



How Implementing the Rights of Wetlands Provides Benefits to People and Wetlands: Relationships, Rights, Responsibilities, Experiences, and Actions

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Abstract

Rights of wetlands shifts the people-wetlands relationship towards one recognizing the intrinsic rights and living beingness of wetlands, embodying reciprocity, kinship, and gratitude. Recognition of wetland rights occurs within the broader Rights of Nature movement, which has often been led by Indigenous Peoples and local communities from many cultural traditions. Intrinsic wetland rights centre on the right to exist and incorporate seven other rights, forming a holistic framework that enables preservation of wetland ecosystem integrity. These rights provide the basis for a wetland's thriving existence. The eight rights are: • the right to exist. • their natural place in the landscape; • natural and connected hydrologic regimes; • natural climatic conditions; • naturally occurring biodiversity; • natural ecosystem processes; • natural water, soil, and air quality (i.e., structural integrity and form); and. • regeneration and a naturally determined future. Moral and ethical responsibilities towards these rights include fostering harmonious relationships in and with wetlands, respecting interdependence of all wetland components, safeguarding and fostering conditions enabling rights of wetlands, and acting in a precautionary manner when faced with risks of harm to wetlands. Legal and policy responsibilities include acknowledging plural worldviews, recognising legal standing and political orientations to represent and defend wetland rights, providing adequate means for wetland representation and defending and advocating for wetlands, and using best available science to restore degraded wetlands and support regeneration, thereby supporting harmonious societal relationships with wetlands. Opportunities for implementation of rights of wetlands at a variety of scales (individual, community, national, and global) are explored, and training/guidance resources are referenced.

Keywords Rights of wetlands · Pluricentric worldviews · Natural regime · Living beingness · Intrinsic rights · Rights of nature

Introduction

Need for Transformative Change

The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Chair Ana Maria Hernandez Salgar (2021) stated that, “Transformative change in all parts of society and our economy is needed to stabilise our climate, stop biodiversity loss and chart a path to the sustainable future we want. This will also require us to address

both crises [biodiversity and climate] together, in complementary ways”. Wetlands and other ecosystems are essential components of Earth's operating system, yet they are often treated as natural resources to be exploited for economic gain or as a barrier to be removed to achieve economic goals. Further, successive assessments of the state of wetland environments (Davidson et al. 2020; McInnes et al. 2020; Simpson et al. 2021) show that current models of human efforts for wetland conservation are largely failing. The need now is not just “doing the same things better”, but

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a shift away from this destructive, transactional mindset to a relational value system. The most recent Global Wetland Outlook (2025) states,

“Transformative change for wetlands can be enabled by mobilising value-based levers[148]. The first of these is recognizing the full range of values of wetlands. The second is to embed these values in decision-making....a broader shift in society toward wise use of wetlands needs to be encouraged by triggering shifts and deep changes in individual and societal views, structures and practices which respect and provide stewardship to the plural values of wetland.”

Recognition, implementation, and enforcement of the rights of wetlands embodies the transformative change that is essential to re-establish a healthy, balanced, and sustainable future and to align human culture and governance with ecological reality.

The proposed *Universal Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands* (Davies et al. 2020) outlines eight specific rights that wetlands hold that serve as a foundation to protect their ecological integrity and ensure their continued existence, ability to thrive, and capacity to regenerate. These rights are grounded in the idea that wetlands have intrinsic value as part of Earth’s community of life (Society of Wetland Scientists Rights of Wetlands Initiative and Operationalisation Working Groups, 2025), often referred to as the “web of life”, particularly by Indigenous Peoples. Since the landmark publication of *Towards a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Wetlands* (Davies et al. 2020), the worldwide momentum for recognition and implementation of such rights has continued to gather pace (McDonald and Gillespie 2024; Surma 2025).

Based on the past seven years’ development in the growing Rights of Nature movement (Kauffman and Martin 2021) and specific community and governance experience in implementing wetland rights in a variety of cultural and legal contexts around the world (Rights of Wetlands Partnership 2024), we further refine and expand our understanding of what each of the eight originally proposed individual rights (Davies et al. 2020) entails, articulate more fully the human responsibilities that are implied by recognising the rights, provide examples of how the rights of wetlands can be implemented, reference rights of wetlands implementation training and guidance resources, and suggest a pathway for accelerated action.

The original 2020 (Davies et al.) articulation of the rights of wetlands explored the ecological basis for eight rights that make it possible for any wetland meeting the Ramsar

Convention on Wetlands definition of wetlands¹ to exist, thrive, regenerate, and participate in the Earth’s ongoing natural processes. Experience over the past few years in implementing rights of wetlands in communities and with policymakers has revealed the need for the eight rights to be articulated in less technical and easier to understand language. In this article the eight rights are described in simpler language that corresponds to the original ecologically defined meanings of the eight rights, such that the originally intended meaning of the eight rights is unchanged yet is more accessible to a broader audience. Section 2 provides a more detailed discussion in this regard.

Wetlands offer particularly good contexts for enacting wider Rights of Nature actions, and this article provides a ready articulation of wetland rights for uptake in relevant legal and policy processes such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Our intention here is not to argue for fixed terminologies or definitions, but to propose a robust, practical framework that can evolve alongside growing experience in implementing wetland rights.

Why is the Rights Construct Needed for the Future of Wetlands?

Business as Usual Continues Current Wetland and Biodiversity Degradation/Loss and Accelerates the Catastrophic Climate, Ecological, and Societal Destabilisation Trajectory

Society is at a crossroads. Current patterns of human consumption-of-nature show that our ability to meet human economic needs, including housing, food, and clean water, is deteriorating along with the degradation of ecosystems that ultimately provide these essential ecosystem services that support people, their economies, and their societies. If we continue on our current trajectory, food harvests and freshwater supplies will continue to dwindle (this is already happening as drought and water shortages increase), and forests, fisheries, and other elements of the web of life upon which people depend will continue to be negatively impacted by

¹ Wetlands are defined by the global intergovernmental treaty on wetlands (Convention on Wetlands, 1971, Article 1.1), as: “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six metres”. Global commitments relating to wetlands have also been adopted in other intergovernmental fora including the Convention on Biological Diversity, and in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022) which has targets for the conservation and restoration of inland water, marine, and coastal ecosystems.

climate change, biodiversity loss, unsustainable agricultural, water, land, and fisheries use, and unsustainable energy practices (Rodell et al. 2018; Albert et al. 2021).

Despite the efforts of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands over the past 50 years, as well as efforts by national and sub-national governments and non-governmental organisations, severe wetland loss and destruction continue, with an estimated 22% of wetlands lost since the 1970s based on data gathered thus far (Convention on Wetlands 2025). In addition to wetland loss, five out of six global regions have experienced wetland deterioration since 2011 and more than one fifth of global wetlands are reported to be in “poor” condition based on the 2024 World Wetlands Survey (Convention on Wetlands 2025). Wetland loss and destruction lead to climate change, biodiversity degradation and loss, increased flooding, storm damage, high heat, and dwindling fisheries, water supplies, and water quality (Convention on Wetlands 2025; Moomaw et al. 2018). Wetlands are fundamental components of Earth’s operating system, upon which we all depend. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states:

- **“Safeguarding biodiversity and ecosystems is fundamental to climate resilient development, in light of the threats climate change poses to them and their roles in adaptation and mitigation (very high confidence).”** (IPCC AR6 WG 2, 2022 Summary for Policymakers D.4).
- **“...maintaining the resilience of biodiversity and ecosystem services at a global scale depends on effective and equitable conservation of approximately 30% to 50% of Earth’s land, freshwater and ocean areas, including currently near-natural ecosystems (high confidence).”** (IPCC AR6 WG 2, 2022 Summary for Policymakers D.4).

