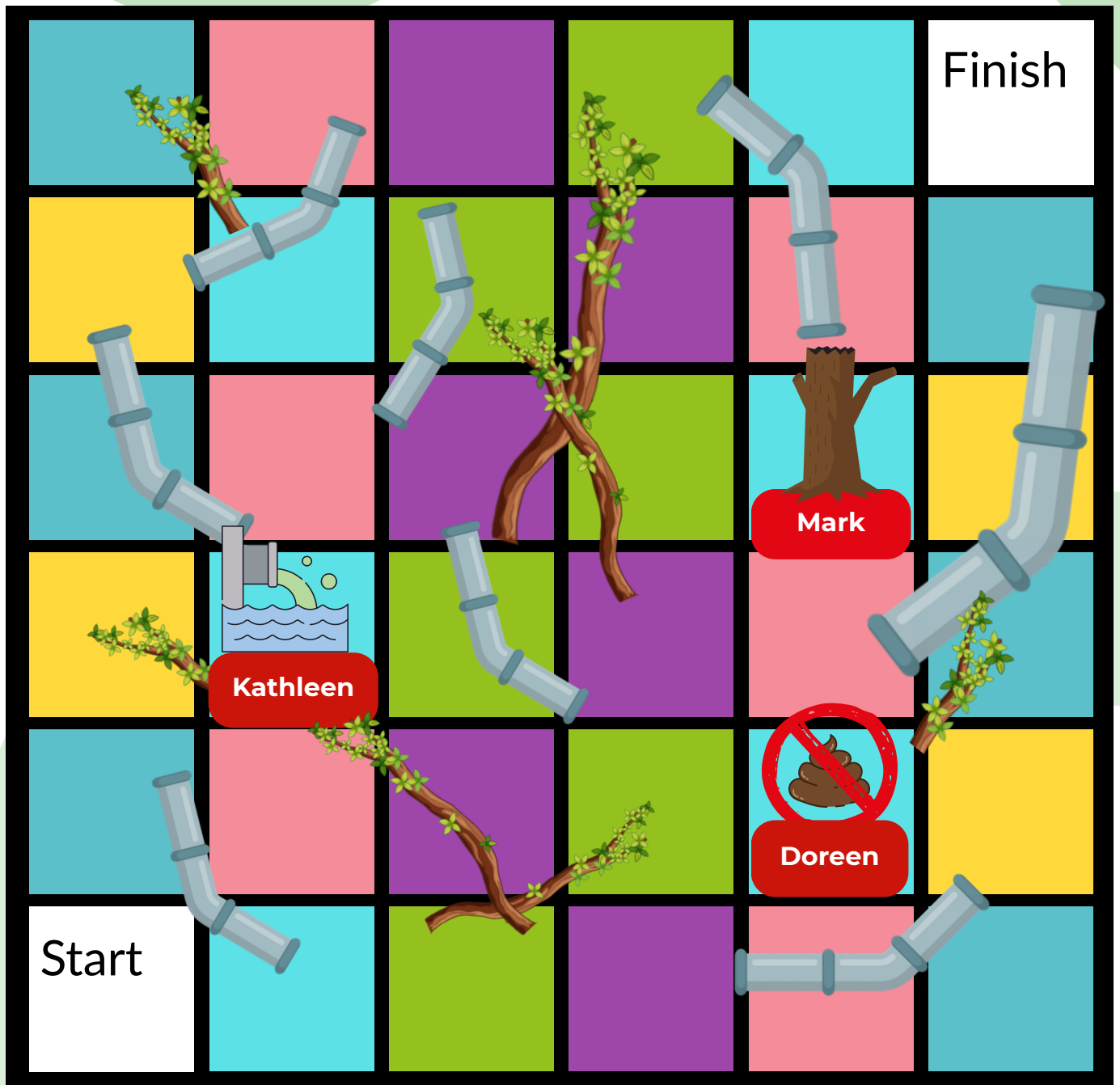
Despite our players' commitment and growing expertise on environmental regulations, they seem to keep hitting the same barriers:

- A lack of accountability and being passed between different organisations
- A lack of monitoring to understand the full extent of pollution
- A lack of enforcement over clear breaches of environmental regulations
- Meeting after meeting with key officials, and no action to show for it.

With each step back, they fall down a pipe (snake)



