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CONFRONTING HUMAN SUPREMACY IN DEFENCE OF THE EARTH



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The challenge of ecological citizenship in anthropocentric epicentres

Taylor Hood

Taylor is a Scottish naturalist and writer who holds degrees in literature and wildlife ecology. His research advocates for ruptures in the normal functioning of our self-centred society, seeking to reopen a world that has become insulated against non-human claims. He is an Associate Editor of *The Ecological Citizen*.

Keywords: anthropocentrism

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I have often thought I should not speak on matters urban, since I am fortunate enough to have always lived and worked in quiet semi-rural areas – close to the coast’s enlivening breeze, in sight of rugged hills, near rich expanses of heathland and beside bluebell-suffused ancient woodland. Today, the long green arm of the Chilterns National Landscape protects me, as it were, from the influence of London. Whenever I venture south, I must mentally prepare myself to cross over into a world-within-a-world, in which the surrounding landscape is cut off, wild beings go unseen and opportunities to be touched by the *other* are few and far between. After braving London, or any major urban centre for that matter, my mind often replays conversations I have had with people expressing a more well-founded sense of unease, even despair, about the ‘concrete jungles’ they struggle – like their nonhuman counterparts – to inhabit. Although I am not an architect or urban planner – another confession – my background in ecology, alongside engagement with cultural and philosophical questions, has shaped how I understand these concerns. It was a desire to help articulate what is wrong with metropolitan existence that led to proposing this semi-themed issue.

The Ecological Citizen has addressed a wide array of themes relevant to the built environment, such as overpopulation, economics and rewilding, and human habitations have occasionally appeared as spaces to be confronted. Moreover, one of our main topic areas is that of *urban life and its ecological potential*. Yet we have never explicitly examined this domain in full force. It is important to do so because domination and management of the Earth, driven by anthropocentrism, are clearest here. Developed locales concentrate the flows and demands of energy, materials and infrastructure, magnify the

consequences of human–nature interactions (or reinforce their absence) and act as arenas for testing ecological interventions. Indeed, if the city in particular has been thought of as the locus of civilization (the word derives from the Latin *civitas*, meaning city) then this publication gets to the heart of where ecological citizenship arguably matters most.

It is within this context that the present issue's contributions emerge. My offering conceptualizes the city as an apparatus of enclosure, whose organization diminishes the exposure and vulnerability through which presence arises, with implications for how we perceive changes to urban conditions. Elsewhere, Petroselli's non-utopian account draws on Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* as an imaginative lens for understanding cities as sites of multispecies conflict rather than idealized harmony. In an article that explores conflict in the city with regard to impacts on avifauna, McFarland argues that looks can be deceiving: the façades of seemingly ecologically oriented buildings endanger birdkind, a problem she addresses through bird-safe glass. Turning to wider framings of accessibility and spatial justice, Battersby interrogates how the built environment is modelled on assumptions about embodiment and belonging that produce patterns of inclusion and exclusion across both human and nonhuman life. Meanwhile, the legal and regulatory dimensions of civic ordering are brought to bear in de Tróis's case study of a destroyed wooded block in Osasco, Brazil, which shows how land-use and environmental legislation renders mature ecosystems legally invisible.

The pieces gathered here differ in register and focus, yet they all converge on a shared preoccupation: the extent to which the built environment remains arranged around human terms, even amid rising awareness of nature's plight and increased sensitivity to ecological problems. This stance is a natural consequence of the journal's championing of ecocentrism, which necessarily entails thinking beyond human-centred designs. And yet in challenging metropolitan governance and the excesses of city life, I feel it is important to insist that none of us is writing out of anti-urban zeal, or from a broader anti-civilizational outlook. Ours, after all, is a journal of pragmatism in negotiating the tensions between human and nonhuman claims. We are inclusive of humanity – and urban spaces *are* homes for the human animal – even as we support the flourishing of other Earthlings.

By way of inviting the reader to engage with this issue, I wish to draw upon the words of an author I return to often – a writer of both country and city whose critique of industrializing modernity is inseparable from an emphasis on the imagination as a force for change: “Come with me, ladies and gentlemen who are in any wise weary of London: come with me: and those that tire at all of the world we know: for we have new worlds here” (Lord Dunsany, 1912: preface).

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When the law doesn't see the land: The destruction of a living urban block in Brazil

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Keywords: urban ecology

Citation: de Trói M (2026) When the law doesn't see the land: The destruction of a living urban block in Brazil. *The Ecological Citizen* 9(2): 115–19.

The story of a block in the centre of Osasco (SP), a city in the São Paulo Metropolitan Region of Brazil, demolished to make way for a real estate development, does not begin with technical documentation or with public-administration offices, but with the living ground that existed there before the intervention. Mature trees that had accumulated decades of presence, canopies that sheltered birds and insects, roots that stabilized the soil, subtle variations of humidity and shade that shaped the local microclimate, and even a piped spring that – although rendered invisible by asphalt – continued to emerge quietly into the public drainage system. This ecological fabric destroyed by clear-cutting – part of what Malcom Ferdinand (2022) identifies as the ecological injustice and forms of coloniality intertwined within contemporary urbanization processes – never entered the legal equation guiding decisions about the fate of that block. The legislation governing land-use planning, tree suppression and environmental approval in Osasco, as in many Brazilian cities, reflects an urban paradigm that insists on treating land as a mere platform for construction rather than as what Ferdinand (2022) describes as the surface of the “common world”, where life interweaves, resists and demands recognition.

The administrative and legal procedures involved in the Osasco case reveal this structural limitation. I belong to the kind of human who is deeply outraged by attacks on nature, especially those directed at urban trees. In this region, all urban trees are part of the Atlantic Forest, one of Brazil's major biomes, which once covered fifteen per cent of the national territory but now retains only a quarter of its original area (Atlantic Forest Foundation, 2024). When I noticed unusual activity on the land next to my building – an area I can fully observe from my bedroom window – I suspected that the work was being carried out without proper authorization. I filed an anonymous complaint with the São Paulo State Public Prosecutor's Office, arguing that the small woodland hosted

important species, including two ipê trees (*Handroanthus albus*), emblematic of the state of São Paulo. My hypothesis proved correct: according to the subsequent investigation, demolition had indeed begun without the required permit. As a result of my complaint, the project was embargoed and a formal inquiry into potential irregularities was opened in September 2024. It was, at least momentarily, a partial victory.

I knew the embargo would not last long; in a political landscape increasingly judicialized, a single injunction is often enough to clear the way for destruction – a pattern well documented in the city of São Paulo (Trois and Caldas, 2025) and repeatedly reproduced as a *modus operandi* across Brazil. In November 2025, when I was awakened by the sound of chainsaws cutting through the trees, I received a notification from the Public Prosecutor's Office informing me that the complaint had been dismissed. The real estate development had been regularized on the basis of Municipal Law 3.995/2005 and Decrees 12.741/2021 and 13.950/2023 (Municipality of Osasco, 2005; 2021; 2023), regulations that – although recent – are grounded in a profoundly asymmetrical logic of environmental compensation. Under this framework, each mature tree felled must be 'offset' by the planting or donation of seedlings, as if ecological time could be converted into a kind of vegetal currency.

According to the case file, City Hall informed the Public Prosecutor's Office that no changes had been made to the vegetation on the plot and that all environmental obligations had been fulfilled. The investigation report issued by the Public Prosecutor's Office further stated that none of the tree species identified on the site were classified as endangered. These official justifications were deemed sufficient, leading the Public Prosecutor's Office to close the inquiry on the grounds that there had been no administrative omission, no proven environmental harm and no risk to collective or trans-individual interests. Yet this logic – technically coherent within the framework of an outdated regulatory system – reveals itself to be ecologically blind.

The disregarded temporalities of the climate emergency

The notion that the loss of a mature tree can be compensated by the promise of a sapling planted elsewhere in the city is an administrative fiction that disregards the temporality of vegetal life. A tree that reaches twenty or thirty meters does not materialize overnight; it emerges through decades of slow, cumulative ecological relations that shape microclimates, regulate moisture, sustain soils and provide habitats for multiple species. Félix Guattari's concept of ecosophy (Guattari, 1990) helps illuminate how these relations exceed bureaucratic categories, as they involve inseparable connections between environment, subjectivity and social organization. Guattari (1992) further argues that industrial capitalism produces a generalized entropy in urban environments, erasing heterogeneity and destroying ecosystems in the name of the endless reproduction of architectural and economic models. Nothing exemplifies this entropy more vividly than the stark contrast between the two photographs of this block: in the first, a cluster of old houses sheltered by large trees; in the second, a bare expanse of exposed soil, waiting for concrete

and steel. This destruction – though rendered ‘regular’ by administrative procedures – is inscribed in the territory as an irreversible loss, at least for the coming decades.

If we follow the perspective of Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2015), a *quilombola*¹ thinker who denounces the persistence of colonialism, we gain another interpretive key for understanding this case. For Bispo (2015), there is an ongoing conflict between the logic of merchandise and the logic of life – a tension that becomes especially visible when urban space is appropriated by real estate speculation for vertical developments that promise progress but ultimately deliver homogenization and heat. The block in Osasco, which once functioned as an ecological corridor – even if never officially recognized as such – performed essential environmental functions: regulating local temperatures, providing shelter for urban fauna and ensuring soil permeability. Yet because these functions produce no direct financial returns, the legislation assigns them little or no value. Even the spring on the side street, evidenced by the constant flow of water channelled into the storm drain – and audible to anyone walking by – is not treated as a living hydrological relation. Rather than being understood as part of a living system, it was simply absorbed into the urban drainage infrastructure, like so many other springs buried in the course of accelerated urbanization in the metropolitan region of Latin America’s largest city (Diário Verde, 2016).

It is important to stress that the destruction of this vegetation does not merely represent the elimination of individual trees. It has compromised a complex web of environmental, historical and social relationships that, from an ecocentric perspective, cannot be reduced to figures in technical reports. Mature trees perform climate-regulating functions that no number of saplings



Images: April 2024 (A), at the time of the initial complaint to the São Paulo State Public Prosecutor’s Office; November 2025 (B), with the houses demolished, vegetation removed and the land fenced off (source: author’s archive).

can replace in the short or medium term. They offer shelter for birds that, under increasing pressure from habitat fragmentation, rely on the few remaining green islands to survive. Their root systems stabilize the soil and participate in the water cycle in symbiosis with subterranean microorganisms – organisms that were also obliterated in the process. The block's green area was not an accident; it was a collective creation of life over decades, shaped by domestic cultivation practices, trees planted by former residents and spontaneously emerging species. It was, in this sense, a form of ecological memory, and its erasure disrupts a continuity that cannot be rebuilt by decree. But who, within our current legal and political frameworks, is paying attention?

By allowing this block to be transformed into bare land, Osasco's urban legislation reaffirmed a model of city-making that prioritizes profit through verticalization over ecological responsibility. The laws and decrees in force operate under the assumption that administrative regularity is sufficient to legitimize environmental destruction, provided it is accompanied by formal compensations and minimal urban parameters such as the fifteen per cent permeability index (Municipality of Osasco, 2024). In practice, these norms function as legal technologies designed to enable questionable architectural developments rather than instruments aimed at protecting the living Earth. The result is that ecological time – slow, accumulative, patient – systematically loses out to the time of real estate capital, which moves at the pace of financing cycles, construction schedules and profitability targets.

If we look at this episode from the perspective of the land, as contemporary political ecology thinkers suggest, it becomes clear that the Public Prosecutor's decision to dismiss the case does not mean that no damage occurred; it simply means that such damage is not recognized within the existing legal grammar. The destruction of mature trees, the suppression of living soil, the disturbance of underground watercourses and the elimination of urban habitats are not classified as harm because the legislation itself has been crafted not to perceive these forms of life as integral components of the city. Under this framework, vegetation is treated as a decorative element rather than as critical ecological infrastructure. In times of climate emergency, such a conception is no longer tenable.

Final considerations: To the Earth what belongs to the Earth

It is urgent that Brazilian legislation incorporate new categories of protection for privately owned green areas with environmental relevance – recognizing that wooded backyards, lot edges and small clusters of trees form essential networks for the ecological functioning of cities. It is equally necessary to abolish the seedling-compensation model, which operates as an accounting fiction that obscures real environmental losses. The planting of saplings may function as a complementary policy, but never as a substitute for the ecological roles of mature vegetation. Urban springs must also be formally acknowledged, and strict protocols established for their protection, regardless of their visibility or their presence – or absence – in official cartographic records.

The case of the Osasco block exposes not merely an administrative failure, but a mode of urban existence that has become incompatible with the planet's

biodiversity and habitable climate future. By reducing life to technical indicators and formal compensations, municipal legislation reveals its inability to grasp that the city is a territory co-inhabited by multiple forms of existence. The destruction of the trees on that land, although legally regularized, is ecologically indefensible and ethically unacceptable. It reminds us that legal regularity does not ensure environmental justice, and that land – unlike administrative procedures – cannot simply be filed away.

Note

- ¹ This term refers to members of Afro-Brazilian communities descended from enslaved people who established autonomous settlements (*quilombos*) as forms of resistance. These communities maintain distinct cultural, territorial and political traditions and are recognized in Brazilian law as traditional peoples with collective land rights.

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The environmental impacts of the Russia–Ukraine war: Reflections from the setting of an English botanic garden

Janine Natalya Clark

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Keywords: ecological living; nature

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The scene is a beautiful botanic garden, a peaceful oasis within a large and crowded city in England. I come here as often as I can, especially during spring and summer. I come to observe, to listen, to reflect. I am here, but also somewhere else. In Ukraine. I have never visited the country, but my research on the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war – and specifically its environmental impacts – is never far from my thoughts.

Tree stories

In the garden, I lend the trees my ears and try to shut out everything else around me. I focus on their many voices, whisperings and susurrations. One or two start and the others follow, like a well-rehearsed orchestra. The wind conducts them skilfully.

My eyes are drawn to a silent tree by itself. Short stumps are all that remain of its former limbs. In the past, I would probably have just walked straight past it. Not now. I wonder what happened to it. What is your story?

Off one of the pathways, I notice a wooden head stone on the ground. It reads “MEMORIAL TO AN ENGLISH OAK”. I am curious to know what happened to this oak, just as I want to know more about the tree with the stumps. What are their stories?

Robert Frost’s *A Witness Tree* (1942) includes a poem called *Beech* and the lines:

*One tree, by being deeply wounded,
Has been impressed as Witness Tree.*

Trees as witnesses; witness trees. How many of these trees are there in the world? What have they ‘seen’ and experienced? If they were people, they would be referred to as ‘victim-witnesses’. Indigenous writer and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013: 168) explains that “[i]n our Anishinaabe way, we count trees as people, ‘the standing people’”.

Trees as people. A tree wearing a gas mask. Skinny and damaged, it doesn’t look much like a tree anymore. The tree is next to a road in Kreminna, in eastern Ukraine (Dyer, 2024). The tree wears a khaki green gas mask, the breathing tube dangling like an elephant’s trunk. Is it still there today, I wonder? Who put the gas mask on it and why? Were they making the point that trees also suffer the effects of war? Were they acknowledging the tree itself as a witness? I wonder what name Donna Haraway might give this strange creature of bark, rubber and plastic. Perhaps a type of holobiont (Haraway, 2016: 60), an assemblage that represents and reflects the entanglements of different lifeworlds in war – and the stories that arise from these entanglements.

Trees as witnesses. Trees as victims. The acrid smell of smoke continues to linger in the cold Ukrainian air. Smouldering, blackened barks stand in the place of once verdant forests (DW, 2025). How many lives have been lost? How many more-than-human worlds have been harmed or destroyed?

A biologist in Kharkiv, in northeastern Ukraine, is seeking to restore destroyed forest by planting English oak trees (Harding, 2024). I think back to the wooden head stone with the words “MEMORIAL TO AN ENGLISH OAK”. Will there be memorials to the trees harmed and destroyed by the Russia–Ukraine war?

Encounters

For a few brief seconds, I hear nothing except the trees whispering together. A squirrel suddenly scampers across the grass a few metres away from me. It stands on its back legs and appears to look at me intently. Just as suddenly, it scurries off into a bush. I wonder what the garden is like once everyone has left. If I were the only human animal here, how might it open out, concertina-like, to new sights and sounds?

I find a spot near some violet *Agastache* Blue Boa, the tubular flowers shaped like dainty over-turned cups. I watch several bees as they busily fly in and out, consuming the rich nectar and collecting pollen. Some bee species use vibrations, or sonications, to extract pollen. This ‘buzz pollination’ captures and reflects a deep and ancient synergy between bees and flowers.

I momentarily hear a buzz near my right ear. Bzzzzzz. Now the sound is coming from overhead, loud and persistent. I am running from it, but it continues to pursue me. Panting, I take cover in a nearby bush and wait. Drones, large numbers of them, hover and loiter above Ukraine’s forests, cities and frontline areas with deadly effects. Bzzzzzz. I see the squirrel again. We

look at each other through the undergrowth. I wonder what the buzzing sounds like to him/her.

Acoustic trauma

Close to where I am sitting, a young woman relaxes on the grass with a group of her friends. Her shimmering blue skirt reminds me of a mermaid's tail, swishing from side to side in the breeze.

I think of a Ukrainian marine biologist whom I interviewed. She shared with me a recording of the Black Sea that she had made in 2021 while doing research on Dzharylhach Island. The gentle and rhythmical lapping of the waves is comforting (<https://is.gd/MGBbIE>). “Listen to the surf”, Beston (2019: 40) writes, “really lend it your ears, and you will hear in it a world of sounds”.

This world of sounds fundamentally changed one year later. Explosions. Sea mines. Naval sonar. During the first year of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, large numbers of dead dolphins began to wash up on the Black Sea coast (Węgrzyn *et al.*, 2023). They were just some of the many other-than-human victims of a war that has deeply interfered with the sonic components of ecosystems – and with how “plants and animals interact with each other and with their surroundings” (Mullet *et al.*, 2016: 2).

