



Group of the Progressive Alliance of
Socialists & Democrats
in the European Parliament



Nature's Rights: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle **European Parliament, Brussels, 29 March 2017**

On 29 March 2017, Members of the European Parliament, representatives from key EU environmental institutions, NGOs and international experts met at the European Parliament in Brussels for a conference exploring the adoption of rights of nature - legal personality and rights for ecosystems and species - in EU law and policy and informing about the upcoming European Citizens Initiative to propose a Draft EU Directive on the rights of nature to the European Union's legislative agenda.

The conference was co-hosted and co-organised by the non-profit organisation Nature's Rights (founded by [UN HwN Knowledge Network expert Mumta Ito](#)), MEP Pavel Poc (S&D; Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety), MEP Benedek Jávor (Greens/EFA; Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety) and MEP Marco Affronte (Greens/EFA; Member of the European Parliament Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety).

The conference was a resounding success. Co-hosts MEP Marco Affronte and MEP Pavel Poc opened with poignant statements about the pressing need for a paradigm shift and strong support for the role that rights of nature can play in environmental protecting. After deploring the current governance system - inter alia for its exploitation of natural resources as if they were without limits - and noting its devastating consequences for nature and people, MEP Marco Affronte stated: "Our solutions, decisions, policies are trying to face each problem that the system created by staying in the system itself". Instead, he said, "We need new ideas, probably we need a new system, a new paradigm. One that focuses on nature alongside an ecological approach. The rights of nature can be a crucial first step in this direction". MEP Pavel Poc expressed: "Decades of insane worshipping of growth and making growth a measure of our progress brought us to the edge of the cliff, looking at wonderful horizons. I think it is time to look underfoot now and stand still, otherwise nothing follows but a deep, deep drop. Nature has its rights and will impose these rights without or with us. We are only starting to recognise the situation and introduce solutions. We need safety ropes to save us before it is too late. Hopefully rights of nature can be part of the solution. One thing is clear, in any case: no matter how, we must succeed, we have to succeed... There is no plan B and there is no planet B".

Mumta Ito (Lawyer and Founder of Nature's Rights) followed with a powerful introduction to rights of nature: "There is a deep flaw in our system of law, which treats living beings as objects or property while treating corporations - a form of property - as subjects of the law with legal personality and rights. This

fuels an economic paradigm that is coupled with the destruction of nature. If we are to decouple our economies from the destruction of nature, we need laws that recognise the intrinsic value of nature. The way to achieve that is through legal personality, the recognition of rights of nature and a legal framework that aligns with ecology to sustain life". Mumta Ito subsequently illustrated why the current model of sustainable development is not working and explained why rights of nature are so urgently needed to bring about the systemic transformation necessary to transition to sustainability and living in harmony with nature.

Thereafter, Hans Bruyninckx (Executive Director of the European Environment Agency) gave an insightful keynote address on the need for systemic solutions to climate change and nature protection so that we can "live well, within the planet's ecological limits" in 2050, a prerequisite for a safe and sustainable society, as outlined in the 7th European Environment Action Programme. Luc Bas (Director, IUCN European Regional Office) gave the second keynote address, providing an overview of IUCN's resolutions on rights of nature and the inclusion of rights of nature in IUCN's Global Programme 2017-2020. To conclude the opening speeches, Maria Mercedes Sanchez (Focal Point of the UN Harmony with Nature Initiative, Division of Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs) gave a video presentation, in which she detailed the UN General Assembly resolutions adopted under the auspices of the UN Harmony with Nature Initiative and provided an introduction to Earth Jurisprudence, the philosophy that underpins rights of nature and provides a guide for the transition towards sustainability.

In the ensuing high-level panel, Professor Massimiliano Montini (EU Law Professor at Siena University, University of Cambridge Fellow and [UN HwN Knowledge Network expert](#)) gave cogent examples of the double failure of EU environmental law and discussed the opportunity presented by rights of nature. Thereafter, MEP Sirpa Pietikäinen (EPP; Former Environment Minister of Finland) reminded of the struggle that eventually led to previous paradigm shifts, granting legal personhood and rights to women and other members of society. "We need the same kind of change for nature's rights", she said, expressing strong statements of support for ecological philosophy and a nature-centric approach. "It is the same as racism, to think I can own my cat and my cow and do whatever I want within a few limits! Like a cell in an ecosystem, we are part of the whole, and we do not have any more rights than the other parts... We definitely need a paradigm shift, we need the citizens initiative for the rights of nature and we need a lot of discussion and a lot of cooperation from NGOs" Sirpa Pietikäinen concluded. Mumta Ito subsequently introduced the main substantive and procedural provisions in the proposal for a Draft EU Directive on the rights of nature and urged attendees to reach out with comments for its further revision. Finally, Jen Morgan (Systems Change Consultant and Co-Founder of the Finance Innovation Lab) explored the process of complex systems change, drawing on her experiences with the Finance Innovation Lab that has pioneered the transformation of the United Kingdom's financial system.

Upon closing, MEP Benedek Jávor noted: "we are far beyond the limitations of the planet and we have to face the simple fact that the approach we had before, to set up specific environmental legal texts, is simply not working. It doesn't deliver what we need and the destruction of nature continues". He expressed that the problem lies not with the individual legal texts themselves but with the whole system, which is failing to address root causes. "It is time to break up and rethink our basic notion and concept of rights... future generations, non-human beings and ecosystems do not have rights and I think that perhaps the problem lies with our notion of rights, which we have had since the Enlightenment philosophy of the 18th century. We have to do something to go beyond our actual notion of rights, to extend it to include non-human beings, to include future generations and to include non-individualistic living beings like ecosystems and nature as such. Such an enlargement of rights is not revolutionary, it has happened before... and what we are claiming now is the next step ahead... I believe that this is not day-dreaming, we are witnessing that it is happening in several countries across the world".

Mumta Ito

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