

# Ecodemocracy: Operationalizing ecocentrism through political representation for non-humans

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The authors present a general argument for the political representation of non-humans that sits under the broad umbrella of ecocentrism but that does not rely on one specific non-anthropocentric ethical theory. As such, they hope to help move the debate towards a consensus on the need for such political representation. The argument itself has two main prongs. The first is an empirical one: It has the potential to give more effective representation of non-human interests than the alternative of simply having those interests accounted for through internalization within human needs and wishes. The second combines empirical and normative elements: It can add to the development of Earth jurisprudence by envisioning political decision-making processes that are broadly inclusive, so that the protection of non-human interests does not rely solely on legal protection in terms of, for example, tools employed during court hearings on a case-by-case basis. Two illustrative examples are presented, and the work of the the Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy (GENIE) is introduced.

She is on the point of exhaustion, having just completed an energy-sapping flight to the British coast from her wintering grounds in Africa. She has defied predation and numerous other life-threatening risks along a journey of many thousands of miles, but, on finally reaching her destination, she discovers something that is preventing her from completing the crucial last few inches. There is a fine mesh drawn across the nesting holes that she has used in previous years, the site she needs to be able to raise her next brood. She tries again to fly into one of the holes, with even more determination this time, but in so doing becomes entangled in the mesh. In her struggle to escape, she risks catastrophic damage to her wings.

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The above example represents the type of fate that met some sand martins on the coast of East England in the spring of 2019. Netting had been put up on cliffs that the birds used for nesting each year in an attempt to reduce erosion, which was putting human property at risk (BBC, 2019). The species' legal standing, which

makes it an offence to intentionally kill, injure, or catch individuals or damage their eggs or nests (RSPB, 2019), did not protect the martins from having access to their nesting sites blocked. The incident led local campaigners to speak out and the netting was taken down, but only after the sand martins' breeding cycle had already been interfered with. Had the sand martins been considered, instead, as a stakeholder in the cliff-face and given political representation by human proxies in the deliberations that led to the netting's implementation, then this might well have been avoided.

In numerous other instances, across a wide range of political arenas, anthropocentric decision-making leads to irreversible harm to non-humans.<sup>1</sup> In the face of such outcomes, a major aspect of operationalizing ecocentrism – a worldview that finds intrinsic value throughout nature – must be the achievement of adequate political representation for non-humans. Decision-making processes in line with these ecodemocratic commitments can potentially arise at various geographical and institutional scales, from, say, the management board for a small protected



The sandmartins  
by **Anna Sebastian**

About the artwork: Gouache on paper (25×40 cm; 2019).

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“The moral standing of non-human individuals as entities with interests underpins the need for their political representation as stakeholders.”

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area to a global panel of non-human rights advocates sanctioned by the United Nations.

For reasons of length, our focus in this paper is on representation for wild non-human nature, in terms of living beings, and the illustrative examples presented later are weighted towards conservation biology and concern, primarily animals in the UK and other parts of western Europe. This is not to say, though, that the consideration of domesticated beings is excluded from our thinking. Indeed, one of the examples shows how the needs of wild organisms and domesticated ones could (and should) be considered side by side.

### From moral standing to representation

Philosophically, a defence of the moral standing of all non-human individuals can be made by a number of argumentative routes. One such means is to invoke a universal trait of living organisms, such as the bearing of interests (e.g. Curry, 2017; Donoso, 2017). This provides – as do other routes – a starting point for our main argument here: The moral standing of non-human individuals as entities with interests underpins the need for their political representation as stakeholders (e.g. Lundmark, 1998; Eckersley, 1999; Donoso, 2017). Attributing meaningful interests to species and ecosystems is more controversial (e.g. Smith, 2016), but, as a minimum, their (intrinsic) value still demands some kind of consideration within a fair multi-species democratic process, even if not as stakeholders. The importance of this latter point will become clear in an example on the Iberian lynx. Crucially, what we present here is a general argument in favour of the political representation of non-humans that sits under the broad umbrella of ecocentrism but that does not rely on one specific non-anthropocentric ethical theory. Rather, it is compatible with various non-anthropocentric perspectives and, as such, we hope, helps move the debate towards a consensus on the need for political representation of non-humans.

