

# Ecocentric democracy

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Enabling  
the rights  
of nature

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# La démocratie axée sur la Terre

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Pour les  
droits de  
la nature

Geneva Forum


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Background

# THE ROOTS OF MY INTEREST

- I am not a political theorist or scientist
- Instead I'm motivated by pragmatic desires as an Earth-centred conservationist
- My interest grew out of research into competing values associated with reintroducing Eurasian lynx to the UK<sup>1</sup>




PROPOSED REINTRODUCTION OF EURASIAN LYNX TO BRITAIN

**How the proposed reintroduction of Eurasian lynx to Britain illustrates competing values and contrasting views associated with humans and the natural world**

JOE GRAY MBNA, JAMES BROCKINGTON, DR MATT W HAYWARD, & DR JAMES D WALMSLEY

**Introduction**  
In 2015, the Lynx UK Trust declared its proposal for a UK reintroduction of the Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*) – a large, forest-dwelling carnivore that would have significant interactions with human activities (Table 1). Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Cumbria, Norfolk, and Northumberland were announced as prospective areas for pilot releases (Figure 1). The Trust's proposal document (Eagle, 2015) reported the expectation that one or two sites within these areas would be selected for a "highly controlled, time limited and regulated study." For each site, it is

reintroductions – both official and unsanctioned – have been conducted in at least 15 locations across eight European countries (Linnell *et al.*, 2009). The list does not include Britain, but it is only relatively recently that evidence has emerged to firmly support the reintroduction precondition that "past causes would not again be threats to any prospective translocated populations" in the country (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Species Survival Commission, 2013). The evidence in question comes from carbon dating of



Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*)

# WHAT IS ECODEMOCRACY?

- Defined by **Jan Lundberg** in 1992 as:  
*"the restructuring of our society for maximum conservation and equal rights for all species"*<sup>2</sup>
- Has parallels with **Vandana Shiva's** more recent concept of "Earth democracy" ...



*" We are members of  
the Earth Community  
in which all species,  
peoples, cultures  
have intrinsic worth  
and rights to  
sustenance"*

This, in turn, echoes Patrick Curry's  
"ecological republicanism"<sup>4</sup>...

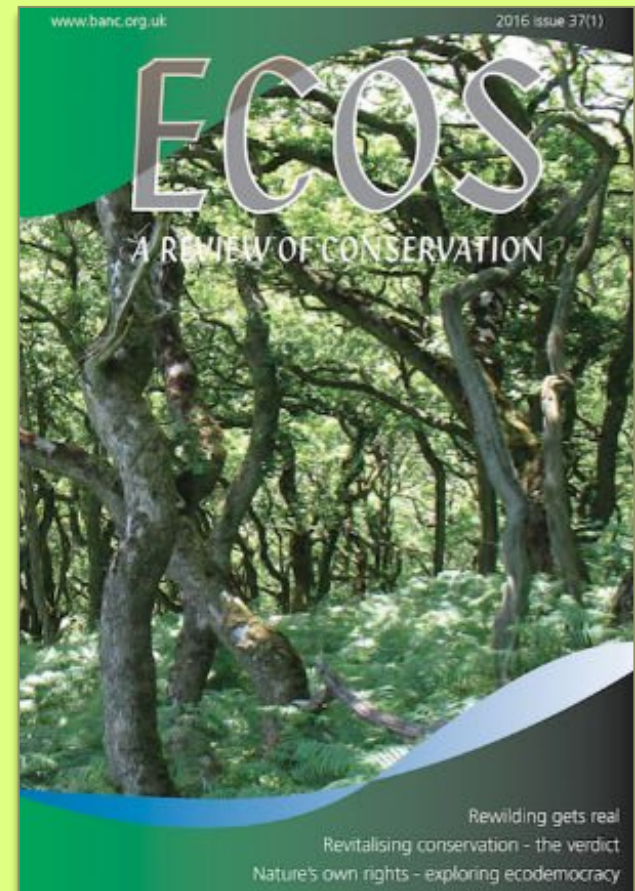
Point 9 of A  
People's Pact  
to Protect  
the Planet<sup>3</sup>

*" [A] community which meets the conceptual demands of both human community, as understood by the social sciences [...] and natural community, as defined by [...] ecologists"*

Definition of  
a community  
in ecological  
republicanism<sup>4</sup>

# A MORE PRAGMATIC DEFINITION

- With Patrick Curry, I have produced a more practical definition, which appeared in a 2016 article in *ECOS*...<sup>5</sup>





*" Groups and communities using decision-making systems that respect the principles of human democracy while explicitly extending valuation to include the intrinsic value of non-human nature..."*

