

Ecodemocracy: helping wildlife's right to survive

Concepts such as ecosystem services and natural capital illustrate the benefits that people gain from preserving ecosystems, but they overlook wildlife's ethical right to thrive independent of any benefit to humans. Many nature conservation bodies have changed their mission to give more emphasis to human benefits. The intrinsic value of non-human nature has all but disappeared from their arguments for conservation. This article examines the pitfalls of the shift to this anthropocentric mindset. It argues that non-human nature's right to survive can be accounted for in decision-making, namely "ecodemocracy".

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Talk of the need to save the blood sport of bullfighting will, to animal-loving conservationists, be like a red rag. However, part of an argument for its preservation in Spain is that "bull-breeding estates are valuable reservoirs of biodiversity in intensively farmed landscapes, and without the bulls there would be nothing to sustain them".¹ This alignment of wildlife protection with animal cruelty is an apt coal-mine canary, warning of an impending crisis of neoliberally driven conservation compromises that will be destructive to non-human nature. Addressing this crisis is one of two main themes of our article.

We introduce the second theme with another example that links blood sports and conservation in Britain. The practice of fox hunting, as Oliver Rackham taught us, has had a conservation benefit, helping to prevent some ancient semi-natural woodland from being grubbed out or coniferised.² But this is an incidental influence, not a justification. The second theme of our article, then, is that, in order to revitalise conservation, we must restore the full underlying rationale for protecting wildlife and habitats.

Anthropocentric drivers of conservation

The concept of ecosystem services gained traction in conservation circles from its prominence in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005,³ and it has since received mainstream attention in the UK following, among other events, the recent major floods. In the press, the need to reduce the risk of flooding has been presented as a reason for reintroducing the Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*). We do not contest the validity or importance of this. However, we have been saddened to read many reports linking the beaver to flood prevention and economic gain without mentioning its right as a species, independent of its benefits to humans, to thrive once more in this corner of its native range. The beaver seems to have been reduced to a mere tool for human convenience, as it was when it was hunted to extinction here. This illustrates why the ecosystem services approach is far from being a complete answer. We owe it to the species with whom we share the

land, water, and air to critically question this and other contemporary drivers of conservation, including the associated market-driven concepts of natural capital and biodiversity offsetting. And we are not alone in our concern.

In a recent comment piece in *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, Jonathan Silvertown, a Professor of Evolutionary Ecology at the University of Edinburgh, sums up the evolution of the ecosystem services concept as follows: "[It] has become the dominant paradigm framing research and policy making in biodiversity, ecology and conservation biology... [It] draws power by chiming with dominant neoliberal ideology. Scientific paradigms such as this have an inherent tendency to stop adherents from recognizing alternative approaches. It is high time to examine whether the concept is being oversold with potentially damaging consequences".³

A particular danger associated with using metaphors such as "natural capital" is that they narrow the terms of environmental debate,⁴ stripping away any notion of intrinsic value. An even stronger criticism of the current trend comes from Clive Spash, a Professor at the Vienna University of Economics and Business: "Many conservationists have become enamoured with mainstream economic concepts and approaches, described as pragmatic replacements for appeals to ethics and direct regulation. Trading biodiversity using offsets is rapidly becoming part of the resulting push for market governance that is promoted as a more efficient means of Nature conservation... I argue that offsets, along with biodiversity and ecosystem valuation, use economic logic to legitimise, rather than prevent, ongoing habitat destruction".⁵

This viewpoint backs up the call made by Peter Shirley (former BANC Chair), in a recent issue of *ECOS*, to free up non-human nature from market forces.⁶ It also supports an insightful body of writing on the topic from Sian Sullivan, who, for instance, has cautioned: "When nature's health becomes converted into a dollar sign, it is the dollar not the nature that is valued".⁷

Another argument that complements this view has been presented by Douglas McCauley, Assistant Professor at the University of California: "Market-based conservation strategies, as currently articulated, offer little guidance on how we are to protect the chunks of nature that conflict with our interests or preserve the perhaps far more numerous pieces of nature that neither help nor harm us... When we employ the aid of ecosystem services to help pay the bills of conservation, we must make it abundantly clear that our overall mission is to protect nature, not to make it turn a profit".⁸

This, in turn, echoes a prescient comment made in the 1940s by conservation pioneer Aldo Leopold in his ground-breaking *Land Ethic*: "One basic weakness in a conservation system based wholly on economic motives is that most members of the land community have no economic value. Wildflowers and songbirds are examples. Of the 22,000 higher plants and animals native to Wisconsin, it is doubtful whether more than 5 per cent can be sold, fed, eaten, or otherwise put to economic use. Yet these creatures are members of the biotic community, and if (as I believe) its stability depends on its integrity, they are entitled to continuance".⁹

While the current ecosystem services concept broadens the valuation of nature to cover much more than the basic tradable worth that Leopold questioned, it remains human-centred in stopping short of intrinsic value. This anthropocentric mind-set dominates conservation in the UK today, as is discussed below.

