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To Save the Planet, Forget about the Globe

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A ground-breaking movement calls for the recognition of the inherent rights of nature and non-human species. This vision seeks to displace human beings from the central, privileged place they have hitherto occupied to act on the world and shape it in their interests. Rather, humans are one element in a complex, tangled web of life, whose right to exist and thrive needs to be reconciled with those of the planet's other inhabitants.

The Magpie River courses through rich boreal forests, vast scenic gorges, and thunderous waterfalls on its nearly 300-kilometre journey through eastern Québec. The immense waterway is a place of deep cultural significance and alluring adventure. For the Indigenous Innu people of Ekuanitshit, who know the river as Muteshekau-shipu, it is an important part of their traditional territory that requires respect and stewardship. For tourists seeking its world-renowned white-water rapids, it is a place of excitement and adrenaline. But it is also a place rich in potential for hydroelectric energy. As the river nears the end of its journey, it churns through a 40.6-Megawatt-generating station before finally reaching its mouth on the shores of the mighty Saint Lawrence. Local communities have long been concerned that there may yet be further developments along the Magpie. But, after a decade-long campaign, the Magpie's mouth may have gained a new faculty curious to rivers: the right to speak for itself.

In February 2021, the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the local municipality of Miganie passed motions to grant the Magpie River legal personhood. The resolutions granted the Magpie nine legal rights including the right to flow, to be protected from pollution, and to maintain its integrity. But perhaps the most interesting right recognised is the right to take legal action on its own behalf. The move comes after a decade of slow campaigning against future hydroelectric dams on the river, which divert and disrupt waterways and have a detrimental impact on biodiversity. That fight seemed to have been won in 2017, when Hydro-Québec promised to rule out future projects. However, only two months later, Canada's *National Observer* learned that the Québec government was refusing to enshrine concrete protections into law. Seeking further legal tools for protection, campaigners looked to both longstanding Innu beliefs in the inherent life of the Magpie and the burgeoning "rights of nature" movement. The river is now the first in Canada to be recognised as a living entity, adding to the growing number of waterways, forests, and mountains around the world that have achieved such status. Perhaps one of the biggest successes of the rights of nature movement was in New Zealand, where in 2017 Māori campaigners secured the national government's recognition that the Whanganui River is a unique living entity from source to sea, not simply a resource to be used by humans.

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Debating who governs nature

It may seem strange to grant a river legal personhood, but we might consider that all sorts of non-human entities are granted such status, from government agencies to corporations. Of course, this leaves the question of how the Magpie will represent itself in any future legal battle. The Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the municipality of Miganie have agreed to appoint guardians who will speak on behalf of the river and represent its interests in court, although it is unclear how existing laws would accommodate such representation. Whether the Magpie River will be spoken for accurately or listened to seriously remains to be seen, but the "rights of nature" movement may offer interesting solutions for broader problems of environmental governance.

While the movement has been gaining ground over the past decades, there's an ongoing debate in academic disciplines from geography to cultural theory. This is the debate over whether we need to move away from a human-centric perspective on the planet in order to protect nature and ourselves from the worst impacts of anthropogenic climate change. It is not only a debate about how we conceive of the world and our place within it, but also about how we relate to the planet in our politics, culture, economies, and laws. From the deliberations in various academic disciplines, one question that has emerged is: how can nature be governed by humans while also ensuring that it is not being overdetermined by us? There is also a debate to be had *which* humans do the governing.

Humans have historically governed nature through top-down mechanisms created by states and international institutions and arbitrated by legal systems. This "international" approach to environmental governance, is carried out by states and often arbitrated by institutions, agreements, and treaties between them. The problems inherent in such an approach are well known and we only need to consider the failure of most states to stay on track with the goals of the Paris Agreement to see this.

Fundamental geopolitical problems of state competition and the myth of endless economic growth remain within any international framework that aims to protect the environment. Indeed, the small steps achieved at the COP26 summit in Glasgow suggest that states may be pathologically incapable of abandoning growth, with most observers agreeing that fundamental problems have not been solved. The need for concrete goals on net-zero emissions by 2050 and ambitious renewable funding have become only more urgent following the dire projections of the International Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) sixth assessment report published August 2021. The intransigence of states seems to loom over any hopes of progressive international climate policy. So, we seem to be left with the question of how we can create new frameworks for coherent and unified climate policy that supersede national concerns.