**Up,
down,
round and round our players go ...**

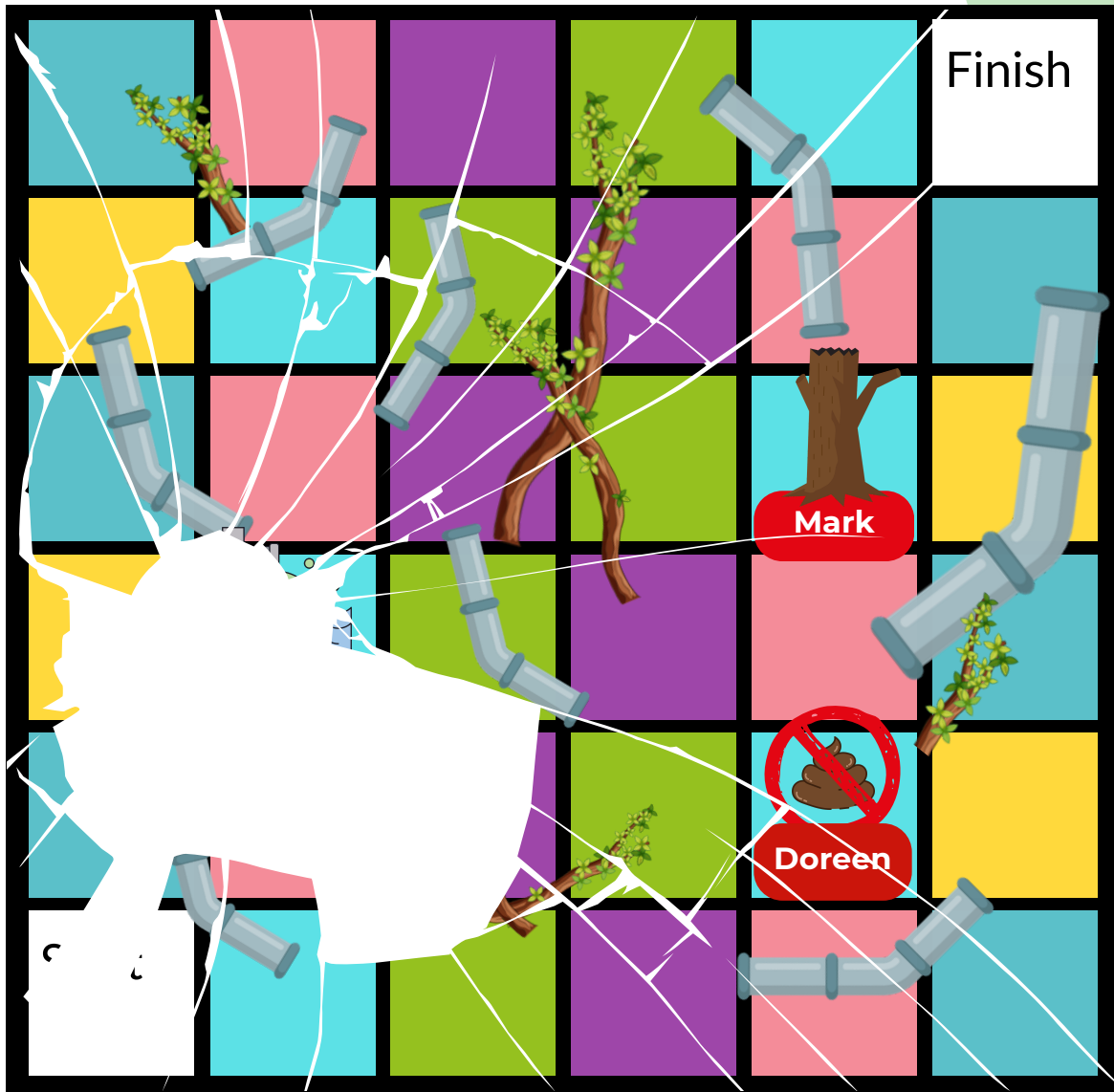


... trying to protect nature and their communities.

Act 3: Enough of the game

Our players have had enough.

They break out of the game and get legal advice.



We're not playing your game anymore! It's obvious we're not getting anywhere.

We've all spent years going back and forth. Doreen has spent almost two decades!

We've enlisted the help of the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland. We've all received legal advice and support.

Doreen

Thanks to ERCS, we forced the Scottish Government to publish reports on sewage sludge that have been hidden for 4 years.

They have helped put pressure on the Scottish Government, who have now introduced new regulations on sewage sludge spreading.

But these don't go far enough. So now, with ERCS, we've begun a campaign on sewage sludge spreading. We are asking for a moratorium on spreading until the risks to humans, animals and the environment are gone.



To learn more about Doreen's campaign read her Voices for Justice: [Sewage sludge spreading - the harm and fight for improved regulation.](#)



To learn more about Kathleen's campaign, see [Clean up Scotland's Sewage.](#)

Kathleen

Over 30 billion litres of raw sewage were discharged from sewer overflows into Scotland's waterways in 2024.

My community have been fighting this issue for five years and it's only recently, with ERCS's help, that we have made the most progress.

ERCS helped us to escalate our previously failed bathing water application and our complaint to SEPA on permit breaches to Scotland's environmental watchdog. We didn't get the result we wanted, but we have exposed the system for what it is.

We are now working with ERCS on the Clean Up Scotland's Sewage campaign. Rivers are still being polluted, so we continue to fight.

Mark

With ERCS, I had the legal support and backing to pressure regulators and my local council to address the pollution in my local forest.

Now, the quarry has a stricter permit to follow.

I'm still fighting all sorts of pollution in my area, but now I'm not alone. I have ERCS and others around me.



To learn more about Mark's campaign read his Voices for Justice: [Defending Cullaloe Forest from environmental harm.](#)

In six years, ERCS has received over 700 enquiries to the law service.

Kathleen's total time campaigning: 5 years and counting

We need accountability

Mark's total time campaigning: 5 years and counting

We need access to justice

Doreen's total time campaigning: 18 years and counting

We need an enforceable human right to a healthy environment

Find out more about the lived experiences of people across Scotland fighting environmental injustices in our [resources hub.](#)

Fighting for environmental
justice in Scotland

Environmental Justice Network



The Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland (ERCS)

Our aim is to assist everyone, especially people who face the biggest barriers, to exercise their rights in environmental law and to protect the environment.

What can I do about an environmental problem?

Contact our free law service at www.ercs.scot/get-advice



www.ercs.scot



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