Resilience

The garden is a different place now. There is a thin layer of frost on the ground and a bitter wind is blowing.

The surface of Ukraine's Dnipro River has frozen over. Some local men are drilling holes into the ice, trying to catch fish (BBC, 2026). Fishing offers them a brief respite from the four-year war. Is there any respite for the animals too? Perhaps for some. There is currently a hunting ban in place, for example. Probably some of the animals have also adapted, at least to some extent, to the shocks and stressors of the war.

I hear the cawing of a rook flying overhead. I hear the sound of rooks in a park in Dnipro in central Ukraine, recorded by one of the interviewees – a bird watcher (<https://is.gd/Um2zbb>). I hear the sound of Nature's resilience.

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On hope and the environmental crisis: A sermon delivered at Ely Cathedral, 5 October 2025

Nigel Cooper

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“We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”

– 2 Cor 4:18¹

We have not had feel-good readings this morning.² No “Come to me all ye that are heavy laden”. Paul is apparently in prison. Habakkuk’s prophecy is still waiting to be precisely fulfilled.

These readings come on top of the desperate dynamics in the news, especially the terrifying momentum to the right, both in Britain and in many other countries.

As a lifelong environmentalist, I weep and often despair.

You know the catalogue. Let me just mention Trump calling climate change the greatest con job ever. Kemi Badenough wants to repeal the Climate Change Act. And the UK’s Climate Change Committee persistently criticizes governments of all colours for not doing nearly enough. The Paris 1.5 degree target has been breached and is surely now a lost cause. And all this in the face of both the science and our lived experience.

There is a saying – attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson – that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. I find that true for me. What about you? Is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism?

Of course the end of the world is not the explosion of the Earth into tiny fragments; or the end of life on Earth; or even the end of humanity. It is really about the end of life as we know it, including capitalism itself. A leading Swiss insurance executive recently caused a stir by suggesting on his blog that

climate change might destroy capitalism (Thallinger, 2025). From what little I have read, it seems the insurance industry is genuinely anxious.

This pitting of the environment against capitalism I find very instructive. I think what is meant by capitalism here is not basic market exchange. It is primarily a social system, bolstered by some theories of economics to justify it. It is where people and corporations with wealth use it to extract more wealth from the system for themselves. They want ever more wealth to gain the power they need to control society so that it works in their favour. Wealth gives them power over media and so how we all think; it gives them leverage over politicians; it gives them financial bargaining power; it can give them celebrity status as an influencer. All this works quite effectively. Wealth inequality statistics demonstrate this. Here is just one; back in 2023 researchers at Greenwich University estimated that the top fifty wealthiest families in Britain own as much wealth as the total owned by the bottom fifty per cent of the population (Tippet and Wildauer, 2023).

Nature doesn't work that way. Wealth cannot bargain with it, force it to compromise, change the way it thinks about itself, or impress it with posturing. Nature is actually the real world, in contrast to the social and financial worlds, which are the products of human imaginations.

Take fish. Marine conservation biologists estimate the 'maximum sustainable catches', which are often much less than what is being caught. Governments, when determining quotas, hear these as negotiating positions *vis-à-vis* the demands from the industry and go for some sort of compromise. But nature does not negotiate. In this case, the fish populations just decrease until a tipping point is reached and the ecosystem collapses. This was the case in the cod fisheries in the north-west Atlantic. Now the North Sea cod populations are also in dire condition (Beament, 2025)

The wishful thinking of a Trump or a Farage is based on phantasy or a callous disregard for others for short-term personal gain: When it all goes wrong, I have enough money to do well out of the catastrophe; or, *in extremis*, I shall go to Mars! Meanwhile, such people can employ the environment or Net Zero Carbon policies as another scapegoat, alongside immigrants, to work up the populace into voting them into power; this, despite it being against the interests of the general population. Currently, they are promulgating the claim that net zero pushes up prices and the cost of living, rather than admitting that profiteering is to blame (UNITE, 2025).

Now, in this scenario I have been sketching, it is not surprising if religion is sidelined. This is particularly the case for what might be termed a Lukan gospel. Think of last Sunday's gospel of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), of the Magnificat, and of much more. You cannot serve both God and mammon. It is not a welcome message. In truth, as a middle-of-the-road Anglican I am not very keen on it either. I think this is one of the factors behind church decline. It is at odds with the spirit of the age.

"They have Moses and the prophets, let them listen to them", says Abraham to the rich man. Yes, and I would add, resurrecting the old notion of God's two books, of scripture and of nature: "They have nature, let them listen to her".

The church has been unfashionable for a while now. I anticipate it can expect hostility to increase, particularly if we are faithful to our prophetic calling, of turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

Yet the gospel is not just the proclamation of judgement; it is also the proclamation of hope. This is not to be reduced to merely a hope in personal salvation, but a hope for the whole of creation. It is now subject to vanity, waiting in hope for its consummation in Christ.

Amongst all the environmental gloom, many clutch at points of light. Technology has developed rapidly and has been taken up in some fields – think of the rapid increase in electric cars. Though this is also, unfortunately, a classic example of the Jevons paradox: something becomes possible with less resources, but people use this as an excuse to use as much as (or more than) before by driving much bigger cars – how many small electric cars does one see on the road?

When we reflect on human nature and specifically with society's current terrifying momentum, we shall probably have to put up with whatever crumbs technology can provide; hence my personal hope shifts to my second point. If it does go badly wrong, it will not be the end of history. The forces of oppression and of justice will continue to wax and wane. Nature naturing will endure. I am reminded of Orwell, "but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it" (Orwell, 1968: 145).

For me, though, the focus of hope lies in a third direction. Hope is not an estimate of probabilities but a spiritual discipline. In his poem *East Coker*, TS Eliot writes,

*I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing*

Hope is much deeper than hoping things will turn out for the best. It is an anchored commitment to things unseen, the things that are eternal; things summed up in the three transcendentals of goodness, truth and beauty, or in St Paul's faith, hope and love. That commitment is costly. It can end one up in prison, like St Paul.

I recently heard the BBC correspondent, Fergal Keane, talk on what gave him hope. He spoke of his experiences in South Africa at the end of apartheid, of Rwanda and in Northern Ireland. He singled out people of great courage who stood out against the forces of evil and hate. Some have famous names like Nelson Mandela. Most are hardly known. Do we have the faith, not to move mulberry trees, but to face prison with a Mandela or a St Paul? Do we have the grit to come in from the ploughing and then immediately to start serving our Lord in the poor?

That is a sermonic rhetorical question if ever there was one! Without the drama that the question presupposes, are there realistic – yet costly – ways in which we ordinary Christians can express spiritual hope?

One I particularly commend to you is to find ways of speaking about this to people around you (cf. Climate Outreach, 2025; Global Action Plan, 2021). It is

not at all easy, as it is a socially taboo subject. Nevertheless, a Yale University study of British people less than a year ago found 75 per cent of us understand climate change to be human-caused; 68 per cent thought the climate should be a high or very high priority for government; 80 per cent are 'somewhat worried' or worse (Leiserowitz *et al.*, 2025). Another study found that about 15 per cent of UK adults suffer from eco-anxiety, rising to 33 per cent in 18 to 34 year-olds (BusinessGreen, 2023). This provides the context. Can we, maybe, look out for opportunities to talk about climate in conversations? The perennial topic of the weather begs extension. "It's cold today." "Yes, but do you remember how cold it used to be in our childhoods?" At the mention of a grandchild, "I worry about how fit the world will be for them to live in. Do you also worry?" Let's just talk about it.

To end, I want to return to the thought that hope is a spiritual discipline. In the line following that which I quoted above, Eliot wrote,

*there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

That waiting may be in the watchfulness of a Habakkuk on his rampart, or in the prison cell of a St Paul. It can be in the faithful speaking of the gospel, in season and out of season. We wait patiently, alert to the unseen, the things that are eternal.

Notes

- 1 Some might worry that this text consigns the natural world to the seen and the passing away. I do not read it that way. For those who look on nature and see only what is seen, they are seeing a surface of power. They can only see nature and all its members as instruments available for them to use in their own projects, projects that are themselves 'visible' and passing away. When we look for the unseen in nature we see the transcendentals instantiated. This is not as a mere window onto ideas (as Plato), but as particulars, each with their own being (which is the ultimate transcendental). It is also not a temporary phenomenon. Each moment of each member of nature partakes in eternity. Change and decay does not cast these beings into nothingness, the non-lasting. Rather, each moment is anchored for ever in the realm of the eternal. Beauty is a transcendental particularly associated with 'seeing'. An animal, a flower, a view, all we might judge from their appearance as beautiful. If we are only looking at what is seen, then we see a moneymaking opportunity. If we see the unseen, we are in awe. Beauty also has a time dimension, most easily appreciated in music and natural sounds, but also, for instance, in a sunset as it changes and the dark overwhelms it. The change adds to the beauty, even its passing does. The change itself partakes in eternity.
- 2 The readings were Habakkuk 1:1–4; 2:1–5; Psalm 37:1–9; 2 Timothy 1:1–14; and Luke 17:5–10.

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Bird-safe glass as a step toward species-inclusive design

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To design ecocentrically, we must see our built environment through the eyes of non-human species. In this article, I briefly consider one example of how anthropocentric thinking has made our cities into killing fields for members of other species: the fatal hazard of glass to our avian brethren. The hazard can be greatly reduced if we incorporate a literal bird's eye perspective into architecture and urban planning. Thus, I present bird-safe glass as a case study in moving beyond anthropocentrism in built environments.

Collisions with windows and other glass surfaces are estimated to kill over one billion birds each year in the US alone (Kornreich *et al.*, 2024). Glass-caused fatalities have been documented in 90 countries, affecting hundreds of bird species worldwide (Klem, 2025). Moreover, contrary to common belief, birds who collide with windows might still be fatally harmed even if they fly away or are 'merely' stunned. Although some do go on to lead long lives, others soon perish due to injuries that they have sustained. Collision research pioneer Daniel Klem documented birds who appeared to recover from window collisions only to die later from intracranial haemorrhaging (1990). One recent study tracked the outcomes of more than 3,000 window collision victims admitted to wildlife rehabilitation clinics. Even with the most technologically advanced expert care, 60 per cent of these patients succumbed to their injuries in hospital (Kornreich *et al.*, 2024).

These painful deaths and injuries can be greatly reduced with appropriate design or treatment of glass panes. Before proceeding, however, it is useful to draw a contrast between genuinely *ecocentric* design – which incorporates the needs and interests of non-human species and ecosystems – and *biophilic* design. In its origins, biophilic design was an anthropocentric movement that focused on creating built environments that appeal to *humans'* attraction to nature for the sake of *human* health and well-being. Natural light, greenery,

and views of nature are all fundamental to biophilic design (e.g. Kellert and Calabrese, 2015). A stereotypical ‘biophilic’ building is likely to feature large glass windows, indoor plants, and views into exterior gardens. While it might be appealing to human sensibilities, such design can create death traps for birds.

Birds cannot see transparent glass. In that respect alone, they are not so different from us. (Don’t we all know someone who has walked straight into a glass door or wall at some point?) Unlike us, however, birds do not learn where to expect glass by growing up in buildings in which glass windows are standard architectural features. Depending on lighting conditions and the properties of the glass, a window can appear either transparent or reflective from the outside. Under transparency conditions, birds perceive glass panes simply as open space through which they can fly to reach whatever they see on the other side. Under reflectivity conditions, birds perceive the scene reflected on glass – leaves and branches of nearby trees, for example – as habitat they can fly into. In either case, untreated glass is deadly, and all the more when surrounded by attractive greenery (e.g. Rössler *et al.*, 2023).

If we are truly ‘biophilic’, it seems the least we can do is to protect other creatures from painful premature death. Fortunately, urban planners like Timothy Beatley have been instrumental in shifting the meaning of ‘biophilic’ to a less human-centric perspective. The Biophilic City Network, which he founded, promotes the “ethical responsibility that cities have to conserve global nature as shared habitat for non-human life and people”. Beatley is also the author of *The Bird-Friendly City* (2020), in which he specifically encourages planners to try “to put ourselves in the position of birds” and ask “What are the dangers, and what are the obstacles to flight and movement? Where are the stopover points, where is the habitat, where are the places of respite and nourishment [...]?” (p. 181).

Of course, a more holistic *ecocentric* perspective consists of more than birds. Certainly, however, one aspect of *ecocentric* design is to recognize that human perception is not the only vantage point from which to view a shared planet. In the case of bird-safe glass, the question we must ask is, “How can we get birds to recognize glass panes as obstacles?” We don’t know how to give them a crash course (no pun intended) on human architecture, but we *do* have sufficient understanding of how birds see and react to obstacles. The general strategy, therefore, is to mark glass so that birds will interpret it as an impermeable obstacle.

Extensive testing has shown that most birds will not attempt to fly between vertical barriers spaced closer than four inches (10 cm) or horizontal barriers spaced closer than two inches (5 cm). The deterrent effect can be achieved by marking the exterior of glass with vertical or horizontal stripes, a matrix of dots, or any other pattern that follows the “2×4 rule” (Klem, 2019). In addition to the spacing, it is crucial that stripes, dots, or other pattern elements are large enough to be discerned by a bird’s eye, at a great enough distance to avert their flight trajectory in time to avoid a collision. Testing shows that horizontal stripes should be at least 3 mm wide, vertical stripes at least 5 mm wide, and

dots at least 9 mm in diameter, and that high contrast is more important than any particular colour (Rössler *et al.*, 2023). When such solutions are implemented, numerous avian lives are saved. In 2023, Chicago's McCormick Place gained international notoriety when more than 1,000 birds were killed in a single night during the peak of autumn migration. This mass mortality event was a call to action: building managers were subsequently able to reduce collisions by 95 per cent by retrofitting its windows with dot-patterned film (Cosier, 2024).

We might think of bird-friendly design as an extension of two traditionally anthropocentric concerns: safety and accessibility. When developers and politicians balk at bird-safe legislation, the overriding concern is almost invariably cost. But consider other safety codes that architects and builders must follow, such as those intended to prevent structural collapse or the spread of fires. These are not optional; they are legally mandatory *because they save lives*, and any architect or engineer who willfully disregards them to cut costs would rightfully lose their license. Likewise, most countries have laws mandating that businesses are accessible to persons with disabilities. The desire to save money provides no excuse for a building owner to refuse to provide a ramp for wheelchair users, for example.

The inclusive design movement decentres norms like (for example) able-bodied persons as standards for design. *Ecocentric* design should extend the spirit of inclusive design even further to decentre the norm of the *human* user. We must consider how non-human species could be affected by anything that we design and build. Birds are only one part of the more-than-human world, of course, but I submit that requirements for bird-safe glass could provide one first step in the direction of ecocentric standards for architecture and urban planning, and one easily within our reach.

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Insects in an urban park in Peckham, London (series) Penny Metal

From the artist: “Surveying and photographing insects in Warwick Gardens in Peckham reveals the remarkable biodiversity that can thrive in an urban park. Despite surrounding streets and housing, a mix of habitats – grassland, hedgerows, and mature trees – supports a wide range of insect life. These species show how urban green spaces act as vital refuges, sustaining pollination and other key ecological processes even in densely built environments.”

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Dark-edged bee fly (*Bombylius major*)

From the artist: “The dark-edged bee fly is often mistaken for a bee due to its dense hair and similar body shape. This resemblance is a classic example of Batesian mimicry, where a harmless species gains protection by imitating a more defensive one. One of its defining features is a long, rigid proboscis, used to feed on nectar while hovering in front of flowers. Although this hovering flight is energetically demanding, it allows precise access to nectar sources that are out of reach for many other insects. Females lay eggs by ‘twerking’ her eggs near the entrance to mining bee nests. After hatching, the larvae crawl into the nest and develop as parasitoids, consuming both the bee larvae and stored provisions. As with all flies it undergoes complete metamorphosis – egg, larva, pupa, and adult – with development closely tied to the seasonal activity of its host bees and flowering plants. The dark-edged bee fly exemplifies the intersection of mimicry, specialised feeding, and parasitic life strategies in a single insect.”



Acorn weevil (Curculio glandium)

From the artist: “Acorn weevils are small beetles distinguished by their long, curved snouts, which they use to drill into developing acorns still attached to oak trees. The female deposits her eggs inside, turning the acorn into both nursery and food supply. As the larvae grow, they consume the interior of the acorn, hollowing it out from within. By early autumn, mature larvae cut a neat exit hole, drop to the ground, and burrow into the soil to continue development. Although the process destroys individual acorns, it does not harm the oak tree.

Instead, these beetles form a natural part of woodland ecosystems, helping regulate seed populations while also supporting other wildlife.”



Shield bug hunting wasp (*Astata boops*)

From the artist: "The female shield bug hunting wasp is a precise and methodical predator. She targets shield bugs, typically softer-bodied nymphs, by tracking them through vegetation before delivering a paralysing sting. Though immobilised, the prey remains alive as she carries or drags it back to her carefully constructed underground burrow. Within a sealed chamber, she lays a single egg on the paralysed insect. The living prey becomes a fresh food source for the developing larva, which consumes it gradually after hatching. Once fully grown, the young wasp completes its development underground and emerges as an adult the following year."



Blue mason bee (male; *Osmia caerulescens*)

From the artist: “The male blue mason bee is striking in appearance, covered in a warm golden coat that shines in sunlight. In contrast, the female is far more subdued, with a darker, blue-tinged colouring – an example of pronounced sexual dimorphism. Males spend much of their time actively searching for mates among flowers and sunlit patches, their colouring blending with dry grasses and petals. In doing so, they also contribute to pollination as they move between blooms. Females, meanwhile, focus on gathering pollen and provisioning nests, transferring pollen between flowers as they forage and playing a central role in plant reproduction. Their less conspicuous colouring helps them remain discreet while working.”



