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DRAFT DOCUMENT for engagement and further development

A Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature: Pathways to Establish a Mechanism for Endorsement and Adoption by World Governments

Introduction

The legal and cultural concepts underpinning the Rights of Nature framework have gained significant traction in recent years as innovative approaches to environmental governance. According to the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, Earth Jurisprudence—the legal philosophy that informs Rights of Nature legislation—“can be seen as the fastest growing legal movement of the twenty-first century.”¹ This ecocentric framework recognizes that ecosystems, natural entities, and all species possess inherent value and rights, independent of human use.² Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court rulings recognize that humans are embedded within the

¹ Seventy-fourth session Item 19 (i) of the provisional agenda. Sustainable development Harmony with Nature. Report of the Secretary-General. United Nations. [\[LINK\]](#)

² Boyd, D.R. (2017). *The rights of nature : a legal revolution that could save the world*. ECW Press; Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. [\[LINK\]](#)

natural world and that, therefore, socio-economic systems must be nested within environmental rights in sustainable development models.³

This legal paradigm shift is essential in addressing interlocking environmental and social crises of our time, including biodiversity loss, climate change, ecological degradation, and environmental injustice. This Rights of Nature Global Initiative presents the importance of and outlines a strategy for national and subnational governments to have a mechanism for countries to adopt a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature, which would draw upon a foundational document, the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth⁴ drafted in 2010. This campaign aims to parallel successful frameworks such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,⁵ UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁶ and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.⁷

Implementing nature's rights globally is vitally important in addressing climate and environmental crises because it fundamentally redefines unhealthy and unsustainable relationships with the natural world. By recognizing ecosystems, all species, and natural entities as legal subjects with inherent rights (e.g., the right to exist, flourish, regenerate, and naturally evolve), this approach challenges anthropocentric worldviews, which are driving ecological degradation and the climate crisis.

This effort is part of a long history of Indigenous peoples, communities, groups, and individuals advocating for Rights of Nature laws and policies, as well as ecocentric cultural change, at the local and global scale. This initiative is simply one voice in the vast ecosystem of people worldwide advocating for legal, management, and socio-economic systems to reflect the interconnectivity between humans, other species, and the entire natural world.

A Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature can serve as a transformative international, national, and subnational mechanism to collectively protect global biodiversity and mitigate the worst impacts of the climate crisis. By recognizing nature's rights in legal and management systems, the global community can chart a way forward for stronger governance structures that prioritize the health of ecosystems and communities, halt biodiversity loss, uplift Indigenous rights and knowledge, and create

³ Kauffman, C. & Martin, C. (2019). *The Politics of the Rights of Nature: Strategies for Building a more sustainable Future*. MIT Press.

⁴ Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth. *World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth*. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁵ UN Guiding Principles. *Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. *United Nations*. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁷ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. *United Nations*. [\[LINK\]](#)

resilient communities and natural systems capable of withstanding climate change impacts.

Defining the Rights of Nature

Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court cases are informed by a collection of legal and philosophical concepts that recognize the interdependence of human and non-human communities.⁸ Concepts underpinning this framework have been applied through legal and policy provisions to recognize nature as a rights-bearing entity. Unlike current environmental laws, policies, and management frameworks, which treat nature as property, the Rights of Nature framework asserts that ecosystems, species, and natural processes have intrinsic rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and naturally evolve. These rights are not guaranteed by human laws but are inherent, similar to human rights. By recognizing nature's rights in legal, socio-economic, and environmental management systems, governments can begin to address the root causes of the world's myriad ecological crises.

Many of the foundational concepts of the Rights of Nature framework have roots in numerous different Indigenous cultures and worldviews, many of which have recognized the interconnectedness of all life and the intrinsic value of the natural world for thousands of years.⁹ Indigenous leadership has been central in advocating for an ecocentric paradigm shift and nature's rights (Several examples being the Yurok Tribe,¹⁰ Whanganui Iwi,¹¹ Innus de Ekuanitshit,¹² Embera and Wounaan,¹³ among many others.)