Anthropocentrism as the dominant mind-set in UK conservation

The current mind-set of key UK conservation bodies is illustrated in the Green Paper from the RPSB and Wildlife Trusts calling for a Nature and Wellbeing Act.¹⁰ The crucial chapter, on valuing nature, starts promisingly, its opening line stating: "Nature has immeasurable intrinsic value." Yet, incredibly, the 16 paragraphs that follow do not reference this once, instead discussing market and non-market benefits for humans. The last 10 paragraphs talk simply about natural capital.

Further insight can be gleaned from the Response for Nature documents that were published for each of the four UK nations in October 2015, with signatures from 34 conservation organisations in all.¹¹ Again, there is an overwhelming focus on the benefits for humans. The small mention of the ethical case for nature conservation goes no further than observing how it is wrong to be "leaving less for ourselves and future generations." Next to this observation, the report cites the following finding from a June 2013 survey by the European Commission: "94% agree we have a moral obligation to halt biodiversity loss".¹² But no attempt to split that moral obligation into anthropocentric and ecocentric components is made by the *Response for Nature* document, or the survey that is cited, and there is thus not one explicit statement that non-human nature has intrinsic value.

More recently, the Green Alliance think tank has published a document titled *Natural partners: Why nature conservation and natural capital approaches should work together*.¹³ It calls for a strategic combination of nature conservation and natural capital approaches as a "more effective route to managing environmental challenges" than either in isolation. But this broader approach remains anthropocentrically framed, focusing on "assets such as clean air and biodiversity, where the benefits principally accrue to society at large." The paper does observe that "intrinsic value" motivates nature conservation and is something that can be "safeguarded" by nature conservation approaches, but intrinsic value is far from being the document's dominant thrust.

The evidence described above clearly reinforces Jonathan Silvertown's troubling contention that "major nature conservation organizations have refocused their missions towards the needs of humans".³ But why is this so? Why has the ethical argument of intrinsic worth become so overshadowed in UK conservation?

Maybe good sense has been consumed by capitalism and overwhelmed by corporate meddling. Or maybe the authors and signatories on documents like these believe that ecocentrically framed conservation strategies are doomed to failure in a neoliberal, growth-obsessed political system and are thus making a tactical appeal to market-driven anthropocentrism. We hold out hope for it being the latter rather than the former and thus argue that what is needed are political systems that can properly account for intrinsic value and ecocentric arguments.



How can we ensure non-human nature has a say in the democratic process?

Photo: Joe Gray

In retaining some faith in decision-making systems, we are hoping that it is possible to defy the wisdom of Canadian naturalist John Livingston. Worn by conservation having been transmuted into resource development, he wrote in 1981: "Political process and nature conservation are fundamentally antithetical".¹⁴

Introducing ecodecocracy

"Ecodecocracy" (ecocentric democracy) was defined by Jan Lundberg in 1992 as the "restructuring of our society for maximum conservation and equal rights for all species,"¹⁵ which has parallels with Vandana Shiva's concept of "Earth democracy".¹⁶ In such a society, as one of us (Patrick) wrote back in 2000, the

natural world would "provide the context of human political, social and ethical deliberation".¹⁷ And nature conservation – borrowing the words of Paul Evans, a former Conservation Director at Plantlife – would be "what we do as members of a community of life to maintain and encourage the continued diversity of plants, animals and their habitats that make up that community. This means everywhere, the whole space we occupy with nature".¹⁸

The key question that this vision raises is, of course, how we get there. To provide a framework to answer this, we offer an expanded, more practical definition of ecodecocracy: 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, with the ultimate goal of evaluating human wants equally to those of other species and the living systems that make up the Ecosphere.

