

Upcoming Symposium: A Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands – Shifting the Paradigm to Restore the Human-wetland Relationship in Support of Wetland Restoration, Conservation and Wise Use

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ABSTRACT

Current approaches to wetland conservation, restoration and protection have failed to stop global loss and deterioration of wetlands. This is leading to the consideration of complementary approaches to augment existing international and national approaches, and could possibly lead to their replacement. Recognition of the inherent rights of wetlands may be part of a transformational paradigm shift that is needed to reverse current trends of wetland loss and degradation. The issues raised when considering the rights of wetlands are being discussed through an informal working group within the Society of Wetland Scientists.

INTRODUCTION

As current approaches to wetland conservation, restoration and protection have failed to stop global loss and deterioration of wetlands (Ramsar Convention 2018; Davidson et al. 2020) we are using the opportunity of the Quebec RE3 Conference: Reclaim Restore Rewild (June 2020), with participation from the Canadian Land Reclamation Association (CLRA), Society of Wetland Scientists (SWS) and Society for Ecological Restoration (SER), to consider alternative approaches. In doing this we are aware that these alternative approaches will likely require further discussion and modification before they could be seen as having wide acceptance. The SWS Ramsar Section (<https://www.sws.org/Membership/section-membership.html>) symposium at the RE3 conference will build on ideas first presented and developed at the SWS Annual Meeting held in Baltimore in May 2019. The 2020 Ramsar Section symposium is titled: *A Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands – Shifting our paradigm restores the human-wetland relationship in support of wetland restoration, conservation and wise use.*

At one level the envisioned considerations could raise approaches to augment those currently in place through international conventions and treaties, such as the multilateral Ramsar Convention on Wetlands or bilateral and multilateral migratory bird agreements. At another level they could potentially raise issues that could eventually show that existing approaches such as multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) are redundant and no longer ‘fit-for-purpose’, and replace them. Further, these approaches are being implemented at all levels of governance around the world, from local to international and stimulating some interesting responses, in favor or against.

Given the global and national investment in existing approaches shifting paradigms could be particularly challenging as many existing approaches have been developed over many decades with many dedicated supporters and practitioners. However, the effectiveness of these approaches is being increasingly called into question by recent global analyses which indicate that, despite local successes, the condition of wetlands globally continues to decline (Ramsar Convention 2018) and further steps are needed if this decline is to be stopped and reversed. This includes asking questions about the efforts of the 171 countries that have signed onto the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands and specifically committed to actions for maintaining the ecological character of all wetlands (Davidson et al. 2020).

With this backdrop in place we have followed the lead of indigenous cultures by proposing that society as a whole recognizes the inherent rights of nature, including wetlands, as part of the transformational paradigm shift that is needed to reverse current trends. Hence, through the Ramsar Section symposium we are proposing a *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands*, thereby providing a wetlands-focused response to the Rights of Nature movement as well as to the *World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice* (Ripple et al. 2017) and will address how an ethical and legal paradigm shift could accelerate prioritization of wetland restoration and wise use.

Rights of nature recognize the inherent right of natural systems and their biodiversity to exist and to avoid degradation of the resources that support them, as well as the ethical and legal responsibility that humans have to safeguard

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the interests and well-being of ecosystems. Rights of nature recognize the dependence of human health and well-being on maintaining healthy and holistic relationships with the natural world. The symposium will address why a *Declaration* on wetland rights is needed now, what the *Declaration* entails, how it differs from existing declarations, and how the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, wetland scientists and scientific societies can utilize the *Declaration* to further the restoration, conservation and wise use of wetlands globally. We are particularly interested in how scientific societies such as SWS can contribute knowledge and improve practices to support governments and others responsible for wetland management. SWS's members are well placed to play a major role in future efforts given their individual and combined expertise in advocacy and policy, research and knowledge generation, education and training, and communication and information sharing (Finlayson et al. 2017).

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

The abstracts of the speakers in the symposium have been paraphrased below to provide an introduction to the topic and a think-piece for those who cannot attend as well as for those who choose to engage with the many issues that are being raised. The above-listed authors are presenting these talks and would like the opportunity to engage widely with readers and the wider community to further develop these ideas.

