

Rights of Nature

In his Encyclical ***Laudato si'*** Pope Francis invited us to gaze at Creation with compassion in acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all living things and creation. It is about wonder and gratitude for a gift which when appreciated will be cared for and shared. When people fall in love with something they take care of it. Pope Francis called for a radical renewal of interdependence among the Earth community as we have developed a way of life that opposes nature. As Charles Eisenstein (in *The Ascent of Humanity*) writes, 'We have defined ourselves as other than what we are, as discrete subjects separate from each other and separate from the world around us.'

In recent years, a unifying view that integrates life's biological, cognitive, social, and ecological dimensions has emerged. This new understanding of life includes a change of metaphors: from seeing the world as a machine to understanding it as a network. This needs to be extended to the sacredness of all things because God is deeply immanent in creation, every element of nature—from birds to trees—possesses inherent, sacred dignity. Ilia Delio writes of nature as 'a choreographed ballet, a symphony, whereby an organism is dynamically engaged in its own self-organization, pursuing its own ends amid an ever-shifting context of relationships.' (Evolution and social justice, nature itself ***Global Sisters Report*** August 30, 2017)

Rights of Nature laws put the health of the natural world at the centre of human decision making. They enable the non-human world to be 'seen' in the eyes of the law and to 'have a voice,' rather than to be invisible or secondary to human centred objectives. This leads to increased recognition that there must be a change in the relationship between humankind and the natural world which means recognising our dependence on nature and respecting our need to live in harmony with the natural world. There has been a growing advocacy for the rights of nature that recognises the Earth community's right to exist, thrive and continue into the future because it is sacred in itself, has inherent worth, and necessary for the good of all living things.

The culture of Indigenous peoples, First Nations people, see plants and animals as relatives, members of an inter-connected community of life that is self-sustaining and deserves respect. Whereas they draw from the natural world to live without taking more than the natural system can provide, the dominant systems in western industrialised nations treat plants, animals and entire ecosystems, rivers, jungles and mountains, as property to be exploited. In western and industrialised nations, nature is legally treated as human property by law – and can be damaged or destroyed by the owner. Here those who 'own' wetlands, forests, and other ecosystems and natural communities, can use them as they wish. The Rights of Nature movement recognises that ecosystems and natural communities are not mere possessions but have an independent and inalienable right to exist and flourish. Rights of Nature laws have transformed the status of nature from being regarded as property to being rights-bearing and prohibit activities that interfere with the ability and rights of ecosystems and natural communities to exist and flourish.

A powerful and inspiring movement is emerging in Philippines where faith, youth, and grassroots activism converge. Unlike other Rights of Nature movements, it is grounded in spirituality and solidarity leading to action. GARN (Global Alliance for

the Rights of Nature) states that the Rights of Nature movement (<https://www.garn.org/>) is not just a legal concept or an abstract idea but a global call to recognize that ecosystems—rivers, forests, mountains, and all living beings—have inherent rights and challenges the status quo and offering new pathways for ecological justice. **Listen to the full episode:** [garn.org/conversations-with-mother-nature](https://www.garn.org/conversations-with-mother-nature) and <https://www.garn.org/philippines-podcast/>

The Rights of Nature movement is a story of hope which draws on both Indigenous wisdom, faith-based inspiration (cf. **Laudato si'**) and Catholic social teaching. There is a deep convergence of Indigenous traditions and Rights of Nature which have been practiced for many generations. Their deepest roots are found in the living traditions of Indigenous communities who have long understood the Earth as living, Sacred, and worthy of respect beyond its usefulness to humankind. Indigenous understanding of development is not about economic growth, wealth accumulation or resources extraction, but flourishing among people, communities, nature and future generations.

This is a challenge to the dominant models of development that measures progress in terms of economic growth, extraction, and consumption. The invitation is to rediscover reverence, reciprocity and communal responsibility towards Creation where nature is viewed as kin, a living relative, a sacred community of interconnected beings where there is no commodification. Nature here, is seen as gift from the Creator, who had entrusted humanity to care not own. The sacredness of nature requires ethical limits to all human behaviour and fosters reverence. Nature is a living presence. Mountains, rivers, forests are not inert matter but kin to whom humans belong.

This consciousness of relationship transforms environmental protection from a technical obligation into the area of moral vocation of care for family, a sacred community of interconnected beings, land and resource rather than commodities for person accumulation. This has relevance to the extractivist mentality and consequences for peace (cf. <https://www.earthlaws.org.au/event/garnap-1july/>)

Rights of Nature also exist in other parts of the world and enshrined in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution, Bolivia's 2010 'Rights of Mother Earth' Act, dozens of local laws in the USA, and a number of ecosystems in Aotearoa New Zealand where rights of nature legislation takes on an anti-colonial perspective as well by explicitly acknowledging the connection that First Nations people have had with these entities. The Whanganui River was previously used for social and cultural purposes, and the communities considered the health and wellbeing of the river to be intrinsically connected to their health and wellbeing with a deep awareness of the indigenous principle of **Ko au te awa Ko te awa Ko au** - I am the river and the river is me.

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