Carrot wasp (*Gasteruption erythrostomum*)

From the artist: “The carrot wasp is a slender, unusual-looking species with a long, narrow body and a distinctive elongated ‘neck’. Females possess an exceptionally long ovipositor, used not for defence but for laying eggs. The wasp specialises in locating the nests of solitary bees, particularly scissor bees. After finding a suitable nest hidden in wood or crevices, the female inserts her ovipositor to lay an egg inside. The emerging larva feeds on the bee larva and its stored food, making the wasp both a parasitoid and a kleptoparasite. Their presence is often a sign of a healthy ecosystem, indicating a strong population of solitary bees and flowering plants. Notably, this species was only recorded in Britain as recently as 2023.”



Mottled shield bug (*Rhaphigaster nebulosa*)

From the artist: “The mottled shield bug is often overlooked at first glance, but closer inspection reveals a quiet, intricate beauty. Its body carries a rich, mottled pattern of browns, greys, and soft creams, broken into irregular speckles that mimic the textures of bark and dried leaves. In the right light they shimmer with bronze and pink highlights. Like all true bugs, it develops through incomplete metamorphosis, progressing gradually from egg to adult without a pupal stage. Eggs hatch into nymphs, which resemble small, developing versions of adults but lack full wings and mature colouring. As they grow, the nymphs moult several times, shedding their outer skin at each stage, or ‘instar’. With every moult, their body shape, colouration, and wing development become more refined. Eventually, they reach adulthood, gaining full mobility and the ability to reproduce. Unlike insects that undergo complete transformation, this gradual process allows them to remain active and feeding throughout their development.”

What's accessibility got to do with ecocentrism?

Hannah Battersby

Hannah is a postdoctoral researcher within the Institute of Philosophy at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research is in environmental ethics, with a focus on relational environmental values and intersectional, non-anthropocentric justice.

Drawing on disability studies, animal studies and ecocentric environmental ethics, this article argues that built and managed environments are organized around a narrow anthropocentric ideal of embodiment – the able-bodied, mobile, independent and economically productive human individual. Such environments thus tend to marginalize both disabled humans and nonhuman beings, albeit differently, through spatial arrangements that privilege certain forms of embodiment while excluding or devaluing others. These ableist and speciesist exclusions are traced to a common set of assumptions about value, normality and belonging embedded within social systems. Ecocentrism challenges these assumptions by affirming the intrinsic value of life's diversity and recognizing the interdependence of nonhuman communities. From this perspective, accessibility emerges not as a purely human technological concern, but as a multispecies ethical concern centred on human–nonhuman co-dwelling compatible with ecological limits. Ecocentric approaches to planning, architecture and design should be guided by principles of ecologically constrained multispecies co-dwelling, in which diverse forms of life are recognized as legitimate co-inhabitants of shared environments.

Keywords: values

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My lived experience as a variably disabled person navigating built and managed environments has made visible something often unnoticed by those whose bodies align with dominant spatial norms. Contemporary built environments are designed for a privileged human archetype. Streets, buildings, recreational areas and other shared, curated and managed spaces typically presuppose an able-bodied, mobile, economically productive and independent subject. For those such as myself whose bodies diverge from this model, built environments become landscapes of barriers and exclusions, requiring continuous negotiation of obstacles. These obstacles comprise not

only physical barriers, but also social meanings and values. Disability scholars have long argued that accessibility is therefore not simply a technical matter of ramps and lifts, but a question of how social life is organized – that is, which bodies are anticipated, enabled or marginalized. Managed and built environments materialize these normative assumptions and judgements through architecture, planning and design; producing forms of spatial injustice, which are then realized through construction practices that are ecologically hostile.

In this article, I argue that considering (in)accessibility reveals something further: the spatial norms that marginalize disabled people are not isolated phenomena, but expressions of a broader anthropocentric paradigm that structures relations between humans, nonhuman beings and the environments they share. Anthropocentrism sustains patterns of domination that underpin ableism, speciesism and environmental degradation. Ecocentrism challenges these logics by affirming the intrinsic value of life in its diversity (Washington *et al.*, 2017; Piccolo *et al.*, 2018). If this commitment is taken seriously, the spatial organization of built environments cannot remain anthropocentric, and accessibility therefore emerges as a central concern of ecocentric justice. Crucially, ecocentric accessibility cannot entail unrestricted human presence and inclusion, but instead requires ecologically constrained forms of multi-species, and *multi-body*, co-dwelling.

Overlapping critiques and a common culprit

Built environments are typically organized around what Garland-Thompson (1997) calls the *normate body*: able-bodied, mobile, economically productive and independent. When planning assumes such a body, those who diverge from it encounter disabling design (Hall and Imrie, 1999). Exclusion thus arises not merely from impairment but from the spatial organization of environments themselves – an organization that privileges certain bodies while marginalizing others. Furthermore, the embodiment privileged by built and managed environments is a narrow archetype of *human* embodiment, with belonging structured through interlaced norms of both ability and species. In one of the parallels of “(de)valuation” that “cross species” (Santinele Martino and Lindsay, 2020) noted by scholars in critical animal studies, built and managed environments often render both disabled humans and nonhuman life as deviations from the expected spatial order, and in turn, as forms of life to be managed, controlled or excluded rather than legitimate (default) co-inhabitants of shared environments.¹

Scholars from various disciplines have criticized the fact that animals and their needs do not tend to be considered in the planning, design and development of built environments, and are rarely treated as legitimate co-dwellers of managed and/or built space. Where they are considered, they tend to be factored into planning and design decisions either as resources or as obstacles to be managed – as unwanted and unwelcome ‘intruders’ (Dobraszczyk, 2023; Hadidian, 2015). Architectural research has historically focused on *preventing* the presence of nonhuman animals, not engendering multispecies co-dwelling.

Moreover, the impacts of *constructing* the built environment are also negative for nonhumans and for nonhuman nature overall, owing to the consequent ecological harms. Relevantly, scholars of critical animal and disability studies have pointed out that the ‘myth’ of the individual lauded in modern industrialized societies not only contributes to the social construction of disability, it concurrently fosters the exploitation of nature, and, in turn, environmental degradation (Ray and Sibara, 2017). Consider that construction is deeply implicated in biodiversity loss, climate change and massive ecological disruption. The present political economy of building centred around continual growth and expansion is ecologically unsustainable – this applies even to ‘green growth’ initiatives – and poses an existential threat to our (and presumably other) species, as Imrie (2022) discusses. More fundamentally, the *status quo* regarding construction of the built environment assumes an ‘instrumentalist rationality’ regarding the environment; it is predicated on the idea that the ecological world is “a means to an end rather than an end in itself” (Imrie, 2022: 191–2).

Scholars working at the intersections of architecture, urban planning and various multispecies studies have begun to challenge prevailing anthropocentric logics within design approaches. Research on multispecies design has explored how built environments might be conceived as shared habitats rather than exclusively human domains (Grobman *et al.*, 2023). These discussions echo elements of disability critiques regarding the conventional approach to design and planning insofar as the presumption of a normate *human* subject, for whom sovereignty over space is assumed, is problematized. Decisions about access are informed by dominant human biases and prejudices under an anthropocentric view (Taylor, 2017). Where the disability and multispecies criticisms converge concerns the common culprit with regards to ableist and speciesist spatial injustices: the archetypal ‘normal’ user of space that conforms to a narrow form of embodiment dictated by anthropocentric, as well as capitalist and neoliberal, ideology (Nocella *et al.*, 2019). As Taylor points out, a common ranking of capacities that has long served to marginalize disabled humans also shapes how nonhuman animals are evaluated and treated under prevailing anthropocentric conditions. Taylor highlights that the same hierarchy of capacities underpinning ableism also structures speciesism. Speciesism, in this sense, is closely imbricated with ableism (Taylor, 2017: 57).

Ecocentrism and the intrinsic value of life's diversity

The denial and devaluation of diversity, stemming from oppressive anthropocentric ideals, assumptions and value hierarchies, incurs multiple, intersecting, spatial injustices that are borne out through the built environment. The question is now how we might ethically respond to this. At the heart of these spatial injustices is a disregard for life's diversity and the multiplicity of embodiments that life can take – and denial of their value and legitimacy. Ecocentrism serves as a corrective because it rejects anthropocentrism and affirms the intrinsic value of all life, including in the natural diversity of organisms (Rolston, 1988; Callicott, 1989; Piccolo *et al.*, 2018).

If life and its diversity is considered to possess intrinsic value, then there are consequences for the construction, organization and management of shared space. Within an ecocentric design philosophy, the organization of space around anthropocentric norms that deny diversity and discriminate by privileging a narrow form of embodiment – the rational, independent, able-bodied, human archetype – is no longer tenable. Planning and design must instead consider the presence and value of multiple forms of life with all their diverse forms of embodiment and modes of being; whose flourishing is valid, and dependent on mutual, inclusive and sustainable social-ecological arrangements. The environment and its ecological systems must also be considered in the design and configuration of shared, managed environments.

Accessibility and ecocentrism come into contact here because ecocentrism rejects the anthropocentric paradigm which structures present practices of design, planning, and construction (Imrie, 2022). This paradigm has historically shaped urbanization and development of the built environment based on domination of a certain body over all others, and of this body over ecological space itself – a patterned relational dynamic connected to various forms of ableism and disablement affecting both humans and nonhuman nature (Wolbring 2013). An ecocentric perspective reframes this dynamic by shifting the locus of value to life, seeing intrinsic value in the diversity of life, and recognizing the fundamental interdependency of planetary life.

Here we can draw parallels between disability studies and ecocentrism insofar as both underscore the reality of human dependency and of global, ecological interdependency; dispelling the anthropocentric myth of the independent individual insulated from vulnerability (Washington, 2013; Nocella and George, 2017). The symmetry between these positions in this regard was expressed by Leipoldt, who proposed that “the disability perspective of inter-dependence is a practical guide from the margins to making new choices that may lead to a just and sustainable world – one that reduces the distance between each other and our environment” (2006: 21). If ecocentrism affirms the intrinsic value of life and life’s diversity, then the spatial organization of environments must reflect that value.

Importantly, ecocentric accessibility does not entail the unrestricted presence and inclusion of humans in all spaces: human presence, however inclusive and diverse, can negatively affect nonhuman life and ecological systems at both proximal and distal scales. Ecocentrism’s commitment to the intrinsic value of life in all its diversity, therefore, necessitates that accessibility within an ecocentric framework must be understood as negotiated and ecologically constrained co-presence rather than universal human entitlement to all spaces.

Ecocentrism, accessibility and design

From an ecocentric perspective, built and managed environments should be conceived from the outset as shared habitats in which diverse human and nonhuman beings have a legitimate place. Planning and architectural design must anticipate plural embodiment, appreciate ecological relationships,

acknowledge dependency and foreground the intrinsic value of life in all its embodiments. Within this remedial perspective, accessibility ceases to be an afterthought, it is built into design from the outset. The default presumption is a rich multiplicity of occupants and co-dwellers.

Importantly, on an ecocentric outlook, accessibility cannot be pursued through ecologically destructive construction. This would undermine the spatial injustice that diversity-guided design seeks to achieve. If accessibility is realized through practices that undermine biodiversity and climatic stability, the basic conditions of shared inhabitation are eroded. An ecocentric paradigm therefore binds accessibility to ecological health and sustainability – a joining of values that has some precedent in the ‘Universal Design’ approach (Gossett *et al.*, 2009). Ecologically constrained co-dwelling means that accessibility must be negotiated in the context of ecological limits and the needs of nonhuman life. In some contexts, restricting human presence wholesale may itself be ecologically necessary in order to sustain habitats, species or ecological processes.

An ecocentric paradigm – alive to accessibility understood in intersectional and multispecies terms – would not simply entail that we add accessibility features to existing anthropocentric configurations or practices. It would reorganize priorities and processes. Rather than maximizing circulation, productivity, surveillance and enclosure (from the environment, its entities and rhythms) an ecocentric paradigm would prioritize ecological permeability, multispecies co-existence, sensory diversity, low-impact construction and forms of inhabitation compatible with ecological continuity. Movement flows of multiple forms of embodiment would be presupposed, with standard infrastructural configurations arranged around the normate (able-bodied, human) body being supplanted by arrangements that anticipate multi-body and multi-species presence.

A simple contrast case helps illustrate the difference that an ecocentric paradigm would make. Consider a public library or civic building designed according to conventional design norms that presuppose the normate body: you will see steps at entrances, hard surfaces that amplify noise, bright lighting, large sealed glass façades and climate-controlled interiors that isolate the building from surrounding ecological processes. Accessibility is typically addressed retrospectively through ramps, lifts and designated seating areas. An ecocentric design approach would begin from a different premise – that the building is a site for shared inhabitation among diverse human and nonhuman forms of life. Step-free entrances, quiet rooms, sensory-considerate lighting, ample resting spots, lifts and ramps as defaults (not subsequent additions), would anticipate diverse human embodiments from the outset rather than retrofitting accommodation. At the same time, the building itself would remain ecologically permeable: incorporating nesting spaces, green façades, permeable surfaces and materials chosen for low ecological impact. Outdoor areas would support pollinators and native vegetation, while lighting and glass design would minimize harm to nocturnal species and migrating birds. Rather than isolating human activity from the surrounding environment, the building

would be designed as part of a living ecological fabric. Furthermore, the materials and construction practices would be as environmentally sustainable and non-exploitative as possible. Environmentally consumptive technologies such as air conditioning would be sparingly used, with human comfort being one priority amongst many to be continuously negotiated.

Such a design approach would not eliminate conflict or perfectly satisfy every need, but it would embody a different organizing foundation. Namely, that diverse, multiply embodied forms of life are all legitimate co-inhabitants of shared (built and managed) environments whose needs must be considered from the outset rather than treated as afterthoughts or obstacles, *in tandem with* broader ecological needs and limits. In rejecting the anthropocentric logics, values and assumptions implicated in multiple intersecting spatial injustices – where ableism and speciesism are tangled – the ecocentric perspective would steer us towards a design philosophy that does not build in exclusions from the outset, thus making spatial injustices inevitable, but instead fosters human humility, multispecies inclusivity and diversity, and ecological restraint at each stage of the process.

Ecocentrism implies a different way of arranging built and managed environments, one grounded not in human mastery over space but in ecological interdependence, plural embodiment and negotiated multispecies co-dwelling. Accessibility, interpreted in an intersectional and multispecies manner, therefore emerges not as an optional addition to ecocentric ethics but as one of its core normative implications. To take the intrinsic value of life's diversity seriously is, in part, to take accessibility seriously; and this must be done in a way that foregrounds ecological limits and human humility.

Note

- 1 As a disabled person I feel the need to express caution at drawing overly simplistic symmetries between different forms of exclusion and oppression – particularly where disability and animality are connected, given the damaging historical associations between disabled people and animals that disability activists have worked to deconstruct (Taylor, 2017). With this caveat in mind, this paper nonetheless argues that both disabled people and animals endure spatial injustices and structural exclusions founded in a common anthropocentric cluster of norms, values and expectations.

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Ecologies of oppression: Fraying the fabric of justice

Don Christoff

Don is an environmental scholar whose work explores relational justice, ecological ethics and multispecies governance.

As ecological and social crises deepen, the concept of justice demands deeper reflection. This article argues that justice is not a human-made institution or moral ideal but an ontological condition: the integrity of relationships that sustain existence. When these relationships are systematically and deliberately broken, oppression emerges, affecting not just humans but the entire web of life on Earth. Three case studies drawn from the US – the Flint water crisis, the resistance at Standing Rock, and the fragmentation of transboundary corridors in the Northern Rockies – illustrate how governance, resource extraction and neglect weaken relational harmony. Seeing justice as the natural order of relationships shifts ethical responsibility: our role is not to create justice but to recognize and honour it, living as one thread in the larger fabric of existence.

Keywords: ecological ethics

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Scholarship in environmental justice has long demonstrated how marginalized human communities disproportionately bear the burden of pollution, toxic substances and ecological damage (e.g. Bullard, 1990). Frameworks such as climate justice, intergenerational justice, procedural justice and epistemic justice, offer additional essential insights to this expanding discussion. Critical Environmental Justice studies further broaden the perspective to include capitalism, colonialism and global inequality (Pellow, 2018), while intersectionality reveals how various oppressions intersect to create layered inequalities that increase vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomas, 2022).

Despite all these advances, environmental justice frameworks tend to be strongly anthropocentric, viewing other-than-human beings and the ecosystems that support life as ‘background conditions’ or as ‘resources’ rather than as subjects of justice. Environmental justice, however, cannot remain centred on human concerns. Systems of domination, racism, sexism, classism, colonialism and speciesism not only overlap within human communities but also circulate ecologically – harming humans, other-than-humans and the Earth itself.

An ecocentric framework for environmental justice requires a reconceptualization of justice. This paper argues that justice is not a human-made institution or moral ideal but rather an *ontological condition*: the integrity of relationships that sustain existence. Oppression thus disrupts the relational fabric that supports all life; in other words, injustice should be seen as an ecological rupture rather than a breach of moral or legal obligations. Justice, from this perspective, is not a commodity to be granted or revoked, but a relational state of being that can only be respected or violated.

Conceptual foundations

While this argument emerges from a critique of contemporary anthropocentric justice frameworks, the idea that justice is woven into the living fabric of the world is not new. Many Indigenous worldviews, as well as traditions such as Daoism and Stoicism, have long understood relational balance as foundational to existence. This article builds on that lineage while addressing the internal contradictions within contemporary justice discourses.

As noted above, environmental justice and Critical Environmental Justice frameworks include accounts of the interrelations between systemic inequalities, state authority and environmental harm. However, these frameworks often view ecosystems as merely the setting for injustice rather than as active participants. The concept of *multispecies justice* goes further by broadening ethical and political concerns beyond humans (e.g. Chao *et al.*, 2022). Yet, it still frequently depends on a rights-based language that continues to prioritize humans as the ultimate judges of value and justice. The limitations common to these traditions reveal a deeper conceptual issue: their reliance on a juridical ontology that views justice as a social construct that can be distributed, legislated or enforced.