Related to this, it has been argued in the context of democracy, for example, that a qualification for such representation arises from “the potential to be subject to unfair outcomes” (Gray and Curry, 2016: 23), which would extend to both sentient and non-sentient beings. Here, as Robin Eckersley (2012: 251) noted in outlining her ‘all-affectedness’ principle, “all those potentially affected by ecological risks should have some meaningful opportunity to participate or otherwise be represented in the making of the policies or decisions which generate such risks.” Yet, there are counter-arguments brought forward against different versions of this principle within democratic theory, including from non-anthropocentric perspectives (e.g. Donoso, 2017). An alternative route would be to argue that a democracy whose legitimacy is contingent on being grounded in justice should explicitly consider what is right for not just humans but non-humans too, particularly if we think that non-humans should also be given their due in terms of justice (for non-anthropocentric accounts of justice see Baxter [2005], Schlosberg [2007] and Wienhues [2017]). We will put such questions aside, however, because they are not essential to the more pragmatic argument that we present here.

Based on the broad premise that (at least some) non-humans have interests that can be represented, our argument for the explicit representation of non-human interests within decision-making processes, in terms of ecodemocracy, has two main prongs. The first is an empirical one: It has the potential to give more effective representation of non-human interests than the alternative of simply having those interests accounted for through *internalization* within human needs and wishes. The second combines empirical and normative elements: It can add to the development of Earth jurisprudence by envisioning *political decision-making processes that are broadly inclusive*, so that the protection of non-human interests does not rely solely on legal protection in terms of, for example, tools employed during court hearings on

a case-by-case basis. Additionally, such explicit representation of non-humans would contribute markedly to changing the anthropocentric or human-supremacist zeitgeist.

### Beyond internalization

Political theorist Robert Goodin (1996) argued that non-human nature can be enfranchised by subsuming its interests into those of humans. He championed the internalization of interests of others as a realistic means of enfranchisement. The main alternative to simply internalizing interests is the supplementary implementation of discrete representation of others, but this is something that Goodin deemed impracticable. Internalization, of course, already happens to a degree. When nature lovers vote, for instance, at least some of them do so with non-humans in mind, as much as the options presented allow. While this appears to be the most 'realistic' means in terms of likelihood of implementation, it seems highly unlikely that it would be the most effective means. At present, it remains woefully inadequate as a strategy for enfranchisement, as is evident in non-human nature's widespread exploitation and precipitous decline (e.g. IPBES, 2019). Furthermore, most existing political parties, with rare exceptions such as the Party for Animals, still represent single-species interests. Overall, we thus contend that there is an onus on human societies to strive to find ways to make practicable the discrete representation of non-humans.

As fellow political theorist Robyn Eckersley (1999: 45) has noted: "If we are to try in some way to 'represent nature's interest' then vicarious representation seems unavoidable if justice is to be done." This championing of vicarious representation need not imply that non-humans are inferior in some sense or merely passive beings outside of the scope of our communities and daily lives. Rather, non-humans do participate in communities, as defined in ecological rather than narrow anthropocentric terms, and they are incredibly active in life-making processes. They also express themselves to us, issuing

signals – the 'bad news from below', as Val Plumwood termed it (Plumwood, 1998: 579) – that humans can listen to if they so choose. It is just that they do not speak the language of human democracy (e.g. Eckersley, 1999; Meijer, 2017). This broadening of represented interests, as Gideon Calder (2009: 37) has commented, would shift the "dynamics of the human/nature relationship in a less colonial, less authoritarian, less instrumentalising direction," which would, in turn, make the decision-making process more inclusive.