1. Why could a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands support wetland wise use?

We face a global biodiversity crisis and wetlands are not exempt. In 1971 the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands was established by governments because of increasing concerns over wetland loss and degradation and its impacts on wetland-dependent species. But since then the areal extent of wetlands has continued to decline, through deliberate drainage and conversion, in all parts of the world. Since 1970, populations of freshwater species have declined more than populations of species depending on other biomes. It is clear that governments will not meet their 2020 Aichi Targets <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/> for wetland biodiversity. Nor are they on track to deliver the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/?menu=1300>; <https://www.cbd.int/conferences/post2020> for wetlands. Yet they are continuing with “business as usual”, and during 2020 are negotiating another set of similar targets for 2030 and 2050. Despite all such agreed targets, nature conservation actions and protected area approaches for wetlands have failed to deliver, and will continue to fail to deliver, while the drive for economic growth rather than truly sustainable development continues to dominate the use of wetlands. We need to change our mindsets and develop new paradigms for truly wise use of wetlands globally

2. Changing our paradigm to improve wetland conservation, restoration and wise use outcomes.

As noted above, the current paradigm for conservation of wetlands is failing to meet stated goals. In the context of climate destabilization, the need to reverse these trends is increasingly urgent. Often led by local and indigenous peoples, a global Rights of Nature movement is shifting the ethical and legal paradigm for the Human-Nature relationship. In response a group of wetland and climate scientists have proposed a *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands* with the goal of shifting our relationship with wetland ecosystems.

Acknowledging the inherent rights of wetlands and their legal personhood returns to values and modes of thinking that modernity has typically pushed to the margins. In reconsidering our place in the community of beings making up the Earth community, we can restructure our relationships with wetlands. By embracing relational values with Nature, such as reciprocity, gratitude, responsibility, and acknowledgement of the personhood of Nature we shift decision-making away from exploitation, depletion, degradation and loss, and towards real conservation, restoration, re-wilding and remembering our integrated and relational presence as a part of Nature.

3. When the Biological Becomes Political: The US implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

How has the United States implemented, or put into action, the Ramsar Convention since ratifying it in 1986? Which implementation challenges have been most persistent, and why? Can big data, such as that from the Environmental Conventions Index help ameliorate persistent challenges? Have environmental values changed across administrations? The United States has unique attributes as a constitutional federal government, is an understudied case, and is the largest contributor to Ramsar's international budget. This is assessed using the Environmental Conventions Index which scores worldwide implementation of environmental agreements. Secondary materials from the US Ramsar's online portal, including news stories, press releases, and videos, also informs the broader narrative, contextualizing activities across time.

Tentative results indicate that activity has changed, including how international compliance has been framed. The biological realm has also become increasingly politicized compared to the past. This has led to several persistent challenges, including how community outreach activities have been supported.

4. The rights of wetlands in the context of the Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: biodiversity loss and threats to human well-being.

The Americas Regional Assessment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) details the critical relationship between biodiversity, ecosystems, and the ability of Nature to provide benefits, while recognizing a diversity of world views and multiple values of Nature. The Americas are diverse, hosting 40% of the world's most biodiverse countries with three times more "biocapacity" per capita than the global average. However, the increasing demand for food, water, and other material goods has increased consumption and intensified land use, continuing a pattern of widespread degradation and destruction of wetlands with regional wetland losses ranging from 20-60% of total wetland area since 1970. The result is the loss of the benefits wetlands provide to food and water supplies, climate regulation, and adaptation to hazardous and extreme events, with a 50% decline in the freshwater supply per person.

Overall, there has been a substantial decline in Nature's contribution to people. The intrinsic value of Nature is at the heart of the IPBES framework, recognizing the links between biodiversity, Nature's contributions to people, and quality of life, with efforts to incorporate local and indigenous knowledge. The *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands* reflects this, acknowledging the importance of wetlands as a universal heritage.

5. Cultural, local community and indigenous peoples' issues for a Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands.

Much of the recent growth in contemporary formal recognition of the rights of Nature draws on improved understandings about the belief systems and traditional practices of indigenous peoples and local communities. The cultural and linguistic heritage of these systems and beliefs contributes to the world's diversity. Their knowledge and practices have enhanced respect for the environment and natural resources, often offering models of sustainable approaches to water security, food security, health and well-being.

Rights of wetlands can be an important component of enlightened and holistic approaches of this kind, which see humans as part of the ecosystem rather than apart from it. Increasing evidence suggests that land demarcated as Indigenous Lands protects the natural environment through reduced rates of wetland degradation and deforestation, less habitat conversion and lower greenhouse gas emissions compared to surrounding areas.

Traditional knowledge and management practices often play a significant role in protecting crucial habitats and the socio-ecological systems they support. The United Nations *Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples* addresses the

most significant issues affecting indigenous peoples - their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. A *Declaration* of wetland rights needs to fit with this philosophy, and to support the wisdom and rights of indigenous peoples with respect.