Key principles of the Rights of Nature framework include:

1. **Inherent Rights:** Nature has inherent rights, independent of human recognition or legislation.
2. **Legal Standing:** Natural entities should have legal standing and representation in courts, allowing for the defense of their rights.
3. **Ecocentric Governance:** Decision-making processes center the health and well-being of ecosystems—of which humans are embedded within—over economic or short-term human interests. Environmental management

⁸ Kauffman, C. & Martin, C. (2019). *The Politics of the Rights of Nature: Strategies for Building a more sustainable Future*. MIT Press.

⁹ Cajete, G. (2000). *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Clear Light Publishers.; Thompson G.E.B. (2020). Codifying the rights of nature: The growing Indigenous movement. *American Bar Association*, 59 (2). [\[LINK\]](#)

¹⁰ Resolution of the Yurok Tribe Council: 19-40. [\[LINK\]](#)

¹¹ *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017* (NZ).

¹² Partie 1 : L'identification de la Mutehekau Shipu/Rivière Magpie (2021). [\[LINK\]](#)

¹³ Colombian Court (T-622/16-16, section 5.11)

frameworks recognize ecosystems as holistic interreliant communities rather than entities that are divisible into independent parts.

4. **Interconnectedness:** Recognizing the interconnectedness of all life forms, including the fact that human communities are embedded within natural systems, and, therefore, have a responsibility to steward the Earth. This framework acknowledges that nature's rights and human rights are integrally intertwined, including Indigenous rights.

Global Successes of Rights of Nature Cases

Many countries and communities around the world have successfully enacted and implemented Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court rulings, setting legal precedents and inspiring a global movement. Notable examples include:

- **Ecuador:** In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to enshrine the Rights of Nature in its Constitution.¹⁴ The Constitution recognizes that 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.”¹⁵ This codification of nature's rights provides the legal grounds for the protection of rivers, forests, and other natural entities. In a 2021 landmark case, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador upheld the Ecuadorian Constitution's Rights of Nature provision, banning mining and extractive activities in the Los Cedros Protected Forest ecosystem.¹⁶ This ruling effectively canceled a company's mining concessions and permits.
- **Canada:** For the first time in Canada, a natural entity was granted rights in 2021: the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the Minganie Regional County Municipality granted Mutuhekau Shipu (the Magpie River) legal personhood.¹⁷ Guardians of the river will be assigned by the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the Regional Municipal Council of Minganie. The guardians will be responsible for proactively advocating for the river's health and representing it in court, as well as consulting the councils as they take action on behalf of Mutuhekau Shipu.¹⁸
- **New Zealand (Aotearoa):** In 2017, through the *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017*, New Zealand (Aotearoa) granted the Whanganui

¹⁴ Ecuador Const. art 71, 72, & 74.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ El Pleno de la Corte Constitucional del Ecuador, En Ejercicio de sus Atribuciones Constitucionales y Legales, Expide la Siguiete. (2021). [\[LINK\]](#)

¹⁷ Partie 1 : L'identification de la Mutehekau Shipu/Rivière Magpie (2021). [\[LINK\]](#); Reconnaissance de la personnalité juridique et des droits de la rivière Magpie – Mutehekau Shipu (2021). [\[LINK\]](#)

¹⁸ Ibid.

River legal personhood with rights, following decades of advocacy and leadership by the Whanganui iwi (the Indigenous people of this region).¹⁹ This landmark decision acknowledged the river as an ancestor with its own rights, setting precedent for other natural entities. The Act also established a guardianship body (composed of a Whanganui iwi representative and a state representative) which can judicially represent the river and enforce these rights in court, as well as proactively take action to protect and promote the health of the river.²⁰

- **Bangladesh:** In 2019, the Bangladeshi Supreme Court recognized all of the country's rivers as living entities with legal rights.²¹ In this decision, the Court also appointed the National River Conservation Commission as guardians (person in loco parentis) of the rivers and amended the *National River Conservation Commission Act 2013* to strengthen the Commission's enforcement capabilities. Later, in 2020, the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh upheld this decision. According to reports, recognizing the rivers' rights has led to authorities deconstructing thousands of illegal establishments along the Turag River and recuperating almost 200 acres of land since the initial court decision.²²
- **Colombia:** Colombia's Constitutional Court granted the Atrato River legal rights in 2016, recognizing it as a legal subject with rights to protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration.²³ In this ruling the court also recognized the local Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities' biocultural rights: "rights that ethnic communities have to stewardship and exercise guardianship autonomously over their territories..."²⁴ The Atrato decision was coupled with procedural orders to state entities to develop and implement public policies to protect the rights of the river and create monitoring mechanisms to follow up on their implementation.²⁵ Local communities and guardians of the river, along with state entities, participate in the development and implementation of these policies. This new model of