Existing approaches to conservation, restoration, and sustainable development have failed to shift the people-nature relationship or halt consumption-oriented human behaviour, which has led us to the brink of catastrophic climate destabilisation and brought on the 6th mass extinction (Cowie et al. 2022; Leakey and Lewin 1995). All of this is happening more rapidly than anticipated (Ceballos et al. 2015; IPCC 2023). We have little time left to change course and we must act now.

A Rights of Nature Approach Enables Transformation

Rights of wetlands are part of a global Rights of Nature movement (Surma 2025), often led by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, which is transformative and shifts

the globally predominant paradigm responsible for endangering the well-being and continued existence of wetlands and other biodiverse ecosystems, as well as humanity. The Rights of Nature paradigm shifts the people-wetlands relationship from one of exploitation, extraction, and depletion to one that recognises the rights and living beingness of wetlands and embodies a relationship between wetlands and people based on reciprocity, kinship, and gratitude, a perspective held by many Indigenous Peoples for millennia.

For millennia and across cultures, people have recognised the Rights of Nature, including specific elements of nature, as members of the web of life, as documented in supplementary material in Davies et al. (2020). Without this recognition of the living beingness of other elements of nature a dualistic, mechanistic view of the people-nature relationship predominates, and people are viewed as separate from and superior to nature. When people are recognised as being part of nature, with wetlands and nature having rights, the people-nature relationship then explicitly includes the ethical responsibilities that people have towards nature, as exemplified and practiced by many Indigenous Peoples and local communities (Kauffman and Martin 2021).

What is the Change?

The graphic below (Fig. 1) illustrates a Rights of Nature and eco-centric perspective.

Adopting Rights of Nature (including wetlands) is transformative because it creates an ethical and ecological imperative to align human behaviour with the laws of nature by recognising that people are an integral part of nature and that our societies and economies exist within, and depend upon, nature. In other words, a Rights of Nature approach fosters harmonious relationships with nature by respecting equality and interdependence among all species and through recognition of plural worldviews. People cannot persist in taking more from nature than nature can give while also sustaining the web of life (i.e., life on Earth) without jeopardising the health and well-being of people and nature. Continuing with the current incremental improvements that do not meaningfully change the overall trajectory towards ecological and climate collapses is creating increasingly negative consequences for people and society. Rights of Nature (and of wetlands) provides a potential pathway for proactively changing our current downward trajectory.

People are continually balancing and prioritising competing rights. Rights of Nature requires us to include nature in that prioritisation process. Recognising Rights of Nature does not define which rights will be prioritised in any given situation. In an economic sense, impacts to nature have been externalised (i.e., not included in cost-benefit analyses) and

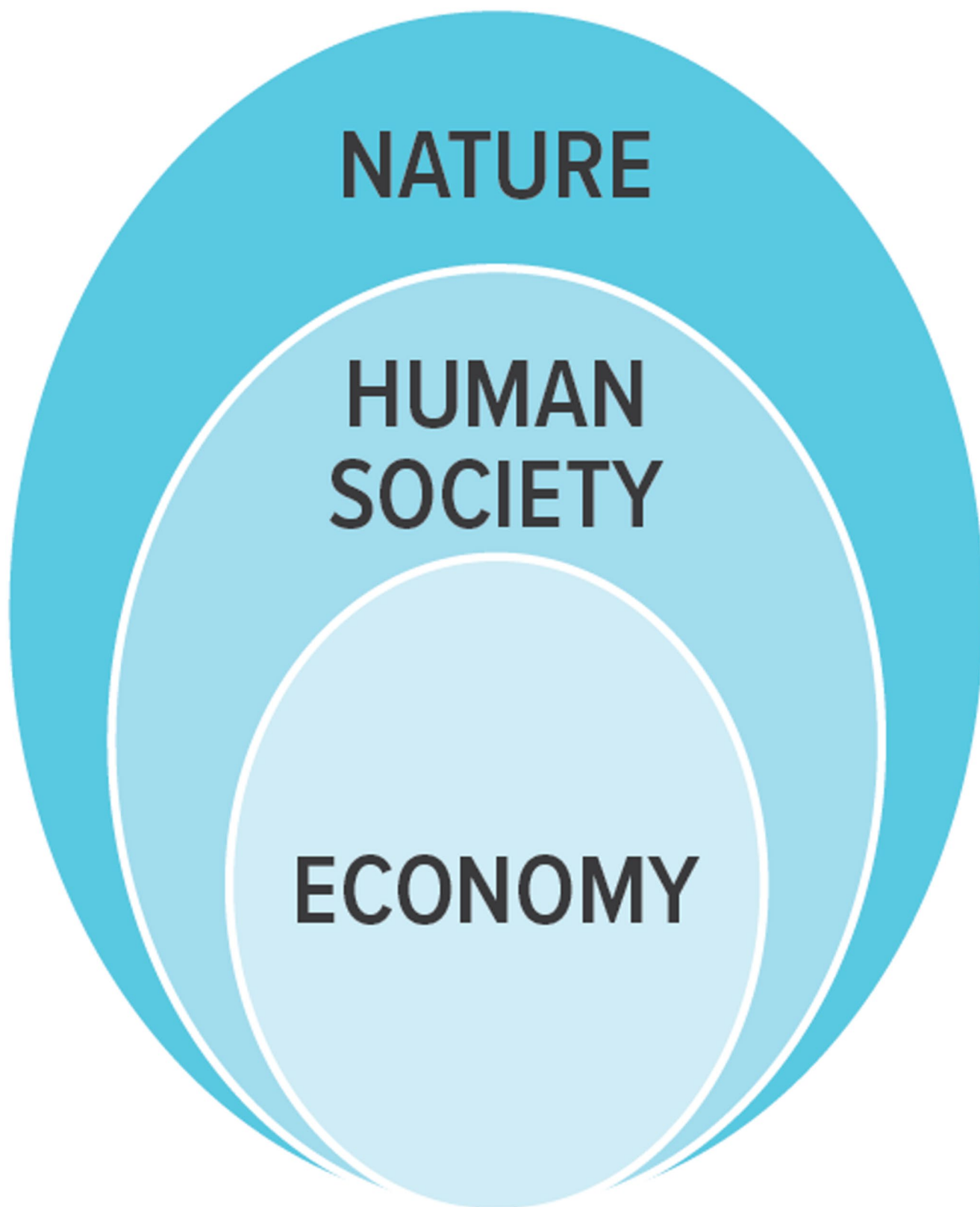


Fig. 1 Rights of nature is transformative as it embeds human societies and economies within ecosystems. Adapted from Kauffman and Martin 2021, p. 225 (adapted from Ito 2020, p. 324)

ignored, which has led to the rapidly worsening global collapse of a stable climate, healthy biodiversity populations, and many ecosystems including wetlands. These ongoing and accelerating collapses result in hardships for people and societal instability. Alternatively, taking a Rights of Nature approach expands the circle of rights holders to include all of nature, not just people, and restores ethical, legal, and ecological balance, an effective approach for restoring the Earth’s operating systems while also meeting the needs of people.

What does it Mean for Wetlands to have Eight Rights?

The Global Wetland Outlook (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2018) states, “Healthy, natural wetlands are critical for human survival.” This implies that the recognition of rights ensures wetlands maintain natural conditions, benefitting both people and wetlands.