6. The rights of wetlands in support of a safe climate and effective wetland restoration – the charter model.

Wetlands are an integral component of the global ecosystem that connects through gas exchange with the atmosphere. Wetlands sequester carbon dioxide and respire both carbon dioxide and methane. They support large amounts of biological diversity including migratory birds that connect local wetlands to global biodiversity. Current attempts to declare that wetlands have a fundamental right to exist can learn from previous declarations on the rights of Nature that have utilized the charter model. Two examples are examined: the *World Charter for Nature* (WCN) (1982) and the *World Charter – 1999*, to determine if either or both provide a suitable model for a *Universal Declaration on Rights of Nature*.

WCN contains strong statements on the value of Nature, and defines five principles for conserving it. The Charter was engraved in bronze tablets that were placed outside the common meeting room of the UN General Assembly that endorsed it. *The Earth Charter* is a civil society initiative that has been endorsed by UNESCO and many societal groups including indigenous people and some representatives from government including mayors and other officials.

The Earth Charter was proposed by Maurice Strong and Michael Gorbachev as the World Commission on Environment and Development was drafting *Our Common Future* in 1987 - the report that defined sustainable development. In many ways it provides a template for more recent proposals for the Green New Deal in the United States and the Green Deal in Europe. Like those efforts, it creates a global order that links environmental conservation with socio-economic issues. We need to determine whether either of these two charters provide a useful structure or precedent for a *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands*.

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

The upcoming RE3 symposium will conclude with a panel discussion on how to make progress towards a *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands*. This starts with the recognition that the continuing global decline of wetlands in the context of biodiversity loss and climate destabilization is leading to the consideration of complementary approaches to augment existing international and national approaches, and a sense of urgency in finding effective responses to these challenges. Our intention is not to propose that existing approaches be replaced – we are specifically

asking a wider audience to consider ways to augment them so their better features can be maintained while those features that have not been successful or sustainable are improved or replaced, in the hope that we can find a path to a truly sustainable existence. We do though recognize that unless substantial progress is made, and made quickly, that support for existing approaches may wane and even lead to their abandonment. Can you imagine moving ahead with your efforts to manage or restore wetlands without a Ramsar Convention on Wetlands? Or instead of working with governmental approaches for the wise use of wetlands that you embrace those individuals, communities or organizations that are actively advocating for a new way forward?

If this symposium and associated efforts lead to a *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands* then so be it. If it leads to a transformational change in the effectiveness of existing instruments then so be it. If it does not, then we will need to identify other approaches – our preference, though, is for one based on the rights of wetlands. We see that a specific *Universal Declaration on the Rights of Wetlands* is a pathway for shifting the paradigm to restore the

human-wetland relationship in support of wetland restoration, conservation and wise use and to respond effectively in the sphere of wetlands to the dual challenges of climate destabilization and biodiversity loss. ■

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President's Address, continued from page 73

While much from the past may resemble the present we have not though been the scenario that we now confront with COVID-19. In amongst the pandemic that we are now experiencing many organisations, including our own, are facing calls to cancel or postpone meetings and activities that they have previously planned. We did face the mosquito-borne Zika virus in 2017 and whether the San Juan annual meeting should go ahead. It was a different scenario, and the conference went ahead and was successful.

We have an article in this issue of WSP on the Rights of Wetlands. This stems from recent efforts to extend our commentary and dialogue on climate change, and also on the future of wetlands, and how people inter-relate to wetlands. The Rights of Wetlands has in some places extended to wetlands being given the rights of people – I do wonder how our membership as a whole regards that idea? Does it seem sensible to you, or how much further explanation do you need to make your mind up? And what does it mean

for wetland research and practice? This is intended as an effort to raise these questions, and to help develop individual opinions, and identify gaps in knowledge or understanding and practicalities. In cogitating over such issues some members have asked if existing methods of conserving or managing wetlands are adequate. To my mind they are not – the evidence on wetland loss and degradation tells me that. A few colleagues and myself did a few years ago ask in a journal article if wetland conservation mechanisms overall had been successful – our answer was that we thought it would have been worse if we did not have these mechanisms. Not a great answer in my view. Getting a better answer is possible and I believe that SWS contains the type of people and expertise that can help answer it.

In any event I do look forward to meeting with as many of you as possible at the next opportunity, and wish you all good health as we address the COVID-19 situation and our normal daily activities. Best wishes, and good health. ■