

# Enacting the wisdom of Chief Seattle today in Latin America

Humanity is currently dominated by an anthropocentric interpretation of the value of the rest of nature. The history of this paradigm is briefly explored before the author turns to review recent and ongoing initiatives in Latin America aimed at promoting the ecocentric worldview and developing the necessary supporting legislation. In particular, the author describes major political developments in Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as more local changes in Mexico. The *1st International Forum for the Rights of Mother Earth*, which took place in Mexico City between 1 and 5 June 2016, is reviewed. The article concludes with a rallying call for local endorsements of a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, a continuing of national and global actions to stop destructive projects wherever they are happening, and the mobilization of a global ecocentric alliance.

“The Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth.”

## Chief Seattle

Despite the many interpretations and controversies related to the above proclamation, it remains one of the most accurate and simple statements for expressing that the Earth is a living being, and that all the other living beings that exist on, above and under its surface, including the human species, depend on her continuing to be a healthy organism.

In all the original cultures, since the beginning of civilization, natural laws set the foundation of a respectful and harmonious conviviality among humans and non-humans. This non-written agreement was broken at a certain point in history, when slavery, colonialism, religion and legislations were adopted systematically to justify the domination of the ‘other’, be it another person, another culture or race, or the elements of nature herself.

This development radically changed our governing systems and our understanding of the relationships not only among ourselves as human beings, but also of the Earth to the solar system, the process of evolution of life, and the movements and

evolution of the whole known universe. Culture became anthropocentric, and a small part of humankind turned ‘owner’, by right, of a large part of the planet, including territories, natural ‘resources’ and the lives of its inhabitants.

The Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania became the main targets of this process, but the original nations from Europe were also colonized and dominated by the grace of their kingdoms and churches. And with this, natural law was gradually replaced with Roman law and the Christian religions.

It took centuries for some individuals, and small organizations, networks or alliances of persons, to begin questioning this paradigm and promoting actions to change it. First, in the second half of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, it was the voice of a few naturalists, poets, philosophers and conservationists, advocating for the animals, the mountains, the forests – the last pristine reserves of the Earth.

It took until the 1970s for a new generation of activists to take up the baton and become more proactive. Greenpeace, an early global environmentalist organization, was created and began using non-violent direct action to bring awareness of the dangers of an ecological planetary crisis. And, in 1970,

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the first Earth Day celebration signalled that environmental issues had begun to take an important place in the growing conscience of larger sectors of society.

In the 1980s, other individuals, groups and organizations, such as Earth First!, questioned the anthropocentric worldview and proposed equality of rights for humans and non-human species. Others began questioning the use of nuclear technology both for weapons and for electricity, and even for medical purposes, and opposed the proliferation of such industries. They began advocating, instead, the use of non-contaminating and regenerative energy sources. Early environmental movements thus began to grow and then facilitated the sprouting of other allied organizations.

The Earth Summits of Stockholm in 1972, Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Johannesburg in 2002 (Rio+10) and Rio again in 2012 (Rio+20) brought to the attention of all nations and governments that the global ecological crisis was no longer just a banner of radical and romantic environmentalists, committed ecologists and brave defenders of the Earth, but a real threat to the survival of our species in the immediate future.

The World Social Forums originated in Brazil in 2001, and have, since then, brought together hundreds of thousands of eco-activists and social activists each year from across the world in an effort to create an alternative society (hence their nickname *altermundistas*). This alternative society is based on values that promote not only a global social justice and civil human rights but also a harmony with natural laws and a fruitful and respectful relation between humankind and the Earth.

At the presidential elections of 2008 in Ecuador, the candidate Rafael Correa was elected on a platform generated by the social, indigenous and environmental movements of that nation that questioned the worldwide dominant legislations based on the anthropocentric Roman law. In its place was adopted the rights of Mother Earth as the basis of their federal Constitution. This legislation originated as a contemporary version of the *Sumak Kawsay*,

which is a social philosophy inspired by ancient cosmogonies from the indigenous Andean peoples. The term translates to “good living” – in harmony with ourselves, our communities and, most importantly, our living, breathing ecosphere.

Two years later, Evo Morales, the first indigenous Bolivian president to be elected in his country, also modified the plurinational state’s Constitution. The amendment was inspired by the *Suma Qamaña*, which also means “good living” and translates as a way of living in harmony with the rest of nature that reflects how the ancient cultures of this region lived (considering human rights as secondary in importance to the rights of *Pachamama*, or Mother Earth).