¹⁹ *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017* (NZ); Cribb, M., Macpherson, E., & Borchgrevink, A. (2024). Beyond legal personhood for the Whanganui River: collaboration and pluralism in implementing the *Te Awa Tupua Act*. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 1–24. [\[LINK\]](#)

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Civil Petition for Leave to Appeal No 3039 of 2019. (2020). [\[LINK\]](#); Anima Mundi Law Initiative. *Rights of Nature Case Study Turag River*. [\[LINK\]](#); Kahui, V., et al. Comparative analysis of Rights of Nature (RoN) case studies worldwide: Features of emergence and design. *Ecological Economics*, 221.

[LINK](#)

²² Ibid.

²³ Colombian Court (T-622/16-16, section 5.11)

²⁴ Colombian Court (T-622/16-16, section 5.11)

²⁵ Wesche, P. (2021). Rights of Nature in Practice: A Case Study on the Impacts of the Colombian Atrato River Decision, *Journal of Environmental Law*, 33(3), 531–555. [\[LINK\]](#)

environmental governance has led to increased participation of local communities and additional protection measures for the river.²⁶

- **United States:** Numerous municipalities and Indigenous Nations in the U.S. have adopted laws recognizing nature’s rights, particularly in response to threats such as fracking and water contamination. The Ponca Nation, for example, was one of the first Indigenous Nations in the U.S. to recognize nature’s rights in law, effectively protecting their territory from fossil fuel extraction.²⁷ In another instance, Grant Township, a small township in Pennsylvania, recognized the rights of the Mahoning Watershed in 2014 through an ordinance and, later, a Home Rule Charter (i.e., a local constitution).²⁸ After over a decade of court battles in which the Rights of Nature provision was strategically employed, in and outside of court, the community successfully prevented a fracking wastewater well from being developed in the township.²⁹
- **Spain:** In 2022, after a citizens’ movement around a popular legislative initiative, the Spanish Parliament recognized the legal personhood of the Mar Menor—a large saltwater lagoon in the region of Murcia.³⁰ By legally recognizing the lagoon’s rights, Spain has enabled everybody to take legal or administrative action on behalf of Mar Menor.³¹ The law also establishes a governance structure for the lagoon, including a Committee of Representatives, a Monitoring Commission, and a Scientific Committee.³²

These examples demonstrate the growing acceptance and success of Rights of Nature laws and policies, influencing global legal frameworks, environmental governance models, and global public awareness.

Importance of a Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature in Protecting Biodiversity and Addressing Climate Change

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma. Resolution 51-07062022. [\[LINK\]](#)

²⁸ Grant Township, Indiana County, Pennsylvania Community Bill of Rights Ordinance. (2014). [\[LINK\]](#); HOME RULE CHARTER OF THE TOWNSHIP OF GRANT, INDIANA COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA. (2015). [\[LINK\]](#)

²⁹ CELDF. *Grant Township*. [\[LINK\]](#)

³⁰ Krämer, L. (2023). Rights of Nature in Europe: The Spanish Lagoon Mar Menor Becomes a Legal Person. *Journal for European Environmental & Planning Law*, 20(1), 5-23. [\[LINK\]](#)

³¹ Granting Mar Menor and its basin status of a legal person. (2022). [\[LINK\]](#)

³² Ibid.

A Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration can serve as a necessary and transformative mechanism to protect biodiversity and mitigate the worst impacts of the climate crisis. By establishing support for and adoption of a global framework that recognizes the intrinsic value and rights of natural entities, governments could drive systemic changes in how western societies interact with and relate to the environment.