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anthropogenic climate change.

The problem with thinking globally

Of course, the international approach is not the only one available. The work of civil society actors such as academics, nongovernmental organisations, and others may be suggestive of a "global" approach that seeks to constitute a non-state community for environmental protection. While it often uses state and international mechanisms, such a global approach attempts to shift authority away from the state and towards a broader basis of power that is centred not on sovereignty and gross domestic product (GDP), but on science and environmental ethics. This approach decentres the state and international institutions in a positive way; it attempts to overcome the geopolitical exigencies of competition and economic growth, focusing instead on values, expertise, and ethics. The figure of a unified globe seems to emerge from this approach. Such an approach avoids the competition of states for power and resources, shifting to a focus on the benefits for a much wider community than a single state, namely a global community. In addition to the political difficulties inherent in shifting from an international to a global framework, some scholars have argued that the entire notion of the global remains problematic because it is essentially human-centric, limiting the possibility to engage with the natural world in the kind of way that the Innu people and Miganie municipality are doing with the Magpie River. This has been the argument of the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, who has recently critiqued what he terms "global ways of thinking."

For Chakrabarty, "global" does not refer to the entirety of the world, but rather to a particular mode of thought. This mode of thought is deeply human-centric and refers less to the world itself than to the projection of a fully knowable world that is "out there." In other words, to think globally is to assume the world is essentially an object – or set of objects – that could in theory be fully apprehended and systematically categorised in human thought. This is the globe that emerges from the processes of colonisation and globalisation. It is the reduction of divergent worldviews and cosmologies into a singular world, a global system determined by hegemonic political relations. Along similar lines, the cultural theorist Claire Colebrook has argued that thinking globally creates, "an earth of a single time, single market, and single polity." The worlds of different peoples are reduced to the fully synchronised world of the "global community." The worlds of non-human life remain outside this community. The figure of the globe, theorised in this manner, becomes what the political scientist Jairus Grove has termed "the great homogenisation" of the planet. The planet is essentially reduced to the human conception of it, and it is really only a certain privileged type of human that does that conceiving.

In terms of how the global emerges in environmental governance, we may think here of the recent 30×30 campaign to create marine protected areas that cover 30 per cent of the world's oceans by 2030. Part of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, the campaign will likely have many benefits for biodiversity and ocean health. However, to achieve its goals will require the kind of global thinking that ironically flattens the earth to make it measurable, ignoring its complexity and certainly not entering into the kind of mutually respectful relationship that we see in the "rights of nature" movement. The 30 per cent of the oceans that it is hoped will be protected will be determined by humans and

ultimately secured – or not – by states and international institutions. To critique such a global approach is not to say that such campaigns and projects will not provide some benefits – they very often do. Rather, the point is that there are issues in simplifying the complexity of the planet to make it legible and measurable. As Bruno Latour argues, complexity must be worked with rather than reduced. This does not mean we dismiss pragmatic initiatives, but rather, the aim of Latour and others to is to productively critique and re-enliven scientific research by acknowledging the shortcomings of reductionist thinking, encouraging experimentation with the very real complexity of the world.

Some will no doubt argue that this is too abstract a vision and that the global approach is the best we can achieve. Some may even argue that in critiquing initiatives such as the 30×30 campaign we risk weakening environmentalism and strengthening every form of extractivism. But not attending to the divide that remains between humans and nature is potentially catastrophic. Indeed, this is perhaps the very reason that global initiatives so often fail to adequately tackle climate change and environmental destruction. In other words, thinking globally may well reinstate one of the very root causes of environmental destruction, the belief that humans are at the centre of the world. Or as Colebrook suggests, "it is the image of the globe that lies at the centre of an anthropocentric imaginary that is intrinsically suicidal."