### Enriching legal mechanisms

At present, Earth jurisprudence discourse is strongly focused on establishing the legal rights of non-human nature (e.g. Borràs, 2016), strengthening animal rights law (Bisgould, 2008; Kopnina and Cherniak, 2016; Sykes, 2016) and criminalizing ecocidal acts (e.g. Higgins, 2010). A prominent real-world development is the well-described case of Ecuador, where constitutional rights for Pachamama have enabled anyone to sue on behalf of the rights of nature since 2008 (Hillebrecht and Berros, 2017). While the enabling of a judicial defence of non-human nature is certainly one key means of operationalizing ecocentrism, many decisions and developments of legislation made by human societies are not done in courtrooms but, instead, rely on democratic processes. Earth jurisprudence (in terms of legal representation) and ecodemocracy (in terms of political representation) are interlinked but separate domains.

Adding to the toolkit of Earth jurisprudence, the development of ecodemocratic decision-making processes also broadens the range of cases that it can effectively cover by introducing an additional procedural element where non-human interests can be considered alongside a range of human interests. In the context of conservation biology, for instance, judicial mechanisms lend themselves well to the seeking of prevention of ecocidal acts, as well as retribution and restorative action in their wake. However, they might not apply so neatly to determining the best course of actions in complex new cases

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such as the sand martins example, or in those relating to the reintroduction of long-ago-extirpated species or projects for rewilding landscapes. Here, democratic deliberations in which a broad range of interests are represented will be more fruitful. Approaching such complex cases with democratic means is also normatively important because, as we mentioned above, justice might influence how legitimate we consider a democracy to be; conversely, democracy is also “necessary to validate norms of justice” (Eckersley, 1999: 46).

### Implementing representation of non-humans

In implementing political representation of non-humans, there are several key questions to address. As Alfonso Donoso (2017) argues, the primary questions that need to be resolved concern what entities should be represented and under which conditions. Here is where different non-anthropocentric theorists will diverge. Yet, all perspectives will also need to

answer a more ‘applied’ pair of questions (Eckersley, 1999):

- Who can speak for whom and on what terms?
- What kind of interaction counts as appropriate participation?

In addressing the first of Eckersley’s questions, it is necessary to start by introducing the concept of human proxies for non-humans (*e.g.* Dobson, 1996) – simply ‘proxies’ hereafter. It would be the responsibility of such proxies to represent their best-informed understanding of the interests of the non-human or non-humans to whom they were assigned.

For reasons of pragmatism, proxies will often need to represent the interests of multiple non-humans. If a one-hectare woodland was scheduled to be felled, for instance, it would be an impossible task to find a proxy for each individual springtail – to cite just one group of organisms – that would be potentially affected. At a density of over 50,000 individuals per square metre, as might be the case (Fjellberg *et al.*, 2005), there would be more than 500 billion individuals at risk. Instead, a proxy might represent the interests of all springtails, or even all litter-dwelling microorganisms, *en bloc*; or, alternatively, they might represent the ‘aggregate’ interests of the ecological community at stake. Where interests might be felt to differ within the ‘bloc’ (in this case, some microorganisms might favour the increased light levels in the felled forest while others would favour the greater moisture of the unfelled habitat), this would need to be factored into the proxy’s contributions to the decision-making process. And, clearly, each individual case to which ecodeмократic considerations could be applied would comprise a different set of non-human interests in need of representation. While this poses institutional challenges (Lepori, 2019), they are challenges that *must* be tackled, considering what is at stake.

One method that has been proposed for the selection of proxies is “a random sample of people from the ‘ordinary’



electorate” (Lundmark, 1998: 52). Such an approach would address the important fear expressed by Mark Brown (2018: 33), who cautioned against “moral or scientific technocrats who attempt to shut down democratic debate with claims to speak for nature’s objective interests.” An alternative approach would be to appoint people with specialist ecological knowledge, who would have a strong epistemic starting position, and possibly a greater willingness to fully engage in the process, than a randomly chosen proxy. The knowledge level of proxies has relevance, too, for the legitimacy of representation of non-humans in the absence of explicit authorization. John O’Neill (2006) argued that the legitimacy can arise epistemically, through possession of the knowledge of the interests of the non-humans represented. This knowledge will never be complete or perfect (Eckersley, 1999), but we do all share a planet and the same basic constituents, which makes it reasonable to take a starting point of some understanding. Carina Lundmark (1998: 53) argues that “through science and experience [...] we can increase our understanding of other species and maybe even uncover what they want.” Certainly, we can as a minimum be confident that some substantial non-human interests usually lie in the conditions for their survival and flourishing (Dobson, 1996). And the quality of representation will be further strengthened if the proxies are given time in preparing for their role not just to enhance their ecological knowledge but to develop an empathy for the non-humans being represented (Gray and Curry, 2019).

