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Ecodemocracy in Practice: Exploration of Debates on Limits and Possibilities of Addressing Environmental Challenges within Democratic Systems

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Abstract

This article examines the practical implications of ecological democracy or ecodemocracy, inquiring how capable democratic societies are of addressing environmental challenges. It asks: What is needed to secure democratic legitimacy for policy measures to benefit nonhuman species? What would ecodemocracy look like in practice? Different types of existing and possible types of representation are discussed, including the expansion of the precautionary principle, the Council of All Beings or Parliament of Things, and representation through the Parties for Animals. A possible approach in the form of a mandate for proxy eco- representation similar to civil rights through continuous affirmative action is investigated. Limitations and possibilities of each approach for nature representation are weighed.

Key words. anthropocentrism, democracy, ecocentrism, ecological democracy, ecodemocracy, ecological justice, environmental justice, multispecies justice, rights of nature.

Introduction: Democracy and environmental problems

Several social and political scientists question the capacity of current democratic systems to address environmental challenges and/or the interconnected concepts of the interests and rights of animals and Nature, of which we are part (Midgley, 1994; Mathews, 1996; Eckersley, 2004; Dryzek, 2005; Lidskog & Elander, 2010). In this article, we argue that conventional democracy based on one-species representation falls short of decision-making that benefits Nature. It is argued that anthropocentric motivation is unlikely to protect all life on the planet, especially instrumentally "useless" species (Katz, 1999). Despite the evidence of mass extinctions and the

inability to address climate crises, the pathological attachment to the idea of “progress” in our democracies remains (Foster, 2015). This belief underpins environmental politics within advanced modern consumer societies that foster denial (Blühdorn, 2007) and limit our understandings of extinctions and human and nonhuman world relationships.

Since nonhumans are not represented in parliamentary systems, their interests are often ignored (Lidskog & Elander, 2010) and our society and politics remain exclusively anthropocentric (Baxter, 2005; Washington et al., 2017; Piccolo et al., 2018; Gray & Curry, 2020). Therefore, following Eckersley (2004), in an anthropocentrically-minded democracy that values biodiversity only in economic terms, there will be no institutional guarantees that respect nonhuman interests. Recognizing the legal rights of Nature is one way, but in many jurisdictions, this remains difficult to implement or operationalize (Taylor et al., 2020). Rethinking “progress” has become increasingly critical.

As a solution, this article proposes uniting animal rights with Rights of Nature (Naess, 1973; Kopnina et al., 2018a) approaches, which are both critical of human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism. This research discusses how existing forms of democracy can form a basis for eco-representation (Baxter, 2005; Eckersley & Gagnon, 2014; Gray & Curry, 2016), inclusive pluralism (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016), and “Earth Jurisprudence” (Cullinan, 2003; Burdon, 2011) both through existing and still possible democratic means. This article uses existing forms as a base to advance ecodecocracy, including the application of the precautionary principle, the Council of All Beings (Seed et al., 1988; Macy 2005), the Parliament of Things (Latour 1993), and Parties for Animals.

By adopting an environmental philosophy that stresses the intrinsic values of nonhuman species and biological diversity, this article argues for eco-representation at individuals, populations, species, communities, and governance levels. Ecocentric (ecology or ecosystem)-centered democracy or ecodecocracy is a legal and political system in which nonhumans and their habitats are represented and nonhuman beings’ right to survive and flourish can be accounted for in human society’s decision-making processes (Stone, 2010; Gray & Curry, 2016; 2020). But can existing democratic governments effectively solve the most pressing environmental problems of our time?

This paper critically examines steps to ensure existing democratic systems are more inclusive and ecocentric. Some of the emerging questions include: What is needed to secure democratic legitimacy for policy measures for the benefit of nonhuman species that may impose added responsibility on their present electorates? What are the best strategies for swaying current electorates to accept these burdens? Will representatives agree on what the “good” is regarding millions of species, climate change, and biodiversity loss? These are questions worthy of analysis in environmental politics.

