**Headline:** How the Rights of Nature Movement Is Reshaping Law and Culture

**Teaser:** From the sacred peaks of Aotearoa to the rivers of Colombia and the contested waters of Lake Erie, a global movement is emerging to grant the natural world legal personhood, driven by Indigenous worldviews and a growing call for environmental justice.

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**[Article Body:]**

The mountain dominates the western coast of New Zealand's [North Island, also known as Aotearoa](https://theconversation.com/putting-aotearoa-on-the-map-new-zealand-has-changed-its-name-before-why-not-again-168651). Its peak is like the center point of a sundial, the shadows on its slopes telling time. The cloud formations drift in and out, shaping the weather.

There are several Māori stories related to the creation of Aotearoa's geography. One tells of [four mountain warriors](https://teara.govt.nz/en/whenua-how-the-land-was-shaped/page-4) who lived in the interior of the North Island: Tongariro, Taranaki, Tauhara, and Pūtauaki. Two of them, Tongariro and Taranaki, were in love with a maiden mountain, Pīhanga, and they fought a mighty battle over her affections. Taranaki was defeated, and in shame and sadness, he left the center of the island. He dragged his club along behind him as he left, carving a deep gouge out of the land, which filled with his tears. This tear-filled ravine became the Whanganui River. When Taranaki reached the sea, he turned north and saw the beautiful [Pouākai mountain range](https://taranakimounga.nz/nga-mounga/history/) and settled there. The offspring of Taranaki and Pouākai became the plants, trees, animals, rocks, and rivers that flow over the slope of Taranaki Maunga (Mount Taranaki) today.

**Aotearoa New Zealand’s Role in the Rights of Nature Movement**

The Māori have fought for decades to incorporate the natural world into their national law. Through the long process of conflict, negotiation, and reconciliation between the [Māori iwi](https://teara.govt.nz/en/tribal-organisation) and the Crown, Aotearoa New Zealand is now at the forefront of the [Rights of Nature](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347280376_Stop_Burying_the_Lede_The_Essential_Role_of_Indigenous_Laws_in_Creating_Rights_of_Nature) movement, with laws enacted that recognize the rights of Taranaki Māunga, the Te Urewera Forest, and the Whanganui River. These laws are among the most detailed and widely known examples of a growing global campaign to develop laws recognizing the rights—or legal personhood—of natural entities.

The most recent example was the signing of the [Taranaki Maunga Collective Redress Bill](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/czep8gg5lx4o) on January 30, 2025. This bill granted the mountain [legal personhood](https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/30/travel/mount-taranaki-personhood-new-zealand-intl-hnk/index.html) and gave it all the rights, powers, duties, responsibilities, and liabilities of a person. The mountain’s rights are being recognized not because of its use to the communities who live in its shadow, but because the mountain deserves such recognition as a living being. These [legal rights](https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/30/travel/mount-taranaki-personhood-new-zealand-intl-hnk/index.html) will also enable conservation efforts and prevent forced land sales.

Another famous example is the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act, which recognizes the values and legal personhood of the Whanganui River. Although the existence of this law has been extensively covered in news stories, the process of drafting the legislation, its history, and the implementation mechanisms have received much less attention. Understanding how the Te Awa Tupua legislation came about provides insight into whether it is possible to create a framework for successfully implementing and enforcing similar laws elsewhere.

**Challenges and Lessons From Lake Erie**

In a different context, half a world away, the citizens of Toledo, Ohio, passed the Lake Erie Bill of Rights (LEBOR) on February 26, 2019. This measure, which would have been added to the City Charter, was the culmination of several years of citizen-led efforts in response to the increasing number of toxic algae blooms appearing in [Lake Erie](https://theconversation.com/how-giving-legal-rights-to-nature-could-help-reduce-toxic-algae-blooms-in-lake-erie-115351). The proposal passed with 61 percent of the votes in favor, although the [special election](https://www.toledoblade.com/local/politics/2019/02/26/polls-open-tuesday-special-election-in-toledo-turnout/stories/20190226159) drew only about 9 percent of eligible voters to the polls. The day after the election, a local farm filed a lawsuit challenging the new law.