David Choquehuanca Céspedes, Bolivian Minister of the Exterior, expressed the concept employed in the Constitution very clearly in an interview in 2010:<sup>1</sup>

Good living is a process that is just beginning and will soon be a common practice, because for those of us who belong to the culture of life, neither silver, gold nor humankind are more important, because we came here in the last place. Most important are the rivers, the air, the mountains, the stars, the ants and the butterflies. Humankind came last to the Earth; the most important thing is life itself.<sup>1</sup>

We can see here how two small countries in South America have been able, in the 21st century, to reflect in their legislation the proclamation of Chief Seattle. In doing so they have asserted that “the Earth does not belong to us; we belong to the Earth.”

Also in 2010, the *World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth* took place in Cochabamba, Bolivia. This was a response to COP in Copenhagen, in which the countries taking part agreed to create and present a project for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth at the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2011.

Between 2008 and 2011, Pablo Solón Romero, Ambassador to the United Nations for Bolivia, was instrumental in

#### Key dates

- 1972: Stockholm Earth Summit
- 1992: Rio Earth Summit
- 2001: 1st World Social Forum
- 2002: Rio+10 Earth Summit
- 2007: Election of Rafael Correa as President of Ecuador
- 2009: Adoption by the United Nations’ General Assembly of its first Resolution on Harmony with Nature (<https://is.gd/IQLy3Y>)
- 2010: 1st International Mother Earth Day (22 April)
- 2010: People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (Cochabamba, Bolivia)
- 2010: Amendment to the Constitution of Bolivia
- 2012: Rio+20 Earth Summit
- 2016: 1st International Forum for the Rights of Mother Earth (Mexico City, Mexico)
- 2017: New Constitution of Mexico City approved

campaigns that culminated in agreement of the following by the General Assembly:

- the adoption of 22 April as International Mother Earth Day;
- a first resolution on Harmony with Nature;
- the recognition of the human right to water and sanitation;
- the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

In response to these initiatives, several organizations in Mexico City began to lobby at the Chamber of Deputies for a law that included the recognition of the Earth as a living organism, with its own rights. Adopted in September 2013, it is titled the Environmental Law of Protection of the Earth in Mexico City. Although still not a truly ecocentric law, it was nonetheless a step in the right direction, and this small success gave some colleagues and me the confidence to set about organizing an international forum on the rights of Mother Earth, in Mexico.

After a year of preparations we were finally able to send out invitations across the globe for this ambitious project. With the help of Mexico's National Human Rights Commission we were able to grant official invites to Pablo Solón, as well as Vandana Shiva from India, Leonardo Boff from Brazil, Saamdu Chetri from Bhutan, Esperanza Martínez from Ecuador, Maria Mercedes Sanchez from the United Nations and some other 20 special guests to take part in the *1st International Forum for the Rights of Mother Earth*.

Between 1 and 5 June 2016 nearly 800 people attended the forum at the Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Figures 1 and 2), and for the first three days we ran keynote presentations from some of the most respected national and international speakers, as well as panel and round-table discussions aimed at developing an ecocentric approach to Earth jurisprudence. We also held two main sessions for articulating the different proposals coming from these discussions.

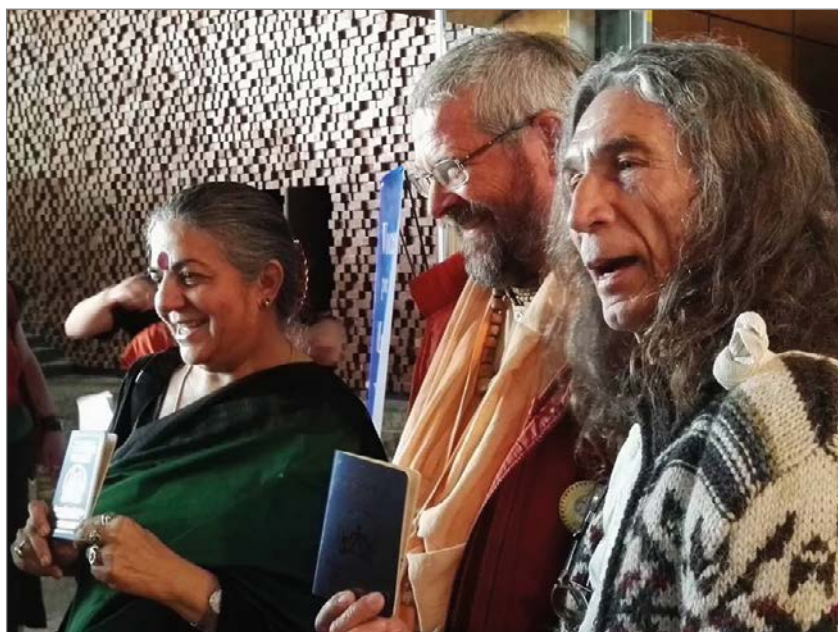
In addition to these daytime sessions, we had three evening presentations of



**Figure 1.** Official opening of the *1st International Forum for the Rights of Mother Earth*.

documentaries relating to the subject of Earth rights, including a magnificent video shown at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. Then, on the fourth day, we held a musical festival with 16 bands from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, all of whom were artists and groups committed to the defence of nature. This event was attended by nearly 4000 people.