Before we turn to practicalities and the assignation of rights, we address the larger requirements of ecodecocracy. To begin, we ask under which conditions will almost 8 billion (potential) voters speak up on behalf of the Earth system, composed of interactive and reciprocal relationships that connect every organism on Earth into one planetary and complex interdependent ecosystem. Firstly, we argue for the recognition of the grave injustice that innumerable nonhuman beings have no legally recognized voice in human democratic decision-making. This exposes current democracies as vastly inadequate to address the planet-wide subordination of places and beings to a single dominant species. To quote Crist (2012, p. 148):

Our conceit has made us so imagination-poor that we cannot fathom that future people, disabused of our species-small-mindedness, will desire to live in a world rich in kinds of beings and kinds of places. Hope lies in humanity’s coming to realize the immensity of what we are irretrievably losing, which is not resources. Hope lies in the fact that we are native to the Earth: we have the potential of understanding that we are losing our own family.

This realization of injustice recognizes limits in the human capacity to meet projected future farmed animals’ product demand, while also “achieving animal welfare and environmental goals, limits that signal the need for urgent action to also reduce overconsumption and escalating demands” (Garnett et al., 2013, p. 34). Resolving such tensions must constitute part of the resolution process. What is proposed here is neither acceptance of a conventional democratic

model nor a conspiracy theory of environmentalists imposing a totalitarian state – but an expansion of democracy to include greater-than-humans.

Relevant definitions

These definitions are key to the discussion we offer, with the cognizance that the making of ecodemocracy is beset with complex challenges, aimed at combating overt or covert forms of speciesism (Singer, 2009) and anthropocentrism. “Anthropocentrism” is defined as: “the privileging of that class of beings who best fulfill a conception of what is considered to be quintessentially human over and against all nonhuman others” (Calarco, 2014). “Democracy” here refers to a system of government by (parts of or whole) population of a nation through chosen representatives. “Ecodemocracy” is intertwined with “earth democracy”, “eco-justice” or “Earth justice”, and refers to political processes that recognize the intrinsic value of non-human beings through “inclusive pluralism” (Cullinan, 2003; Baxter, 2005; Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016; Gray & Curry, 2011). “Environmental justice” is social justice focused on equalizing relationships and access to so-called “natural resources” among different social groups (Bird Rose 2007; Schlosberg 2004). By contrast, proponents of ecological justice emphasize that we should also consider non-human species as morally significant agents (Baxter, 2005; Cafaro & Primack, 2014; Mathews, 2016).

“Ecocide” is a crime against elemental Earth itself, the damage caused to the land and water, the flora, and fauna within one or several affected ecosystems (Higgins, 2010). “Earth jurisprudence” refers to a philosophy of human law and governance based on the idea that the welfare of each member of the community of beings, including humans, is dependent on the welfare of the Earth as a whole (Cullinan, 2003; Burdon, 2011). The term “nonhumans” (or “greater-than-humans”, or “animals”) includes vertebrates such as mammals, birds, marsupials, and reptilians; and invertebrates such as sea urchins, earthworms, sponges, jellyfish, insects, and snails, but also plants, fungus, algae, etc. “Nonhuman nature” refers to environment, ecosystems, or habitats that might have been altered by human anthropogenic change. “Wilderness” refers to minimally human-altered “Nature” (Sitka-Sage et al., 2017). The term “interests” refers here to well-being, with concepts and theories of interests, rights, virtues, etc. being different lenses by which to understand and act on what well-being means. The term “rights” refers to a set of legal, political, and/or moral understanding or recognition of certain kinds of (ethical) considerations of what is in the best interest of a species, based on the recognition of “intrinsic value” (Naess, 1973; Midgley, 1994; Singer, 2009).

While “animal rights” might protect the animal from human use, “animal welfare” might permit animal use as long as they are used “humanely” (Garner, 2015). Similarly, “Rights of Nature” refer to ecology-centered (“ecocentric”, or “deep ecology”) protection of the environment, ecosystems, or habitats (Naess, 1973; Kopnina et al., 2018a; Piccolo et al., 2018; Washington et al., 2017; 2018). In “shallow ecology”, a usually healthy environment is protected for the sake of human welfare, not because of recognition of its intrinsic value (Naess, 1973; Mathews, 2016). “Intrinsic value” refers to the non-instrumental value, independent of human benefits, of living beings, and ecological systems (Nelson et al., 2016). For Mathews (2016:143), “To possess intrinsic value is to be valuable in one’s own right, and inherently worthy of moral consideration”, and further that “Biocentrism ... attributes intrinsic value, and hence moral considerability, to non-human entities in their own right”. The terms “eco-representatives” and “proxies” are legal advocates for future generations of people, animals, and Nature (Treves et al. 2019). Human proxies represent “nonhumans” or “Nature” through “ecodemocracy” (Eckersley, 1995; 2004; Lundmark, 1998; Baxter, 2005; Dobson, 2010).