An alternative approach understands justice as originating not from human institutions and socially constructed norms, but from the integrity of relationships in which beings – human and other-than-human – exist in reciprocity within the fabric of life. When that integrity breaks down, oppression manifests as both ecological and moral rupture. This approach builds on Deborah Bird Rose's work on multispecies knots of ethical connection (Rose, 2011) and Kyle Powys Whyte's concept of relational repair (Whyte, 2017). Rose emphasizes that ethics cannot be separated from the living systems that support existence, while Whyte argues that justice involves renewing relationships damaged by colonial and extractive systems. Together, they frame justice as a process of sustaining continuity across differences rather than restoring balance through human control.

From this perspective, oppression is not simply the misallocation of resources or power. Rather, it is the collapse of relationships – the tearing of relational integrity within what Celermajer and colleagues (2024) describe as ecological and ethical interdependence, sustained through relationships rather than imposed by institutions. This reconceptualization provides an interpretive lens for examining how systems of racial, colonial, gendered, economic and species-based domination manifest ecologically as disruptions in relational

integrity. In this view, the measure of justice is not institutional recognition but relational vitality: the capacity of communities and ecosystems to sustain reciprocal, life-supporting relations.

Traditional frameworks rely on legal, economic or policy indicators to measure fairness or harm, often reducing justice to rights, distribution or compliance (Marshall, 2019). In contrast, a relational approach sees justice as expressed through the integrity of relationships between humans, other-than-humans and the systems that support them. Ecological well-being and social reciprocity reflect moral relationships: when relationships are respected, systems thrive; when they are violated, systems collapse (Chao *et al.*, 2022). These visible states provide insight into whether the moral fabric of existence – the weave of life itself – is being upheld or torn apart.

Where justice is honoured, we thus see thriving species populations, intact habitats, clean air and water, soil regeneration, equitable community–ecosystem relationships and practices of reciprocity between humans and other-than-humans. In contrast, where justice is violated, we see species decline, ecological contamination, habitat fragmentation, public health crises, extractive practices and social systems that prioritize profit over planetary vitality.

These manifestations are not quantitative indicators but qualitative reflections that show how moral and ecological coherence either persists or collapses across scales (Rose, 2011). Observing justice through these conditions does not impose value externally but recognizes the state of relation as the evidence itself (Whyte, 2017). Seen this way, using an interpretive lens does not turn philosophy into metrics; it restores visibility to the moral dimensions of ecological life.

The following case studies from the US illustrate how these conditions appear across different contexts, revealing how relational justice can be honoured or violated through the interactions of humans, other-than-humans and ecological systems.

Case study 1: Flint, Michigan – water as witness

The Flint water crisis illustrates how oppression impacts both human and ecological systems, damaging the connections that sustain life. In 2014, state officials changed Flint's water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River, a cheaper but highly corrosive option. Old infrastructure leached lead into the city's drinking water, exposing thousands of residents, mainly Black and low-income communities, to toxic contamination (Hanna-Attisha, 2018). But the harm extended beyond the tap. The river itself, already affected by decades of industrial discharge, absorbed more corrosion and pollution. Fish, invertebrates and microbial life declined, and riparian habitats withered (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, 2016). The Flint River, long regarded as disposable, became both a symbol and a victim of injustice.

Viewed relationally, the crisis was not simply a policy failure; rather, the policy failure was the result of a deeper injustice. The same moral logic that devalues Black communities also devalues the river's life, treating some bodies – human or otherwise – as expendable in the pursuit of economic efficiency (Pulido, 2016).

Relational justice here means more than just compensation or technical fixes. It requires reestablishing the web of reciprocity among residents, governance and the river, recognizing the river as a participant in the community's recovery. While lead levels may have decreased, trust, ecological health and moral integrity remain broken. Healing involves acknowledging that oppression's effects go beyond humans, and that justice, to be complete, must include the waters and beings that sustain life (Bullard, 1990).

Case study 2: Standing Rock, North Dakota – water as relative

The Dakota Access Pipeline transports oil more than 1,800 kilometres from the Bakken formation in North Dakota to the oil terminal at Patoka, Illinois. Protests against the pipeline's construction began in 2016, organized by Native American communities around Standing Rock. Thousands of water protectors gathered in nonviolent resistance, engaging in ceremonies and community life rooted in reciprocity with the river and Earth (Estes, 2019). The proposed pipeline, running beneath the Missouri River just north of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, threatened the tribe's primary water source and sacred lands. For the Oceti Sakowin, water is not a resource but a living relative – *Mni Wiconi* ("Water is Life"). When the US Army Corps of Engineers approved construction without full tribal consultation, it extended a long history of colonial extraction that treats both land and Indigenous bodies as disposable (Whyte, 2017).

From a relational perspective, the pipeline symbolized more than environmental risk: it embodied a renewed act of dispossession. The same systems that disconnected Indigenous peoples from their lands sought again to carve the land itself for profit. The encampments at Standing Rock turned that wound into a space of relational renewal. Thousands gathered in nonviolent resistance, practicing ceremonies and community life grounded in reciprocity (Estes, 2019). In doing so, they reframed protest as ceremony, asserting that protecting water means protecting kinship itself.

This movement demonstrates both violation and resilience. The state's militarized response highlights the persistence of colonial violence. However, the camps also demonstrated an alternative: justice as a lived relationship, expressed through collective care for land and life. Even after the pipeline's completion, the Standing Rock movement remains a moral milestone, asserting that justice is not achieved through ownership or control, but through protecting the relationships that make existence possible.

Case study 3: Northern Rockies – boundaries of being

Across the Northern Rockies in the United States and Canada, habitat fragmentation and increasing climate pressures illustrate how other-than-human species experience oppression through the gradual loss of their connections. Species like grizzly bears, bull trout, woodland caribou and many others depend on seasonal migrations that once linked ecosystems from Yellowstone to the Yukon. Today, highways, resource extraction and urban

development cut through these migration routes, leaving populations isolated and vulnerable. This form of violence is structural rather than abrupt, representing a quiet unraveling of the ecological fabric that once supported these beings in connection.

For species whose survival depends on movement, barriers become a form of captivity. Each lost corridor is not just a geographic boundary but a moral one, revealing where human governance has prioritized convenience over coexistence. Differences in conservation policies and land use priorities across borders intensify these divides: while one jurisdiction invests in connectivity, another approves new mines or roads. The result is a landscape of partial protections that fails to recognize the continuous flow of life across boundaries.

Across this region, fragmented ecological relations show how oppression spreads ecologically, through broken habitats, disrupted migrations and policy silences that deny the right to thrive. Justice, in this context, requires more than species recovery targets or cross-border agreements. It calls for governance that recognizes interdependence as the foundation of survival, ensuring that the freedom of movement, nourishment and reproduction are respected across political and ecological boundaries.

Implications

The patterns revealed through these cases point to something deeper than political or social imbalance. What unravels in each example is not only a set of human institutions or ecological functions but the foundations of existence itself. The breakdown of relationships between species, communities and Earth systems exposes the ground on which all justice relies. To understand oppression, we must look beneath its symptoms to the fabric it tears apart.

Seen through this lens, justice cannot be reduced to legal rights or policy reform. It is an ethical condition that precedes recognition, a state of relational cohesion that sustains life. When those relationships are broken through extraction, exploitation or neglect, the damage extends beyond the physical world into the moral fabric of being. Oppression, therefore, must be understood as a systemic disruption of life's ability to sustain itself.

As Thomas (2022) observes, “[t]he climate crisis is a human rights crisis”. Her insight emphasizes how environmental destruction and social injustice are inseparable. However, these crises are not merely physical or political; they are also moral. From a relational perspective, the climate crisis represents a rupture in the foundation that supports life. Exploiting the Earth is a violation of the justice that underpins existence itself. Therefore, justice is not only a social requirement but also a moral duty: the responsibility to respect and restore the relationships that enable life to endure.

This perspective resonates with the call of Bullard (1990) for justice as the protection of community well-being and with the argument of Pellow (2018) that structural systems commodify life itself. It broadens their insights by situating those systems within the larger ecological fabric they disrupt. When societies dominate the Earth, they reproduce the same hierarchies – racial, colonial, economic – that divide people from one another. The domination

of nature and the domination of peoples are not separate injustices but expressions of the same broken system relationship.

Recognizing this interdependence redefines environmental justice as a planetary ethic. It urges acknowledging mutual belonging and awakening to the truth that justice is owed not only to humans but to all beings in the living world. Harming one thread of existence weakens the entire fabric. Our goal is not to impose new systems of control but to practice reverence, reciprocity and care for the conditions that sustain life. This is the meaning of justice: not just an aspiration, but the ongoing foundation of relational harmony within reality itself.

Justice is not an ideal we construct but the condition that allows life to cohere. It is the living integrity that binds being to being, world to world. To live justly is not to legislate fairness but to participate in the relationships that support existence. Oppression occurs when relationships are intentionally broken and some lives are deemed disposable. It is a denial of kinship with the living world, a wound in the fabric of existence itself. Whether in Flint, Standing Rock, or the Northern Rockies, the pattern remains the same: domination disrupts reciprocity, and the web that holds life together begins to fray and unravel.

As Celermajor (2021) reminds us, once we grasp the impossibility of the isolated individual, the idea that only some lives deserve protection collapses. Justice is not something we grant but something we discover by recognizing our inseparability from the world that sustains us. Honouring this truth is to participate in relationships that sustain life without trying to control them. Justice is renewed whenever we approach the living world with care, humility and respect.

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Opening the city: Reorienting the built environment towards exposure, vulnerability and presence

Taylor Hood

Taylor is a Scottish naturalist and writer who holds degrees in literature and wildlife ecology. His research advocates for ruptures in the normal functioning of our self-centred society, seeking to reopen a world that has become insulated against non-human claims. He is an Associate Editor of *The Ecological Citizen*.

This article examines how the contemporary built environment diminishes the possibility of presence by minimizing exposure and vulnerability. By drawing on the work of Byung-Chul Han and Patrick Curry, the paper provides an interpretative account of how cities are constructed to enclose the human figure in a world that is increasingly separate from the more-than-human realm, and then clarifies how urban change itself is to be understood once enclosure is recognized as an imperative of the built environment. It argues that many well-intentioned efforts to improve cities ecologically can produce real alterations while leaving intact the deeper organization through which everyday experience is structured. Rather than proposing policy measures or design solutions, the paper offers a way of reading urban change that attends to the distinction between effects that human-centred cities can absorb and conditions that would have to endure as an ordinary part of their texture.

Keywords: ecological living; environmental humanities; societal change; values; visions

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To live ecologically is to allow oneself to be touched – even disrupted – by the many nonhuman agencies that surround us. Yet in our major towns and cities, we rarely feel their influence. This makes urban centres important sites for investigating how contact with the more-than-human world is both restricted and mediated.

The city as enclosure

Modern cities organize urban life through their mass, surfaces, organization of movement and proliferation of signals. Crucially, these aspects cannot be

cleanly distinguished; together, they enclose human life in ways that separate it from the more-than-human world. The result is a felt sense of being sealed off from the wild and beautiful Earth, even where nature is present.

Enclosure is easiest to recognize in the physical order of major urban conurbations. In such places, tall, monolithic buildings predominate, blocking views of the sky and severing continuity with the surrounding land. Repeated across cities, their scale and uniformity render urban form progressively standardized. With respect to these buildings' surfaces, glass and polished metal reflect traffic, signage and human activity back upon itself, enclosing perception within a self-referential urban field. At ground level, expansive concrete pavements and roads harden and flatten the city. Streets and crossings form a repeating grid that encourages endless movement, funnelling bodies and vehicles along set lines, while ranks of streetlights prolong this activity into the night – dimming the stars above. And within this heavily engineered landscape, space for nonhuman beings is sharply restricted. Where nonhuman life is not eliminated within the enclosure, it is often treated as a managed remainder and confined to bounded pockets, such as parks, roadside plantings, the gaps and edges of the city.

These spatial and material arrangements cannot be understood adequately as neutral solutions to urban problems. Rather, they reflect a way of regimenting the city – and the world it sits within – around the coordination of human goals. Recent ecological critiques describe this situation as one of planetary humanization, whereby buildings, transport infrastructures, industrial and material systems, and communication networks increasingly dominate the Earth's surface, outweighing nonhuman biomass and reconfiguring landscapes at every scale (Gray and Crist, 2024). Enclosure, from this perspective, does not depend on cities being spatially compact or physically contained, since urban sprawl can intensify enclosure insofar as expansion extends these same patterns of domination outward, subordinating nonhuman life to human coordination. Curry (2019) describes this mode of ordering as Apollonian hyper-control, a bid for detached, calculative mastery. In Curry's account, which develops from that of Mumford (1967), such hyper-control is structurally embedded in the Megamachine – the vast anti-ecological system that marshals labour, technology and governance towards efficiency. The engine of capital drives standardization and exploitation; technoscience supplies the technical means; and the state consolidates control through regulation and planning. I suggest that these interlocking arms do not operate automatically but rely upon constant, often unseen maintenance to sustain the system's apparent stability.

The coordination and resulting structural enclosure just described is most pronounced in Global North centres such as London or New York, which most closely approximate an aspirational form of urbanism. Many cities in the Global South, such as Lagos and New Delhi, fail to instantiate the above dynamics in the same systematic way, often marked by uneven development and infrastructural strain although others – notably Dubai – pursue and reproduce many of the same spatial and material configurations as those of the North. Yet these

tendencies are not perfectly realized even within the North, since development and coordination are always partial and incomplete. The argument here therefore concerns an organizing orientation, independent of location.

The way cities are organized dictates how they are felt in daily experience. Following Curry (2013), place gives way to space as the sensuous particularity of lived localities is overridden by universalizing abstractions, causing sites to become interchangeable and thin in character. What is lost in this displacement is not merely familiarity, but the qualitative depth through which a place can found meaning and facilitate relation. A place, in this stronger sense, is a situated world not assembled entirely around the self but one in which the human figure remains answerable to something beyond itself. According to Han, processes of globalization in particular intensify this displacement by producing environments marked by a disorienting sameness and sterility, enacting what he calls a “de-siting violence” (2021: 71) that makes dwelling difficult. The term ‘dwelling’ here refers to the capacity to remain with a place over time in ways that allow resistance and interruption to register. When such dwelling is undermined, the likelihood of exposure to otherness recedes. Han’s formulation is decisive: “The *experience of presence* requires *exposure, vulnerability*” (2022: 57). Under the sway of the Megamachine, however, exposure and vulnerability are minimized because they represent obstacles to unimpeded mastery.

At the level of lived perception, the Megamachine’s ordering of urban life is experienced phenomenologically through smoothness and transparency. Within the sphere of aesthetics, Han (2015) takes aim at the elimination of roughness and resistance due to society’s fixation on sleek and polished forms, which is evident both in our buildings and technologies. In broader terms, smoothness describes the drive to accelerate circulation – of capital and communication – by structuring environments so that movement, interpretation and response are anticipated and streamlined. This experiential smoothing is inseparable from an ideal of transparency (Han, 2021; 2022). When pathologized, the ideology of transparency creates the expectation that nothing should remain opaque or withdrawn. What cannot be quickly understood or navigated comes to appear dysfunctional or suspect. Yet ecological connection in particular depends on mystery; paradoxically, it is opacity that makes openness – and connection to what is different – possible. Rather than standing in a causal relation, then, smoothness and transparency operate as complementary logics, since smoothness orchestrates experience so as to minimize interruption, while transparency enforces a demand for immediate availability and access. Jointly, they describe the experiential conditions through which enclosure is normalized.

The smooth – even agreeable – character of our existence, coupled with our claim to access, protects us from opposing forces. Han (2021; 2022) argues that, through neoliberal capitalist society’s insistence on constant affirmation and compulsory self-optimization we have lost touch with negativity, which refers not only to challenging emotions but also to the deeper capacity of something to resist assimilation through the introduction of limits, friction

and otherness. In the context of the contemporary built environment oriented around smoothness and transparency, this capacity is either destroyed or, where elimination is impractical, pre-emptively softened. Disturbance is registered only fleetingly, as an anomaly, rather than allowed to reshape ordinary experience. When negativity is no longer deflected in this way but endured, a break in smoothness becomes felt. Han (2015) gestures towards such moments through the evocative figurative image of the *wound*, but he has not developed it systematically and discusses it, in part, through aesthetic reflection. The wound matters here because it identifies the exposure that follows this break, in which resistance is lived as vulnerability and presence comes forth. “Without a *wound*,” Han writes, “I ultimately hear only the echo of myself. A *wound* is an opening, an *ear for the other*” (2022: 57). In a sealed environment, such moments of attunement may be occasioned by slight encounters: a narrow gap between two towers suddenly revealing the sky, or a bird’s call briefly carrying above the cacophony of traffic. Understood in this way, the wound becomes generative. Rather than a celebration of damage or suffering, it constitutes a breach in the self’s shield and in systemic enclosure, through which the world may reappear.

The wound, I suggest, is part of the enabling ground through which wonder may arise, since it brings forth an initial sense of presence via exposure, without determining how that exposure will be received (for a broader discussion, see Hood, 2025). In its unfolding, the emergence of wonder may feel entangled with this opening or even appear to precede it. As Curry (2019; 2021) insists, wonder – the heart of enchantment – is a spiritual–material experience arising relationally in encounters with an enchanting other, in which the other’s inherent qualities, such as beauty, mystery or agency, are apprehended without reduction to human utility. Enchantment, at its fullest, entails nothing more than “sheer presence” (Curry, 2019: 81). Such a deeply felt sense of presence cannot be generalized, repeated at will or secured in advance, which is precisely why regimes of calculability and control must suppress them. These regimes operate by making the world manageable and predictable, a process of disenchantment in which beings come to appear primarily as resources rather than as agencies to be encountered (Weber, 1946; Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Curry, 2017). By its very nature, then, wonder signifies a meeting with another that cannot be simulated or substituted without being lost.