Each of the individual rights is discussed below to explain why each is important and what each means for a specific wetland (Fig. 2). The term “natural” or “naturally” is used in seven out of the eight rights. To clarify, we reference the Convention on Biological Diversity’s definition of “naturalness,” (2006) as follows:

“The degree to which an area is impacted and changed due to human activities [or not]. An area with high naturalness has no or a low level of human-induced disturbance or degradation.”

In this second, and more in-depth exploration of the rights of wetlands that were articulated in the Davies et al. (2020) article, the terms “natural”, “naturally occurring”, and “naturally determined” have replaced some of the original language in the descriptions of the seven rights that support the most fundamental right, the right to exist. The intent is for the naming and explanation of the seven supporting rights to be more accessible to a broader audience, beyond the scientific community. The underlying scientific basis for the eight rights remains the same, and the rights themselves are fundamentally the same as in the original articulation, with the exception that restoration of wetlands is now viewed as a responsibility that people have to wetlands, rather than a right, and the right to be free from pollution has been framed more positively as the right to natural water, soil, and air quality. Wetlands continue to have the right to regeneration, but people are responsible for restoring wetlands that they have damaged as a mechanism to enable wetlands to realise that right. Wetlands have the right to natural water, soil, and air quality (ecological structure), but people are responsible for avoiding

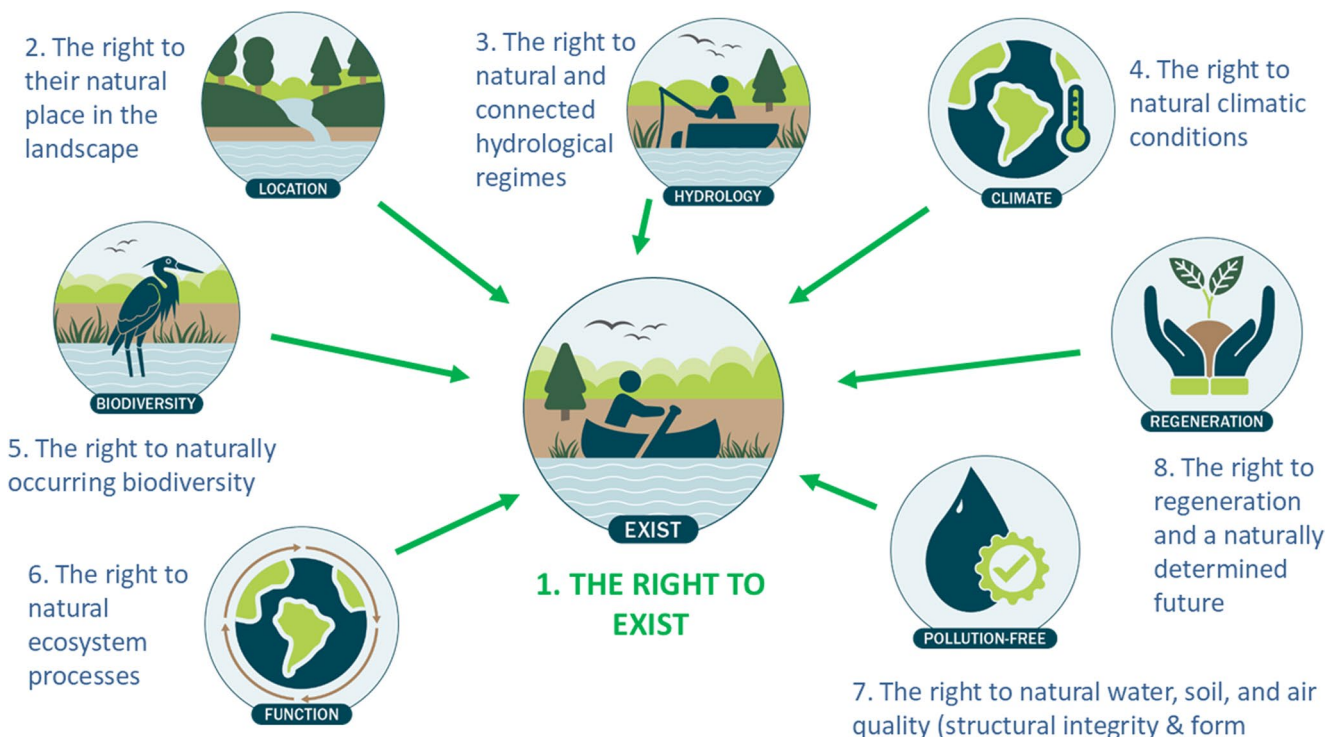


Fig. 2 Eight rights of wetlands

pollution of wetlands and removing pollutants when they do impact wetlands.

The term “natural” cuts across the description of most rights and may convey an intention to maintain the wetland ecosystem in a particular regime or condition, in whatever ways and forms the regime is defined. There has been a fundamental shift from the perception of ecosystems as static entities in equilibrium, or a balance of nature, to complex systems that are dynamic and often unpredictable across time and space (Scoones 1999; Wallington et al. 2005). Previously, in the classical ecology paradigm, ecosystems were believed to follow a linear development path towards a stable “climax stage”, with management tending to eliminate disturbances, which would occur in the form of rare external events (Mori 2011; Wallington et al. 2005). Such views have been found to be too limiting, with ecosystems such as wetlands being instead in a constant state of flux. Disturbances, such as those brought by fire or floods, are now recognised as an inherent feature of ecosystem dynamics, thus making uncertainty/change the normal condition, and stability a temporary condition rather than an inherent property of the system (Middleton 1999; Osborne et al. 2013). Thus, the description of “natural” conveyed in the rights includes the wetland regime with its disturbance, existing in a non-equilibrium stochastic condition. It is also recognised that disturbance legacies have a bearing on ecosystem structure and functions, and thus historical contingency, multiple stable states, and the open heterogenous nature of ecological systems remain the key defining features of the natural regime (Keddy and Campbell 2020; Oro and Martínez-Abraín 2023).

In support of wetlands as essential components of Earth’s operating system and the web of life, self-sustaining wetland ecosystems require legal and ethical consideration. The eight rights assure wetlands’ role not just as resources to be used or altered, but as having intrinsic value that should be protected and respected. These eight rights, discussed below, are all essential and serve as a minimum set of interrelated core rights. Beyond that, specific wetland types might have additional rights that are needed for that particular wetland type to flourish; for example, rivers have the right to flow and connect with downstream waters, permafrost wetlands have the right to appropriate frozen conditions, and coastal wetlands have the right to exist in fluctuating tidal regimes.

In principle, all eight rights apply to all wetland types, including human-constructed or human-modified wetlands, and the degree of “naturalness” or “artificiality” bears only on the way they are considered in each given case. For example, a low-functioning, artificial wetland would only

have rights that reflect its level of ecological function and history. Where rights of a human-constructed or modified wetland conflict with the rights of the pre-existing natural wetland, resolution of the rights would happen on a case-by-case basis.



The Right to Exist

The core tenet of a wetland’s right to exist is that this right is inherently or intrinsically held by the wetland independent of any need to demonstrate its utility, benefits, or justification in human terms. Indigenous Peoples (Santi et al. 2024; Kauffman and Martin 2021) and western philosophers (Berry 2001) provide examples of this perspective in which the right to exist is ascribed to membership in the web of life, Earth Community, or the Universe, with rights originating from that which creates existence (whatever form this creating/original source is taken to be).