Can existing democratic governments solve pressing environmental problems?

Whether democratic governments can move toward ecological justice depends on many factors including prevailing worldviews and beliefs in society, the power of the industry, and other social institutions such as the education system, the role of political parties, and grassroots movements. On the level of civil society, experimental and experiential groups emerge that play with alternative perspectives on human nature and human-animal relations.

The belief that democracy can protect nonhumans is based on the “convergence thesis” which assumes that a healthy environment is beneficial to human welfare (Norton, 1986). Since the protection of the natural world is in the interests of humans, anthropocentric and nonhuman-centered policies are assumed to converge in the long run (Norton, 1986; Light, 1996). This process is supposed to be supported by the twin processes of democracy and the advancement of “postmaterial values”, the transformation from economic to more “enlightened” ones such as environmental protection (Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987). This transformation is believed to take place through economic development, technology, and education (Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987; Light, 1996). In Africa, for example, it has been noted that even the issue of community conservation and participatory approaches to biodiversity protection is complicated by economic factors (Fitzgerald, 2015; Habu & Muhammad, 2017). Human-wildlife conflict has taken its toll on wildlife conservation because of crop damage and the levels of (illegal) killing wildlife (Osborn & Parker, 2002; Plotnik & de Waal, 2014). It was suggested that unless governments take drastic measures in solving their people’s economic problems when it comes to the issue of allocation of natural resources, ecodemocracy will hardly be supported.

The environmental crisis has been attributed to the increasing human population and growing material demands stimulating production and consumption (Crist et al., 2017). Thus, one key action is foregrounding ecocentrism and ecojustice in political, legal, and economic decision-making (Stone, 2010). This includes promoting volunteer non-coercive family planning (Crist et al., 2017) and striving towards degrowth or steady-state-economy approaches (Kallis, 2011; Washington & Maloney, 2020). Re-pacing development may be easier to implement where environmental deprivation is already making itself felt (Tremblay & Dunlap, 1977), simultaneously protecting developing countries’ economies. Otherwise, growing demands on natural resources will continue to jeopardize ecological integrity. In turn, long-term prosperity and alleviation of poverty become all but impossible, rendering the Sustainable Development Goals unachievable (Kopnina, 2020). Economic development, which critics have identified as a form of a neo-colonial vision of progress, leads to short-term thinking. Earning quick money through poaching and logging gives way to long-term security through eco-tourism. However, some political and economic barriers need to be overcome (Habu & Muhammad, 2017).

It can be hypothesized that any politician wanting to start subtracting environmental costs from the national economy accepts funding from established allies and industrial lobby groups (Ranci re, 2007). What is perhaps most disturbing, is not just the fact that democracies are influenced by powerful industrial lobbies, but that even environmentally-conscious politicians, may fail to push through reforms that are unpopular with the voters and lobbies. After all, the relationship between the democratic system and the capitalist market economy (Ranci re, 2007) is stronger than it seems at first sight and affects the ways Nature is treated (Goldman, 1998)

Even in an “enlightened democracy”, Warwick (1998) warns that the assumption that the twin processes of education and democracy are globally transforming values “needs to be treated with some degree of caution” (p. 604). Despite more than half a century of environmental education, environmental problems have worsened (Bonnert, 2013; Sitka-Sage et al., 2017). While “diversity”, “pluralism” and “equality” are embraced in democratic societies (Goodman, 2019), these virtues have little bearing upon rights or well-being improvements in other species (Eckersley, 1995; 2004; Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016). The great moral wrong of extinction (Cafaro & Primack, 2014), or the “silent killer” of habitat destruction (Fitzgerald, 2015), or the miserable conditions of farm animals (Crist, 2012) are still largely not recognized as ethically abhorrent in current democracies as these are not concerned with the rights of nonhumans.

