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Nature's Rights in a Promethean World

Contribution to GTI Forum [Interrogating the Anthropocene: Truth and Fallacy](#)

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As eloquently [described](#) by Paul Raskin, we find ourselves in a predicament. The Anthropocene and its consequences call on us to focus not just on what we do, but on who we are. Addressing it in any meaningful way is, in other words, an existential issue. If we are to be the solution, we have to abandon the ideology rooted in human supremacy over nature that has made the scale and impact of the human venture so devastating.

Prometheus, the titan, stole the fire from the gods and gave it to humans, whom he loved dearly. Now we have desecralized the world and, with fuel from ancient eras, set it on fire. The name Prometheus means “to think before.” The rational capacity of humans is what is most celebrated by the culture that views ancient Greece as its cradle. Rationality is the quality most invoked to justify the ideology of supremacy.

The defining feature of our historic moment is not, however, our taking control of the earth, nor our losing control. The lesson we need to learn now, which is at the heart of a Great Transition, is that we never had any control of the earth, that control is not an appropriate approach to a complex, self-organizing, unpredictable whole. That would create new assumptions, making an Ecozoic era a possibility.¹

I hope we are not so much waking up to losing control, as opening our eyes to the reality of control as futile hubris. All the ideas of governing and managing a planet are misleading. Building on the ideology of human supremacy and control, we have tried to manage the unmanageable living world with terrible results. If anything, it is time to govern ourselves now, instead of trying to govern everyone and everything else (the seas, the forests, the wild “game”).

Even if this is a matter more concerning who we are than what we do, we have to act. There can be no other option than collective self-restraint. So, how do we design for a culture in harmony with nature? Without the idea of control and aware of the risks of growth and efficiency as driving forces?

There is no time to lose. Ideas travel easily and quickly through time and across scales, and should play a leading role. The most powerful idea I know is the simple yet paradigm-shifting and concrete idea of acknowledging that Nature, just as humans, has rights. This idea is perfectly well understood by current legal systems, which are essentially the set of rules the dominant culture operates by. Law is the DNA of society, as South African lawyer Cormac Cullinan has pointed out.² Rights of Nature is inspired by, informed by, and to a large extent driven by indigenous peoples, who see it as a bridge between their worldviews and modern institutions. It also has the great advantage that it is already happening all over the world, involving various contexts and actors—from local communities to Superior Courts.³ Indeed, I have been involved in an effort last year to inspire the Global Biodiversity Framework (the strategic action plan of the anthropocentric Convention on Biological Diversity) to acknowledge that Nature has the right to exist, not just as a resource for humans.⁴ The draft of this framework (to be adopted in Kunming, China in 2021) is now the very first international treaty to acknowledge the rights of Nature. We are working to further balance human rights with a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth, which has existed in draft form for ten years now.⁵

It is not possible to live in harmony with nature as long as it is legal to destroy it. If Nature has the right to exist, mass damage and destruction of ecosystems, ecocide would be criminal. This idea has also gained a lot of traction last year, with six governments showing interest in it and a high-profile drafting panel recently assembled to provide a draft definition for ecocide as an international crime.⁶

Rights of Nature and Ecocide law are powerful, philosophically sound, and, importantly, feasible ideas. They make the creative force of Nature a starting point for development. They use existing institutions in transformative ways. Of course, all frameworks and institutions are flawed and fragile in these times. However, we need to use the power of the system in order to transform it. I

do not know whether these ideas can make a successor civilization worth the name possible, but I do believe they can support us to live with dignity, even beauty, in a wild world.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Berry, "The Ecozoic Era," E. F. Schumacher Society Lecture, October 1991, <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/the-ecozoic-era/>.
2. Cormac Cullinan, *Wild Law: A Manifesto for Earth Justice* (Cape Town: Siber Ink, 2002).
3. Craig Kauffman and Pamela Martin, "Constructing Rights of Nature Norms in the US, Ecuador, and New Zealand," *Global Environmental Politics* 18, no. 4 (2018).
4. Rights of Nature in CBD, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://rightsofnaturecbd.earth/>.
5. Pella Thiel, "Time for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature," *Medium*, June 4, 2020, <https://medium.com/@pella.thiel/time-for-a-universal-declaration-on-the-rights-of-nature-ad97263a39f4>.
6. "Top International Lawyers to Draft Definition of 'Ecocide,'" Stop Ecocide, press release, November 17, 2020, <https://www.stopecocide.earth/press-releases-summary/top-international-lawyers-to-draft-definition-of-ecocide>.

About the Author



Pella Thiel is an ecologist and the co-founder of the Swedish Transition Network, End Ecocide Sweden (currently chairperson), Save the Rainforest Sweden and the Swedish Network for Rights of Nature (currently coordinator). She serves as one of the experts in the UN Harmony with Nature initiative. She teaches ecopsychology and coordinated the first three Rights of Nature Conferences in Sweden. She holds an MSc in ecology from Stockholm University.

About the Publication

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