

Water – a free-flowing subject that reveals the urgent need for humanity to change its course

There is perhaps no theme that reveals more than water does our need to behave as a plain member of the Earth community. In this, the fourth issue of *The Ecological Citizen*, we bring you a collection of articles, poetry and artworks on this subject, as well as a number of other pieces not specifically related to water. Much of the aquatically themed content focuses on freshwater, and, in particular, rivers. John Piccolo and his co-authors, in an article starting on page 173, explore the guidance that ecocentrism offers on the trade-off between ‘clean’ energy and the negative impacts of hydropower. Cornelia Wieser, in her Opinion piece (pages 131–5), makes an impassioned plea to save the Vjosa and other natural river systems in the Balkans. A protest that she organized for this cause is depicted on our cover. In addition, Ian’s mini-essay within this Editorial reflects on abuses by humans to his local river, the Ottawa (see [Box Essay 1](#)).

The ‘rights of rivers’ movement has received some press attention in the past couple of years, and Grant Wilson and Darlene Lee review this topic in an article starting on page 183. They observe, more generally, that establishing legal rights can give non-human nature a “seat at the table.” This idea – as the recently launched Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy (GENIE) states in its advert on page 125 – can be extended to push for seats at not just legal but political and administrative ‘tables’ too. Where such seats can be obtained, it will be important that those humans speaking for non-human life have not just a sound ecological knowledge of the ‘silent stakeholders’ receiving their representation but also an empathetic understanding. Joe’s mini-essay in this

Editorial (see [Box Essay 2](#)) looks at how aquatic contexts can help evoke such empathy.

We also explore, in this issue, ocean-related matters. In a special feature (pages 153–4), Captain Paul Watson reflects on the achievements of Sea Shepherd. We also have a photo feature from Caroline Power on plastics and other waste in the sea. We plan to return soon to the ocean, including the looming threat of deep sea mining, with articles being in the works for our next issue and an upcoming special supplement exploring the biodiversity crisis.

Rounding out the issue’s main theme, Max Finlayson describes what needs to be done to halt the loss of wetland biodiversity (pages 139–40) while activist John Seed presents a call for action to save the remarkable rainforests of Ecuador (pages 141–5).

There are also a number of water-focused artworks in this issue, and we have Stephanie Moran (our Art Editor) and the many talented contributors to thank for this. Within this Editorial, photos by Tony Cassils appear in Ian’s mini-essay and the page that follows it (and can also be seen elsewhere in the issue), and we conclude the piece with a digital illustration by Franciska Tawetz, titled *Life*, which is about the overarching importance of water. “Making visible the indispensable,” Franciska comments, “could help the planet in its struggle.”

In addition to these articles and artworks, the issue’s poetry section, compiled by Victor Postnikov, exclusively comprises water-themed works, both classic and contemporary, including his own translation of Aleksander Blok’s

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Joe Gray and Ian Whyte

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Box Essay 1.

Can we stop choking the life out of rivers?

by Ian Whyte

Ecocentric principles accord intrinsic value to water. The reality of this value ought to be reflected in water's treatment by humans. How does society reflect this? I'll use the Ottawa, a big river with a mean annual discharge of around 2000 cubic metres per second (Pham *et al.*, 2000), the river I know best, as an example. It flows within a rich country. How has the Ottawa been treated? I'll bet you can guess: it's more or less typical of how all free gifts from the commons are treated.

A toxic disposal facility, five stories high and containing up to 1 million cubic metres of low-to-medium-level radioactive waste, is to be constructed within a kilometre of the river, and this by a company with a ten-year contract (CBC News, 2017b). That an environmental impact assessment has been conducted is supposed to make us feel better (or at least those of us who have had no experience with such things). *Humans do not value the future of the river.*

The City of Ottawa dumps sewage in the river on its rainy days – lots of it: 2.1 million cubic metres in 2017, and again, on only two days in 2018, nearly 600,000 cubic metres (CBC News, 2017a; Willing, 2018). *Humans treat the river like a sewer.*

The river used to contain eels. Enough eels came to Ontario to constitute up to 50% of the fish biomass in relevant waters (MacGregor *et al.*, 2013). Now, owing to dams, they are locally extinct. *Humans are choking the life out of the river.*

By the personal observation of anyone who cares to look, there is lots of garbage along the shores. *Humans treat the river as if it is a trash can.*

And, of course, there is the endless infestation of private dwellings and public infrastructure along both sides of the river; this actively blocks the usefulness of the riparian area for its rightful users. *Humans try to seize all value for themselves.*

How can these observations lead to action? I've come to believe, over years of continuous battles featuring few, often overturned or otherwise negated, victories, that it is not rewarding to fight on individual issues. Their main use probably should be as examples in a larger struggle. Without changing the paradigm, nothing will really change; this is where we should work.

Patrick Curry, in *Ecological Ethics*, mentions favourably a form of government called 'civic republicanism',



Ontario's Mississippi River, a tributary of the Ottawa River, in spring flood (photo by Tony Cassils).

which, thankfully, is not at all related to today's US Republicans. Here, educated, informed and substantive voters take part in a government dedicated to the common good. In theory at least, greed is not part of it. In a similar manner, the Buddhists have a concept of 'right livelihood', which could easily be turned to right behaviour (if it has not done so already).

It would also be useful to many to ruminate on the ideas that there is no right way to do a wrong thing, and before doing anything one ought to consider the needs of all species and the Earth. These concepts, married to ecocentric precepts, would go a long way towards allowing the world's water problems to be remediated. ■

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Photos of
Gatineau Park,
Quebec, Canada

by **Tony
Cassils**

Higher-resolution versions:
<https://is.gd/ecoartwork>



Box Essay 2.