It has been argued that without recognition of the intrinsic value of nonhuman Nature, no institutional guarantees, legally or politically, can be given that nonhuman well-being will be considered (Katz, 1999; Washington et al., 2017; Kopnina et al., 2018a; Piccolo et al., 2018). Perspectives foregrounding ecocentrism supporting nonhuman Nature: individually, in parts, or as a whole, needs integration into the functioning of political and legal institutions (Eckersley, 1995; 2004; Peterson, 2013; Lynn, 2015; Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016).

While Western “enlightened” societies recently became alert to safeguarding the rights of people of different gender, sexual orientations, and especially racism (Williams, 2020), this moral consideration applies only to humans (Bisgould, 2008). For example, the use of millions of

laboratory animals to develop the COVID-19 vaccine is justified by the idea of the “common [human] good” (Toliver, 2020). Following postmaterial values theory (Inglehart & Flanagan 1987), the choice of “common good” in people of less privileged backgrounds might be determined not as much by the images of billions of dead lab animals but of affordable products. Industrial-scale farming operations, slaughterhouses, factories, and enormous quantities of food waste suggest that the way one species turns all other species into “fictitious commodities” (Polanyi, 2001) is by no means competitive with the idea of democracy.

A key question regarding including nonhuman beings in the sphere of moral concern is whether national governments can secure lasting electoral support for imposing major responsibilities on electorates for the benefit of nonhuman species (Lidskog & Elander 2010). Empirically speaking, it appears they struggle to do so, even for the sake of electorate health. Nevertheless, the majority support of the electorate and society need to deliberate on what is “good” regarding millions of species, climate change, and biodiversity loss. The question of what is “good” is of course ethical and relative, while some of the issues discussed here are practical (Midgely, 1998).

Pragmatically, existing Green parties primarily focus on the environment when it affects human welfare (Kopnina, 2019a). In mainstream politics, words like ecology and sustainability are increasingly used in rhetorical rather than meaningful ways, with anthropocentric economic policies (Washington & Maloney, 2020). Meanwhile, grass-roots environmental movements impact the political agenda beyond green parties. Fridays For Future (FFF), the global activist movement calling for ‘climate justice’ inspired by the Swedish youth activist Greta Thunberg, brought millions to the streets, issuing a call for both environmental and ‘democratic renovation’. FFF protests affected the EU elections in Germany and Austria by boosting results for the Green parties (Spanning, 2020). Yet, aside from Parties for Animals, the political representation of nonhuman beings is rare, and social movements that defend Nature often compete with a myriad of human-centered interest groups, with mutually exclusive interests (Kopnina, 2019b).

For example, in 2018, in Paris, the Gilets Jaunes, protesters in yellow vests, blocked roads opposing the decision of the French government to raise taxes on fossil fuels. When interviewed many protestors identified as “common citizens” demanding the government not interfere with their livelihoods. Simultaneously, in 2018, Extinction Rebellion, a group of activists that originated in London, engaged in civil disobedience and roadblocks to pressure their government into action on climate change and species extinction, which demonstrates an ecocentric viewpoint. Extinction Rebellion modeled their non-violent direct action and strategies on the civil rights, suffragettes, and social liberation movements of centuries prior. Because of the shifting membership and lack of coherency in goals and practicable policy reforms in both cases, the value of these protests is yet to yield tangible results, hence, the role of government remains central.

What is needed to secure democratic legitimacy for non-anthropocentric policy?

To accept complex trade-offs of eco-representation, ecocentric or animal ethics must be widely shared in society. If this does not occur, nonhumans' interests are likely to be underrepresented (Werzansky-Orland, 2019; Wilson, 2019). To achieve this representation, Lundmark (1998) and Dobson (2010) both suggest a form of proxy representation in parliament. Lundmark reflected that “a random sample of people from the ‘ordinary’ electorate act on behalf of non-humans” (p. 52).

Given that nonhuman stakeholders cannot formally authorize their representation in political discussion or deliberation, direct representation is impossible (Gray & Curry, 2020). According to O’Neill (2006), the legitimacy of representation can instead arise through the possession of knowledge concerning the interests of non-human stakeholders. Existing deliberative democracy allows for “virtual representation” through the internalization of the interests of nonhuman stakeholders (O’Neill, 2006). The practicalities of this proxy representation are not yet fixed, yet some could complement Parties of Animals by expanding focus on a spectrum between domestic animals and wild species and habitats.