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Time to rethink our relationship with the planet

To change our way of thinking, we need a new theoretical framework that somehow decentres humans and allows us to act more responsibly. This is not to deny the obvious: that we are inescapably human and can ultimately only think and act as humans. But rather, that we must experiment to shift and broaden the possibilities of our perspectives. We need to recognise the blind spots and biases that we inherit as a species, even if we cannot ultimately transcend them. The rights of nature movement is an effort in formulating a respectful relationship that can fit into legal frameworks, and one that I believe is worth nurturing. While we can never really "speak for" another species in the sense of transmitting its views, we do have some ability to discover what is beneficial for other life forms and advocate on their behalf. Indeed, we already "speak for" nature all the time. The point of the rights of nature movement is to grant novel rights and try to represent nature better and more conscientiously. This does not reject what I have termed global approaches entirely, but rather recognises that we need to go further. To do this, we need to think about our relationship to the planet differently. We perhaps need to forget about the globe.

In critiquing the global, Chakrabarty offers another mode of thinking that can perhaps

provide the philosophical grounding for a truly ecological approach. He terms it the "planetary." Chakrabarty argues the "planetary" is not a unified totality, but rather "a dynamic ensemble of relationships." While the global mode of thought retains the centrality of the human observer, the planetary mode of thought decentres the human and its apprehension of the world. The human becomes only one node within a much more complex and multivalent system of actors, both human and non-human. In other words, Chakrabarty is arguing that the planetary mode of thought refuses the assumption that humans are somehow imbued with a natural authority that can determine what the world is. To think in the planetary mode, therefore, means to never assume an inherent divide between humans and nature. The planetary is thus a disruptive, experimental way of thinking that accepts the limitations of human knowledge and focuses instead on entanglements of human and non-human systems. It assumes that life is never self-contained or neatly bound up in separate units or categories – a human, a river, some salmon – but rather everything is entangled in an infinitely complex web of life. This is the insight of anthropologist Anna Tsing in her popular book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. To accept an entangled vision of the world makes it impossible to assume there is a binary of humans and nature, even less so a hierarchy. We are always, as Tsing argues, "mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration."

Being human in an entangled world

So, if we are to adopt this philosophical position of the planetary, to think not from the centre of the world but from a point of entanglement with other forms of life, how are we to act in the world? How are we to recognise non-human life as something more than a resource for consumption? And how are we to protect the world without putting ourselves in a position of too much authority and thus reinstating the hierarchies of global thinking? Perhaps the example of the Magpie River can help here. It may be suggestive of the kind of planetary thinking that some scholars are calling for and that many Indigenous peoples have been doing all along. While it remains to be seen how this approach will work in practice, at its best, it could bring together a dynamic ensemble of Indigenous people, local communities, environmental scientists, and lawyers centred on the legal personhood of the Magpie River and ultimately having greater legal standing in courts and parliamentary backrooms against the lawyers and lobbyists of extractive industries. This approach is, therefore, about bringing Indigenous, scientific, legal, community, and policy expertise into greater concert, all focused on a foundational principle of finding better ways to discern the needs of an ecosystem and to represent these as best as possible.

The question remains as to how we act in a planetary way on the planetary scale, not just for an individual river. This would need to be part of a broader approach to environmental governance. International approaches are mired in state competition and myths about endless economic growth. Global approaches structure the world around human cognition and seem to tacitly assume the centrality of humans, while also assuming a singular and universal world that flattens out human difference and often reinforces racial, gendered, and other hierarchies. With COP26 failing to deliver the level of ambition required, the stakes could not be higher. Indeed, some may argue that we don't have time to philosophise about these questions, we need to act now with whatever means we have. But how effective will action be if it replicates the social and political structures of the state, capital, and human exceptionalism that have very arguably caused the crisis in the first

place? Genuinely planetary forms of governance are beginning to emerge in the world and the granting of personhood to the Magpie River seems to be an example of this. If we can nurture the rights of nature, engage more honestly with Indigenous philosophy, and attend to the question of our place in the world, we can perhaps begin to build larger frameworks of environmental governance that avoid overdetermining the world and that experiment creatively with how we can give non-human life a voice in our politics. If the Innu people and Miganie municipality can figure out a way of responsibly speaking for the Magpie River, and if the Québec government and courts can figure out a way of listening, then we may have the beginnings of such a planetary framework on which to build.

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