The right to exist incorporates the seven other rights, thus forming a holistic framework that preserves the integrity of wetland ecosystems. The other seven rights are those necessary to ensure that wetlands’ right to exist is a right to an ecologically thriving existence. The eight rights are connected and should be viewed as an integrated whole that maintains ecosystem integrity.

Wetlands are inextricably linked to other ecosystems, from upland forests and grasslands to open oceans, and wetlands thus function as critical components of the Earth’s operating system (Haig et al. 1998; Cohen et al. 2016; Leibowitz et al. 2018). As part of the web of life, wetlands interact with other ecosystems through the exchange of materials, energy, and ecological processes. Wetlands’ right to a healthy, thriving existence is necessary to the rights of other elements of nature, and of the Earth/nature as a whole. In this sense, the recognition of wetland rights reflects a broader commitment to honouring the interdependence (and rights) of all life on Earth.

The Right to Their Natural Place in the

Landscape



Wetlands exist, and have a right to exist, in specific natural locations in the landscape/seascape. The interaction between the location in the landscape (i.e., geomorphology) and other physical structural elements (such as water, sediment, soil, etc.) and naturally occurring processes (physical, chemical, and biological) results in suitable conditions

for wetland ecological communities to assemble and persist (Winter 2001; Sharitz and Pennings 2014). Wetlands are often spatially distributed systems whose functions depend on where they are located on the landscape and their openness to, for example, hydrological, chemical, and biotic fluxes with other systems (Mitsch and Gosselink 2000).

However, a lack of recognition of the relationships between wetlands and the surrounding landscape has led to land-use decisions that adversely affect wetlands, such as draining, filling, or altering them for agricultural development, urban expansion, or infrastructure projects (Gutzwiller and Flather 2011). These actions are often referred to as “reclaiming land,” rather than “destroying a wetland.” Wetland conversion disregards the ecological principles that govern their integrity and functioning and leads to the degradation and loss of habitat and biodiversity, thus impacting their beneficial role in climate mitigation and resilience and provision of other ecosystem services. In most cases, such alterations to locations are irreversible (Li et al. 2022; Fluet-Chouinard et al. 2023).

The Right to Natural and Connected Hydrologic



The pattern of water flows and levels over time is a key variable that determines the structure and function of wetlands. Recognising the significance of hydrological regimes in the existence and integrity of wetlands, this right focuses on two dimensions: the regime’s naturalness and connectedness (US EPA 2015; Liu et al., 2025). Wetlands must maintain access to and interaction with their natural water sources, including streams/ivers, surface and groundwater, seasonal flooding patterns, and nearshore coastal/ocean conditions. This right emphasises the importance of preserving natural hydrological processes—such as water flow, seasonal inundation, and water level fluctuations—that wetlands rely on to sustain their ecological functions. Natural hydrological regimes must be considered over the long-term, allowing for variations in water flow magnitude, frequency, duration, timing, inundation depth, and rate of change, all of which play a significant role in the structure and functioning of all wetlands (Poff et al. 1997).

Hydrologic connection results in the flow and exchanges of water, organisms, materials, and energy within and among water catchments/river basins in which the wetlands are located (US EPA 2015; Sulliván et al. 2025). For example, catchments that maintain unmodified flow regimes support a mosaic of hydrologically connected ecosystems—including rivers, streams, ponds, marshes, swamps, and estuaries—that may be linked by lateral (floodplain), longitudinal (upstream-downstream), and

vertical (surface-groundwater) connectivity. These links facilitate the movement of water, solutes, sediments, organic matter, and biota, sustaining the ecological integrity and resilience of wetland complexes (US EPA 2015; Sulliván et al. 2025). Recognising the right to connected hydrological regimes underscores the ecological and biophysical dimensions of wetlands. Recognition of this right is therefore integral to ensuring a wetlands’ broader right to exist.

The Right to Natural Climatic Conditions



Wetlands, like all ecosystems, are both shaped by climate and influence it (Pokorny et al. 2010; Moomaw et al. 2018; Mitsch et al. 2023). The structure and processes of current wetlands depend upon the global climate as it determines the local and regional weather and water cycle. Climatic conditions vary naturally. Although climatic variability is a natural feature of the Earth system, wetlands’ continued existence and resilience depend on the rate and magnitude of climate change remaining within bounds that allow these ecosystems to adapt and evolve naturally over time.

Climatic conditions that support healthy, thriving wetlands must remain within planetary boundaries (Albert et al. 2021; Richardson et al. 2023). Climatic conditions determine local temperature and precipitation patterns of variability and associated hydrologic cycles (including storm severity and frequency of drought), local sea levels, reliable sunlight and humidity, and avoidance of ocean acidification. Wetland plants contribute to terrestrial carbon dioxide removal, and globally, wetlands store about 30% of the Earth’s soil carbon (Jackson et al. 2017; Poulter et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2021) while comprising an estimated ~13% of the land area (Lehner et al. 2025). Hence, they are an essential component of Earth’s operating system that determines climate.

The Right to Naturally Occurring Biodiversity



Biodiversity is critical to maintaining the ecological integrity of wetlands (Gopal 2009; Song et al. 2024). As complex socio-ecological systems (Kumar et al. 2023), wetlands support a high diversity of species, many of which are tightly coupled through ecological interactions that drive key processes such as nutrient cycling, decomposition, and trophic energy transfer (Song et al. 2024). The conservation of naturally occurring biodiversity within wetlands is therefore essential for sustaining long-term ecological resilience and adaptive capacity in the face of environmental change (Ponzio et al. 2019).

Biotic integrity in wetlands depends on the persistence of native species assemblages shaped by evolutionary and ecological processes specific to each region (Karr and Dudley 1981). The introduction of non-native or invasive species can disrupt these processes, leading to altered species composition, reduced functional diversity, and cascading effects on ecosystem processes (Wetzel 2005).

Despite their limited global extent, wetlands support disproportionately high levels of biodiversity, providing critical habitat for approximately 40% of known species (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2018). This richness reflects the ecological heterogeneity and dynamic hydrological regimes characteristic of wetland environments (Junk et al. 2006). Maintaining naturally structured communities also supports broader conservation goals, including maintaining genetic diversity, population viability, and species-specific habitat requirements. In this context, the protection of wetland biodiversity is foundational to ecosystem persistence. Species assemblages, and the ecological functions they perform, are inseparable from the systems in which they evolve.



The Right to Natural Ecosystem Processes

This right recognises that wetland processes (such as support for biodiversity, biomass production, nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration and storage, and water dynamics) are ongoing and essential in maintaining a healthy wetland. Wetlands are self-organising systems whose species and processes are fundamental to the Earth's cycle of water, nutrients, carbon cycling, and biodiversity (Mitsch et al. 2023). Wetlands should be allowed to function according to their natural ecological processes without interference or disruption, thereby maintaining their local and global roles.

A wetland with high ecological integrity functions as an integrated system that supports biodiversity and performs ecological functions characteristic of its type and region. Integrity reflects the wetland's capacity for self-organisation and its integration into broader biogeochemical cycles - namely water, nutrient, and carbon cycling - within the global ecological system. Examples include regulating the flow of water in rivers (Bullock and Acreman 2003), determining water quality (Verhoeven et al. 2006), and the cycling and storing of carbon (Nahlik and Fennessy 2016). The interaction of naturally occurring processes and wetland structural elements forms a wetland's socio-ecological character and helps define its resilience (Kumar et al. 2020).