Just as non-humans cannot explicitly authorize the appointment of proxies, they cannot object to the quality of their representation (other than by sending signals in the form of a failure to flourish). This means that a potentially important part of any ecodemocratic decision-making process is a human-run safeguard against inappropriate representation. For Eckersley (2012), the best such shield would arise from ordinary processes of public

democratic deliberation; alternatively, a watchdog could be appointed. The need for a safeguard mechanism does not imply that there is some reason to think that a typical proxy would have cause to subvert the process, but it is important that no proxy is above suspicion. The dual aim should be to provide appropriate representation of non-human interests while simultaneously fitting into, rather than circumventing, the deliberative democratic process.

The short answer to the second of Eckersley’s questions is that a robust ecodemocratic process is likely to involve both representation in deliberative procedure and voting rights, depending on the institutional setting. A particular strength of voting rights is their explicit affirmation of the moral standing of the non-humans represented. A deliberative dimension is needed too, though, in order to fully infuse the decision-making process with the proxy-voiced needs and wishes of the non-humans concerned, as well as to minimize the problematic potential of a technocratic infringement on the democratic process. It might be unrealistic to hope that such a system would satisfactorily represent all views. As Brandon Keim (2018) notes:

There’s no assurance that every conflict would be solved equitably. Some tensions may be intractable. But that’s the nature of politics. Democracy isn’t a promise that everyone will end up with what they want; it’s a system for working things out among every voice that has a right to be heard.

Yet, in supporting Earth jurisprudence, an ecodemocracy with all its imperfections would be a significant improvement over single-species democracy and signal a healthy movement towards deepening the human understanding of justice.

### Illustrative examples

As mentioned above, decision-making processes in line with ecodemocratic commitments can potentially arise at various geographical and institutional scales. One suggestion for a global-scale

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The Iberian lynx  
by Anna Sebastian

About the artwork: Gouache on paper (25×40 cm; 2019).

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implementation of inclusive decision-making processes is to form an 'Earth system council', which would constitute an ecological analogue to the UN Security Council security council (Burke and Fishel, 2016). At a more local level, to give one example, inclusive decision-making processes could be used to give identified non-human stakeholders a voice in the application processes for development projects (Winter, 2019). Below, we offer two further examples that together illustrate different, but far from exhaustive, potential contexts and scales for the political representation of non-human interests.

### Translocations for species preservation

The Iberian lynx is the world's most endangered feline species. The plight of these cats has stemmed in part from loss to development of their favoured scrubland habitat and road-kill fatalities. Also instrumental in this lynx species' steep decline, on account of a strong dietary preference for rabbits, was the introduction of myxomatosis by humans

to Western Europe in the 1950s and the emergence and anthropogenic spread of rabbit haemorrhagic disease in the 1980s (Platt, 2011). A major part of the conservation strategy for this species involves translocating individuals from the stronger remaining populations to other suitable areas (Figure 1).

Beyond anthropocentric motivations, such an intervention might be focused on honouring the intrinsic value of the species, the moral standing of the individual lynx affected, some broader considerations about the value of biodiversity, or – all the more robustly – the combination of these rationales. If the moral standing of the individual lynx were the main motivation, the examination of whether such translocations are in their interest is something to which an ecodeмократический процесс could be applied. On this individual level, weighing against translocation would be the stress it would cause, while weighing in favour might be, for instance, the promise of a more abundant food supply. The representation of non-human interests by proxies would need to take these



Figure 1. The Mediterranean scrubland and forest of the Sierra de Morena, one of the last refuges for the Iberian lynx (photo: Romita Gray).



