

Rights of nature: A report on a conference in Switzerland

The Geneva Forum is a yearly event run by Objectif Science International, a not-for-profit organization with consultative status at the United Nations (UN). Within the programme for the 2016 iteration was the *5th International Annual Conference on Rights of Nature*, which comprised thirteen oral presentations along with follow-up workshop discussions (for presentation videos and slides, see <https://is.gd/9NVAtK>). Below we summarize those sessions with the most relevance to fostering the development of an ecological society.

Session summaries

Giving Mother Earth legal rights

Doris Ragettli (Rights of Mother Earth) reported on an initiative that is underway to lobby the UN for adoption of a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth. To this effect, a petition is being circulated (<http://petition.rightsofmotherearth.com/>) and, at the time of writing, it has gathered over 847,500 signatures. The goal is to reach 1 million signatures in time to prompt the UN General Assembly to accept the declaration in 2018, the 70th anniversary of the of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Blocking ecological destruction

Miriam Clements (Sustainable Quality Purpose) noted the minimal consequences that exist, at present, for those committing ecological crimes. However, one of the core international crimes specified under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, she argued, can be used to prosecute such offenders. Using this mechanism, she has submitted six case profiles to the International Criminal Court for review (with coverage including

ecological destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, the Amazon rainforest and the Arctic; (see www.sustainablequalitypurpose.com). Under the Rome Statute, Miriam continued, the assets of those committing acts of ecological destruction against those ecosystems could be seized and frozen. By effectively rendering such destruction 'not for profit', this would strongly incentivize the use of environmentally responsible practices, she concluded.

Making sentient animals stakeholders

Laura Bridgeman (www.wearesonar.org) presented a proposal for non-humans to be granted stakeholder status in ecological participatory projects. Laura's discussion was focused on cetaceans, animals whose behaviour has been studied in depth and whose ecological needs are well understood. For these reasons, it was argued, their requirements should be recognised when making decisions that affect ecosystems (*e.g.* when creating marine protected areas). While in a later presentation, which is described below, one of us (Joe) argued against restricting stakeholder status to sentient organisms (arguing, instead, for its validity across biotic and abiotic parts of ecosystems), it is certainly true that what we know about cetaceans presents an emphatic case for questioning the legitimacy of decision-making processes that are based on narrow anthropocentric interests.

Enabling the rights of nature through ecodecocracy

Joe explained how ecocentric democracy (or ecodecocracy; [Figure 1](#)) could be used to enable the rights of nature and how it might be practically implemented at a range of scales. The proposed mechanisms

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Location

Geneva, Switzerland

Date

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included deliberative ecodeмокracy, ecodeмокracy by human proxies with voting rights, ecodeмокracy by juries of citizens and ecodeмокracy by statute.

Redefining the relationship between humanity and Mother Earth

Germana de Oliveira Moraes (Nación Pachamama) spoke about the philosophy of Pachamama, an eco-spiritual and cultural movement inspired by the traditions of the Andes and the Himalayas. The philosophy is based on the realization that nature is an organic and interrelated whole, and it is through understanding that humanity belongs to this whole, it was

argued, that hope arises. Furthermore, the postulation of harmony with the rest of nature as an axis for systems of law and governance can be used to generate a new Earth-centred worldview.

Expanding the UN Harmony with Nature initiative

Finally, Maria Mercedes Sanchez, who is coordinator of the UN's Harmony with Nature programme, gave a remote presentation from New York that updated delegates on progress with the initiative. In particular, it was noted that a trust fund has been created to support the activity, and that Bolivia is leading the way by being the first country to contribute to the fund.

Conclusion

The conference succeeded in bringing together people from a range of specialities and backgrounds for a cross-disciplinary discussion of the rights of nature, and it featured a number of excellent presentations. One criticism that can be made is that the programme at times drifted from its intended focus on the rights of nature to anthropocentric concerns. In addition, the only presentation given a lengthy slot was on animal rights; while a very important topic, this would probably have been better placed at another forum, giving more time for talks on the rights of ecosystems and wild nature.

Overall, Objectif Science International did a commendable job of getting such an array of people together. We are both hopeful that in future years the conference can be further used as a platform for facilitating ongoing collaborative action. ■



Figure 1. A photo presented by Joe during his session on ecodeмокracy.

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