Within urban spaces, this relational mode is frequently distorted via the management of attention, a more subtle means of enclosure than the sheer material structuring of buildings and grids. In contrast with wonder, Curry (2019) conceptualizes glamour – perpetuated by the Megamachine – as an artificial simulation that functions as a pervasive distraction in modern society. Glamour distorts the natural need for connection by channelling Dionysian unity – the extreme merging in which difference is obliterated – into managed, consumable ends, producing intense experiences that seemingly satisfy longing without enabling genuine ecological relation and risk. The work of glamour is most evident in the saturation of urban spaces by advertisements, which offer a

veneer of openness within a sealed environment, demanding and commanding our attention. More generally, the preponderance of screens, signs, notifications and shifting images in cities produces an overload of information. Han (2022) argues that this perpetual flood of information fails to confer durability, which only arises from sustained dwelling in places and from contact with stable physical things that resist our immediate grasp. In cities, attention is kept in motion, eroding the stillness in which relational rupture might take hold.

As argued above, enclosure in cities is maintained both physically and perceptually. In pursuit of synthesis, it is worth examining a single paradigmatic scene of enclosure. Figure 1 shows a street outside an Apple shopfront, a space of humanization that, being extremely ordered, manifests hyper-control. The wide walkway – devoid of vegetation or soil – signals a fixation on aesthetic smoothness and, more broadly, enacts the city's logic of frictionless exchange. This walkway abuts an enormous glass façade, through which the inside of the shop can be seen under too-bright lights, exhibiting the queue of eager consumers. Here, transparency operates first as a material element, exposing the interior in full view, and second as an idea of access, whereby everything appears available and offered without resistance. Access, however, is directed towards consumer goods rather than things at once more challenging and enriching – the living, autonomous agencies of Earth. Almost in mockery of this state, there is the stylized landscape printed onto the glass itself, paired with the phrase “wonder awaits” beneath the image. This pairing



Figure 1. Signs of enclosure: structured streets, manufactured wonder, absent nature (author's own, 2023).

introduces glamour at the threshold of access, tethering the promise of wonder to consumption and playing up to the human attraction to ecstatic unity, which cannot facilitate true ecological connection.

Indeed, in this manufactured environment, the conditions for meaningful encounter are largely foreclosed. Encounters with nonhuman agencies are likely to be brief and absorbed into the routines of urban life; only when this absorption fails will they register as interruptions – moments that are experienced as a wound. A wound is a breach in which the negativity of resistance becomes felt as exposure, vulnerability and presence. Wonder occurs with the intensification of presence in a positive direction, revealing that even within managed spaces, full relationality persists. Such wild relationships – which depend upon difference and otherness – defy the Megamachine, the disenchanting system through which capital, the state and technoscience coordinate to render the world manageable.

Reopening the possibility of presence

If the contemporary city operates as an apparatus of enclosure, then recognizing this forces a reconsideration of what counts as transformation and how efforts at change are to be interpreted. Accordingly, this section resists the urge to translate the above diagnosis directly into a programme or checklist, since the kinds of encounter that matter here cannot ever be guaranteed as regular outputs of design or governance (Curry, 2021).

Even well-intentioned change – aesthetic, infrastructural or regulatory – can occur without unsettling enclosure. In cities structured to anticipate disturbance, reforms may improve what appears in urban space while simultaneously ensuring that exposure remains discretionary and interruption fleeting. Their significance therefore depends on the level at which the change operates. Here it is worth drawing a distinction between *effects* and *conditions*. An effect is a genuine alteration that the city can register while still preserving its prevailing expectations. A condition is an alteration that reorganizes those expectations themselves, such as what counts as normal contact in the first place, as well as what kinds of interference are tolerated. Crucially, the distinction I am making is analytic rather than programmatic, since it does not prescribe interventions. Instead, it offers a way of differentiating between alterations the city can absorb and alterations in the conditions of inhabitation that would have to endure. With this in mind, it is possible to examine forms of urban change that appear progressive or reparative, using them as limit cases to illustrate the reassertion of enclosure.

Some contemporary approaches concretize and inherently reinforce the city's organizing tendencies. Smart-city systems exemplify the desire for totalizing control by embedding anticipatory governance and data-driven management into the already closely regulated character of the built domain (Kitchin, 2014). These systems are frequently justified through arguments closely aligned with ecomodernism, which extol technological optimization alongside urban intensification as environmentally responsible means of reducing ecological impact while safeguarding nature elsewhere (Asafu-Adjaye

et al., 2015). In Han's (2022) terms, smart systems eliminate the resistance inherent in the terrestrial order of the Earth. Openness takes the form of smooth informational transactions and operational transparency, rather than exposure or vulnerability, and is therefore fully pre-scripted and supervised.

The same impulse re-emerges in forms of urban change that appear less as overt control than as 'nature-positive' repair. In this case, the question we must necessarily ask concerns how nonhuman life is framed as acceptable within environmental governance, rather than which specific ecological interventions are introduced at the level of design. As Curry (2017) argues, when nature is approached primarily through instrumental outlooks, the possibility for fully ecological relationships – as signalled by enchantment – is reduced, since nonhuman beings are approached less as responsive others than as elements to be calibrated or optimized. Sullivan (2017) shows that such governance incorporates nonhuman life only insofar as it can be translated into anthropocentric schemes that make it legible and administratively manageable, privileging aggregate gains and functional value over situated ecological interdependence. When this managerial imperative is taken up in urban contexts, the return of nature to cities can increase the presence of nonhuman life while that presence is still received primarily as amenity (service provision), atmosphere (aesthetic enhancement) or even branding (sustainability markers) – a type of 'greening' that remains compatible with the marketable framing of mainstream reformist environmentalism (a framing criticized in Spash, 2024). The city becomes greener, yet the living world remains at a distance, encountered selectively and readily assimilated into the smooth reproduction of the urban milieu.

Other interventions attempt to target advertising spectacle, which contributes to enclosure by pervading the spaces in which ecological connection might occur. For instance, practices such as 'subvertizing' and 'brandalism' seek to interrupt the circulation of images by altering advertising surfaces, exposing contradictions and undermining the glamour that consumer capital deploys. As Harold (2004) argues, such tactics remain primarily representational, intervening at the level of meaning and symbolism rather than addressing the systems they seek to critique, and thereby inadvertently perpetuating those systems. Even so, more structural measures do not necessarily touch the conditions of exposure. Where outdoor advertising is removed altogether, as in well-known municipal initiatives such as São Paulo's 2006 *Lei Cidade Limpa* ("Clean City Law"), perceptual space may be cleared without exposure becoming a durable fact of everyday urban existence.

As analyzed above, enclosure refers to the prevailing spatial, material and perceptual structuring of life that minimizes exposure in advance. Within this structuring, alterations or openings are taken up in ways that ensure the city does not have to reorganize itself. The core concern, then, is not simply which reforms should be pursued, but whether exposure, understood as unguarded vulnerability, can endure. What matters is whether moments of openness can persist structurally as part of the ordinary conditions of urban existence – carrying with them the negativity that resists assimilation and making

instances of the wound more likely within an otherwise smooth field of experience – or whether what they introduce is steadily reintegrated into managed and predictable forms. In practice, this is why change within cities so often succeeds as improvement while failing to endure at the level of conditions, not because openings never occur, but because their persistence would destabilize the city's governing rationality.

The argument made throughout this paper cannot culminate in a plan. Instead, it puts forward an ethic of restraint. It refuses the assumption that residual openness is a flaw to be engineered away, and instead treats exposure and vulnerability as a valuable openness to the world. This stance aligns with ecological ethics understood as a horizon that orients practice through lived relations with the more-than-human world, which is far more demanding than any rule-based framework or managerial system (Curry, 2017). On this account, an ecocentric city would require a willingness to endure disruption over time. This entails the ability to accept that presence cannot be produced on demand but only arises where exposure is no longer pre-empted.

In closing, it should be clear that the perspective developed here is not entirely anti-urban, nor is it anti-civilizational, since cities are homes that the human animal has fashioned upon the Earth. At their best – quiet, green and venerable – they actively foster human culture and heritage, while also sustaining ecological presence. Yet even the busiest and most nature-sparse conurbations may gather human and nonhuman lives into shared worlds. Despite all barriers and constraints, the other side of enclosure nevertheless remains reachable. This follows from the fact that exposure to the other-than-human may still occur within urban life, and that the possibility of presence – blooming into full-blown wonder – can never be fully eliminated. We must therefore not reject the city as the enemy, nor idealize escape from it. Instead, it is important to resist the assumption that urban existence must be sealed against what lies beyond human purposes. Instead of seeking to control or turn away from the city altogether, the more subtle and challenging task is to ask how to open it.

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Urban ecocentrism, multispecies violence and the anti-utopian lessons of *Princess Mononoke*

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This article argues that the main challenge for urban ecocentrism lies in the difficulty of translating ethically ambitious ideals into practices compatible with urban realities of conflict, scarcity and institutional limits. Hayao Miyazaki's film *Princess Mononoke* is read as a portrayal of the city as an infrastructure of conflict, in which human survival, social inclusion and ecological destruction are structurally entangled, and where animals appear as territorial agents rather than symbolic victims. By bringing this diagnosis into dialogue with contemporary normative proposals on urban ecocentrism, particularly debates on the political recognition of urban animals, the article advances an anti-utopian conception of the ecocentric city. It proposes urban ecology as a political practice of limiting violence rather than an attempt to achieve harmony, and identifies the management of ecological conflict, the containment of damage and the institutionalization of responsibility as minimal conditions for ecological habitability in contemporary cities.

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The ecological crisis manifests itself with particular intensity in urban space. Cities are environments of forced cohabitation between humans, other-than-human animals and technical infrastructures, in which political decisions and everyday practices produce radical forms of inclusion and exclusion (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Wolch, 1998). Urban ecocentrism must therefore go beyond the design of green spaces and the reduction of environmental impact, and critically examine the ways in which cities determine who is allowed to inhabit, who must adapt and who is systematically eliminated (Harvey, 2012).

Many proposals for ecocentric cities tend to be utopian, in that they imagine the urban environment to be a system that could be harmonized or perfected,

given sufficiently widespread ethical consensus and subjects willing to reorient their behaviours. This article adopts a different, non-utopian, position. It argues that the main obstacle to a practicable urban ecocentrism lies not in the moral realm, but in the structural difficulty of governing ecological conflict within real urban contexts marked by power asymmetries, material constraints and deeply ambivalent subjects (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

To articulate this position, the article draws on Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and its radically anti-utopian representation of the city – as an industrial space in which human survival, social inclusion and ecological destruction are deeply intertwined, and in which animals do not appear as symbols or passive victims, but as territorial forces resisting urban expansion (Napier, 2006; Lamarre, 2009). In *Princess Mononoke*, the city is not a moral project to be perfected, but an infrastructure of conflict in which every form of cohabitation entails losses, compromises and irreversible violence. It is precisely this absence of reconciliation that makes the film particularly relevant for a non-idealized ecocentric reflection: urban ecology emerges here not as equilibrium, but as the imperfect management of fundamentally incompatible relations (Yoneyama, 2018).

The city as an infrastructure of conflict

In *Princess Mononoke*, the city never appears as a site of ecological harmonization, but rather as a material infrastructure that organizes conflict between human survival, environmental exploitation and non-human resistance. Tatara-ba (Iron Town) is neither a symbolic city nor a mere narrative backdrop: it is a fully functioning urban device, grounded in extraction, production and the transformation of territory. Its existence depends on a direct and violent relationship with the surrounding environment, which is progressively deforested, perforated and reconfigured in order to sustain the city's economy.

However, the film explicitly rejects any simplistic dualism between 'bad city' and 'good nature'. Tatara-ba is also a space of social inclusion: it accommodates marginalized subjects, provides labour, security and a minimal form of welfare. Ecological destruction is therefore not presented as an act of pure greed, but as the material cost of an urban project aimed at protecting human beings in a hostile context. In this sense, the city embodies a structural tension typical of real urban environments, in which the inclusion of some is achieved through the radical exclusion of others, both human and other-than-human (Harvey, 2012; Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013).

Animals and forest spirits in the film do not assume the role of passive victims or symbolic figures of an offended nature. They occupy territory, exercise force and defend boundaries. Their opposition to urban expansion is not moral, but spatial and material. The city, in turn, responds not through mediation, but through policies of elimination: hunting, extermination and the systematic destruction of habitat. This dynamic renders visible an aspect often marginalized in discussions of urban ecology: the management of the non-human as a problem of security and territorial order, rather than as an abstract ethical issue (Wolch, 1998; Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005).

The character of Lady Eboshi concentrates this ambivalence in an emblematic way. Far from being a purely antagonistic figure, Eboshi represents a form of urban rationality oriented towards the protection of her inhabitants, even at the cost of escalating ecological violence. Her project is not to destroy nature as a principle, but to secure stability and autonomy for the city. For this reason, *Princess Mononoke* rejects a moralistic reading of conflict: there is no solution capable of fully preserving both the city and the surrounding ecosystem. Every choice entails an irreversible loss that cannot be compensated or neutralized (Napier, 2006; Yoneyama, 2018).

This absence of a final reconciliation is one of the film's most significant contributions to a non-utopian ecocentric reflection. Destruction is not healed, animals are not reintegrated into a harmonious order, and the city does not suddenly transform into an ecologically just space. What emerges instead is a wounded city, forced to recognize the limits of its expansion without being able to erase the consequences of its actions. Urban ecology, in this scenario, does not coincide with balance, but with an awareness of damage and with the necessity of inhabiting a compromised territory (Gandy, 2014).

Read from this perspective, *Princess Mononoke* does not propose a model of an ecocentric city to be emulated, but dramatizes the material conditions that make such a model difficult to realize. The city appears as a field of forces in which multispecies cohabitation is not the outcome of ethical consensus, but the unstable product of conflicts, resistances and political decisions. It is precisely this anti-utopian representation that makes the film a fertile point of departure for interrogating contemporary proposals of urban ecocentrism, not in order to celebrate or reject them, but to measure them against the material realities of existing cities (Lamarre, 2009).

In this sense, *Princess Mononoke* functions as a device of disenchantment. It shows that the urban ecological question cannot be resolved through absolute moral imperatives or through utopian images of total reconciliation between humans and non-humans. Rather, it calls for a reflection on the governance of conflict, the distribution of ecological costs and the possibility of limiting violence without pretending to eliminate it altogether. It is on this terrain, marked by incompleteness and loss, that it becomes possible to ask, in a realistic way, what it means to render a city ecologically inhabitable.

One of the main difficulties of urban ecocentrism emerges when the protection of the non-human is formulated in terms of absolute imperatives. In urban space, where divergent interests, material constraints, and ambivalent subjects coexist, models grounded in ecological purity or total reconciliation tend to produce counterintuitive effects: normative rigidity, social resistance, and, paradoxically, new forms of exclusion (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

As *Princess Mononoke* shows, the problem is not an excess of attention to the non-human, but the inability to govern ecological conflict without immediately transforming it into elimination or utopia. A practicable urban ecocentrism does not require morally perfect cities, but cities capable of recognizing limits, distributing ecological costs and reducing violence without pretending to erase it altogether (Harvey, 2012).

Urban animals and the politics of cohabitation

The representation of animals in *Princess Mononoke* makes visible a dynamic that is central to contemporary cities: when the other-than-human enters urban space, it is rapidly transformed into a problem of security, order or territorial management. Non-human animals are not simply 'other inhabitants', but presences that disrupt infrastructures, challenge boundaries and expose the limits of human-centred urban projects. The city's response, both in the film and in real urban practices, is often elimination: hunting, expulsion and the destruction of habitat (Wolch, 1998; Philo and Wilbert, 2000).

This dynamic is not limited to imaginary or historical contexts. In contemporary cities, many animal species – such as foxes, wild boars, corvids, rodents and insects – occupy interstitial spaces produced by urbanization itself. Their presence is a direct outcome of infrastructural transformation, yet it is rarely recognized as such. Instead, these animals are classified as pests, invasive or dangerous, and are managed through control policies aimed at restoring an urban order conceived exclusively for humans (Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005; Whatmore, 2006).

It is in this context that several theoretical proposals have sought to rethink the relationship between cities and non-human animals in explicitly political terms. In particular, Donaldson and Kymlicka's *Zoopolis* (2011) introduces the category of *liminal animals* to describe species that live stably within urban environments without being either fully wild or fully domesticated. Their proposal to recognize such animals as *denizens*, rather than as parasites to be eliminated, represents a significant attempt to move the governance of urban animals away from the logic of extermination.

The primary value of *Zoopolis*, in relation to the diagnosis offered by *Princess Mononoke*, lies less in its full implementability than in its capacity to render politically visible what the film presents in conflicted form. Where Miyazaki depicts animals resisting urban expansion as territorial forces incompatible with the city, *Zoopolis* seeks to translate this incompatibility into a problem of citizenship, rights and governance. In both cases, the central issue is not the achievement of some utopian harmony, but cohabitation under conditions of permanent tension.

Nevertheless, the transition from symbolic recognition to the concrete management of conflict remains problematic. Real cities operate through unstable compromises, limited resources and subjects who do not necessarily share an ecocentric worldview. The risk, even in the most advanced proposals, is to presuppose a level of ethical consensus and cooperation that rarely characterizes urban environments (Swyngedouw, 2011). In this sense, *Zoopolis* functions less as a prescriptive model to be fully implemented and more as a critical device capable of interrogating existing urban practices.

Read in relation to *Princess Mononoke*, the proposal to recognize urban animals as *denizens* can be interpreted as an attempt to interrupt the automatic transformation of ecological conflict into elimination. The aim is not to abolish conflict, which remains structural, but to limit its most violent outcomes, reframing the presence of the non-human as a matter

of political responsibility rather than of purely technical or repressive management.

This shift allows urban ecocentrism to be reformulated in less utopian and more practicable terms. An ecologically inhabitable city is not one that achieves pacified coexistence among all species, but one that develops tools to recognize, negotiate and contain multispecies conflicts without systematically resorting to policies of radical exclusion. In this sense, the dialogue between Miyazaki and *Zoopolis* does not produce a solution, but opens a critical space in which it becomes possible to rethink the relationship between cities, non-human animals and ecological responsibility.