This right recognises that wetlands are dynamic systems that vary over time and space (Euliss et al. 2014; McLean 2022); the species that occur in a wetland may shift as they adapt to changing conditions. Over longer time periods, the adaptation and evolution of species create a holistic system

where biotic and abiotic components interact in an evolving relationship. Natural variation includes any sustainable use of wetlands, as people are an integral part of wetland ecosystems and can use wetlands sustainably just as other wetland beings do (e.g., fish, beavers, birds).

The Right to Natural Water, Soil, and Air Quality (i.e., Structural Integrity and Form)



The right to natural water, soil, and air (structural components of a wetland) ensures that wetlands retain their natural form, integrity, and biodiversity, including chemical, physical, and biological composition (Mitsch et al. 2023).

Some human-made wetlands are created specifically to clean waters by removing and converting pollutants to benign forms (Vymazal 2010). They are not to be viewed as experiencing negative biophysical change when pollutants are added, unless the design loading is exceeded, or the system becomes saturated with pollutants (Ávila et al. 2014). If not designed well, they may pollute downstream wetlands when their stored pollutants are released due to extreme weather events.

The Right to Regeneration and a Naturally

Determined Future



The right to regeneration affirms the wetland's ability to sustain itself, self-heal, and evolve through time and in response to external natural disturbances and change (Gao et al. 2023a, 2023b). Over longer time periods, the adaptation and evolution of species create a holistic system of interacting biotic and abiotic components that continues to adapt and evolve. The natural interactions among wetland structural components and processes provides the resilience that allows the ecosystem to thrive (Gao et al. 2023a, 2023b).

What Responsibilities do People have Regarding Rights of Wetlands?

We will frame the relationship between people and wetlands as coupled people-nature systems. The relationship between people and nature is multi-layered, with many human activities failing to sustain and maintain nature, which then leads to systemic societal stresses and, in some cases, collapses (Kumar et al. 2023; Schoon & van der Leeuw 2015). Sustainability sciences increasingly have

called into focus the people-nature connections, which in normative terms, can foster a flourishing life for people and nature and overcome human tendencies to dominate and control nature through hierarchical relationships (Chan et al. 2018; Walsh et al. 2021).

Work on informational feedback indicates that the social-ecological system can exist in a range of interactive states. At one extreme is the coupled system, wherein the informational feedback between social and ecological systems enables proactive system management to prevent undesirable outcomes. At the other end is a decoupled system, wherein these feedback systems are broken, and thus the overall system has a higher affinity for moving towards a highly unstable condition or state that is less supportive of human interests. (Quintas-Soriano et al. 2022).

People-nature relations are a fundamental factor in contemporary conservation challenges. With a flourishing interest in relational and pluricentric ways of valuing nature, values regarding what matters in human interactions with nature (such as stewardship) and values regarding relationships between people (such as collectivism) are seen as relational values supportive of sustainability (Martin et al. 2024). More recently, it is argued that the boundaries separating the two-way flows between people and nature are indeed artificial, and these need to be framed as an “integrated” social-ecological system, with the relationship being cross-scale and dynamic (Reyers and Bennett 2025). This understanding forms the basis of describing the human responsibilities towards the eight rights discussed here.

In a legal sense, for an entity to have a right, other entities have a duty to respect that right. Each right implies a corresponding responsibility on the part of another (Misselbrook 2013). Ethically, as members of the web of life, what are peoples’ and societies’ responsibilities to the community of beings with whom we share the Earth? What are the individual and societal responsibilities to respect rights of wetlands? The section below explores these questions.

Human responsibilities regarding the rights of wetlands fall into two major categories: (1) the moral and ethical responsibilities that guide peoples’ behaviour towards nature (in this case, wetlands), and (2) the responsibilities to address these rights in legal systems and through political representation.

Moral and Ethical Responsibilities

The moral responsibilities people have towards the rights of wetlands flow from an “eco-centric” ethic, which recognises that nature has intrinsic value (innate value separate from any value specifically *for* people). Ecocentrism expands the moral concern beyond people and encompasses the entire ecosphere, including the biotic and abiotic

elements (Guczalska 2023). For wetland conservation, the eco-centric ethic means that wetlands should be conserved, nurtured, and restored, not just for their ecosystem services for human well-being, but for the very fact that wetlands are a part of nature (Zedler 2014). While espousing this ethic, we are consciously not pitting this ethic against any other, such as anthropocentrism (Kopnina et al. 2018; Washington et al. 2017). In other words, we recognise that while some wetlands should be preserved, other wetlands will be used in a balance between human needs and the needs of other-than-human entities. This section examines the consequences of the eco-centric ethic on the forward-looking moral and ethical responsibilities people have towards wetlands (Fahlquist 2009).

Responsibility to Foster Harmonious Relationships in and with Wetlands

“Right Relationship” is a fundamental principle and a guiding ethic to support people in leading fulfilling lives as creative and integrated participants in human society and as an integral part of nature (Brown and Garver 2009; Ellyatt 2024). This principle recognises that people and nature are intertwined with multilayered unfolding relations, and guides people to fulfil ethical responsibilities for fostering healthy and mutually supportive, intertwined, and interdependent relationships. This principle therefore challenges the duality of people as separate from nature and instead fosters recognition of the interconnectedness among all forms of life through a culture of respect, reciprocity, and harmony. Such a relationship is built on a worldview favouring participatory and holistic approaches to knowledge, embedding ethical consideration into actions of self, and emphasising the relationships and inseparability of “people with nature” (Reyers and Bennett 2025). In the context of the rights of wetlands, people have a responsibility to foster relationships with wetlands built on holistic and relational worldviews that dissolve the boundaries between people and wetlands and foster collaboration between people and nature (Leach et al. 2018). There is clearly an asymmetry in the relative ability of people and wetlands to exercise agency in upholding their respective intrinsic rights, but solutions to this are found in regimes that identify roles for “guardians” or equivalent voices to assert the interests of the wetland (see e.g. Section 3.2.5 and 4.1 below).

Responsibility to Respect the Equality and Interdependence of all Components of the Life-Web in Wetlands

This responsibility entails being informed and conscious of the structural components and processes of a wetland system and recognising that they each depend upon the other

components. Understanding the wetland *as a functioning system* and not merely a collection of separate elements leads to acting in cognisance that a threat to any one part of the system may pose a risk to the interests of the whole (Cherry 2011).

Responsibility to Safeguard and Foster Conditions that Enable Continued Fulfilment of Rights of Wetlands

The overarching responsibility of people is to safeguard and foster the conditions that enable continued fulfilment of the rights of wetlands. This is a responsibility to avoid harming the overall web of life and does not imply that there will be no harm to nature at all. However, when a wetland will be “used” for resources there is still a responsibility to fulfil as many rights as possible. The semantic construct which is the word, “nature” includes the entirety of Earth, including people. Thus people, along with all other beings, are invited to have a seat at the table. The responsibility is to consider other-than-human nature as equally valuable as people. Recognition of this responsibility guides individuals, governments, corporations, and other collective entities to avoid actions that could jeopardise a wetland’s ability to exercise its rights, such as its right to exist, to function naturally, or to fulfil any of the other individual intrinsic entitlements that it holds. This may involve altered attitudes, active protection, prohibitions or restrictions on certain industrial activities that systemically harm the ecosystem, and management regimes that benefit the interests of the wetland.

