
Editorial

The Roots of Rights—Special Issue: “Transformative Practices: Rights of Nature and the Good Life”

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ABSTRACT: This special issue focuses on the social practices of Rights of Nature (RoN), specifically exploring the transformative competencies and skills involved. The research investigates both individual competencies, such as resilience, mindfulness, and creativity, and collective skills, like relationship building and sustainable forms of interaction with the social and the ecological environment. The central question is if RoN does include “best practice” examples of cultivating non-instrumental relationships with the self, the social other, and the natural other.

Keywords: Rights of Nature; Environmental ethics; Transformative change; Socio-ecological transformation; Nature conservation



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In the special issue, we want to publish contributions that conceptualize the rights of nature as a social form and explore its transformative potential.

The Rights of Nature (RoN) represent an innovative form of environmental governance and legislation. By granting rights to natural entities, the RoN offer a unique global laboratory for integrating more alternative human-nature relationships into governance and legal frameworks. These rights are often inspired by Indigenous and local knowledge (ILK), such as the conceptions of a good life (vivir bien or buen vivir) found in the Andean and Amazonian region of Latin America [1]. The diverse approaches are based on a relational worldview that rejects dichotomies between humans and more-than-humans, often in connection with ethics of care or responsibility towards others. Through RoN, the legal fundamentals of society are significantly transformed. Outside indigenous contexts, the principle of sustainability currently serves as the most significant normative benchmark for societal change [2]. Also a sustainable approach to nature requires resonant human self- and social-relations, guided by values that recognise the human and natural Other as more than mere means to satisfy individual needs [3].

In Germany, the RoN are advocated by numerous civil society actors and citizens’ initiatives in the Free State of Bavaria and other states. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example the Whanganui River [4] and recently the Taranaki Mouna [5] were granted legal personhood. Rights of Nature, particularly at the instigation of the Māori. Indigenous perspectives do not play a major role in Germany. Nevertheless, the German RoN-initiatives often refer to legal developments such in Aotearoa New Zealand or Ecuador. Additionally, the German RoN proponents frequently criticize the “Western” worldview that sees nature as a mere provider of resources. Whether this critique shares common grounds

with Indigenous perspectives has to be investigated. Nevertheless, it becomes clear that RoN both in the Global South and the North are inspired by social practices that challenge the predominant instrumental view on nature.

RoN function as such a tool translating human-nature relationships into legal language. The special issue thereby examines the role of diverse (local, transnational and, particularly, indigenous) forms of social practices and organizational forms in the justification, establishment, and enforcement of the RoN. The codification, formulation, and, where necessary, application of the RoN are approached through jurisprudential methods. At the same time the translation of the RoN falls into different social dynamics which are influenced by the various ways of the social-practices of RoN. Within the special issue the lifeworld grounding of the demands for a revised legal status for more-than-human nature beings will be explored and analysed through the lens of environmental ethics. Perspectives on socio-culturally shaped value concepts and legal governance instruments for environmental protection and nature conservation are also essential components of sustainable landscape planning within social-ecological systems.

The special issue is based on the concept of viewing the establishment and application of the RoN as transformative practices, focusing on the social factors that enable a relatively profound change in the governance of nature within specific spaces. Particular attention is paid not only to the human-nature relationships present in these contexts but also to the self- and social-relations of the communities and actors involved, as well as their transformative capacities. The coherence of the contributions is ensured through the conceptualisation, and the added value of the article compilation is guaranteed by the editors.

The special issue is grounded in a question drawn from the interdisciplinary research and practice domain of transformative change. The strongest motivation to protect nature arises when we value it not merely as a means to satisfy our needs (instrumental value of nature), but for its own sake (intrinsic value of nature), or when we regard it as indispensable to our good life (relational value of nature). As a recognised desideratum of geographical research, the task emerges to place greater emphasis on fundamental transformative self- and social-relations.

Research Question: What transformative self-, social-, and nature-relations underlie successful local initiatives for the establishment and application of the Rights of Nature?

Hypothesis:

- (1) Sustainable treatment of nature is promoted through a sustainable relationship with oneself (transformative self-relation) and with others (sustainable social-relation).
- (2) Transformative self- and social-relations are based, in particular, on non-cognitive transformative abilities, such as a sustainable relationship with oneself (being) and care for others and the world (relationship).

We encourage multi- and inter-disciplinary work in connection with social sciences and humanities (e.g., philosophy, sociology, anthropology, law and others). We welcome empirical studies, theoretical articles, case studies, methodological articles and literature reviews. A regional focus on New Zealand (Māori: Aotearoa) or Germany is desirable, but not mandatory.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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