Under this expanded definition, Lundberg's formulation is an end point of the process of conversion to fully ecodemocratic societies. In order to get there (without the collapse and re-birth of society) it will require large-scale culture change. This could be achieved through a positive feedback loop between a responsive, democratic state and a body of conservationists and other citizens who are informed, concerned, and empowered. And it would be facilitated, as Patrick wrote more recently, by "building and strengthening local communities, civil associations and citizens' movements with a shared understanding that without ecological integrity, no other kind is possible".¹⁹ These groups could be informed by the *Manifesto for Earth* and the principles of Earth jurisprudence.^{20,21}

The principle of ecodecocracy applies to decisions directly affecting conservation, as well as those indirectly impacting it through their effects on habitats and the

Table 1. Examples of proposed socio-political systems, and how they differ from ecodeмократy (ecocentric democracy)

Socio-political system		Main premise/ motivation	How it differs from ecodemocracy
Achieved through higher level of state control	Eco-authoritarianism ²⁵	An authoritarian, technocratic central government guided by an "eco-elite" Motivated by the viewpoint that freedom, justice, and public participation are luxuries that might not be affordable for societies facing ecological disaster	Not explicitly ecocentric (i.e. focused on improving human lives rather than justice for non-human nature) Undermines human democracy
	Environmental deliberative democracy ^{23,25}	Emphasises the role of discursive processes, as opposed to just majority votes, in a democracy	Not explicitly ecocentric
	Ecological democracy (sensu Hester ²⁴)	Democracy that applies ecological thinking to the design of habitation and communities	Not explicitly ecocentric
Achieved through lower level of state control	Ecological citizenship independent of an ecological state ²⁵	Motivated by the viewpoint that ecological states cannot avoid the "problems arising from the nexus between liberal democracy and capitalism" ²⁵	Not explicitly ecocentric Operates independently of political systems
	Eco-anarchism (sensu Carter ²⁵)	Self-governing communities with ecological goals	Not explicitly ecocentric Anti-state

environment in general. And it can operate at any geographic scale, from a local stakeholder group to an international alliance of governments, although it aligns itself particularly well with the thinking behind bioregionalism – the geographical organisation of socio-political systems by ecologically defined boundaries, such as watersheds, instead of socially constructed boundaries such as nations.

A crucial part of our argument is that small-scale ecodeмократic decision-making systems, and partially ecodeмократic societies, can, we believe, still offer significant benefits for nature conservation. In this light, we see conservationists who share our ethical standpoint about the intrinsic value of non-human nature – including various contributors to *Keeping the Wild*²² and *Protecting the Wild*⁸, two recent anthologies from Island Press – as being among the people pushing hardest to advance ecodeмократy.

How ecodeмократic decision-making would work

We now discuss examples of how ecodeмократy could be implemented in practice. (Table 1 describes how ecodeмократy differs from some other "greener" socio-political systems that have been proposed.²³⁻²⁵)

Deliberative ecodeмократy

Intrinsic values of non-human nature should be incorporated, with allocated time, in decision-making processes. This could be achieved, for instance, through a "Council of All Beings", which is a process in which participants step aside from their human identity and speak on behalf of another life-form.²⁶

Ecodeмократy by human proxies with voting rights

A way to extend the benefits of the discursive process in deliberative ecodeмократy would be to assign stakeholder status and voting rights to non-humans, which would be achieved through human proxies (they would need a good grasp of both ecological and ethical principles). This suggestion has been made previously in the literature,²⁷ but in a rebuttal it was branded "stakeholder identity run amok" on the basis that non-human nature cannot sensibly accept the moral obligations associated with the fairness-based underpinning of stakeholder processes.²⁸ We counter this rebuttal by arguing that entitlement for stakeholder status should come not from the capacity to understand fairness, something which is already covered by having proxies, but rather the potential to be subject to unfair outcomes – such as going extinct. (A darker corollary of insisting on capacity to accept moral obligations is that it excludes humans with senility or severe learning difficulties, for instance, from consideration.²⁹) In our view, stakeholder status could be assigned to species, ecological communities, or non-living components of ecosystems such as water and soil.

In the early days of adopting the ecodeмократic principle, it might be wise that these human proxies should not dominate the group of stakeholders, but as communities expand their ethical sphere to become fully ecocentric the proxies grow to form the dominant part.

Ecodeмократy by juries of citizens

Instead of having a number 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 second panel, formed of elected politicians, would similarly create a proposal, but one that considers the desires of humans in the traditional way (this would not exclude nature conservation). 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.