The Rights of Nature as a Tool for Biodiversity Protection:

Biodiversity is the foundation of ecosystem resilience and functionality.³³ The biodiversity crisis is one of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time, with species disappearing at an alarming rate due to habitat destruction, pollution, climate change, and overexploitation. A Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature could serve as a powerful mechanism to protect biodiversity by:

- **Enhancing Legal Protection:** By drafting, endorsing, and eventually adopting a Universal Declaration and granting legal standing to diverse species and ecosystems, countries can empower legal actions against destructive activities, such as deforestation, mining, and pollution, that threaten biodiversity. Additionally, countries could build stronger ecocentric legal frameworks to safeguard critical habitats, species, and biodiversity hotspots. For instance, the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the Minganie Regional County Municipalities' recognition of the Mutuhekau Shipu's legal rights has empowered First Nations to defend the river's health and biodiversity against high-impact hydroelectric development, as well as increase community participation in the stewardship of the river.³⁴
- **Providing Legal Guardianship:** In many legal systems, nature is often excluded from decision-making processes because it lacks legal standing. By granting legal rights to ecosystems, a Universal Declaration would allow natural entities like rivers, forests, and coral reefs to have legal representatives in court, ensuring their protection against exploitation. In the case of the Atrato River in Colombia, for example, appointed guardians of the river are empowered to proactively advocate on behalf of the river in management decisions.³⁵
- **Promoting Ecocentric Conservation Governance:** Countries endorsing and subsequently adopting a Universal Declaration would be compelled to implement

³³ Cleland, E. E. (2011) Biodiversity and Ecosystem Stability. *Nature Education Knowledge* 3(10):14. [\[LINK\]](#)

³⁴ Quebec's Magpie River first in Canada to be granted personhood. *Environmental Science and Engineering*. [\[LINK\]](#)

³⁵ Wesche, P. (2021). Rights of Nature in Practice: A Case Study on the Impacts of the Colombian Atrato River Decision, *Journal of Environmental Law*, 33(3), 531–555. [\[LINK\]](#)

and enforce robust conservation measures that center environmental health. Recognizing nature's rights could shift the focus of environmental governance from reactive, damage-control measures to proactive conservation. Countries can implement laws that prioritize ecosystem health and resilience, reducing the risks of species extinction and ecosystem collapse. The *Te Urewera Act 2014*, which grants legal personhood to a forest (Te Urewera) on the North Island of New Zealand (Aotearoa), for instance, has allowed the Tūhoe (the local Maori iwi) to implement traditional stewardship practices that center the health and biodiversity of the forest ecosystem.³⁶ As a specific example, the Te Urewera Board is building walking trails that minimize adverse impacts to the forest rather than prioritizing convenience for recreational users.³⁷

- **Facilitating International Cooperation:** Biodiversity does not adhere to national borders. A Universal Declaration would encourage cross-border collaborations to protect migratory species and transboundary ecosystems, enhancing global biodiversity conservation efforts.

Addressing Climate Change Through the Rights of Nature

Climate change is intrinsically linked to the destruction of natural systems, posing existential threats to the health of the planet.³⁸ Rights of Nature laws and policies provide a transformative framework for addressing the climate crisis. A Global Initiative on the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature that recognizes the rights and inherent value of ecosystems and natural entities could:

- **Promote Climate Resilience and Sustainable Practices:** By establishing legal representation for natural entities and proactive ecocentric management systems, countries can invigorate and reshape laws and policies to protect ecosystems, such as wetlands, forests, mangroves, and agricultural land—which act as natural carbon sinks and buffers against extreme weather. This action enables countries to strengthen their resilience to climate impacts. For example, coastal mangroves play a critical role in carbon sequestration while also protecting shorelines from storm surges.³⁹ By providing legal representation to mangrove ecosystems, countries can allow the ecosystem's needs (independent

³⁶ *Te Urewera Act 2014* (NZ).

³⁷ Kauffman, C. & Martin, C. (2019). *The Politics of the Rights of Nature: Strategies for Building a more sustainable Future*. MIT Press.

³⁸ Conradi, T., Egger, U., Kreft, H. et al. (2024). Reassessment of the risks of climate change for terrestrial ecosystems. *Nat Ecol Evol*, 8, 888–900. [\[LINK\]](#)

³⁹ Choudhary, B., Dhar, V., & Pawase, A.S. (2024).

Blue carbon and the role of mangroves in carbon sequestration: Its mechanisms, estimation, human impacts and conservation strategies for economic incentives. *Journal of Sea Research*, 199.