The complaint argued that LEBOR exceeded the City of Toledo's authority and violated numerous constitutional protections by creating legal personhood for Lake Erie, thereby intruding on state and federal powers. On February 27, 2020, the United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio found in favor of the farm and struck down the proposed law in its entirety. Although the result was disappointing for those who worked hard to get LEBOR on the ballot, it provides key lessons for advocates, including the necessity of crafting laws that fit within the context and culture in which they will ultimately apply.

**Rights of Nature in Colombia**

In contrast to the judicial challenges Lake Erie advocates faced in Ohio, the Supreme Court of Justice of Colombia has issued several decisions recognizing the rights of Nature, the most recent of which granted [rights to the Colombian Amazon](https://climatecasechart.com/wp-content/uploads/non-us-case-documents/2018/20180405_11001-22-03-000-2018-00319-00_decision.pdf). The youth plaintiffs in the case, ranging in age from seven to 25, argued that they had a fundamental right to a healthy environment. They based this on constitutional provisions supported by international law.

The court agreed and further held that the [Colombian Amazon](https://iucn.org/news/world-commission-environmental-law/201804/colombian-supreme-court-recognizes-rights-amazon-river-ecosystem) is “an entity, subject of rights, and beneficiary of… protection, conservation, maintenance and restoration” and that the national and local governments are obligated to protect these rights under Colombian law. In its decision, the court connected a healthy, thriving Amazon to the fundamental constitutionally protected rights of the young plaintiffs.

**A Global Movement for Environmental Justice**

Each of these cases is part of a growing global movement to improve environmental justice protections and develop a more [holistic human-Nature relationship](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311486615_Personhood_and_the_Rights_of_Nature_The_New_Subjects_of_Contemporary_Earth_Politics) that treats all living things as part of a common, interconnected whole. In addition to the above examples, countries such as Peru, Ecuador, India, Bangladesh, Uganda, Panama, and Sweden, along with local communities in the U.S. and elsewhere, have crafted laws that recognize these rights through various legal mechanisms.

These new laws provide an innovative strategy to develop better protections for people, natural entities, and biodiverse ecosystems. Particularly for advocates in the U.S., where existing efforts have been local or Indigenous so far, learning from places where rights of Nature laws have been successful nationally can provide helpful insights on scaling up efforts in other communities.

**Legal Recognition of Nature’s Rights Across the Globe**

The growing body of rights of Nature laws draws on an array of legal cultures and institutions. It provides illustrative examples for advocates interested in developing these legal tools for environmental justice in their communities. Although each law reflects the context from which it emerges, there is a remarkable similarity in the language used to recognize the rights of Nature. In Ecuador, this takes the form of broad [constitutional recognition of Pachamama](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ecuador_2008), also known as Mother Earth. Ecuador’s constitution states in Article 71 that “Nature or Pachamama, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain itself and regenerate its own vital cycles, structure, functions and its evolutionary processes.”

In India and Bangladesh, [public interest litigation](https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/protecting-rights-rivers-turning-intention-action-1998201) has led to court decisions that have recognized the rights of rivers as essential for the common good of both people and the rivers themselves. Uganda implemented amendments to its national [environmental legislation in 2019](https://gaiafoundation.org/rights-of-nature-gain-ground-in-ugandas-legal-system/) to protect Nature’s right to “exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution.” Across the U.S., some municipalities have passed [local ordinances](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/01/florida-rights-of-nature-lawsuit-waterways-housing-development) recognizing the rights of Nature, including in Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Oregon, Colorado, and Florida. Recently, [Panama enacted legislation](https://insideclimatenews.org/news/25022022/panama-rights-of-nature/) protecting Nature’s “right to exist, persist, and regenerate its life cycles” and requiring the government to ensure its “plans, policies, and programs respect the rights of Nature.”