In instances where a wetland’s interests have been negatively impacted (for example, by ecological degradation), upholding the wetland’s rights will necessitate actions to restore the impacted aspects. This may relate to the wetland itself, or to its interconnections with wider systems, or both. Peoples’ responsibilities depend on having sufficient information and understanding, based on the best available science, to judge what may harm or benefit the interests of a given wetland or wetland system. The eight rights discussed in Sect. 2 indicate the areas of ecological knowledge that may be required in any given case, as well as the correct spatial and temporal scales at which the necessary actions must occur.

Responsibility to Act in a Precautionary Manner when there are Risks of Harm to Wetlands or when there is Uncertainty About Potential Risks

Wetlands are complex social-ecological systems, and in several cases, it is difficult to predict the outcomes of interventions. In the context of the rights of wetlands, people have the responsibility to proceed with precaution when faced with uncertainty (Dinneen 2013; Gardiner 2006). Scientific certainty about impending harm should not be a precondition

for acting with precaution (Steel 2013). If there is uncertainty as to whether a given activity would risk harm to a wetland’s fundamental rights, that activity should be avoided until it can be determined that the activity would not risk such harm (Kriebel et al. 2001; UN General Assembly 1992).

Legal and Policy Responsibilities

Systems of law reflect the values a society wants to advance, and laws themselves are the rules that reinforce the value system. National legal systems that evolved after the period of European colonialism reflect a similar value system that places property at the centre for ordering and stabilising government (Parrington 1927). The legal systems then allow for the expansion of property interests through commerce or commercial dealings. This kind of legal construct arises out of Enlightenment thinking that prioritised the needs and interests of people, largely privileged people, above everything else.

Many legal systems have defined what they hold in highest regard through the articulation of rights. Governments and citizens then have a responsibility to avoid violating legally recognised rights. Many governance systems distinguish between “privileged” and “unprivileged” people, categorizing them as “other” within those systems, with limited or no rights (e.g. slave systems that categorise people as property). In addition to unprivileged people, the other-than-human world typically has no (or very limited) rights in these governance systems. Nature, globally, is still largely categorised in law as property, and defined as a natural resource to be exploited for profit.

Operationally, many people have created systems that treat nature as an object to be conserved, enjoyed, restored, used in ways that cause no or minimal harm, or used in ways that degrade, and/or destroy, as it pertains to the property and commerce interests of the rights holders. In modern times, managing nature has been primarily defined and instituted by the volume and rate at which it can be subjected to economically profitable activities that are often damaging or polluting (Kauffman and Martin 2021). Rights of Nature efforts seek to emancipate nature from these systems (Boyd 2017).

Ecocentrism aligns human systems, including legal ones, to reflect the values that are inherent in such a world view. In a legal sense then, the task is to move away from an anthropocentric, property-based system (designed to satisfy the needs and wants of people) to a more complete eco-centric rights-based system (honouring *all* life, including that of people) (Kauffman and Martin 2021). Recognizing nature’s rights does not make Rights of Nature superior to all other existing rights. It elevates nature’s (wetlands’) rights to be on the same level as all other rights. When the rights conflict, the conflict is resolved in a similar manner to how conflicting rights between people are addressed through the legal system.

The pathways towards recognising the rights of the rightless within law have normally been political. Governments adopt, implement, and defend Rights of Nature/wetlands laws when people, at various levels and in various positions of recognised and unrecognised authority, mobilise and advocate effectively. Successful advocacy efforts thus inform the legal system, which becomes more eco-centric, thriving on highly relational practices.

The sections below discuss primary policy and legal responsibilities necessary to honour and animate the inherent rights of wetlands.

Responsibility to Adapt or Expand Political Orientations to Defend the Rights of Wetlands

Transforming cultural views and practices—and the laws that stem from them—will require mobilisation of people to promote that change. Although historically some people and cultures acknowledged that nature has inherent rights, recognising the Rights of Nature, including the rights of wetlands, is, in many parts of the world, a newer concept (Okuno 2025). As such, it will take time for people to understand and adopt rights of wetlands (culturally and legally). In this regard, the more diverse and expansive citizen mobilisation is, the more effective and resilient those efforts will become. As with any effort to recognise the rights of the rightless, innovators and early adopters acting as rights of wetlands champions are important (Stone 1972).

Responsibility to Acknowledge Plural Worldviews

Advocacy actions for the rights of wetlands are already happening in specific places around the globe (Boyd 2017; Kauffman and Martin 2021; Okuno 2025). But as advancements to secure rights of wetlands continue, it is vital that those individual places are in tune with and honour the ways in which different cultures and traditions will or do relate to—and therefore protect—the interests of wetlands. People have a responsibility to recognise the diverse worldviews that shape our understanding of wetlands, including their connectedness with wider landscapes and people. Implicit in this responsibility is the necessity to create an enabling environment in which these diverse values are expressed, considered, and respected while determining the risk of harm and taking actions to prevent and reduce the risk.

Responsibility to Design Human Legal Systems to be in Relationship with Wetlands

Ideally, laws developed from an eco-centric perspective that embodies a right relationship with wetlands would identify explicitly how governments (at all levels—local, national,

Tribal, and international), people, and other human systems (e.g., particular industries) should behave to avoid harming the inherent rights of wetlands. Laws would mandate behavioural practices that are compatible with the needs of wetlands (instructive or preventative) instead of solely holding people to account if harm occurs (punitive). Today, all over the globe, governments have legally defined, funded, and operationalised governmental bodies or agencies charged with overseeing particular aspects of societal needs. The same approach could be taken with Rights of Nature and rights of wetlands, whereby laws and policies inform the ways in which human activities need to function to avoid violating the rights of wetlands. Governments at all levels would tailor their laws and policies so that they recognise and enforce rights of wetlands.

Responsibility to Recognise Legal Standing to Represent and Defend the Rights of Wetlands

Environmental law today typically does not recognise the environment as a legal entity, or as an authorised party with standing. Protection of the environment is typically achieved by showing harm to people and also by showing harm to the environment itself. Alternatively, rights of wetlands laws recognise wetlands as a legal entity. The precise form and function of this legal recognition necessarily varies across governments and at different levels of government, but as a legal entity, wetlands then can defend their rights (through people) when harmed, or proactively defend them prior to harm occurring, via the precautionary approach. Legal precedent exists for recognizing non-human entities as legal, rights-bearing entities (e.g. corporations, ships, etc.).

Responsibility to Provide Adequate Means for Representation to Meet the Needs of Wetlands and to Best Defend and Advocate for Wetlands

If people see themselves as a part of the ecosystems they are connected to, such as wetlands, then rights of wetlands laws would allow for the broadest possibilities for implementation and enforcement of wetlands' rights. This will require governments to provide adequate funding, people, and other necessary resources to ensure that rights of wetlands are not only recognised legally but also are enforced. A designated governmental entity, private citizens, and/or organisations can be legally empowered to act as ecosystem advocates (a.k.a. guardians). Beyond the explicit identification of those who could/should have more direct responsibility to protect rights of wetlands, there would be a direct means for any person to file a lawsuit on behalf of wetlands if justified.

Responsibility to Restore Degraded Wetlands and Support Wetland Regeneration to help make Wetlands Whole

People, as a part of the wetland community, are responsible for providing restitution for harm to wetlands. That restitution could take different forms, such as monetary, volunteer time, and/or other resources, directly applied to benefit/restore the impaired wetlands. In simple terms, support should go where the damage has occurred.

People have a responsibility to restore a degraded natural wetland to support the wetland's right to regeneration, thus improving ecological condition and the capacity of the wetland to regenerate and adapt over time as climate and degree of structural development or other conditions change. To ensure degraded wetlands can regenerate, people have the responsibility to implement effective restoration. Successful implementation of wetland restoration relies in part on clarity in legal systems.