[\[LINK\]](#)

of human-use) to become interwoven within management systems, thereby strengthening their protection against coastal development and deforestation.

- **Hold Polluters Accountable:** A Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature would empower countries to hold governments, industries, and corporations accountable for actions that damage ecosystems and contribute to climate change. In 2022, for example, the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Tribe and Tsuladxw (salmon) in the Sauk-Suiattle Tribal Court against the City of Seattle for interfering with and imperiling the Tribe and Tsuladxw in the Tribe's territory.⁴⁰ The City of Seattle settled with the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe, agreeing to construct fish passages at hydroelectric facilities.
- **Shift to Sustainable Development Models:** The Rights of Nature framework can redefine how economic development is implemented to ensure the protection of ecosystems. By acknowledging nature's rights, governments can be compelled to pursue development models that are aligned with ecological limits, such as renewable energy transitions and sustainable agriculture, reducing greenhouse gas emissions while promoting economic resilience.
- **Facilitating International Collaboration:** All countries are adversely impacted by anthropocentric climate change. This crisis, therefore, requires global solutions that are collectively determined and implemented. A Universal Declaration would foster international cooperation to prioritize nature's rights over short term profits, support ecological and human communities that are the most vulnerable to environmental degradation, and uplift a Just Transition⁴¹ to clean renewable energy.

By embedding nature's rights into a Universal Declaration, the global community can create robust pro-environmental legal and management systems, as well as an ecocentric ethical foundation, for addressing the intertwined challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change. This transformative approach ensures that the health and well-being of the entire planet, including all species and ecosystems, is prioritized, fostering a sustainable future for all life forms.

Importance of a Global Initiative on a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature on Economic and Social Justice

⁴⁰ SAUK-SUIATTLE INDIAN TRIBE on its own behalf and in its capacity as the Sahkuméhu ex rel Tsuladxw v. CITY OF SEATTLE. (2022). [\[LINK\]](#)

⁴¹ Just Transition Principles. *Just Transition Alliance*. [\[LINK\]](#).

- Addressing the Root Causes of Environmental and Social Crises:**
 Current economic systems prioritize endless material growth at the expense of environmental and community health. This model fuels environmental exploitation, deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity. Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court cases challenge this approach by legally recognizing nature's right to exist, flourish, regenerate, and naturally evolve, thereby limiting activities that harm ecosystems. Rights of Nature philosophies shift the legal paradigm from one where nature is seen as property to be exploited, to one where it is seen as a community of life deserving of protection and care. By embedding the rights of ecosystems into legal frameworks, it mandates that economic activities be balanced with ecological well-being, promoting sustainable practices that prioritize long-term environmental health and social equity. This shift is crucial for transforming the extractive and exploitative economic systems that are the root causes of both environmental destruction and social injustices.
- A Holistic Approach to the Climate and Ecological Crises:**
 The Rights of Nature framework offers holistic solutions to environmental crises by recognizing that the health of the planet is interconnected and that human systems are embedded within the natural world. Western environmental management systems are based on models that perceive ecosystems as divisible individual elements, whereas the Rights of Nature framework recognizes the holistic nature and interreliance of the diverse components of ecological communities. This shift in management approaches would allow decision-making processes to adopt a multiscalar model that reflects the connectivity across the landscape, thereby better protecting rivers, forests, and other ecosystems from degradation to preserve biodiversity and enhance the resilience of these systems to climate change.
- Promoting Ecological Justice:**
 The global implementation of Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court rulings is a step towards ecological justice, recognizing that the well-being of humans is intrinsically linked to that of the environment. This ecocentric framework ensures that communities, especially those who are most vulnerable to ecological degradation and climate change, possess the legal and policy tools to safeguard human and environmental health against harmful activities. This is particularly important for Indigenous communities and marginalized groups who often bear the brunt of environmental degradation and climate change.
- Global Responsibility and Solidarity:**
 By collectively drafting, endorsing, and adopting a Rights of Nature Declaration,

countries worldwide can foster a sense of shared responsibility for the planet's health and encourage international cooperation and solidarity in addressing global environmental challenges. This approach aligns with the principles of climate justice and a Just Transition,⁴² ensuring that all nations, particularly those in the Global South disproportionately affected by the climate crisis, have a say in how ecosystems are managed and protected. Implementing Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court rulings on a global scale is essential for addressing the root causes of environmental crises and ensuring that we have a habitable earth for all species. This ecocentric approach provides a transformative legal, managerial, and ethical framework that promotes sustainable, just, and equitable solutions, ultimately ensuring the long-term health and resilience of both human and natural communities.

