

PLANETARY RIGHTS, AT LAST!

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Some days ago, the Universal Declaration of Planetary Rights was pronounced by the United Nations, granting legal personhood and fundamental rights to all that constitute and depend on planet Earth: water, air, plants, animals, and minerals alike. A historic day of an all-encompassing kind of history, concerning humanity and beyond.

Until recently still, no one thought this could ever happen, except maybe a few “juridical environmentalists”, those pragmatic activists subverting existing human frameworks and expanding them to incorporate groups that used to be systematically disregarded. A posture which emerged some decades ago and culminated yesterday, with palpable relief for those who, born as the ecological crisis had already become manifest, doubted for most of their lives that the world would ever get there. The Declaration is one of those texts that reprogram reality, like the 1926 Slavery Convention organized by the League of Nations did in its days. A long overdue rectification of the illegitimate oppression and instrumentalization of a group by another in this case, of humans over the planet, of “culture” over “nature”. A rectification that slowly built up, manifesting in a few milestone decisions and movements showing that this mind shift was indeed possible.

One of the founding moments of juridical environmentalism could be traced back to The Sierra Club of the United States case that opened up the first contemporary Western reflection on the legal personhood of ecosystems, when the Sierra Club, a major environmental protection society in the U.S., sued Rogers Morton, U.S. Secretary of the Interior, to block the creation of a ski resort project in the Mineral King Valley, California. This project, proposed by the Walt Disney Company, was a response to a 1965 US Forest Services call to developers for the “improvement” of the site. Accepted in 1969, the proposal was worth 35 million dollar, [1]and offered beds for 3.300 people, with the associated parking garages, highways and power lines. The Sierra Club claimed that the project would damage the valley's integrity, [2]yet they were turned down in court as the project did not directly threaten their interests. Following this decision, Supreme Court Justice and proto environmentalist William O. Douglas published a forward-thinking dissent stating that harm to humans should not be the sole factor to take into consideration. Pointing that some non-human entities already were deemed legal persons, like corporations, or ships, that have “a legal personality, a fiction found useful for maritime purposes”, he argued that ecosystems should also receive legal standing and the ability to sue in court, adding that this court case “would therefore be more properly labelled as Mineral King v. Morton”. [3] Or even, we might add, “Mineral King Valley v. Disney”, or “the planet v. the entertainment tycoon”. Acknowledging the inability of ecosystems to wield human language, Douglas also suggested that anyone should be allowed to act as a spokesperson in their stead, [4] creating a decentralized network of voices speaking for ecosystemic interest and responding more readily to abuse than a distant central government could.

Almost four decades later, at the turn of the 2010s, as ecological concerns had gained momentum all over the world, countries like Uganda, Switzerland, Ecuador, or Bolivia started inscribing fundamental “nature-rights” in their constitutions, just as New Zealand

started granting legal personhood to some of its ecosystems and landscapes, [5] outlining the start of a movement repurposing existing legislative and juridical tools to acknowledge and emancipate non-human groups. Simultaneously, NGOs and grassroots movements started suing corporations and governments to force them to act against the planetary ecological breakdown. One of the most prominent cases of those years was the lawsuit filed against the Dutch government by the Urgenda Foundation, with 900 Dutch citizens as co-plaintiffs, to force them to raise their emission reduction targets. The case was won, and then confirmed in appeal in 2018, with the foundation's lawyers and co-plaintiffs tearfully confessing on TV their disbelief and emotion in witnessing such a complete and unexpected victory.

By the mid-2020s (aka "the decade of natural disasters"), those global ecological concerns made their way into popular culture with full force. This new wave of mainstream aesthetic became especially visible in 2024, when a majority of the films presented at the Cannes Film Festival addressed climate change and ecological themes, and the Palme d'Or went to *Extractopia*, an ecohorror masterpiece on the life of matter. [6] This film, whose cultural impact was to be profound, supported like many others the formulation of a revised civilizational posture, just like its beautiful soundtrack by British musician Planning to rock did, with eco-pop hymns like "So ... I Was You All Along", which globally topped the charts that summer. In the wake of this cultural movement, ecological citizens' initiatives intensified worldwide. Most prominently, a citizen-driven scientific, juridical, economical and sociological study that started in the mid-2020s in Greece ultimately led the Mediterranean countries and the European Union to sign a treaty in 2033 acknowledging the legal personhood and fundamental rights of the Mediterranean Sea. Another Athens Charter, and one of many such recognitions happening in those days. Following the signature, the President of the European Commission gave a TV interview in which she emphatically explained how the solution to achieving equality and human rights in the EU was to broaden the question to nature and non-human rights. "This allowed the EU to rearticulate its goals and move towards being a union of territories and people, but also of things and ecosystems, way beyond the boundaries of the European continent. In that movement, we gave new rights to many ecosystems, parallel to our expansion towards Russia, Turkey, Northern Africa or the Middle East, and to the gradual, intentional weakening of our internal borders, going back to the radical proposals of the founding Ventotene Manifesto. That is what I call true progress, and I'm proud of all Europeans for pushing for these revolutions."

And now, after years of campaigning and negotiation, the final draft of the Universal Declaration of Planetary Rights has finally been adopted. It will grant legal personhood to ecosystems worldwide, along with inalienable freedoms, and create a new transversal system of existence for the world. A multitude of ecospheres have been granted a variety of new rights adapted to their specific identities, and have been assigned human agents acting as spokespersons and representing their interests in court if need be. Ecosystems, this degraded and exploited group, regarded in the West for millennia as deserving no rights, can suddenly no longer be owned, and we humans become mere tolerated users of them. [7]

Before the signature, young Executive Director of the United Na-

tions Environment Programme Autumn Peletier held a speech, in which she stated: "There is no such thing as a self-standing humanity. There is a living tapestry of plants, minerals and animals and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for all those other realms, and for this one interwoven body." Just as the Declaration had been signed by representatives of 140 countries, "So ... I Was You All Along" was blasted in the General Assembly Hall of the UN Headquarters: a celebratory, dancy eco-pop anthem, to mark the beginning of a new era.

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