A spring of empathy in a barren landscape

by Joe Gray

“Why should one of those damn plants get the water? [...] Lots of people could use the water.”

An exasperated outburst from Lolo, the main character, in the *The Tamarisk Hunter*

Paolo Bacigalupi's 2006 short story *The Tamarisk Hunter* pivots around the life of Lolo, who is paid “\$2.88 a day, plus water bounty” by the Bureau of Reclamation to remove tamarisks from the riverbanks of the US's desert south-west. In this tale, which is set in 2030, the alien status of these plants is not the issue; rather, it is that they are using water that humans do not want to give up. Our refusal to share water – in this imagined, but easy-to-believe, near future – with riverine vegetation is a frightening idea.

We know that water tables are dropping (e.g. Chaudhary, 2018) and that lakes are drying up (Weiss, 2018); yet the human population continues to swell. With the intense water-based conflicts that seem sure to arise between humans and the rest of life over the coming decades, we must not waste the current window for building a platform of ecocentric understanding and empathy.

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In September, my wife and I spent a week in an abandoned village in rural Aragón. Walking late one afternoon down a path that took us from the restored house in which we were staying through the barren and ruggedly pleated landscape, we bumped into a walker who told us of a secret river. More through good fortune than a knowledge of the local dialect, we managed, after about half an hour's exploring, to find a safe descent to the river – a waterway named *el Río Susía* in Aragonese.

Rejoicing in the serenity of this hidden place, I spent some time leaping between the dry patches of the river's exposed slabby bed in search of aquatic life, before the pressing of dusk sent us homeward.

Ascending, we noticed on the otherwise dry track a muddy patch. This natural canvas was crammed with tracks of the river's mammalian visitors: deer of different sizes, the splaying of their slots suggesting urgency; possibly a fox; and almost certainly at least one wild boar, with dewclaw indentations having the wide spacing characteristic of its kind. We skirted the mud to avoid erasing the beauty of the prints with our Vibram soles, as strong thoughts began to cycle... *There were so many prints... The river was not my playground but a vital water*

source... The mammals must have been thirstily waiting for their turn... What a warm afternoon it had been, and what a tough summer... Why did I stay so long?... And there it was: a spontaneous, emotionally powerful feeling of empathy for other creatures. (This empathy born of a shared yearning and need for water can also extend to insects, as Ed Abbey wrote [Gray, 2018].)

* * * * *

Two weeks earlier, I had been walking near my home in England when I came to an unexpectedly high stream. Rather than see the challenge of picking a route across the larger stones through human eyes, my immediate thoughts as I approached it were *as a badger* – specifically, a female badger looking to find a safe crossing for her cubs. The reason for this is that a couple of days earlier I had been playing the video game *Shelter* (by Might and Delight [2013]), in which the player experiences the wild as a female badger sheltering her cubs from hazards. Again, a feeling of empathy for another creature had arisen in me, but this time through a virtual experience (for more on this, see Seegert [2014]). A similar experience with the potential to evoke empathy for aquatic life is the Ocean Odyssey digital aquarium, in which visitors are able to interact, virtually, with creatures of the sea (National Geographic, 2017). I truly think there is something in this.

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To conclude, sharing water is going to be an increasingly stern test of our willingness to behave as plain citizens, but our shared need for this life source also presents a rich context for the development of true empathy for other creatures, something which can be fostered through experiences both real and virtual. ■

Bacigalupi P (2006) *The Tamarisk Hunter*. *High Country News*, 26 June.

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ANNOUNCEMENT from GENIE

The Global Ecocentric Network for Implementing Ecodemocracy

We are a new organization, established in October 2018, with the mission of developing and expanding political, administrative, and legal initiatives to help adequately represent non-human nature within democratic processes and thus give voice to the 'silent stakeholders' in the more-than-human world.

We are currently seeking volunteers to help us trial implementation of ecodemocracy in their own localities. If you are interested in helping us in our mission, please get in touch with us via www.ecodemocracy.net/contact.html.

#ecodemocracynow | **www.ecodemocracy.net**





A brown pelican near Gulf Shores, AL, USA (Ian Whyte).

... continues from page 121

Marsh Priestling. Victor has also contributed prose to the issue, in his Reflection titled 'Limited civilization based on beauty (a vision)' (pages 147–8). This provides a taster of another special supplement in preparation, on 'ecocentric visions'. Victor's piece is followed by a Reflection from Eileen presenting her view that the global population problem should be decoupled from immigration issues.

Elsewhere in the issue, there are a pair of book reviews by first-time writers for the Journal. Adam Dickerson (an Associate Editor of the Journal) and Tarik Bodasing critique, respectively, *Being Ecological* and *The Big Conservation Lie* (starting on pages

198 and 202). We also have articles by Luke Plotica, arguing against enlightened inaction, and by Bill Vitek, on how we can find "grace, beauty, love and even divinity" in wildness. These pieces, which have been inspired in different ways by the life of Henry David Thoreau, start on pages 163 and 189, respectively.

Finally, Earth-system scientist Will Steffen bemoans the lost connection between contemporary human societies and the rest of the living planet (pages 129–30), while philosopher Gregory Mikkelsen argues the case for ecocentrism over sentientism and biocentrism (pages 137–8).

As always, we hope you enjoy reading the issue as much as we enjoyed assembling it, and we very much welcome your views. ■



Life

by
**Franciska
Tawetz**

Higher-
resolution version:
<https://is.gd/ecoartwork>