The most drastic plan would reserve places for nonhuman representatives, based on existing electorates, and as mandated requirements or quotas. This can be seen as compensation for the fact that nonhuman beings cannot appoint themselves as candidates, cannot speak in human assemblies. Proxy representation raises questions about how individuals will be elected, whom they will represent, and how representation will be balanced with existing anthropocentric politics. To ensure democratic legitimacy for ecocentric policies, proportionate representation (number of individuals within a species, or the significance of species for the flourishing of other species) might be possible. However, as a global census of species is impossible, marginal geographies and their species may remain unknown. Mathews (2016) proposes the “bio-proportionality principle”, seeking not merely viable but optimal populations of all species. Allowing all species to flourish has specific policy implications and strengthens the case for increasing the extent of protected areas (Mathews, 2016) with minimal intervention, while also considering the ethical reduction of human populations (Crist et al., 2017).

How to make the existing democratic systems more inclusive and ecocentric?

To address the shortcomings of current democratic systems, a typology of existing and possible ecodeмократic initiatives is emerging. Some steps have already been taken, such as the constitutional entrenchment of the precautionary principle (Eckersley & Gagnon, 2014), which is already widely applied in the context of climate change and pollution. Related to the precautionary principle, the Vorsorgeprinzip helps to foresee, forewarn, and forestall harm in the form of care ethics in public policy which has relevance in scientific disputes about certainty (Bernard, 2016; Lynn, 2018). It applies to harm-causing actions when scientific knowledge of the consequences of this action is lacking or uncertain (O’Riordan, 2013). For example, some governments have taken the precautionary principle regarding wildlife trade based on emerging evidence that the consumption of wildlife caused the spread of COVID-19 (UNEP, 2020).

The restraint to limitless expansion, in terms of population and consumption, will also bear multiple benefits to humans, such as a healthy and abundant planet for future generations, and deeper understanding and affection for what it means to co-inhabit the Earth (Crist, 2012). This could lead to a meaningful change in human society. Another possibility of giving a legally recognized voice to nature in human decision-making processes does not necessarily involve proxy representation, but political engagement emanating from civil group activities, like The Council of All Beings (Seed et al., 1988). The activities of the Council involve deep ecology-inspired “despair and empowerment” workshops, targeted at deeper political engagement for the community of all life. The workshops involve a communal ritual in which participants speak on behalf of another being or entity (for example, a wolf or a river). After each has spoken about their species’ concerns, participants talk as humans about their responsibilities to remove the threats or correct the injustices identified. More latterly, the concept of “water literacy” and “environmental literacy” (Hawke, 2012; Hawke & Palsson, 2017) encourages “listening in to the river” and recognize “a living presence”, as “its own self” (Bird Rose 2007, p. 18) and inviting nature to the policy table (Muecke, 2007).

These workshops are useful in helping individuals to experience the beauty and power of our interconnectedness with all life. The Council of All Beings method is normally not applied in a political context but intended for audiences keen to “better understand both their place in the ecosphere as humans and how they should behave” (Gray and Curry, 2020). Similar to the Council is the Parliament of Things, based on Bruno Latour’s (1993; 2005) theory of subject-object “entanglements”. This idea has recently been developed into a creative collective in the Netherlands, consisting of “designers, policymakers, biologists, artists, lawyers, philosophers and writers” (Parliament of Things, 2021). This collective does “speculative research into the emancipation of animals, plants, and things”. It also established the Embassy of the North Sea, from the starting point that the sea owns itself and researching how the sea “can become full-fledged members of society” (Embassy of the North Sea, 2018).

Latour’s work has been criticized by Whiteside (2013) as it turns attention from environmental problems to technology and “things”. Whiteside (2013) argues that the Parliament of Things refuses to support or create clear norms capable of solving environmental problems, easily dissolving debates in politically disengaged postmodern philosophy. Potentially,

however, these types of informal “Embassies”, “Councils” or “Parliaments” can help empower different socio-economic segments of society through activities such as role-play, moral education, and political visioning (Muecke, 2007).