Best Available Science/Knowledge Supports Harmonious Relationships with Wetlands

The responsibilities articulated above depend on having sufficient information and understanding, based on the best available knowledge (e.g. scientific, ancestral, traditional, practitioner, and local knowledge), to judge what may harm or benefit the interests of a given wetland or wetland system. The eight rights discussed in the previous section of the paper indicate the particular areas of ecological knowledge that may be required in any given case, as well as the correct spatial and temporal scales at which the necessary actions must occur.

Implementing Rights of Wetlands

Georgina Mace, in her much-celebrated work, "Whose Conservation", has suggested that the modern framing of conservation has shifted focus from nature and wilderness or "nature for itself" and generally without people (e.g., late 20th century "fortress conservation", which perpetuated the idea that people are separate from nature, not part of nature) to a greater appreciation of the dynamic relationship between people and nature and the focus on resilience interactions between the two (Mace 2014). Within this falls the evolution of the Rights of Nature in general, including rights of wetlands. Mace and others propose reframing the relationship between nature and people by calling for a jurisprudence that recognises nature as a fundamental and rights-bearing entity, and an explicit recognition that people are part of nature, not separate (thereby integrating human rights with nature rights) (Stone 1972). In this section, we

discuss opportunities for implementation of rights of wetlands at a variety of scales with varied approaches (individual, community, legal, governance, and policy) in a diversity of domains. We note some key Rights of Nature, wetlands examples, and case studies. For lengthier Rights of Nature and Rights of wetlands lists and explanations please see the Supplementary Material in Davies et al. (2020) and the Eco Jurisprudence Monitor website (Kauffman et al. 2025). Section 4.4 lists implementation resources including links to a rights of wetlands guide, quick guides, a short animation, training courses, community and government toolkits, community participatory videos, and other rights of wetlands journal articles.

Legal and Governance

As mentioned previously, rights of wetlands can be recognised, enforced, and defended in legal, policy, regulation, and governance frameworks. Wetland protection laws and regulations, consistent with the precautionary approach, can be developed that go beyond protection of the typical list of ecosystem services that identify the benefits to people provided by wetlands. Rights of Nature legislation has already been enacted in several countries and sub-national jurisdictions around the world (Kauffman and Martin 2021). The Eco Jurisprudence Monitor (Kauffman et al. 2025) provides an online global tracking system for Rights of Nature examples and other Earth-centred laws at <https://ecojurisprudence.org/> (accessed 2026-03-28). For example, in 2008, Ecuador became the first country to grant legal rights to nature by including Rights of Nature in its Constitution. This occurred largely because environmentalist social movements had elevated and advanced the environmental agenda during prior decades, and influential Indigenous organisations consistently advocated for Ecuador to be a "plurinational" polity, whilst demanding respect for Indigenous territories and ways of life and incorporating politicised versions of Indigenous beliefs about the environment (Akchurin 2015). Although early legal cases in Ecuador did not routinely uphold nature's rights, more recent judicial rulings have resulted in the rights of wetlands, related ecosystems, and peoples being defended, upheld, and recognised in the Constitutional Court, demonstrating the importance of the constitutional changes in protecting the Rights of Nature (Tănăsescu et al. 2024). More recently, Panama passed a Rights of Nature Law (Law 287) in 2022 that was instrumental in the 2023 ruling that the Cobre Panama copper mine was unconstitutional.

For wetland-specific legislation, a wetland protection law could list the inherent rights of wetlands that are protected, including the right to exist and all the other provisions that are necessary in order to safeguard the right to exist. The

establishment of legal protections to safeguard a wetland's right to exist does not automatically prevent modifications of wetlands but enables the weighing/prioritising of different rights against each other. This approach could take many forms. An example is the 2018 moratorium in Colombo, Sri Lanka, which halted so called "land reclamation"—more accurately, wetland destruction—through enforceable legal orders (Office of the Cabinet of Ministers Sri Lanka 2018).

Rights of wetlands laws and regulations could place the burden of proof on the entity wishing to impact a wetland to demonstrate that the work or impact proposed contributes to the continued existence of the wetland and its healthy structure, function, and native biodiversity. A mitigation hierarchy would serve as an essential decision-making tool, prioritising impact avoidance first, followed by minimisation of impacts and restoration of any disturbed wetland, with offsetting measures implemented only for unavoidable impacts to a wetland (Phalan et al. 2018). Such regulations could require alternatives analyses and conformity with rigorous performance standards, such as "no net environmental harm" or requiring a positive "net environmental benefit" relative to pre-activity conditions. However, offsetting mitigation measures and/or "net benefits" may cause leakage of harm to other locations, and wetland mitigation has had mixed success. As an example for how some of the elements of this type of law/regulation can work (e.g., burden of proof, alternatives analysis, tiered mitigation hierarchy, performance standards), see the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act (Massachusetts General Laws (M.G.L.) Chap. 131, Sect. 40) and associated regulations (310 CMR 10.00 et al.), which though it does not include rights of wetlands and is based on protection of ecosystem services, it does provide an example of some of the legal/regulatory structures outlined above. Another example is the wetland mitigation banking model, wherein relatively large wetlands are created to replace wetlands destroyed by development projects in other locations (U.S. Code of Federal Regulations <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CFR-2012-title33-vol3/xml/CFR-2012-title33-vol3-part332.xml>, accessed 2025-10-19), although wetland mitigation banking has had only mixed success.

Legal provisions protecting a wetland's right to exist can include the guardianship model, where specific guardians are chosen/appointed to act on behalf of the wetland to secure the wetland's rights, and always in the wetland's best interest, similar to how guardians are chosen/appointed for minors who have rights but need legal guardians as protectors of their rights because they do not have the capacity to represent themselves in a legal setting. Legal guardians give the wetlands a voice in decision-making processes regarding the management of the specific ecosystem or activities in the wider landscape (e.g., catchment), thus allowing rights

of wetlands to be considered and protected proactively. For example, the introduction of Spanish Law 19/2022 granted legal personhood to the Mar Menor Lagoon, recognising the lagoon as a legal entity with rights and guardians to represent those rights. In 2024 the Marañón River in Peru was granted recognition of its rights and guardianship by the Kukama Indigenous women of Santa Rita de Castilla.

Rights of wetlands can also be promoted at the international level through multilateral agreements such as the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and through mechanisms such as the IUCN World Conservation Congress (McDonald and Gillespie 2024). In 2024 Sri Lanka raised the issue of Rights of Nature in wetlands with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Standing Committee, calling on Contracting Parties to recognise rights of wetlands and promote innovative practices that recognise the intrinsic value of living ecosystems. At the time of publication, discussions related to Rights of Nature in wetlands are ongoing with Contracting Parties. In 2025 at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, a motion explicitly mentioning rights of wetlands was adopted as IUCN Resolution 8.066: Living in harmony with rivers through the rights of nature and ecocentric law (<https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/52716>, accessed 2026-02-05).

Rights of wetlands can be, and have been, integrated into contract law and within organisational and corporate structures. For example, some corporations, such as Faith in Nature, have added nature to their Board of Directors and have inserted specific Rights of Nature clauses into their contracts with suppliers and clients.

Ensuring that rights of wetlands laws and regulations are enforced is key. Effective enforcement can be tied to supporting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, human rights, good governance and democracy, and ensuring that corruption is not tolerated (Gilbert 2022).