Towards a practicable urban ecocentrism

The preceding analyses suggest that the main limitation of urban ecocentric proposals lies not in their ethical ambition, but in the difficulty of translating that ambition into implementable practices for governance within urban space. Real cities are neither neutral environments nor harmonizable systems, but territories shaped by structural conflicts, material inequalities and subjects acting under a range of economic and infrastructural constraints. In this context, a practicable urban ecocentrism cannot be grounded in absolute imperatives or models of pacified coexistence, but must confront the concrete management of multispecies conflict (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

This entails a significant political shift: rather than demanding adherence to elevated ecocentric ideals, it calls for interventions in the material conditions that produce conflict. These include urban policies recognizing the stable presence of non-human animals, infrastructural arrangements mitigating the most destructive impacts of urbanization and management practices that accept a degree of disturbance as constitutive of urban life. Multispecies coexistence, in this framework, is not an individual virtue, but the outcome of collective choices and institutional compromises (Bulkeley *et al.*, 2013; Hinchliffe *et al.*, 2005).

A non-radical urban ecocentrism is therefore characterized by attention to limits – ecological, political and psychological. Cities are inhabited by ambivalent subjects who are often unable or unwilling to sustain excessive moral demands. Acknowledging these limits makes it possible to design interventions that operate through incremental adjustments and selective reductions of harm, rather than through total ethical conversion.

From this perspective, protecting the non-human does not require abolishing conflict, but politicizing it. Making visible the decisions that lead to extermination, marginalization, or expulsion shifts them from the domain of the technical into that of the political, and thereby forces recognition of the costs and losses embedded in urban ecological governance (Swyngedouw, 2011). Learning to live with conflict thus emerges not as a retreat from ecological ethics, but as its condition of possibility in contemporary urban space.

Habitable cities, not perfect ones

This article has brought into dialogue an anti-utopian representation of the city, offered by *Princess Mononoke*, with contemporary normative proposals on

urban ecocentrism. The analysis suggests that the main obstacle to urban ecocentrism lies in the difficulty of translating ethical ideals into urban practices that are compatible with conflict and material constraints (Swyngedouw, 2010; Gandy, 2014).

To put this another way, *Princess Mononoke* does not offer a model to be emulated, but a diagnosis. The city emerges as an infrastructure of conflict in which the protection of human life and the destruction of the non-human are historically entangled. Animals appear not as symbolic figures or passive victims, but as territorial presences that disrupt urban expansion and expose the ecological costs of political decisions. The absence of a final reconciliation allows the film to function as a critique of harmonizing visions of the city.

Normative proposals that recognize urban animals as political subjects – such as the category of *denizens* – represent an important step in moving urban governance away from the logic of extermination. Their effectiveness, however, depends on their capacity to engage with the material conditions and limits of urban governance. Ecocentrism grounded in absolute imperatives risks producing resistance and paralysis rather than transformation.

A practicable urban ecocentrism does not promise morally pure or reconciled cities, but cities capable of remaining inhabitable despite multispecies conflict. Rather than eliminating conflict, it seeks to reduce its most violent outcomes by making decisions affecting the non-human visible, contestable and politically accountable. Ecological protection in urban contexts thus appears not as a final state to be achieved, but as an ongoing, endlessly contestable and revisable practice of damage containment and responsibility-taking.

In the ending of *Princess Mononoke*, continued life becomes possible not through reconciliation between city and forest, nor through adherence to a superior moral principle, but through a fragile form of mediation capable of traversing incompatible territories without unifying them. This bridging function does not resolve conflict, but prevents its destructive escalation. Transposed to contemporary urban space, this suggests that ecological mediation cannot rely on exemplary ethical subjects or generalised moral conversion, but must operate as a collective and institutional practice of limiting violence.

The contribution of this article, therefore, is not the proposal of an ideal ecocentric urban model, but the identification of a minimal and necessary function: an ecocentrism capable of operating as a bridge between incompatible interests. As in Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, survival depends not on the elimination of conflict, but on its containment, channelling and transformation into political responsibility. From this perspective, urban ecology does not coincide with equilibrium, but with a continuous refusal of annihilation as a solution.

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When images outnumber encounters: Synthetic wilderness and ecological presence in an age of AI

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A growing share of what many people now call *nature* is encountered through screens rather than through the slow, vulnerable and multisensory conditions that shape ecological presence in lived environments. The rise of artificially generated wildlife and landscape imagery accelerates this shift by producing scenes that resemble ecological worlds while remaining detached from any specific organism, habitat, season or behavioural ecology. Such images circulate faster and more widely than lived encounters, and their aesthetic polish risks cultivating perceptual habits increasingly shaped by representation rather than by contact with places where climate, decay, time and other-than-human agency operate as active forces rather than visual themes. This article examines the emergence of synthetic wilderness within a historical moment already marked by declining human participation in local habitats, and argues that ecological ethics cannot be grounded solely in images, regardless of their realism. Ecological belonging arises instead through shared risk, patience, uncertainty and embodied attention to organisms and processes that resist curation and control. AI-generated nature should therefore be understood as a distinct cultural product rather than as a continuation of ecological encounter, and ethical commitments to multispecies communities must prioritize lived contact with the more-than-human world, including ordinary, unsettled and discomfiting forms of co-presence.

Keywords: ecological ethics; environmental humanities; human supremacy; human–nature dualism; nature

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Certain environments convey a quiet impression that the world pays attention to itself, whether anyone is present to notice or not. During fieldwork in the Apennines and in the central Italian Alps, I learned to walk at a slower rhythm along narrow paths where the presence of other beings revealed itself not through spectacle, but through what remained after their passing. A shallow depression in wet grass suggested the warmth of a resting body that had already moved on; an abrupt withdrawal of birdsong near dusk conveyed shared alertness shaped by an unseen watcher; the faint scent of scat held in cold air disclosed diet and movement without any expectation of a human witness. In such places, relationships felt less like something gained through deliberate knowledge and more like something that unfolded through co-participation in a world that exceeded both my senses and my questions. They required patience, uncertainty and a willingness to proceed without verification. Ecological presence, in this sense, cannot be reduced to what is visible or confirmable.

Far from such environments, a different mode of encountering nature is expanding at a remarkable speed. Synthetic wilderness now travels far more quickly than ecological processes can form, recover or reveal themselves. Artificial intelligence produces wolves that appear to breathe in digitally softened air, forests that sway in winds that never touched a valley and oceans illuminated by the light of no particular season or latitude. Thousands of such scenes can be consumed in less time than it takes to wait beside a real clearing. Although many depict animals rarely encountered outdoors, none arise from tracks, dens, rivers, wounds or trophic exchange. They depend instead on the visual grammar of wilderness, while remaining detached from the slow conditions that sustain it.

Two distinct concerns arise here. One is epistemic: AI-generated nature material can contribute to false beliefs about animal behaviour, habitat conditions and ecological processes. The other is ethical, and it persists even when viewers recognize that the content is artificial. In this deeper sense, synthetic wilderness can recalibrate perceptual and affective habits by offering emotional satisfaction without the shared risk, uncertainty and causal reciprocity through which ecological belonging and responsibility are cultivated. As such imagery accumulates, imagination may begin to lean more heavily on curated representation than on weather, scent, distance or risk, and representational familiarity may begin to feel sufficient for many viewers. This concern does not deny that some mediated or simulated environments may support ecological reflection or empathy; rather, it questions the ethical consequences of AI-generated imagery when it circulates as a frictionless substitute for ecological encounter.

Across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook, AI-generated wildlife has settled into recognisable formats designed for rapid circulation. Many clips begin with familiar handheld or documentary-style aesthetics before shifting into movements no animal anatomy could sustain: octopuses gliding with an excess of limbs folding like cloth; bears bouncing across suburban gardens with an elasticity closer to animation than bone and

muscle; wolves holding prolonged frontal eye contact more characteristic of trained domestic dogs than of wild carnivores; or owls rotating their heads beyond vertebral constraint. While such material is often received as playful, humorous or astonishing, research suggests that hyperreal wildlife representations can influence expectations about animal behaviour and ecological context (Guerrero-Casado *et al.*, 2025).

This article focuses specifically on AI-generated and AI-augmented still images and short-form videos circulated on social media platforms, rather than immersive virtual-reality simulations, open-world games or virtual ecosystems, which involve different affordances, temporalities and ethical questions. Synthetic wilderness is not inherently harmful. It may support accessibility, education, rehabilitation or specialized modelling in ecological science (Frazier and Song, 2025). Ethical concern arises when it begins to displace or substitute for direct ecological experience rather than supplement it.

From an ecocentric standpoint, the value of wildlife does not arise from its capacity to be seen, recognized or emotionally gratifying, but from its autonomous existence within ecological relations that neither require nor benefit from continual human attention. Visibility is, therefore, a poor proxy for ethical relevance. As synthetic wilderness becomes easier to access, share and prefer, the slow, reciprocal learning found in lived environments may become peripheral to daily perception, with implications for how ecological value is formed, prioritized and defended.

In what follows, I explore three interconnected movements: the cultural emergence of synthetic wilderness; the psychological and ethical consequences of encountering wildlife primarily through representation; and the significance of ecological presence as a condition through which belonging within the living world may be sustained.

The emergence of synthetic wilderness

Human cultures have long represented the other-than-human world through cave paintings, carved figurines, pastoral poetry, totemic practices and, more recently, wildlife documentaries. These representations, however imaginative, were shaped by lived ecological encounters. Photographs require a body before a lens; drawings and carvings follow the form of actual organisms or landforms; and stories once travelled orally through environments that informed both rhythm and imagery.

The development of generative artificial intelligence introduces a different mode of nature representation. AI-generated wilderness does not arise through ecological immersion or sensory familiarity, but through the statistical extraction and recombination of visual patterns from large training datasets, guided by text prompts and stylistic inference rather than by any originating encounter with ecological processes. As a result, it can produce representations of animals, behaviours and habitat assemblages that do not correspond to any known ecological conditions, raising concerns for conservation communication and public perception (Guerrero-Casado *et al.*, 2025).

This difference is not merely one of degree. Wildlife documentaries may be

selective, edited or narratively framed, often with conservation or educational intent, but they remain constrained by the behaviour, elusiveness and resistance of living beings in particular places and times. Cameras must wait; animals may not appear; weather interferes; and environments impose limits on what can be shown. Even highly stylized documentaries retain an indexical relation to organisms and habitats that existed independently of the image. AI-generated imagery removes these constraints. It produces convincing scenes without accountability to behavioural ecology, seasonality, decay or refusal, and without any historical encounter anchoring representation to a living being or place. What is ethically distinctive, therefore, is not mediation as such, but the shift from representation *as a trace of encounter* to representation *as fabrication unconstrained by ecological reality*.

Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram operate not only as distribution systems but also as interpretive environments that shape how images are received. All imagery is interpreted within narrative and social contexts, and framing influences perceived meaning, affect and acceptable relations with animals (Riddle and MacKay, 2020). Visually appealing but ecologically misleading content can therefore shape public attitudes even in the absence of direct behavioural consequences, as shown in analyses of viral wildlife media (Clarke *et al.*, 2019). Generative AI intensifies these dynamics by increasing both the volume and perceptual plausibility of such imagery. Perceptual studies indicate that viewers frequently judge AI-generated images to be as natural – understood here as photograph-like and ecologically plausible – as camera-generated ones, even when measurable ecological features differ (Chen *et al.*, 2025; Göring *et al.*, 2023). Familiarity cues can override ecological plausibility, particularly where lived reference points are limited (Osińska *et al.*, 2025). In creative contexts, AI-generated landscapes often reproduce idealized visions of wilderness that privilege visual coherence and dramatic clarity over ecological complexity (Foka, 2025).

At the same time, direct ecological experience is declining in many industrialized societies. Soga and Gaston (2016) describe this process as an extinction of experience, through which reduced contact with biodiversity weakens ecological knowledge and concern. Where such contact is limited, mediated representation increasingly shapes ecological familiarity. Genovart and co-workers (2013) found that children recognized exotic charismatic species more readily than local native ones, indicating that representational exposure can outweigh proximity in shaping ecological awareness, a longstanding pattern shaped by media exposure which AI-generated content may intensify through sheer volume and algorithmic optimization. This perceptual shift has occurred alongside worsening ecological indicators, including substantial declines in monitored vertebrate populations since 1970 (WWF, 2022).

Synthetic wilderness expands within this widening gap between representation and encounter. It offers wildlife without plausible unpredictability, ecosystems without decay and habitats without ecological limits. Coral reefs appear perpetually unbleached; forests are rendered without deadwood or insects; and animals interact with implied observers in ways that field researchers rarely

encounter. Such depictions do not require ecological plausibility so long as they provide visual familiarity and emotional appeal. While synthetic environments may hold value for accessibility, education, rehabilitation or computational modelling (Frazier and Song, 2025), they cannot reproduce the perceptual, relational and ethical qualities that arise from encounters with living beings and places.

For ecocentric ethics, the concern here is not limited to misinformation or aesthetic distortion. It is also ontological, concerning what counts as nature, presence and relation in the first place. If synthetic wilderness becomes a dominant imaginative reference for what nature is or ought to be, ecological meaning risks detaching from the living systems that generate it, and from the responsibilities that arise from their independent existence.

Ecopsychological and ethical consequences

Ecopsychology maintains that perception is not a purely optical or cognitively detached activity, but a relational event emerging through the interplay of body, environment and the situated conditions of attention. In embodied encounters, the world becomes perceptible not only through what is visually present but also through uncertainty, resistance, and partial access. Holding breath on a fog-laden ridge, unstable footing on wet ground, or prolonged waiting without confirmation instructs through vulnerability and exposure rather than through clarity or completion. Such encounters reveal that the living world is not a tableau arranged for observation, but a field of relations in which the human is only one participant among many.

AI-generated environments operate without these conditions. In synthetic terrains, animals do not flee, weather does not injure and time does not stretch into waiting. Movement leaves no tracks; contact alters no habitat; and the viewer's presence produces no disturbance, alarm or ecological consequence. While research suggests that virtual nature exposure can offer short-term affective benefits for individuals with limited access to outdoor spaces (Chan *et al.*, 2023), such environments remain consequence-free perceptual fields. They place the viewer outside the ecological web even while presenting the appearance of immersion, because they remove friction, refusal and withdrawal, which are among the primary sources of ethical awareness in relations with other-than-human beings.

Philosophers of perception have long argued that experience is cultivated through situated participation in a world that resists full disclosure. Abram (1996) characterizes perception as an ecological event involving the entire sentient body rather than a disembodied mind, while Ingold (2000) describes it as a skilled mode of dwelling that unfolds through engagement with materials, weather, gradients, and organismic agency. Synthetic wilderness interrupts this mutuality by offering a world that aligns with perceptual desire rather than ecological constraint. Animals appear perpetually visible, expressive and approachable, whereas in lived ecologies other-than-human beings are often fleeting, peripheral or entirely unseen, with their autonomy grounded in their capacity to remain opaque, indifferent or absent.

This distinction carries ethical consequences that are not reducible to misinformation alone. Where ecological meaning forms primarily through visually gratifying representations, multispecies relationships may become progressively detached from the responsibilities that arise through lived relation. A world in which wolves appear ever-present and expressive may obscure the behavioural ecology that renders real wolves elusive, wide-ranging or locally absent. Forests rendered as perpetually lush may dull perceptual urgency regarding degradation, even while imagery proliferates. These effects align with extinction-of-experience research, which suggests that declining direct contact with biodiversity can weaken ecological knowledge and conservation-relevant attitudes when mediated experience becomes more emotionally rewarding than uncertain, multisensory encounter (Soga and Gaston, 2016).

Synthetic wilderness may also recalibrate affective dispositions. If images become the dominant substrate for ecological imagination, what is unseen, unheard or unresolved may begin to feel irrelevant, even though ecological presence often resides precisely in what exceeds perceptual capture. Rustling grass without a visible body, silence sharpened by cautious observation, or traces indicating nocturnal passage depend on the possibility of concealment and withdrawal. AI-generated environments rarely allow for such non-appearance. Without the possibility of absence, alterity risks being replaced by aesthetic familiarity.

Ecocentric ethics depend upon recognizing that other-than-human beings possess autonomy that extends beyond human perceptual, affective and epistemic horizons. Ethical humility arises when a being does not respond, cannot be located or withdraws, because responsibility becomes anchored in acknowledging that one's presence is neither central nor decisive. Synthetic wilderness, by contrast, centres the viewer through constant legibility and affective availability. As a result, the perceptual foundations of ecological ethics risk attenuation, as responsibility is displaced from lived relations toward representational satisfaction.

Defending ecological presence

If ecological belonging is shaped by the textures through which attention is formed, then perceptual ties with living places hold a value that representation cannot replace, and perhaps should not seek to replace. This is not a call to reject digital imagery or to deny its practical or creative potential. Digital archives can support ecological education and conservation awareness, and certain synthetic or virtual environments may provide psychological relief or assist ecological modelling and research. The ethical task, rather than rejection, is to maintain clarity between two distinct domains: representations of nature produced for human perception, and participation in ecological presence within worlds that are not organized around that perception.

Hood (2022) suggests that some online virtual worlds, particularly those involving role-play and consequence-bearing participation, may contribute to the cultivation of ecocentric dispositions by allowing players to co-inhabit

non-anthropocentric perspectives over extended periods of time. What is significant for the present argument is not the virtuality of such worlds *per se*, but the conditions they instantiate: sustained attention, narrative continuity, limitation and the possibility of consequence. These features distinguish participatory virtual worlds from the AI-generated imagery considered here, which circulates primarily as rapidly consumed visual content and offers no comparable field in which responsibility, restraint or reciprocal orientation can take hold.

Ecological presence is not confined to visual appearance. It may announce itself in sound, scent, trace or absence: the dull impact of wings passing unseen in darkness; the cessation of insect noise that signals a predator's passage; or a faint trail across thawing snow that reveals a body that moved in order not to be observed. In each case, presence is inseparable from partial concealment and from relations that do not fully disclose themselves. Much of what binds a person to a place arises not from what is readily offered to view, but from what withholds itself and requires patient, situated attention.