- **Indigenous and Human Rights:**

The Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration complements international standards on Indigenous and human rights. The Rights of Nature framework recognizes Indigenous and human rights as integrally connected with nature's rights; one does not supersede the other. The Initiative and any Rights of Nature declaration would uplift and uphold Indigenous and human rights.

Pathways to the Global Adoption of a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature

To achieve global recognition and endorsement of a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature, countries can follow a multi-step process similar to the adoption of other international frameworks such as the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. These frameworks were conceived with input from, and subsequently adopted by numerous countries and are globally understood as universal standards. These documents arose because governments needed to address issues that afflicted people worldwide. Similarly, a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature would be a collective effort that would be developed and endorsed by many governments. Additionally, the environmental crises that the Initiative seeks to ameliorate are planetary dilemmas all countries face.

It is essential to acknowledge that The Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth,⁴³ which was developed at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁴² Just Transition Principles. *Just Transition Alliance*. [\[LINK\]](#).

⁴³ Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth. *World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth*. [\[LINK\]](#)

and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2010, is a powerful document that has inspired the Global Initiative and other Rights of Nature action around the world. This Declaration, drafted by Indigenous and Campesino organizations with input from numerous other Indigenous and environmental groups, should be a guiding document for governments and civil society as they engage to achieve a Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature.

Establishing this Initiative would require governments to endorse an engagement process to adopt a declaration. Importantly, this collective engagement would need to involve discussion around how the Global Initiative would be inclusive for all stakeholders, especially marginalized groups and governments in the Global South. In addition to countries and subnational governments endorsing a Global Initiative, groups, organizations, and individuals could also endorse the mechanism as a way to advocate for their governments to get involved and garner public support. Below are a list of strategy ideas for how such an Initiative could be negotiated and endorsed, as well as possibilities for how a declaration could, in turn, be adopted and operationalized.

1. Initial Ideas for Diplomatic Engagement and Endorsement

- **Expert Panel:** Establish a panel of legal, environmental, and Indigenous rights experts and leaders to provide input on and guidance for this process.
- **Global Campaign:** Launch an international campaign spearheaded by a coalition of first-endorser nations, subnational governments, and civil society organizations to advocate for governments worldwide to endorse the Global Initiative to establish a mechanism to adopt a Universal Declaration on the Right of Nature. This campaign would aim to raise awareness, build political will, gain governmental endorsements, and garner public support.
- **Coalition Building and Regional Forums:** Form a coalition of countries committed to Rights of Nature laws and policies, similar to the High Ambition Coalition,⁴⁴ in climate negotiations. This coalition would lead the charge in advocating for the Global Initiative at international and regional forums, such as the African Union, European Union, AOSIS, and ASEAN, as well as UN conferences to build regional support and facilitate broader international adoption country by country.

2. Potential Avenues for Drafting and Adopting a Universal Declaration

⁴⁴ High Ambition Coalition. [\[LINK\]](#)

- **Consultation Process:** Conduct a global consultation process to gather input from governments, Indigenous peoples, civil society, and other stakeholders. This process should ensure that the declaration reflects the values and needs of diverse communities and ecosystems.
- **UN General Assembly:** After momentum is built and significant country endorsements are received, present a draft of the declaration to the UN General Assembly for discussion and endorsement. Engage in diplomatic negotiations to build consensus and secure endorsements from a majority of member states.

3. Further Pathways for Advocacy and Mobilization

- **Mobilization:** Other leaders and endorsers, such as states, cities, civil society groups, health organizations, businesses, elected officials, scientists, youth leaders, and faith leaders, would campaign for the Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration and Rights of Nature policies, laws, and actions at the international, national, and local level.
- **Toolkits and Resources:** Develop and disseminate new and pre-existing toolkits for communities and groups to advocate for the Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration through political campaigns, action, and education.