**Figure 2.** A European badger in the UK (photo: Peter Burnage [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>]).

issues into consideration and then have to engage in broader deliberations with a wider group of stakeholders that would introduce additional concerns and issues. Further impacts that would also have to be considered include the impact on non-humans in receiving ecosystems.

Translocation considerations are not unique to the Iberian lynx, and with rapid anthropogenic climate change and the fragmentation of landscapes combining to potentially trap many wild populations in increasingly unsuitable habitats (Lovejoy, 2019), the practicalities and ethics of this conservation intervention are only going to get increasingly pressing and complex. Inclusive decision-making processes offer a means of reaching decisions that take into account the interests of various non-human stakeholders.

### Animal culling policies

In the UK, culling licences can be issued that obviate the legal protection of badgers (Figure 2), motivated by an aim to reduce the transmission of tuberculosis (TB) to domesticated animals. In the process of being culled, badgers might be trapped in cages with no water or shade, where they will experience terror and be at risk of dying from thirst or heat stroke (Dalton, 2018), while those who survive to experience gunshot execution might suffer for nearly a minute after the weapon is fired (Rahim, 2018).

An ecodemocratic decision-making process would give badgers a voice in order to uphold their interests. A proxy, representing badgers *en bloc*, could express the creatures' interest in survival and avoiding physical suffering and anguish

“There remains an urgent need to trial the implementation of inclusive decision-making processes at different scales and in a range of contexts.”

caused by humans. The domesticated animals to whom TB might be transmitted should also be identified as a stakeholder meriting proxy representation, which might bring into the process, among other factors, a desire for a life free from the diseases that they are exposed to in their artificial confinement. There are various additional non-human interests that might be considered for representation, and farmers themselves would of course be among the other stakeholders. With a broadened pool of recognized stakeholders, the decision-making process could not just robustly cover government finances and human livelihoods but take a substantially more inclusive view on the lives affected by such a policy.

### GENIE

Back in 2006, Saward called for the institutionalization of “multiple modes of representing a range of shifting human and nonhuman interests” in order to “test openly in argument varied representations of nature” (quoted in Brown [2018: 46]). More than a decade on, there remains an urgent need to trial the implementation of inclusive decision-making processes at different scales and in a range of contexts. To assist with this need, a group of volunteers founded the Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy (GENIE; [www.ecodemocracy.net](http://www.ecodemocracy.net); Figure 3) in 2018. GENIE is a loose network of individuals, from a variety of backgrounds, who are united by an interest in seeing different modes of implementing inclusive decision-making processes trialled, refined and

built upon over the course of time. GENIE receives no funding and its limited resources are focused on serving as a hub for coordinating information on implementation efforts, developing toolkits to support implementation, and conducting targeted small-scale advocacy for inclusive decision-making processes.

### Concluding remarks

By giving a human voice to non-humans, ecodemocratic procedures will help in widening the political community and have the broader potential to increase awareness of the interests, needs and lives of non-humans within a world all-too dominated by human societies. Such awareness would, in turn, create a more favourable environment for making ecodemocracy possible on several institutional scales and could thus foster a positive feedback between an appreciation of and respect for non-humans and their urgently needed political representation. ■

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> To give just one example, a Eurasian lynx named Lillith was shot dead in November 2017 after escaping from an animal park in Wales, following a unilateral decision-making process centred on the false idea that there was a threat to humans from this formerly native and very secretive species (Busby, 2017). No amount of protesting could bring Lillith back to life.

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Figure 3. The logo for the Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy (GENIE).

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ANNOUNCEMENT from GENIE

## The Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy

We are a new organization, established in 2018, with the mission of developing and expanding political, administrative, and legal initiatives to help adequately represent non-human nature within democratic processes and thus give voice to the ‘silent stakeholders’ in the more-than-human world.

We are currently seeking volunteers to help us trial implementation of ecodemocracy in their own localities. If you are interested in helping us in our mission, please get in touch with us via: [www.ecodemocracy.net/contact.html](http://www.ecodemocracy.net/contact.html)

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