AI-generated environments rarely grant other-than-human beings the capacity to withhold themselves. Their underlying logic rewards legibility, recognition and affective clarity. Yet relational ethics depend upon forms of not-knowing: upon recognizing that other-than-human beings inhabit worlds that exceed human vantage and may remain invisible, indifferent or silent for extended periods. A forest is not only a collection of visible tree forms, but a dynamic mesh of growth, decay, microclimate, fungi, territorial movement, sound and silence. A river is not only a flowing surface, but also sediment, temperature, oxygen, organisms, history and absence. To treat ecological presence as equivalent to representation is, therefore, to mistake a process for its trace.

Defending ecological presence thus involves cultivating attentiveness to nearby habitats, even when they are modest, fragmented or shaped by human infrastructure. A hedgerow at dusk, a muddy path after rain, a vacant lot where ruderal plants reclaim compacted soil, or wind carrying salt across a coastal street do not require wilderness to foster ecological humility. They require time, a willingness to be inconvenienced and a readiness to be addressed by what exceeds visibility and control. The living world is not located solely in distant sanctuaries or spectacular landscapes; it persists in ordinary places where other-than-human lives continue alongside human activity.

For those who live primarily in urban environments, ecological presence may begin with acknowledging that the world is never only human. Birds navigate thermals between buildings, mammals trace routes along rail lines and verges, fungi bloom overnight in damp margins and plants occupy cracks in asphalt. These encounters do not replicate intact ecosystems and should not be romanticized as such, yet they remain genuine forms of co-presence through which ecological belonging may be sustained. They provide opportunities for counteracting the extinction of experience described by Soga and Gaston (2016), particularly when pursued with attentiveness to the independent lives involved.

Ecological presence is ethically distinct from synthetic wilderness because it calls humans into humility, restraint and attentiveness. Where synthetic wilderness offers worlds in which vulnerability is backgrounded and consequence suspended, ecological presence renders vulnerability and interdependence palpable. Where synthetic wilderness centres the viewer and adapts to their preferences, ecological presence decentralizes them within a web of agencies and constraints. Where synthetic wilderness collapses otherness into legible and emotionally gratifying forms, ecological presence sustains otherness as a condition for responsibility, because beings that cannot be fully known or managed can still command limits, distance and care.

If ecocentrism takes the intrinsic value of the Earth's communities of life seriously, and if movements such as Earth jurisprudence and the rights of nature seek to affirm this value in law and governance, then these commitments must be grounded in perceptual practices that keep the living world present as more than an image or concept. Whilst synthetic wilderness may supplement such practices and may occasionally invite curiosity or compassion, it cannot substitute for the slow apprenticeship to specific places and beings through which ecological responsibility becomes lived rather than abstract. To defend ecological presence is therefore to defend the conditions under which ethical regard for the more-than-human world may continue to grow: not on screens alone, but within the shared, vulnerable spaces through which life persists and upon which it depends.

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Even Deeper (full piece plus detail)

Ann-Margreth Bohl

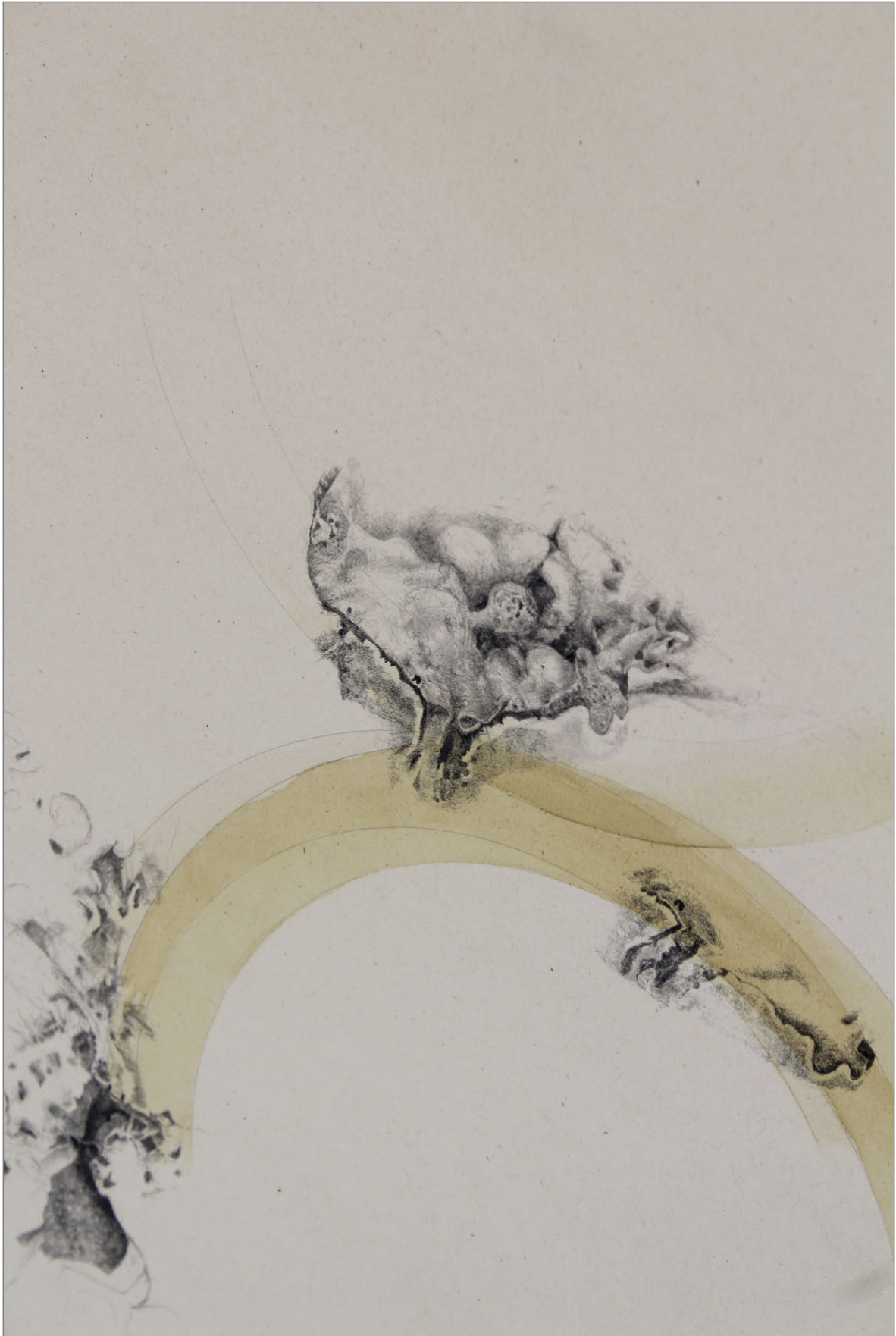
Pencil and rosemary developer on unbleached card (112 x 81 cm; 2025).

From the artist: "Through these drawings I observe small geological details, activating imaginings of mineral processes and life forms millions of years ago. Using plant developer as paint, I connect this drawing with photographic processes. Depending on the contact the drawing has with light, the colour of the applied developer changes. Combining hyper-focused observation with volatile material processes, these drawings consider and question the inanimate attribution that strata firmly holds."

Higher-quality versions of artwork from this issue: <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/artworks.php?v=9&n=2>







Obituary for Paul Ehrlich

Sandy Irvine

Sandy is a political activist based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.

Keywords: overpopulation

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On 13 March, the sad news came of the death of biologist Paul Ehrlich. He had been one of the greatest true friends of the Earth in the last few decades. He also showed that there was another ‘America’, very different from the likes of, say, Trump or Musk.

One of my treasured mementos is a friendly communication I received from Ehrlich. I had been involved in efforts to challenge the utter nonsense being spouted by the then Green Party deputy leader (2013). The latter had claimed that “the Earth could comfortably accommodate twice the current population” and, if need be, we could just get rid of “non-productive trees” to produce more food. It was a symptom how far ‘de-greening’ was harming the Green Party back then.

Ehrlich has bequeathed a rich treasure trove of great writing on the planetary predicament. In it, he exposed the fantasies and falsities of assorted cornucopian dreamers, ‘hopium’ pushers, snake oil sellers of assorted ‘technofixes’ and other deluded folk. He was prepared to cross swords with popular but misguided pundits such as Hans Rosling, a prime ‘good news’ vendor (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013a).

He also addressed the tunnel vision of certain academic disciplines and the consequent failure to see the big picture (e.g. Ehrlich, 2008). He saw how wrong it was to reduce everything to economics and see things just in terms of economic redistribution. He rightly stressed the deeper cultural crisis (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2010) though, perhaps, he did not fully articulate the ecocentric ethic we need.

Ehrlich, often with a small group of colleagues, addressed a whole range of issues. Thus, long before Covid, he wrote on how global changes could make humanity vulnerable to pandemics (Daily and Ehrlich, 1996). He tirelessly stressed that the destruction of biodiversity and the collapse of important ecosystems was being dangerously ignored (e.g. Ehrlich and Mooney, 1983). He certainly pulled no punches about the general threat to human civilization (e.g. Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2013b). Recent research has vindicated Ehrlich (e.g. Foster and Rahmstorf, 2026; Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 2025; Carrington, 2026).

Ehrlich was widely denounced, largely because of his book *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1968). It is true that this work was somewhat

cavalier in its predictions of famines on the immediate horizon, and failed to make sufficient allowance for the impact of high-yielded hybrid plants in the short term. Yet, as Norman Borlaug, ‘father’ of the Green Revolution, himself admitted, this was but a temporary fix, one with unsustainable needs in terms of resource inputs and equally unsustainable side-effects. Borlaug too recognized the threat from human overpopulation (see Borlaug, 1970).

In the longer term, Ehrlich has again been vindicated (Ehrlich, 2015). He further anticipated the complacent argument that fertility rates are falling so there is no need to worry (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2006). Overall, Ehrlich rightly argued that human numbers count: population is indeed the multiplier of all else.

Yet his critics routinely ignore the fact that Ehrlich continuously stressed the multiplicative interaction of human numbers with the two other key drivers of human impacts, namely *per capita* consumption and the choice of this or that technology (the famous formula, $I = P \times A \times T$). For that reason, Ehrlich called the USA, not just, say India or China, one of the most overpopulated countries in the world (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1991).

Another line of attack on Ehrlich was that he ignored the role of inequality. This was another red herring – on the same moronic level of attacking him for being a ‘Neo-Malthusian’ (cf. Irvine, n.d.). If his critics bothered to read books such as *How to be a Survivor* (Ehrlich and Harriman, 1971), they would find a big section on what it calls the “steerage” (pp. 80–101). The book makes perfectly clear that, on ‘Spaceship Earth’, the cabins range from the luxurious to the desperately poor. Ehrlich stood for an “unprecedented redistribution of wealth” and clearly recognized how “the rich [...] run the global system”, calling their Davos summits “‘world destroyer’ meetings”. This is not the language of someone who ignored inequality and power.

His critics also cite the bet he and his associates lost with cornucopian economist Julian Simon regarding the future cost of certain metals. Ehrlich seems to have made the mistake of assuming that prices just follow geology (i.e. the increasing scarcity of intrinsically finite resources). He made insufficient allowance for, say, the effects of economic downturns, government interventions, stock market movements, changing consumer preferences and short-term effects of better mining technology and other such improvements. But the longer term trend is as Ehrlich argued (e.g. Heinberg, 2022).

Moreover, it is not just resource availability and particular prices at any moment in time but, rather, the side effects of production and consumption, whose unsustainable costs are routinely not included in the prices consumers are charged. Many of Ehrlich’s critics seem unaware that there were actually two bets but Simon ducked out of the second. Ehrlich had rightly shifted the proposed wager to those wider impacts and, as references above evidence, he was spot on about a deteriorating state of the planet. The real story is told in Turner (2009), and also discussed in *Betrayal of Science and Reason* (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1996), which is the Ehrlich book I’d recommend if I had to pick just one.

Some of Ehrlich’s best writings were co-authored with his wife Anne. I had the privilege of hearing her speak in Newcastle (1984?) on the threat from a

‘nuclear winter’ after a nuclear war. She was particularly cogent and forceful. Sadly, she too was spot on.

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La libre évolution: Negotiating ecological freedom at UNESCO, Paris

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Keywords: rewilding

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The third meeting of *Les journées de la libre évolution* (11–13 February 2026) – an annual symposium organized by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) – convened NGOs, policymakers, ecologists and researchers over two days to examine the emerging concept of *la libre évolution*. Hosted by UNESCO in Paris, the symposium was opened by Franck Pupumat, Counsellor for the French National Commission, who affirmed that the peace mission of UNESCO applies not only to relations between humans, but also to relations between humans and the rest of the world.

The term *la libre évolution* (which literally translates as ‘free evolution’) means allowing ecological processes to unfold without continuous human control. It goes beyond conservation science to engage the cultural, legal and ethical dimensions of environmental practice. While there are overlaps with the English term ‘rewilding’, for now *la libre évolution* seems primarily a Francophone concept. Linguistic nuances matter here, as speakers grappled throughout the event with what counts as *la libre évolution* and how it should be deployed in practice.

Discussions at the symposium explored how ecological change might be measured beyond conventional indicators while accounting for socio-cultural dynamics. They also addressed how rights of nature institutionalize recognition of non-human interests, and how cartographic practices shape the ways landscapes are understood, prioritized and governed. Taken together, questions of measurement, law and mapping illuminate where *la libre évolution*, with its focus on ecological autonomy, encounters the instruments of governance shaping the future of nature recovery.

The 2026 symposium was steered by the IUCN Working Group *Wilderness et nature férale* led by Pascal Cavallin, and was an opportunity for Cavallin and colleagues to announce their typology of *la libre évolution*, which opens the concept to a range of applications, from rural to urban spaces, and degrees of human intervention, from spontaneous nature recovery to more active approaches (UICN Comité français, 2026). Presented as an evolving resource, the typology set the tone for exploratory discussions throughout the symposium.

These discussions unfolded within a broader policy landscape shaped by biodiversity targets, ecosystem service frameworks and climate adaptation strategies. *La libre évolution* is not positioned outside these institutional contexts. It benefits from support by organizations such as IUCN and UNESCO, and many of its ecological benefits can be quantified. Yet the concept also gestures toward ethical and aesthetic registers that cannot be captured by instrumental metrics. The symposium revealed ongoing efforts to hold these different modes of valuation together.

Among speakers and attendees were NGOs, governmental organizations and ecologists, along with a handful of university researchers. Despite its invocation of ‘free evolution’, the program was carefully structured. Sprinkled among the conventional presentations and roundtables were elevator pitches or *pastilles* and workshops using the ‘World Café’ methodology. Participants from the UK and Germany joined their French colleagues in person, while others from Switzerland, Poland and Canada attended online.

Three interconnected and urgent themes emerged across the symposium’s discussions: how ecological change is measured and valued; the ethical and legal implications of recognizing non-human interests; and the political dimensions of mapping and spatial planning for ecological restoration. Together, these strands indicate where the ideals of ecological autonomy in nature recovery encounter the instruments of governance, raising questions that resonate beyond national contexts.

Measuring the less tangible

During one of the first workshops, facilitated by Anthony Foussard and Hélène Lion from the Born to Rewild project (2025–26), each table in the room became a hub for debating public engagement challenges around messaging, communications media and tensions. These open-ended dialogues highlighted common difficulties and led to meaningful exchanges.

One challenge cut across all tables: how to measure and assign value to both ecological and social phenomena in the context of *la libre évolution*. Shifting baseline syndrome was referenced, but more fundamentally the philosophy of ‘letting go’ prompted questions about whether conventional limit values in Euro-Western environmental science and policy are sufficient. The issue was not a rejection of metrics – many participants acknowledged that biodiversity gains, carbon sequestration and pollution mitigation can and should be quantified. Rather, the discussion turned toward expanding evaluative frameworks to include experiential, relational and aesthetic dimensions. What

emerged was not simply a debate about conservation technique, but about how nature is conceptualized – not only as a resource base and service provider, but as a relational field of ecological co-becoming.

This tension is particularly acute within policy environments structured around ecosystem services accounting, carbon metrics and climate adaptation targets, where ecological value must be rendered legible in quantifiable terms. *La libre évolution*, however, also gestures toward forms of ecological flourishing that may not be fully captured by such instrumentalization. In this sense, the question is not *whether* to measure, but *how*, and according to *which* epistemological commitments. What kinds of ecological worlds become visible, and which remain marginal, when value is tied to ecosystem services provision or climate mitigation potential?

Storytelling and multisensory methods were discussed as promising ways to communicate the ethos of *la libre évolution*. How, for example, might one convey that weeds, fallen trees or animal carcasses are not signs of neglect, but integral to ecosystem processes? Such approaches foreground experience and shifting aesthetic sensibilities, broadening how ecological change is perceived and interpreted (Sabin, 2026). In turn, these shifts in perception shape what is recognized as valuable in a landscape. Storytelling does not displace scientific assessment, but rather expands the repertoire through which ecological value can be articulated and, where necessary, measured.

Rights of nature and ethical relations

Marine Calmet, President of Wild Legal, delivered a rallying presentation on rights of nature, drawing explicit connections with *la libre évolution*. She highlighted legal cases in Ecuador, Colombia, New Zealand and Spain where rights of nature have been formalized either through Indigenous cosmologies or by extending principles rooted in human rights law. In New Zealand, judges have recognized Mount Taranaki as a legal person and ancestral relation; in Spain, the concept of human dignity was deemed inseparable from the ecological health of the Mar Menor Lagoon.

Across these cases, recognition emerged from situated relations between specific communities and the places they inhabit. Legal innovation did not arise in abstraction, Calmet explained, but from lived attachments and sustained advocacy. Wild Legal works alongside local communities to support such initiatives, as comparable examples continue to accumulate internationally. Together, these developments suggest that rights of nature are gaining traction across diverse legal contexts.