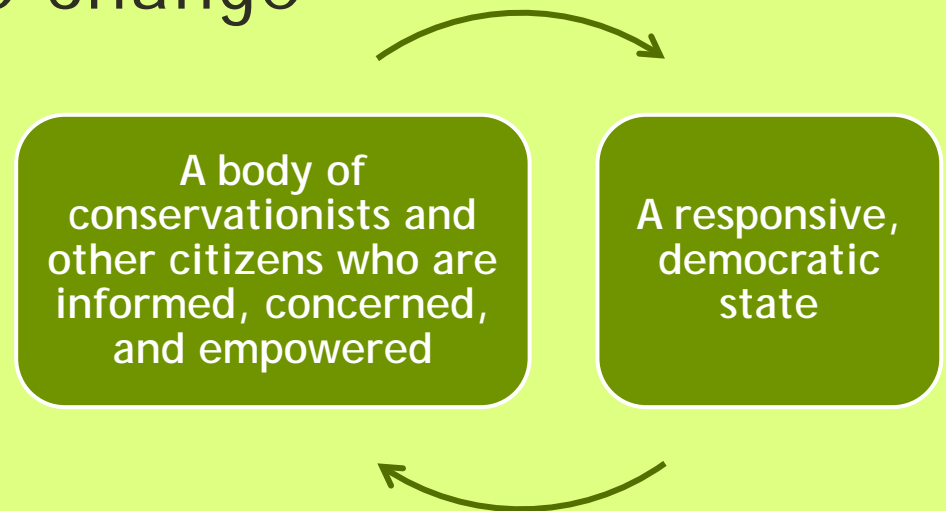
Gray and Curry's definition of ecocentric democracy<sup>5</sup>

*" ...with the ultimate goal of evaluating human wants equally to those of other species and the living systems that make up the Ecosphere."*

Gray and Curry's definition of ecocentric democracy<sup>5</sup>

# COMPARISON OF DEFINITIONS

- Under this definition, Lundberg's vision is an end point of the process of conversion to fully ecodemocratic societies
- This is an attainable end point but requires large-scale culture change
- Could be achieved through a positive feedback loop...



# SCOPE AND SCALE


- The principle of ecodemocracy applies to:
  - Decisions directly affecting conservation
  - Decisions indirectly impacting it through their effects on habitats and the environment in general
- Ecodemocracy can operate at any scale geographically, from a local stakeholder group to an international alliance of governments\*

\*It aligns itself particularly well with the thinking behind bioregionalism



Comparison of  
ecodemocracy with  
other proposed  
“greener” socio-  
political systems

# Examples of proposed “greener” socio-political systems and how they differ from ecodeмократy<sup>5</sup>

Socio-political system		Main premise/motivation	How it differs from ecodeмократy
<p>Achieved through higher level of state control</p>  <p>Achieved through lower level of state control</p>	Eco-authoritarianism	<p>An authoritarian, technocratic central government guided by an “eco-elite”</p> <p>Motivated by the viewpoint that freedom, justice, and public participation are luxuries that might not be affordable for societies facing ecological disaster</p>	<p>Not explicitly ecocentric (i.e. focused on improving human lives rather than justice for non-human nature)</p> <p>Undermines human democracy</p>
	Environmental deliberative democracy	Emphasizes the role of discursive processes, as opposed to just majority votes, in a democracy	Not explicitly ecocentric
	Ecological democracy ( <i>sensu</i> Hester)	Democracy that applies ecological thinking to the design of habitation and communities	Not explicitly ecocentric
	Ecological citizenship independent of an ecological state	Motivated by the viewpoint that ecological states cannot avoid the problems arising from the nexus between liberal democracy and capitalism	<p>Not explicitly ecocentric</p> <p>Operates independently of political systems</p>
	Eco-anarchism ( <i>sensu</i> Carter)	Self-governing communities with ecological goals	<p>Not explicitly ecocentric</p> <p>Anti-state</p>

How ecodemocratic  
decision-making could  
work in practice

# FIVE OPTIONS

- 1) Deliberative ecodeмокracy
- 2) Ecodeмокracy by human proxies with voting rights
- 3) Ecodeмокracy by juries of citizens
- 4) Ecodeмокracy by statute
- 5) Subversive ecodeмокracy



## OPTION 1: DELIBERATIVE ECODEMOCRACY

- This involves allocating protected time in decision-making processes for public discussion of the intrinsic value of non-human nature
  - A simple way to modify existing socio-political systems to ensure that this intrinsic value is considered
  - Could be achieved, for instance, through a “Council of All Beings”

