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# WHY YOUTH SHOULD GET ENGAGED IN THE RIGHTS OF NATURE MOVEMENT

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*In an era described as the Anthropocene, current generations seem to have lost touch with Nature. On the other hand, young people are getting more and more involved in debates that influence their future, especially with regard to climate change and biodiversity loss. Since 2018, youth movements for climate justice are rising around the world, inspired by young activists like Greta Thunberg. This article uses this moment in time to introduce the importance of a powerful legal concept that challenges traditional perceptions of Nature, called 'Rights of Nature', and the role that it can play in youth's efforts to confront the biggest ecological crisis of our time.*

## 1 What are Rights of Nature?

Whilst Rights of Nature have manifested differently around the world, it has often been implemented in the form of the assignment of legal personhood to natural entities. This legal personhood enables Nature to have a voice in human courts of law. This is a very direct way to include Nature in decisions that affect her wellbeing. The specific rights recognized vary in legal systems, but often come down to ancient natural rights of natural entities to exist, thrive and regenerate their vital cycles, processes and functions. Within the Rights of Nature movement, it is interesting to note that the wording used for indicating the inclusion of Rights of Nature in a legal system is 'recognizing' Rights of Nature, and not 'granting' Rights of Nature. This is because the rights assigned are inherent/intrinsic rights whose existence does not depend on humans, but rather, we choose to recognize the rights that have always existed, but that we have not respected in the past.

This is basically what it means to recognize Rights of Nature. Perhaps even more interesting is the philosophical underpinning behind this approach. Rights of Nature are often drawn from Indigenous understandings of Nature; the relationship of the Maori tribe in New Zealand with the Whanganui River for example inspired the act for the rights of the Whanganui River. In Ecuador, the rights assigned to Nature are based on the Andean Indigenous alternative form to (Western) development: Buen Vivir. The source of all wisdom comes from Indigenous people. Recognizing Rights of Nature provides a way to live in harmony with the Earth System, of which we are part, and calls for a systemic change in the current capitalist paradigm ruling development. In many legal systems, Nature is captured under property laws and seen merely as an object for humans to exploit and use for profit. The recognition of Nature as having its own rights goes against capitalist understandings of Nature as property, something which is separate from humans. As such, this approach inspires humans to a non-anthropocentric relationship with the natural world and encourages us to recognize that we are part of Nature and not separate from it.

## 2 The rise of the Youth for climate action

Whilst the Rights of Nature movement has been growing, young activists like Greta Thunberg have inspired young people all over the world to act or demonstrate for action on climate change in the form of a (school) strike. The story of Greta began in August 2018 when she went on to strike on school days to call the Swedish parliament for stronger action on climate change. Ever since, she has inspired millions of students to hold school climate strikes. These movements are called Fridays for Future, and similar movements around the world have been set up.

The demonstrations and strikes are often set up to call governments out on (ineffective) climate action. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports describe the devastating effects of climate change if global warming exceeds 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Despite this warning, and those of many other scientists, activists do not think that governments take enough action on positive climate action. By striking from school, students aim to demonstrate politicians how serious the climate crisis is and how the current ecological changes will affect their future.

## 3 Why should Youth care about Rights of Nature?

Over the last decade, Rights of Nature has been increasingly gaining momentum across the world. The youth needs to be informed about how the Rights of Nature work and what purposes it can serve. Rights of Nature can connect the rise of the youth movements and their objectives. It provides a valuable tool in societal and environmental challenges, as described below:

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- Rights of Nature aims to challenge capitalist perceptions of Nature and the Earth community. By recognizing Nature's legal personhood, or her inherent rights (as is increasingly seen in the protection of rivers around the world where the rights of rivers are being recognized), and placing it on the same level as companies, states and humans, Rights of Nature calls for systemic change and a shift in current anthropocentric paradigms in law and governance. As such, it complements young activists' calls for stopping eternal economic growth under capitalist notions. It is obvious that there is a need for a shift in paradigm, and Rights of Nature provides just that;
- Rights of Nature promotes a non-anthropocentric relationship between humankind and the natural world. In an era where Nature is subordinate to economic growth, this movement provides a way to live in harmony with Nature which is necessary if we are going to confront the environmental challenges threatening all life on Earth. This goes together with the recognition of Indigenous people's relationship with Nature, through Rights of Nature. Young activist Xiye Bastida highlights the voices of Indigenous peoples and their role in environmental movements. People like Xiye could use Rights of Nature to include Indigenous people's voices and beliefs in a legal system, and provide a way to involve culture in legal approaches;
- Ecological disasters, such as the recent Australia fires, keep increasing. Recognizing Rights of Nature, would legally speaking give Nature a voice, through which it can defend itself through guardians in decisions where it is going to be impacted, say for instance deforestation for money gain purposes. Through this approach, we can preventively ensure the preservation of natural sites for future generations if the Rights of Nature are to be taken into account directly;
- There is a current trend to be noted in the lodging of lawsuits against governments regarding the lack of climate action. Rights of Nature can provide a valuable tool in climate change litigation. The issue of legal standing is essentially easier in climate change cases because Nature has a direct interest in defending its own rights. When the claim can be brought by Nature herself, the harm suffered by for example climate change is no longer indirect. In 2010, civil society gathered in Cochabamba, Bolivia where the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth was adopted. Since 2010, many actors have adopted this declaration as a basis for action or as a guideline for Rights of Nature. This declaration calls for the universal recognition of the Rights of Mother Earth but at present is not legally binding. The International Rights of Nature Tribunals mainly administered by the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, have been set up as an educational tool, based on the declaration. If the declaration were to become legally binding, the current Rights of Nature Tribunals would not merely serve as an educational tool but could show how the legal system could work. At the same time, it must be noted that in recent years a number of Rights of Nature lawsuits have been lodged and sentences have been issued from countries like Colombia, Ecuador and Bangladesh. The youth could use these sentences to demonstrate how Rights of Nature are to be applied in a legal system.

Since the publishing of Christopher Stone's article on 'Should Trees Have Standing' in 1972, a lot of scholars have picked up on this topic. In 2008, Ecuador became the first country in the world to recognize Rights of Nature in its constitution. Rights of Nature has ever since been recognized in different forms, ranging from the constitution to lawsuits to policies. Countries like Bangladesh, Bolivia, Colombia, India and New Zealand are advancing the Rights of Nature and now the movement has spread out all over the world. Young leaders of the future have the capacity to spread the concept of Rights of Nature and present a tangible tool for system change to address the ecological crisis to politicians.

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## 4 Youth participation in the Rights of Nature movement

Over the last decade, the United Nations General Assembly has adopted ten resolutions on Harmony with Nature which are being implemented through the United Nations Harmony with Nature Programme. The United Nations Harmony with Nature Programme has a rich database on this topic and works to gather information and ideas to promote holistic approaches to sustainable development in Harmony with Nature. One of those disciplines is Earth-centered law, which captures Rights of Nature. The network of this programme consists of experts from all different disciplines working on Harmony with Nature concepts. Young professionals working on Rights of Nature (for example in the form of a PhD or dissertation) from all over the world are also recognised in this network (click [here](#)). These young professionals are setting the bookmark for Rights of Nature.

If you have become enthusiastic to advocate for Rights of Nature after reading this article, consider joining the [Youth Circle for Rights of Nature](#), a Hub of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature is one movement among many on Rights of Nature and has a network of over 300 organizations and individuals working to defend the Rights of Nature around the world. Within this movement, the Youth Circle for Rights of Nature was set up to engage young people in this movement. This is a global network for the youth, and by the youth, to provide an interactive (online) space for collective mobilization of youth to defend and advance Rights of Nature around the world. The mission of the Youth Circle is to empower youth to become ambassadors of the movement and promote the Rights of Nature and those of future generations. Youth Ambassadors come from all over the world and work together to change the direction humanity is taking on Mother Earth.

If you are interested in joining the movement and advocating the powerful approach of Rights of Nature, you can sign up to become a Youth Ambassador [here](#).