While these ideas were largely met with openness, some participants questioned the practical implications of eco-jurisprudence for conservation practice, suggesting that legal personhood might remain largely symbolic. Calmet responded by drawing parallels with women's suffrage and other civil rights movements, arguing that legal recognition often precedes and enables shifts in institutional norms. Whether or not such transformations are immediate, the discussion underscored the role of law in shaping how ecological relations are acknowledged and acted upon. In this respect, rights of

nature can be understood as a legal articulation of the broader move, shared with *la libre évolution*, to recognize non-human interests and agencies within systems of governance.

The political cartography of wild nature

On the second day of the symposium, Adrien Guetté and Jonathan Carruthers-Jones presented CartNat, a project on mapping degrees of *naturalité* across France by aggregating existing geospatial data. Here *naturalité* is defined as the extent to which ecological processes are original, spontaneous and continuous (Guetté *et al.*, 2018). CartNat has already demonstrated a correlation between concentrated *naturalité* and protected areas. It could also be used to highlight sites where other conservation efforts might be protected or expanded. Such mapping initiatives also resonate with national and EU-level priorities around biodiversity accounting, climate mitigation and spatial planning for ecological resilience.

Guetté and Carruthers-Jones were notably transparent about how they arrived at their conceptualization of *naturalité* and why particular methodological choices were made. Building on this transparency, I suggest that mapping nature – like defining it – is never politically neutral or a ‘merely technical’ matter. Decisions of scale, classification and representation each inevitably carry political weight, insofar as they influence how landscapes are made visible, valued or prioritized. This opens further questions about how cartographic practices might more explicitly attend to justice, local knowledge, multispecies worlds and future imaginaries – such as through dynamic, multi-layered forms of representation. Counter-mapping, for example, emerged from Indigenous land rights struggles and has since become a critical tool in conservation politics (Peluso, 1995).

Final reflections

In sum, while each session evoked a compelling vision of healthier relations with non-human nature, future directions for *la libre évolution* remain necessarily unresolved and open-ended. Several speakers called for humility in the face of uncertainty. Without forgoing measurement, *la libre évolution* is a reminder to value that which we cannot fully understand: the totality, complexity and autonomous unfolding of ecological relations over space and time.

This view continues to sit uneasily within governance regimes that require demonstrable and quantifiable returns in biodiversity indices, carbon sequestration figures or pollution thresholds. The challenge is not to abandon measurement, but to rethink its limits: to ask whether ecological relations must always be justified through the language of services, resilience or productivity. In some cases, perhaps wonder illuminates the most ethical path.

La libre évolution is not a catch-all solution. If, as speaker Alexandra Locquet insisted, *la libre évolution* is a vector or *point d’entrée* among many others for reconfiguring relations among various human communities and non-human nature, how might we practice and embody such a philosophy in our everyday lives?

One might apply this question to symposia *à venir*. As is often the case, many of the most interesting exchanges transpired during an interactive workshop or spontaneous conversation during the breaks. Applying the philosophy of free evolution to the program itself, along with more interactive formats, would allow for more organic and reflexive exchanges to freely evolve.

It is early days for *la libre évolution* and for this community of practice. I am grateful for the warm welcome we received in Paris, the opportunity to learn from others, to meet new contacts or even potential collaborators, and to think across linguistic, national and cultural contexts – beyond the Anglocentric view of rewilding. As my collaborator Alice Eldridge succinctly put it: forests do not recognize national boundaries.

Funding acknowledgement

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A view of the UNESCO headquarters (photo by Alice Eldridge).

Poetry section

Edited by **Victor Postnikov**

Victor is a poet, essayist and translator whose home is in Kyiv, Ukraine.

Life far exceeds humans. For millennia, eco-poets have understood it as a far greater enterprise. In their poetry, we can hear the voices of those who came before us and those who live alongside us. Now, however, they face extinction and die in silence, deafened by the roar of civilization. The time has come to renew the old understanding that all life, including humanity, speaks a common language. Thus, the mission of ecocentric poetry, or ecopoetry, is to help us empathize with non-human entities, be they a whale, a tree or a mountain. For we are all kin. Through metaphor and imagery, it speaks directly to our hearts and genes. We begin to realize that we have evolved together and share a common fate.

CONTEMPORARY

Discovery

Christina Hennemann

*of the week: Moss Mite Mothers
Have Perfected Procreation!
Baby clones from egg*

*to larva, the quick six-legged
nymph, shedding exoskeleton,
growing another pair*

*of legs — mirror
image of their mothers. Sexless single-
sex society, like Gilman's Herland,*

*female utopia. Copy and paste,
jumping genes, success story
of more than 20 million years,*

*the news article jubilates. The story
is inescapable today. In a podcast,
the host jokes with his female*

counterpart about shrinking

*birth rates; offers his sperm to childless
women as commodity.*

CONTEMPORARY

Old Road to Asheville

Danny P Barbare

*Deep in the valley
is where I find my peace
where mountain laurel grows
along a winding road
of sun-split trees
and an old bridge of stone.*

CONTEMPORARY

The Greenness

Danny P Barbare

*Feeling
the
first
sun*

*is
the
beginning
of
the
greenness
in
the
grass
and
trees*

*it
is
the
happiness,
the
unfurling
of
the
new*

as
if
a
dream
has
just
taken
root.

CONTEMPORARY

Rights of the Earth (from “Cronache dall’Antropocene”)
Gabriele Micozzi

*At 1.5°C, the coral bleaches white—
a skeleton reef, a cathedral of silence.
Forty percent of insects vanish
in a liturgy no one wrote down.
The Amazon exhales grief:
1.1 billion tons of carbon, net emitter now.
Lung turned wound.
One species every ten minutes.
Not statistics.
Presence. Name. Gone.
We carved rights into stone
for centuries of human crimes—
but the Earth holds no passport,
stands in no court,
casts no vote.
Who speaks for the world that made us?*

CONTEMPORARY

Springwatch
Peter Sarkies

*An early March day
earth warm as red,
but sky squirrel grey, sunless.
Under the peeling birches
an assault musters:
the marching sticks,
all lurid yellow and green,
are trumpeting.
They are just the vanguard.
Beneath them*

*a dormant army, bulbous,
waits to spring up.
Next year they might breach
February.*

CONTEMPORARY

Knowledge

Peter Sarkies

*You think I'm stupid, that I don't know
where I'm going. It's true, my intellect is
no match for yours; Algebra and alchemy
glance off my brown eyes,
like flies from my smooth hide.*

That doesn't mean I don't know.

*Some things I know better than you:
which blades of grass are good to eat;
and what the air smells like just before rain;
and the sweet smell of the earth afterwards
when the grass tingles my tongue.*

*Yes, some things I know without being told.
I know where you took my two- not precisely,
but close enough.
And I know I'm headed there now
because my glands are drying out.*

*A mercy, you say; true, my udders ache.
Still, I am not done
with grass, with rain;
with those brief minutes
when life churned me
and the fence faded.*

CONTEMPORARY

Straits

Michael Sandler

*Despite the world's plight, I remain cooped
in my home office, space for a small desk
between a wall of books (fiction, nature)
and a pier table (platform for the modem).*

*An immense window to a browning view
is on my left as I type this—
the window's actually a sliding door
locked with two bolts I rarely open,
it reflects an interior door opposite
that I pass through when escaping*

*to another room. Don't scold. From these confines
at least I add little to the world's ills.
If you stood at the window (door), you'd see
a few blades of new grass among the brown.
A wren appeared a couple of days ago;
there're fewer this year. The insects they eat
diminishing too. If I went out, would it help,
hurt, or should I not think about it? The gate
so strait, I'd scrape myself passing through it
and might not reach the wren's faraway call.*

*Even if I made it out, I'd navigate blind
with faulty charts among bleached-out reefs.
Outside the window, you may notice
a sole camellia, leaves thick, buds taut with promise—
a hope to believe in for those not past hope.
Not much hope stirs me, a groundhog in retreat
from a looming shadow. Can you help
my helplessness or at least your own, tell me
there's a path through this landscape.
Tell it to me straight.*

CONTEMPORARY

Monsoons

Tushar Sen

*Monsoons enter the stage with rumble of
Thunder, like great sheets of rippling tin, and
Summers exit, quietly after a
Stewed display of blemishing incandescence.
Clouds that were left to soak in the oceans
For months, are hung to dry on the lightning
Fractured sky, like gray coloured quilts with
Silver braids, along with gigantic
Seven coloured arced rebozos. Water
That drips forms large misty silken scarfs, blowing
Incessantly over vast expanses.
The drizzle hissing in the trees sounds like*

*Leaves sizzling; sans steam, sans heat, sans fire.
 Rains dancing on my parapet sound like
 Pearls ricocheting off a marble floor,
 Each ripple fighting for its territory.
 Raindrops write and erase messages as
 They sinuously slide on my window panes,
 Those sparkling drops hanging on electric wires,
 In pursuit of each other, they embrace
 Lovingly, and become ONE, and gravitate
 As a single blob; those wires are long gone, and
 So are the romancing drops. Forlorn waters
 Stream through these narrow lanes, looking for paper
 Boats, made by the gammer who lives no more.*

Note from the poet: Rebozos are long flat scarfs, worn by women covering the shoulders and head; in the poem it refers to a rainbow. Gammer refers to an old countrywoman.

CONTEMPORARY

The swan song of the planet

Anushka

*There
 is a party
 in a yacht—fiberglass—
 coveted by paper straw users
 eating, drinking atm cards.
 The mother is mourned
 with polyester flowers
 that poke at
 her dead arms
 and choke
 her dead
 children.*

CONTEMPORARY

Duck River

Angie Kinman

*I wonder if Great Egret
 and Red-Winged Blackbird
 discuss the drought
 and draining of the river?*

*Or if Turtle lifts his head above
the surface and nods in agreement?
Monarch must chime in as she flits
from crimson clover to clover!*

*Perhaps it is enough I think,
to be a pastoral scene—
a river iced with yellow water lilies,
butterweed blooming on its banks,
and a layer of tufted vetch of purple hues.*

*Perhaps it is enough I pray,
to protect the river from peril.
Stop the landfill owners and developers—
save them from themselves.*

CONTEMPORARY

The whales' way

John Leonard

*'What is a whale to me?' you ask,
As though the whales' way: the wide ocean,
The salt wind, sun-glare, wave-spume,
The brute force—headland-hewing, strait-breaching—
That stirs whale-journeying, whale song,
Their lives, is not also the force that drives
Our life and song—as though the whales' way
Is not the way of human kind too.*

CONTEMPORARY

Magnolia

Philip Villamor

*Even without its iconic creamy white flower
the tree
in front of a simple small house
across the street from an industrial park
in Westminster California
is magnificent*

*Its massive trunk
becomes three large trunks
It divides after only a foot and a half
and captures my imagination*

*I could climb up in it and take a nap
there in the space where it divides
The curve of the space inside makes me sure
that is what it has been used for*

*I imagine the inhabitants of the house
being so proud to have such a tree
I wonder if they have lived there longer than intended
unable to part with it*

*Today
the middle of January in southern California
the large leathery glossy green leaves
with their rusty brown undersides
are enchanting enough*

*I extend my walk
my break from work
some ten minutes
to fully appreciate the beauty*

*I live two minutes from the beach but here
eight miles from the ocean
an undesirable area by comparison
cracked sidewalks older homes and industrial creepage
I will linger longer than I do at the shores*

In the summer months the flowers will bloom

*If I lived in this house
I would find it hard to leave
on those days*

*Only twenty to thirty feet high
but so full
so robust
because of... in spite of*

Magnificent Magnolia

About the poets

Christina Henneman is the author of the poetry collection *Birthmark* (Shearsman, 2025) and three poetry pamphlets. Her awards include the Cerasus Poetry Prize, the Luain Press Poetry Prize, an Agility Award from Arts

Council Ireland, a Mayo Artist Bursary, a Diana Woods Memorial Award in Creative Nonfiction, and the shared Ireland Freedom to Write Award supported by the John Hewitt Society and Irish PEN. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Ireland*, *Magma*, *Poetry Wales*, *The Irish Independent*, *Four Way Review*, and elsewhere.

Danny P Barbare resides in the US. His poetry has been published widely, most recently in *California Quarterly*, *Birmingham Arts Journal* and *Cardinal Sins*.

Gabriele Micozzi is an Italian poet and essayist whose work explores the fault lines between contemporary economic systems and the living world. His ecological poetry manuscript *Cronache dall'Antropocene* and his climate-fiction novel *Luminante* engage with the tradition of deep ecology and the responsibility of bearing witness to systemic ecological loss.

Peter Sarkies is a Biochemist at the University of Oxford in the UK, where I run a research group and teach undergraduates. I live in Oxford with my partner and a ragdoll cat. I have never published poems before and this is my first submission.

Michael Sandler is the author of a poetry collection, *The Lamps of History* (FutureCycle Press 2021), which Kirkus Reviews praised as “a complex, electric work of erudite poems.” Michael lives near Seattle.

Tushar Sen is a finance professional who also engages in sustained creative and scholarly writing. He is the author of *Pandora's Box*, a collection of short stories. His poetry has appeared in *Lekh* and *Indian Review*.

Anushka is a twenty-three-year-old from India who has always been romanticising the world with her pen. Her work has been published by Goya in February 2026 and is forthcoming in *Steam Ticket: A Third Coast Review* (vol 29).

Angie Kinman is a writer and retired teacher living in Nashville, Tennessee. Writing poetry about the natural world has become a spiritual practice since having a daughter, who had special needs, pass away on 2 March 2023.

John Leonard is an Australian poet with five poetry collections published. His poetry has been widely published, in Australia, the UK and the US, and on the Internet, and some of his poems have been translated into various languages and published, most recently *Frisian*. His novel *Shakespeare in Virginia* was published in 2024 in London.

Philip Villamor is an Administrator of Adult Education for a school district in Huntington Beach, California. He has had essays published in *Philosophy Now* and *Political Animal Magazine*. He lives in Huntington Beach with his wife, Marisa, and two kids, Celeste and Luke.



Swimming with Turtles

How Wonder Reconnects Us to the Natural World

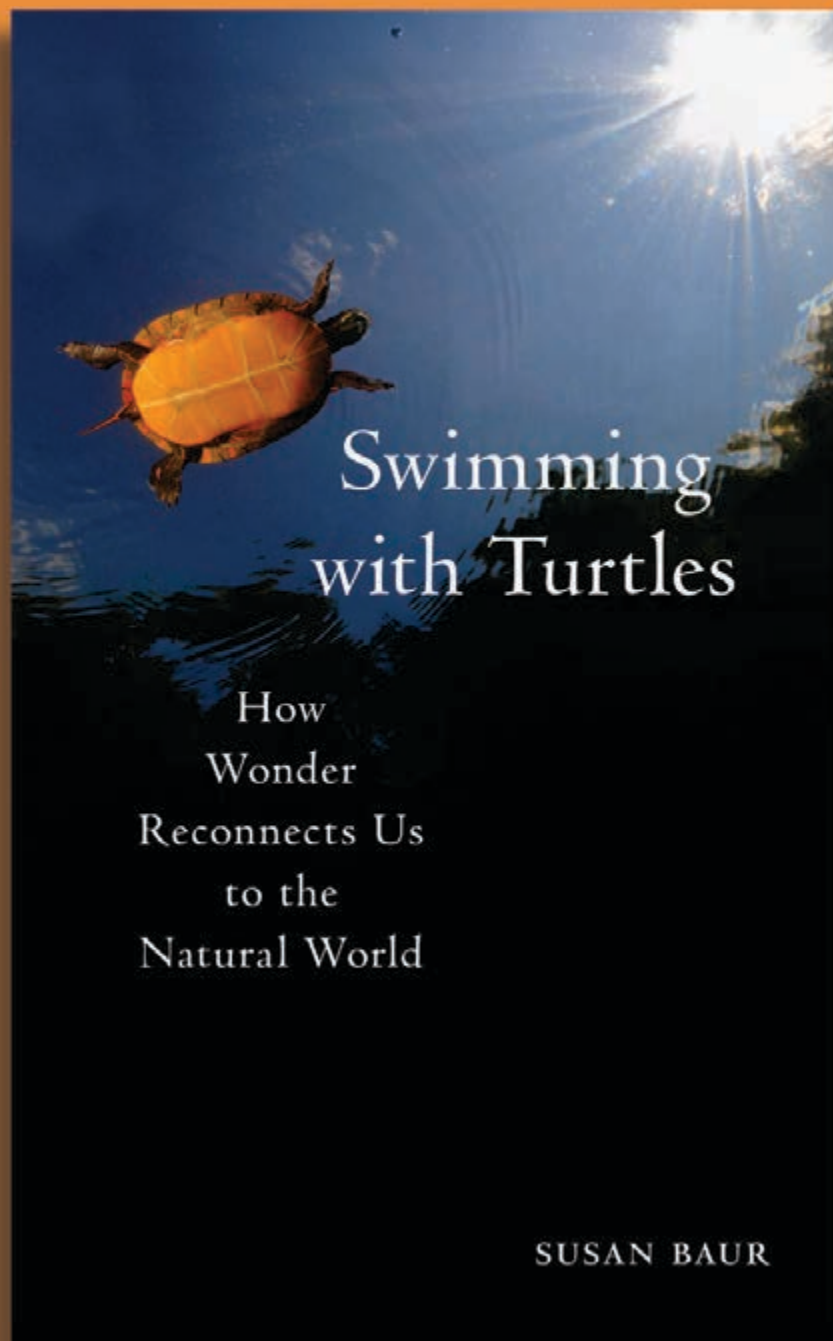
by Susan Baur

**I love this book!
It's a wonder and
a revelation.**

—Sy Montgomery, bestselling
author, *Of Time and Turtles:
Mending the World, Shell by
Shattered Shell*

**I salute Susan Baur,
who offers us a great
gift: an account of
wonder which reveals
the work that a life
changed by wonder
requires, but also the
transformation it can
accomplish.**

—Patrick Curry, author of
*Enchantment: Wonder in
Modern Life*



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