Ecodeмократy by statute

The three mechanisms described above could all be operated locally, nationally, or globally. A fourth and complementary option, but one specifically relevant for

Table 2. Articles describing the rights of nature in Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution³⁰

Article #	Overview
71	Nature has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes.
72	Nature has the right to be restored. This restoration shall be apart from the obligation of the State and natural persons or legal entities to compensate individuals and communities that depend on affected natural systems.
73	The State shall apply preventive and restrictive measures on activities that might lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems and the permanent alteration of natural cycles.
74	Persons, communities, peoples, and nations shall have the right to benefit from the environment and the natural wealth, enabling them to enjoy a good way of living.

the level of the state, would be for the need to act in accordance with the intrinsic rights of non-human nature to be written into a statute. Ideally, this statute would be written in such a way that it cascaded through every layer of political decision-making. Maybe, in the UK, pressure to introduce such a statute could come from the royal family, who have a vision beyond five year terms.

In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to grant constitutional rights to non-human nature (see Table 2). This complements a strong emphasis on human democracy in that country’s constitution: “The participation of citizens in all matters of public interest is a right, which shall be exercised by means of mechanisms of representative, direct and community democracy”.³⁰

Since then, Bolivia has passed a statute that gives non-human nature rights, while the Whanganui River in New Zealand is also now recognised as a right-bearing entity (the latter development reinforces our contention about the applicability of stakeholder status).³¹

Pressure for such statutes in other countries could be generated through recognising “extensive damage to, destruction of, or loss of ecosystems” as an international crime, as is currently being pushed for under the name of the “law of Ecocide”.³² This would demand constitutional amendments and call for ecodeмократic mechanisms to be put in place for decision-making processes. Some countries already have specific means for handling such a law. In Guatemala, for instance, an environmental crimes court opened in July 2015.³³

It is no coincidence that all these cases relate to nations with remaining indigenous culture and thus a greater attachment to the natural world than exists in fully Westernised countries such as the UK. The prevailing view in fully Westernised countries might be that the rest of the world needs to learn from us; but is it not the West that needs to be learning from the countries which have remaining indigenous

Table 3. A few examples illustrating how conservation-driven outcomes might differ between ecodeмократy (ecocentric democracy) and democracy (as carried out in the UK today)

Issue	Outcome under democracy	Outcome under ecodeмократy
CONSERVATION ISSUES		
Excessive pressure placed on natural areas by recreation (e.g. mountain biking)	Pressure may be tolerated as public use of nature’s instrumental value is seen as being essential in the argument to protect it	Pressure is limited by capping use and restricting certain areas, because nature’s intrinsic value is considered in the decision-making process
Rewilding	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)	Focused on restoring a richness of life-forms and processes, based on our best ecological knowledge and driven by moral obligations
Timescale of planning	Significance of ecological timescales might be trumped by pressing human priorities, and thus short-termism may prevail	Created with a longer-term view (e.g. through planning “conservation exit strategies” ³⁶)
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

cultures, for it is they who have preserved more of their spiritual connection with non-human nature?

Subversive ecodeмократy

Our final suggestion is to use the “mask” of an economic rationale to “subversively pursue a more radical ethic”.³⁴ It is inspired by the potential offered by ecotourism; however, there are examples where tourism-based economic arguments run counter

to conservation goals.³⁵ This flaw reinforces the advice presented earlier against over-reliance on economic arguments. Furthermore, the subversive approach, by its nature, nixes any potential for inspiring culture change in broader society. We must, therefore, label this option a last resort: it is preferable to doing nothing, if everything else fails. (In “everything else” we could include an ecocentrically aligned version of eco-authoritarianism [Table 1].)

Examples of possible outputs from ecodeocratic decision-making

In Table 3 we present examples to illustrate how different decisions might be reached through ecodeocracy, as contrasted with the current neoliberally driven socio-political system.

Revitalising conservation for people and nature

Our argument for the ecodeocratic principle, coupled with the suggested mechanisms for implementation, represent our contribution to the debate on revitalising conservation. Ecodeocracy would restore conservation’s powerful ethical basis and enable conservationists to talk about intrinsic value once more. We need to be lobbying for ecodeocracy to be implemented in high-level decision-making while also taking any opportunity to employ the philosophy more locally.

Contact us to have your say or learn more. This article is hopefully just the beginning.

Further reading

For a more in-depth discussion of green citizenship, as well as the ongoing monetisation of nature, and the significance of non-human nature’s intrinsic value, see chapters 12 and 13 of *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction*.²⁹

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