On the last day of the forum, which coincided with World Environment Day, we established a temporary peace ecovillage in one of the central parks of Mexico



**Figure 2.** Vandana Shiva, Swami Paramadivaiti and Coyote Alberto, keynote speakers at the *1st International Forum for the Rights of Mother Earth*.

“The peace ecovillage proved to be a very effective way of reaching out to thousands of people who, for the first time, heard of the possibility for all of nature to have rights.”



**Figure 3.** Preparations at the peace ecovillage, El Parque México de la Condesa, 5 June 2016.

City, El Parque México de la Condesa (Figure 3). Here, 0 civil, social and ecological organizations set up stands showing dozens of options for more sustainable city living. There was also a full programme of conferences, workshops, ecumenical ceremonies and cultural and other artistic activities. The peace ecovillage proved to be a very effective way of reaching out to thousands of people who, for the first time, heard of the possibility for all of nature to have rights.

Overall, the forum attracted significant attention on social media, and even among the traditional media, and therefore served as a showcase for our purposes. In the six months following the forum, our common issue received more exposure in Mexico than ever before. This has all taken place within a political landscape in which Mexico City is transitioning from a federal district to a new state.

On 17 and 18 November 2016, a seminar for the rights of nature was held in the capital city of the Mexican state of Guerrero, the first part of the country to approve a law recognizing the Earth as a

living organism with rights of its own. The event was organized by the University of Guerrero and the local state government with the support of a dozen organizations from the region.

More recently, Mexico City adopted a new Constitution. Most relevant to our purpose is Article 18, which was approved between on 4 and 11 January 2017. In the second paragraph it states:

The right of the preservation and protection of nature will be granted by the authorities of Mexico City, in the area or field of influence or application, always promoting citizen participation in these matters.

And in the third paragraph it notes:

For the accomplishment of this disposition [...] Mexico's Congress will have one month to issue a secondary legislation on how to recognize and regulate the wider spectrum of the rights of nature, comprising all its ecosystems and species as a collective entity, subject to its own rights.

This same Constitution recognizes animals as sentient beings, and therefore needing to be treated with dignity. In Mexico City all persons have an ethical duty and legal obligation to respect the life and integrity of animals. These [are] subject to a moral consideration. Their tutelage is a common responsibility.

Laws such as these, including some more explicitly ecocentric, have begun to be applied in Mexico and other places in the world.

On the other side of the coin, the case of Chico Mendes, a Brazilian activist who was murdered in 1988 while defending the Amazon rainforest and fighting for the rights of its indigenous people, warned us of a growing repression of environmental leaders and organizations. Almost 30 years later, the murdering of Earth's defenders shows no sign of abating. But the fight goes on.

At the time of writing, thousands of indigenous Dakota people, along with representatives from more than 200 other tribes and thousands of other supporters, have been resisting the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline to protect the sacred waters in Standing Rock from contamination by oil.

This is just one example of humanity being conscious of the importance of this type of action. Many others group are struggling across the globe to protect the Earth's heritage and all the living beings co-existing within it.

I feel that a ripple effect has been produced by the approval of laws for the rights of Mother Earth, and their endorsement by organizations such as the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, Nature's Rights (formerly Rights of Nature Europe), the World Conscious Pact, the Pachamama Alliance, Derechos de la Madre Tierra (Mexico), the International Rights of Nature Tribunal, Eradicating Ecocide and the United Nations' Harmony with Nature programme, along with campaigns on platforms such as Avaaz.

The next steps for building Earth jurisprudence, I believe, are:



*"It gives them a sense of safety, Laurie"*

- local endorsements of a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth;
- a continuing of national and global actions to stop destructive projects wherever they are happening;
- and the mobilization of a global ecocentric alliance.

We are conscious that laws and declarations are never enough, but when the actions have a legal framework to defend the actors, who are vulnerable to the power of multinational companies and corrupt local governments, we can better hope to offer opposition not only on the battlefronts but also in the courts. There is a long journey ahead to make ecological issues a priority in personal lives, collective decisions and international jurisprudence. Any step, and any small victory, needs to be promoted through our social networks and all the available forms of media, in order to inspire the many billions of us who continue thinking and acting as if we are the centre of life on the Earth and in the Universe.

I thank *The Ecological Citizen* for opening a space for my contribution to this first issue, and I have great confidence in its efforts. ■

#### Notes

- 1 Translated from the article "Vivir bien" – Propuesta de Modelo de Gobierno en Bolivia, which is available at <https://is.gd/9kWzxF> (accessed February 2016).

Laurie

by Juan Cisneros

Higher-resolution version:  
<https://is.gd/ecoartwork>

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