

On the Commons



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Posted
June 27, 2011

A New Way of Seeing the World

Protecting the rights of nature depends on understanding the commons



*This is excerpted from the new book *Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth*, featuring essays by Margaret Atwood, Vandana Shiva, Desmond Tutu, Eduardo Galeano, Evo Morales Ayma, Maude Barlow, David Suzuki and others about the need for the UN to adopt strong policies to protect the planet.*

Saving the Earth will take more than merely adjusting our actions—polluting less here, conserving more there, moving toward sustainability within the confines of today's prevailing worldview.

To really declare our commitment to protecting the rights of nature, we must change how we think about the world itself and our place within it. This means taking a fresh look at nature,

learning from its amazing rhythms, patterns and interconnections. And it means opening our selves up to new possibilities for how humans work together to survive, thrive and ensure good lives for coming generations.

A shift of this importance will not happen easily. It requires a fundamental reorganizing of our industrial, hierarchical, technocratic, economic-centric culture. And it will be ferociously opposed by those who reap fat profits from the way things are.

Yet we must remember that modern existence—which is so deeply instilled in many people's minds that they can't imagine living any other way—actually serves only a tiny sliver of the planet's inhabitants. Certainly not plants and animals, nor people living in the global south, nor the poor and most of the middle-class in the overdeveloped world, nor people who love nature, nor those seeking meaning in their lives beyond buying and selling.

Most people envision their lives as something more than a never-ending race to accumulate more money, acquire more stuff, achieve more technical prowess and assert dominance over everything around us. Competitive instincts do not wholly define the human character—we also possess deep urges to cooperate with one another and to appreciate the wonder of this world we call home.

That's why I believe the movement for the United Nations to adopt a [Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth](#) (modeled on the landmark Universal Declaration of Human Rights), adopted at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth last year in Bolivia is not a quixotic crusade.

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Growing numbers of citizens are finding hope for the future by recognizing the endurance of a different worldview that challenges the dictates of a globalized profit-crazed industrial system. This promising alternative is called “the commons”—a proven model of how we can relate more harmoniously with nature and each other that has been the organizing principle of many cultures through the centuries.

The commons represents an old way of looking at life that’s now being heralded as a bold new idea for solving the problems that face us. In essence, it’s an operating system for life on Earth that focuses on what we share, rather than on what we own individually. The commons still flourishes around the globe today, not only in indigenous and peasant societies where it is the foundation of daily life but also in the heart of rich, technologically advanced nations.

We all need the gifts of air, water, soil, plants, animals, minerals and genes bestowed by Mother Earth. We all depend on the bounty of oceans, forests, skies, plains, rivers, prairies, wilderness and biodiversity. Without sharing these resources, and the many layers of collaboration they foster, modern society would not exist.

And the commons encompasses human-made as well as natural creations. Think of the Internet, which is no one’s private property (not even the Microsoft or Google billionaires). Think of taxpayer-funded scientific research, the work of non-governmental organizations and public services from tap water to police protection. And think of parks, sidewalks languages, artistic traditions, cuisines, social customs and the whole vast treasure of human knowledge. Without the sharing of these resources and the many layers of collaboration they foster, modern society would never have evolved.

Today the commons is under threat like never before. Wide swaths of what we share are either being privatized for the personal gain of a few or grossly neglected in the belief that anything not privately owned is worthless. This is a tragedy with dire consequences for the future.

But at the same time, there is growing awareness of the absolute necessity of restoring the commons, which got a large boost in 2009 when Indiana University political scientist Elinor Ostrom shared the Nobel Prize for economics. For more than 30 years she has studied how people around the world manage various commons to ensure both equal access and continuing sustainability.

The commons puts useful tools in our hands to stop the assault on Mother Earth and start the healing of our planet. Restoring the commons and defending the rights of Mother Earth are really the same cause, which depends upon discovering a different vision of looking at and living in the world.