Another example of political representation encouraging broad participation is the Parties for Animals, based on the EU’s existing agricultural, animal and wildlife platforms across all sectors of society – civil, corporate, and governmental (Morini, 2018; Kopnina, 2019a; 2019b). The parties are normally focused on farming or domesticated animals, and not on (wild) collectives, or broader issues of sustainability (Kopnina 2019a, 2019b). Animal Parties are stronger in Europe, but also in North and South America, Asia, and Oceania (Party for the Animals, 2021).

As part of the search for a more inclusive and ecocentric democratic system, it is worth considering the degrowth movement (Kallis, 2011), as well as the economy for the common good (Felber, 2015). These movements support the robust protection of ecosystems and the broadening of democratic values, allowing for alternative ethic-political spaces (Calarco, 2014; Wadiwel, 2015), such as eco-democracy.

What would ecodeмокracy look like in operation?

Lundmark (1998) cautions that “our ability to understand nonhumans is primarily restricted to species that are similar to us”. The proxy representation, in this case, may cause difficulties in deciding who will represent which nonhumans and whether all species will weigh equally. Some might be less subjectively “likable” but scientifically – from the ecosystem functioning point of view - more important than others. Because it is not possible to count the numbers of all species populations on earth, the proxy idea must evolve differently and the allocation of votes and inclusions must be ethically considered in the interests of fair representation.

Making room for nonhuman others implies entitlement to the possession of their own lives. Support for nonhuman rights implies that the most basic interests of animals - such as avoidance of death or suffering - should be considered (Wallach et al., 2020). This realization is rooted in many transdisciplinary positions that have been named post-humanism or non-anthropocentrism, inspired by deep ecology (Naess, 1973), animal rights, and animal law literature (Sunstein and Nussbaum, 2004; Borràs, 2016; Shyam, 2019). Stone’s (2010) work “Should Trees Have Standing” argues for the legal standing of trees through legislative measures, advocating the legal personage of nonhuman life.

However, the movement to integrate animal (or broader nonhuman) rights or nature law with ecocentric ethics has not been easy. Efforts to establish legal rights for nature are mired in discussions about which animals should be accorded rights, and whether individual animals should have less ethical standing than species or habitats (Garner, 2015). Species ranking or hierarchy in terms of which species deserve more rights, has indeed been a subject of a long debate in both deep ecology and animal rights literature (Sunstein & Nussbaum, 2004; Garner, 2015). The discussion about whether invasive (but rare or endangered) versus native (but abundant) species or individuals within the species should be included in the sphere of moral consideration has been ongoing (Sunstein & Nussbaum, 2004; Garner, 2015; Wallach et al., 2020).

As an example, the mention of animal rights in the Facebook group “Conservation, Biodiversity, and Biogeography” in May 2020 evoked a variety of comments. One commentator thinks it is insensitive to speak of animal rights before human inequalities are addressed. Another commentator suspects that recognizing the rights of individual animals will negatively affect conservation as a whole by protecting invasive species. Midgley’s (1994) distinction between absolute and relative dismissals of animal concerns is apparent from these reactions. Both commentators seem to be taking a position of relative dismissal based on what they believe are more important issues or goals.

Following this illustration, the idea of “rights” may bring controversies even within “sympathetic” biological conservation. Indeed, nonhuman rights are not likely to be easily accepted unless established political, legal, and broad cultural recognition of these rights exists, as Stone (2010) proposes. This needs a major change requiring care for both nonhuman and human, sidestepping the common confusion between ecocentrism and ecocentric holism

(Peterson, 2013; Lynn, 2015). The change also requires recognition of objectification and commodification of nonhumans and nature and expanding the possibility of care within a multi-species community (Spanning, 2019). Advocates for Earth jurisprudence argue that Earth-centred governance – including representation – does not (and should not) privilege one species over another, but instead emphasize the key priority as overall ecological integrity and the ability of broader ecosystems to support and regenerate life.

Perhaps the largest global organization addressing ecodemocracy is the United Nations Harmony with Nature Programme (United Nations Harmony with Nature, 2021). It states:

Rights of Nature are grounded in the recognition that humankind and Nature share a fundamental, non-anthropocentric relationship given our shared existence on this planet... Legal provisions recognizing the Rights of Nature are sometimes referred to as Earth Jurisprudence, including constitutions, national statutes, and local laws. Also, new policies, guidelines, and resolutions are increasingly pointing to the need for a legal approach that recognizes the rights of the Earth to well-being.