Community and Individual

Adoption and defence of wetland rights can be promoted through culture. Some cultures, such as those of many Indigenous Peoples and local communities, already recognise the rights and living beingness of wetlands (Santi et al. 2024; Kauffman and Martin 2021). In other situations, a cultural and ethical shift has been promoted in support of wetlands' rights. This cultural shift is occurring in many places through the global Rights of Nature movement. For example, in 2023 in the UK, a network of Rights of Nature grassroots groups was established linking many initiatives organised around the rights of the Rivers Dart, Avon, Ouse, Cam, Rydale, and Roding. The network has supported the development of a Rights of River Charter for the River

Ouse, East Sussex, UK, co-developed by the Lewes District Council, Love Our Ouse, and other local partners (Lewes District Council 2025).

Rights of wetlands community and individual actions are often most effective when based on multiple ways of knowing nature, including wetlands, which will lead to a more diverse understanding of how nature functions, such as including traditional relationships between wetlands and Indigenous Peoples and local communities that support socio-ecosystem health and well-being. For example, the “Kawsak Sacha Declaration – Living Forest Living Being and Conscious Subject of Law” (Original Kichwa People of Sarayaku 2012; updated 2018) articulates the biocultural/socio-ecological rights and cosmovision of the Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku and the living forest within their territory in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Community action and individual practices centred on wetlands’ rights can be integrated into wetland management approaches that combine best available science, Indigenous traditional knowledge, cultural practices, and spiritual beliefs into the process of choosing appropriate interactions for a particular wetland (Papayannis and Pritchard 2016). Approaches that integrate Indigenous and ecological perspectives, that reflect the diverse values associated with ecosystems, while maintaining their scientific and legal operability, lead to greater success (Nawrath et al. 2025). An example of such a collaboration is a joint declaration from scientists and the Kichwa Original Peoples of Sarayaku, Ecuador, titled, “*Transforming perspectives on living beings – a convergence of Kawsak Sacha and contemporary science*” (Santi et al. 2024).

Upholding wetlands’ rights is more likely to occur when wetlands are understood as socio-ecological systems (Kumar et al. 2023), and when communities and individuals are engaged early in the process of planning and implementing wetland management strategies, as long-term success and sustainability are most likely when local communities are engaged and steward the wetland over time (McDonald and Gillespie 2024). As communities recognise themselves as members of the web of life and guardians of living nature, rather than owners of natural resources, they are empowered to become powerful defenders of wetlands’ legal rights (Reed et al. 2021).

What Conditions Enable Implementation

Rights of wetlands, and more broadly Rights of Nature, successes have occurred in countries and jurisdictions, such as in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Ecuador, and Bolivia, where there have been strong cultural and Indigenous Peoples and local communities traditions that align with Rights of Nature and that provide a strong foundation for enacting

Rights of Nature laws (Akchurin 2015; Kauffman and Martin 2021). As a result, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Bolivia, and Ecuador can be viewed as having an open political system to Rights of Nature, meaning that the opportunity exists to enact Rights of Nature legislation at the national level. In the case of Ecuador, in 2008, support from the President and other political leaders also contributed to constitutional change. In 2014 and 2017 in Aotearoa/New Zealand, recognition of the rights of specific natural spaces such as the Whanganui River and its watershed became a means of settling treaty disputes between the national government and Māori iwi (tribes) that had been unresolved since the late 1800’s. These agreements strengthen recognition of Māori rights, and thus are biocultural legal vehicles recognizing both Rights of Nature and rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Many governments, communities, and individuals engage in environmental protection. Those who have maintained a connection with nature or are responding to environmental shocks, such as floods, fires, droughts, or tsunamis are often also more likely to be open to implementing actions, policies, and legislation related to the rights of wetlands.

Additionally, there have been successes in implementing rights of wetlands initiatives when there has been strong individual leadership. As discussed in the context of Ecuador, leadership is a key factor for providing enabling conditions for implementing rights of wetlands whether at a national or local level. This was also the situation in Sri Lanka, where the President in 2024 requested the Ministry of Environment to develop a National Policy of Living Entities with the mission to establish an ethical framework that values nature and respects diversity in all forms, regardless of its direct worth to human beings. This initial leadership led to the development of the policy, institutional acceptance of Rights of Nature, and, as mentioned in above, raising the issue of recognising Rights of Wetlands with Ramsar Convention on Wetlands Contracting Parties and ongoing discussions in this regard. Further, although the Sri Lankan government and administration have changed, Rights of Nature policies and initiatives are now widely accepted and embedded within government institutions.

Implementation Resources: Guidance, Toolkits, and Trainings

For those wishing to implement rights of wetlands, a number of resources provide further guidance, including the following resources available on the Rights of Wetlands Initiative website (www.rightsofwetlands.org, accessed 2026-03-21):

- Rights of Wetlands Guide
- Rights of Wetlands Quick Guides (available in 10 languages)

- Rights of Wetlands short animation
- Free, online Rights of Wetlands Training Course
- Rights of Wetlands Community Toolkit
- Rights of Wetlands Toolkit for Governments
- Community Participatory Videos (communities share their stories about implementing rights of wetlands)
- Journal articles on rights of wetlands

Conclusion

Rights of Nature and of wetlands are culturally and legally recognised and implemented in many settings around the world, as discussed in this article and numerous other publications. As with any emerging approach, implementation at various levels, as well as further development of key concepts, led to refinements over time. However, the persistence and globally widespread application of the Rights of Nature (including wetlands) framework in a wide range of cultural and governance settings argues in favour of implementation at an accelerated rate to meet the many global challenges that we face. Ecological sciences and ancestral and traditional knowledges provide sound underpinnings for identification and legal defence of specific ecosystem or species-based rights that are required for actualisation of the fundamental rights of wetlands and other elements of nature to have a thriving existence, to an ecologically appropriate place to thrive, and for the ongoing right to regenerative participation in the Earth's processes.

Rights of Nature and of wetlands provides a transformative paradigm shift in our relationship with nature/wetlands that reconnects people with the rest of our web of life and aligns modern society with both ecological reality and much ancestral and traditional knowledge now being shared by Indigenous Peoples and local communities. The articulation of Rights of Wetlands expands the available toolkit for wetlands wise use as defined by the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands² by including elements related to rights and justice which has hitherto received little attention within the Ramsar Convention and elsewhere. This transformative realignment can accelerate our response to the unravelling of the web of life, Earth's operating systems, to the climate and biodiversity emergencies, to the social and cultural costs of environmental degradation, and to the losses of critical ecosystem services—all of which are the result of our failure to operate within planetary boundaries and ecological realities, and of our failure to understand and honour our responsibilities fully as members of the web of life.

² The Convention on Wetlands (2007) defines “wise use” as follows, “Wise use of wetlands in the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through the implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.”

Ecologists and scientists in related disciplines have an opportunity to contribute a science-based articulation of fundamental rights for ecosystems, similar to the way in which rights of wetlands have been developed, and to collaborate with ancestral and traditional knowledge holders to find synergies between ancestral and traditional knowledges and sciences (Santi et al. 2024) as a way of accelerating the pace of uptake and implementation of Rights of Nature and rights of wetlands, thereby providing knowledges that support communities, governments, attorneys, and organisers in the growing Rights of Nature movement. We view this as an ongoing learning process, as development of Rights of Nature frameworks and practices is in early stages and because we cannot know everything there is to know. The authors invite the interested readers to the Rights of Wetlands Initiative portal <https://www.rightsofwetlands.org/> wherein additional tools and materials are available to support implementation of Rights of Wetlands.

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