## OPTION 2: ECODEMOCRACY BY HUMAN PROXIES WITH VOTING RIGHTS

- This requires assigning stakeholder status and voting rights to non-humans, which could be achieved through human proxies
  - A way to extend the benefits of the discursive process in deliberative ecodeмокracy
  - Stakeholder status could be assigned to species, ecological communities, or non-living components of ecosystems such as water and soil
  - The human proxies would need a good grasp of both ecological and ethical principles

## OPTION 2: ECODEMOCRACY BY HUMAN PROXIES WITH VOTING RIGHTS

- In the early days of adopting ecodeмокracy, it might be wise that the human proxies should not dominate the group of stakeholders
- However, as communities expand their ethical sphere to become fully ecocentric, the proxies could grow to form the dominant part

## OPTION 3: ECODEMOCRACY BY JURIES OF CITIZENS

Here, instead of individual proxies...

- A group of experts in ecology, environmental science, and ethics could be assembled to produce recommendations on decisions that would be preferable from the perspective of the community of life
- A panel formed of elected politicians would similarly create a proposal, but one that considers human desires (including conservation) in the traditional way

## OPTION 3: ECODEMOCRACY BY JURIES OF CITIZENS

- Where there were important differences between the recommendations of the two panels, a **jury of citizens** would be tasked with deciding whether, within an ecocentric worldview, the human desires were sufficiently important to outweigh the needs of the community of life as a whole

## OPTION 4: ECODEMOCRACY BY STATUTE

The three mechanisms described so far could all be operated locally, nationally, or globally...

- A complementary option, but one that is specifically relevant for the level of the state, would be writing the need to act in accordance with the intrinsic rights of non-human nature into statute
- Ideally, this statute would be written in such a way that it cascaded down through every layer of political decision-making

## OPTION 4: ECODEMOCRACY BY STATUTE

- Precedents exist in countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and New Zealand
- Pressure for such statutes in other nations could be generated through recognizing “extensive damage to, destruction of, or loss of ecosystems” as an international crime — as is being pushed for under the name of the “law of Ecocide”

## OPTION 5: SUBVERSIVE ECODEMOCRACY

- This involves using the “mask” of an economic rationale to “subversively pursue a more radical ethic”<sup>6</sup>
  - This could be played out, for instance, through ecotourism-based arguments
- This option is a last resort, not least because it has no potential for inspiring culture change in broader society



Examples of  
possible outputs  
from ecodemocratic  
decision-making

# How conservation-driven outcomes might differ between ecodeмокracy and traditional democracy<sup>5</sup>

Issue	Outcome under traditional democracy	Outcome under ecodeмокracy
<b>CONSERVATION ISSUES</b>		
<p>Excessive pressure placed on natural areas by recreation (e.g. mountain biking)</p>	<p>Pressure may be tolerated as public use of nature's instrumental value is seen as being essential in the argument to protect it</p>	<p>Pressure is limited by capping use and restricting certain areas, because nature's intrinsic value is considered in the decision-making process</p>
<p>Rewilding</p>	<p>Might tend towards a situation as favourable as possible for tourism interests (with a bias towards iconic species) or resource extraction (such as timber harvesting)</p>	<p>Focused on restoring a richness of life-forms and processes, based on our best ecological knowledge and driven by moral obligations</p>
<p>Timescale of planning</p>	<p>Significance of ecological timescales might be trumped by pressing human priorities, and thus "short-termism" may prevail</p>	<p>Created with a longer-term view (e.g. through planning "conservation exit strategies")</p>

## How conservation-driven outcomes might differ between ecodeмокracy and traditional democracy<sup>5</sup>

Issue	Outcome under traditional democracy	Outcome under ecodeмокracy
BROADER ISSUES		
Human overpopulation	Gains minimal political attention and resource	Would gain major political attention and commensurate resource (such as increased funding for family planning clinics)
Subsidies for livestock farming	Continue despite potential downside for non-human nature (relating, for instance, to the relative inefficiency of land use for livestock farming)	Would be more strongly challenged as the downside for non-human nature (such as the reduced availability of non-farmed land) would be given more weight in decision-making
Non-essential goods	Proliferate in the throwaway-and-replace culture of neoliberalism	Would come under increased scrutiny, with measures such as advertising restrictions being enacted

# Further reading and references

# FURTHER READING

- *A Manifesto for Earth*<sup>7</sup>
- Principles of Earth jurisprudence<sup>8</sup>
- [www.ecocentricalliance.org](http://www.ecocentricalliance.org)
- [www.ecospherics.net](http://www.ecospherics.net)

# REFERENCES

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