Wide-ranging actors are incorporating ecocentric and animal-ethics perspectives and revolutionizing the way Earth-centered perspectives can be applied. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN, 2021), the Nonhuman Rights Project (2021), as well as the Ecological Law and Governance Association (ELGA, 2021), all work with the rights of nature in different ways. Some of the youth organizations are Global Youth Biodiversity Network, Youth4Nature, Youth for our Planet, and Earth Advocacy Youth.

In some countries, including the USA, New Zealand, and Bangladesh, some rivers and lakes have been given legal rights (Ruru, 2018; Strang, 2020). In June 2020, the Supreme Court of Justice of Colombia declared the Isla de Salamanca National Park a subject of rights to protect it from rampant deforestation, and in Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Whanganui River/Te Awa Tupua was granted legal personhood rights in 2014 (Ruru, 2018). Indigenous political movements and demands crucially impacted these reforms. In the case of the Whanganui River, the river's interests were represented by Maori Iwi, and local and national government representatives.

Discussion: Strategies for action between idealism and pragmatism

Individual lifestyle change is part of the story but, on its own, is possibly too small to impact meaningful differences. Issues of resource overconsumption and population growth also require effective transnational multi-level governance. At the moment, as Lidskog and Elander (2010) observe in the case of democracy and climate change, this type of transnational governance still needs to be developed through a truly global optic, not just a western gaze.

This does not mean, of course, that some form of the eco-dictatorial elite will impose on people how to live their lives (Ophuls, 1977; Dryzek, 2005). It does imply, however, that several assumptions and values need to be re-examined. Sometimes a win-win scenario of convergence theory (Norton, 1986) might prevail. For example, as United Nations Environment Program (UNEP, 2020) has communicated, the (il)legal trade of wildlife affects both biodiversity and human health, and presently there are serious efforts to regulate this trade. By implication, human-centered policies espoused by current democratic societies can have a positive effect on the environment if they are strongly reinforced.

Bolder initiatives like proxy representation, offer much hope. Values have changed and new institutions have emerged that secure human rights, abolish slavery, and protect individuals and groups from other forms of discrimination. These institutions and mechanisms are not perfect, but they do exist in democratic systems without the use of force or dictatorship and could be replicated in the rights of nature.

Once the basic institutions and mechanisms protecting nonhuman beings are established, specific conundrums need to be discussed. Given climate change, for example, human proxies need to ponder several (limited) choices. If a threatened species cannot move fast enough to keep up with climate change (given the massive fragmentation of landscape caused by highways, cities, agriculture across global landscapes), are we justified in introducing that species to a similar environment elsewhere? Are we justified in taking an interventionist (active

management) approach, as it is, arguably, the management and “pragmatism” that has served mass extermination of invasive species in practice and anthropocentrism in ethics?

We may not reach a consensus on what the “good for the greatest number” is. For some, it is having personal freedom to drive a car, for others, it is a commitment to future generations of humans and nonhumans. While we speak about the “will of the people” in the age of the Anthropocene, when humanity “controls” the entire planet (Johns 2019), some will choose according to reason, and some according to heart.

We recognize that the optimistic story of conventional democratic environmental reform is widely appealing as making claims against the radiant hope of easy salvation is never a popular position (Sitka-Sage et al., 2017). Yet, act we must. This action should be broadly based, and not shouldered by a minority group of committed individuals (although, like all social movements, it is likely that the broad base will be reached only by the efforts of those committed individuals). The broad base is necessary if only to avoid defensive fantasies of “ecofascism” (Zimmerman, 1995), a term commonly applied to the concern that environmentalists strive to impose totalitarian regimes to achieve their objectives. The term might better apply to a situation in which one single species destroys others – what Crist (2012) referred to as genocide of nonhumans, as well as situations where environmental activists (most of them in developing countries) are murdered defending the rights of nature. Simply put, no known environmentalists or environmental groups support totalitarian, authoritarian, or murderous regimes. Violent ideologies and oppression are not compatible with ecocentrism as a worldview. Ecocentrism in its many varieties embraces and defends the entire community of life (Kopnina et al., 2018b; Piccolo et al., 2018; Washington et al., 2017; 2018; Taylor et al., 2020).

