# Ecologies of oppression: Fraying the fabric of justice

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**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.**

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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 Celermajer (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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