4. Possibilities for Implementation and Monitoring

- **International Tribunal:** Establish a legally binding international tribunal or court to hear cases related to violations of nature's rights. This tribunal would have the authority to hold governments and corporations accountable for actions that harm ecosystems and violate the rights of natural entities.
- **National and Subnational Legislation:** Encourage countries and subnational governments to adopt legislation and policy recognizing nature's rights, using the drafted Universal Declaration as a guiding framework. This could include constitutional amendments, new laws and management policies, or integrating nature's rights into existing environmental regulations.
- **Monitoring and Reporting:** Develop a monitoring and reporting mechanism to track the implementation of the Universal Declaration and assess progress towards achieving its goals at the international, national,

and subnational levels. This could involve, for instance, regular reporting by countries, similar to the reporting requirements under international human rights treaties.

Brief Timeline of the Rights of Nature Movement

The timeline below presents a few events and cases within the long and abundant history of the Right of Nature movement. This list does not encompass the numerous organizations, Indigenous Nations, scholars, lawyers, and activists who have been integral to the mobilization of nature's rights and ecocentric action. Nor does it reflect the underpinning philosophies of the framework—that all living and nonliving entities are intrinsically intertwined—which is a worldview that many different Indigenous Nations have held for thousands of years.

- **1972:** Christopher D. Stone introduced the concept of legal rights for nature into Western legal systems in his seminal essay "Should Trees Have Standing?" This essay argues for the extension of legal rights to natural entities.
- **2002:** The Navajo Nation adopted the Navajo Nation Code, which includes a provision that outlines the rights of the natural world and the responsibility of the Diné to protect and preserve natural entities.⁴⁵
- **2006:** The Rights of Nature movement gains momentum with the formation of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature,⁴⁶ an international network advocating for the recognition and implementation of Rights of Nature laws, policies, and concepts worldwide.
- **2008:** Ecuador becomes the first country to include the Rights of Nature in its constitution, setting a global precedent.⁴⁷
- **2010:** The World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, held in Cochabamba, Bolivia, drafted the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth.⁴⁸ This Declaration articulates the rights of the planet and all living beings, proposing a global framework for recognizing and protecting these rights. Led by Bolivia, the Declaration was presented to the UN General Assembly.

⁴⁵ Navajo Nation Code. Title 1, Section 205. (2002).

⁴⁶ Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁴⁷ Ecuador Const. art 71, 72, & 74.

⁴⁸ Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth. *World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth*. [\[LINK\]](#)

- **2010:** Following the Cochabamba conference, the UN established the Harmony with Nature Programme,⁴⁹ aimed at promoting a holistic approach to development that respects the rights of the Earth.
- **2012:** The first International Rights of Nature Tribunal is held in Ecuador, providing a platform for hearing cases of environmental destruction and violations of nature's rights.
- **2017:** New Zealand (Aotearoa) recognizes the Whanganui River as a legal person.⁵⁰
- **2021:** The European Parliament adopts a resolution acknowledging the need for nature to have legal rights, marking a significant step towards the recognition of the Rights of Nature in Europe.⁵¹

Summary

Rights of Nature laws, policies, and court rulings represent a transformative approach to current environmental legal and management systems, challenging the view of nature as property and humans as separate and superior to the natural world. Instead, a Rights of Nature framework recognizes the inherent rights of ecosystems and natural entities, acknowledging that human systems are embedded within the natural world and that socio-economic structures and development models must center on environmental well-being for the health of the entire planet. By endorsing a Global Initiative for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Nature, countries can take a significant step towards safeguarding the planet's ecological integrity and ensuring the well-being of all life forms. The proposed pathway for endorsement, drawing on successful models from other international frameworks, offers strategy ideas for achieving global recognition and implementation of Rights of Nature laws and policies.

Through international advocacy, coalition-building, and diplomatic engagement, the Rights of Nature framework can become a foundational principle in global environmental governance, ensuring a thriving and just future for all.

⁴⁹ Programme. *Harmony with Nature United Nations*. [\[LINK\]](#)

⁵⁰ *Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act 2017* (NZ).

⁵¹ Nature restoration: Parliament adopts law to restore 20% of EU's land and sea. *European Parliament*. [\[LINK\]](#)