**Indigenous Communities and the Rights of Nature**

Indigenous communities have been some of the strongest advocates for creating laws regarding the rights of Nature. In 1998, the Sami Parliament in Sweden adopted a declaration supporting the “Rights of Mother Nature.” Later that year, a member of the Swedish Parliament proposed a constitutional amendment that would enshrine the rights of Nature into [Swedish law](https://www.huckmag.com/article/the-activists-fighting-to-give-nature-human-rights).

In the U.S., Indigenous communities such as the Ho Chunk, Ponca, White Earth Band, and Yurok have explicitly incorporated the rights of Nature into their [tribal laws](https://lawjournalforsocialjustice.com/2020/03/10/a-movement-in-indian-country-toward-legal-rights-for-nature/). These Indigenous communities have taken the lead on codifying legal recognition of what has been, for millennia, a cultural and spiritual understanding of Nature’s rights to exist and flourish as an independent living entity.

Although more people recognize the need to address environmental justice issues, there are still those who are resistant to new ideas. Finding ways to address these challenges is essential and requires outside-the-box thinking that a rights of Nature framework may provide. Each successful promulgation of rights of Nature laws opens more space for the idea that we need to change *how* humans think about Nature, the human-Nature relationship, and current legal and policy structures. The Rights of Nature movement offers environmental advocates in the U.S. and around the world innovative legal mechanisms to do just that.

**The Origins of the Rights of Nature Concept**

Although developing rights of Nature laws is a growing space for environmental justice advocates, the underlying concept of Nature possessing rights is not new. Many point to the 1972 publication of Christopher D. Stone’s article “[Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects](https://iseethics.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/stone-christopher-d-should-trees-have-standing.pdf)” as the origin for this idea of Nature having legal personhood. However, the idea of Nature as an [independent and interdependent entity](https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-people-and-nature-tradition-conservation) that has the right to exist and flourish because of its own intrinsic value and life force has been around much longer.

Many Indigenous communities and cultures have cosmologies grounded in the belief that Nature, ecosystems, and biomes are independent living entities, coexisting in partnership with all living things, including human beings. In these belief systems, no living entity is more or less important than another, and all depend on each other for survival. For these Indigenous communities and others who share these beliefs, the [contemporary rights of Nature movement](https://ictnews.org/news/rights-of-nature-cases-could-bolster-treaty-guarantees) is a manifestation of practices that have always been part of their worldviews and values.

**Overcoming Resistance and Shifting Worldviews**

For others, however, the idea of Nature possessing rights is contrary to a worldview that holds human beings at the apex of a hierarchy, with Nature below us and viewed as a [commodity](https://www.greatlakesnow.org/2019/08/rights-of-nature/) here for our use and abuse. In the U.S., and many wealthy countries, laws have developed from Enlightenment-era ideas about individual rights, including the right to own property. As a result, the concept of Nature having independent legal standing has never been part of the conversation, either culturally or legally. This presents challenges that advocates must be aware of when considering the development of Nature rights in a country like the U.S., where it is not just about changing the law but also changing the culture.

Many people who have grown up under laws and policies that view Nature simply as a resource for human use—whether in the form of industrialization or recreation—will require a shift in worldviews and values to see that Nature in all its forms has the right to exist, be free from critical damage, and protect itself through legal mechanisms. Changing cultural perceptions is often a long-term process, but developing strong laws protecting the rights of Nature can help shift conversations and accelerate the process.

**A Two-Pronged Strategy for Change**

Given these challenges, those who wish to fight for the rights of Nature must develop a two-pronged advocacy strategy to integrate this concept into contemporary norms. First, cultural perceptions and worldviews need to change to view human beings and natural entities as equal parts of an interconnected whole. Second, we must reinterpret existing laws and create new ones that support the concepts of rights of Nature while working to implement more sustainable systemic changes to promote a more just world.

We need to develop this advocacy strategy and create new and better ways to protect our planet and all the living things that call it home. Things won’t happen overnight. Legal change, cultural change, and shifts in worldviews all take time, but we must keep up the fight. By working together, we can ensure that all living things on this planet can continue to thrive and survive.