Ways forward: Keeping the wealth of global non-human nature

Both animal rights and environmental ethics share a rejection of anthropocentrism and economy-centered ideology that seeks to exploit the natural world for short-term human profit (Garner, 2015; Wallach et al., 2020). Once the basic non-anthropocentric principles are established, the interests of various stakeholders can be further discussed, weighed, and negotiated. A new epistemology is needed to establish new goals, as is the non-anthropocentric ontology that underpins it. It is, therefore, a fundamental paradigm shift and this must necessarily involve doubt and resistance.

The realization of global species injustice should lead to action. However, urgent action does not presently dominate the political agenda. Current democratic systems are made in a way that they refute biological kinship and exclude humans from any obligations to other planetary inhabitants. Similar to the civil liberation movements of the past, another key to progress is foregrounding ecocentrism and ecojustice in social, economic, political, legal, and cultural institutions. Another action is developing animal well-being combined with nature/habitat protection agencies that push beyond the boundaries and blinkers of instrumental stakeholder meetings to further develop moral, scientific, political, and cultural deliberations to aid non-anthropocentric agendas. These actions are necessary if our privileged access to anything living on earth is to be truly sustainable, both for our future generations and for innumerable planetary inhabitants.

Examples of possible ecodeмократic strategies

Aside from initiatives that already support the “Rights of Nature”, there are many emerging and developing instruments and initiatives, such as the platform that promotes “ecocide law”, which argues for the criminalization of ecocide and debates the elements required for such an international crime (Ecocide Law, 2021). One way to advocate for an international law of ecocide to be introduced is by reforming the Rome Statute by adding ecocide to the list of crimes against humanity (Mwanza, 2018).

Finally, to achieve a democratic system that can deal with environmental challenges in both pragmatic and ethical terms, eco-representation through “eco-advocates” was proposed (Lundmark, 1998; Baxter, 2005; Dobson, 2010; Gray & Curry, 2016; Gray & Curry, 2020). While details of the process of representation need ongoing adjustment, the overall purpose of

ecodemocracy would be to recognize the entitlement rights of nonhumans to exercise their forms of agency and to flourish in their ways. Building on this shift an ecological democracy must make room for nonhuman others. However, this cannot take the form of simply extending the franchise, since nonhuman others cannot represent themselves in the public sphere in the same way as humans, as we have discussed (Eckersley & Gagnon, 2014).

Following this, “you could, therefore, claim that this rule can serve as a form of proxy representation for future generations of humans and nonhuman others, and broader ecosystems as well” (Eckersley and Gagnon 2014, p. 101). This may need to involve “some type of advocacy mandate, i.e., representatives being appointed for the specific task” (Lidskog & Elander 2010, p. 37). These representatives, like ourselves, can come from a mixed group of biophilic, biocentric, ecocentric, and zoocentric individuals from different countries, cultures, existing inter-, intra-, and supra-government organizations, private sector, NGOs, or green parties that may together form a Global Party for Nature.

Conclusion

In answering the question of whether current democratic governments can solve various environmental problems, this article has delivered both negative and positive answers. This relates to the limitations of growth-centered industrial systems and societies. Both pragmatically and ethically, the needs of nonhuman beings and their habitats independent of their utilitarian value (a complete reevaluation of the anthropocentric paradigm) must be considered.

Existing democratic systems must become more inclusive and ecocentric and involve learning from both existing mechanisms or organizations and pushing for a more ambitious system of eco-representation or mandate proxies. What is needed to secure democratic legitimacy for policy measures for the benefit of nonhuman species, is the realization that while some measures may impose limitations on electorates, if these electorates are expanded to nonhumans, the benefits would by far outweigh the burdens.

Simply put, future generations of humans will profit from a planet that is biologically abundant, and sensitive in an inter-species sense. Articulating this mutual benefit is likely to help sway current electorates to accept wider eco- representations of oppressed nonhuman beings while concomitantly recognizing them as intelligent beings in their own right. Not all present voters might agree on what the “good” for nonhuman species is; eco-representatives are likely to be in the majority but we surmise that they are likely to support mutually beneficial measures. Ecodemocracy in operation will most likely look like regular democracy, only it will be fairer and more inclusive, although perhaps imperfect and in need of constant negotiation and interlocution. Churchill said: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried before”. Maybe we should try again - and keep on trying.

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