

Dismantling the Ecological Divide

TOWARD A NEW ECO-SOCIAL CONTRACT

Without nature our economies cannot function, and our societies cannot survive. The shift from an ego-centric to an eco-centric social contract requires a fundamental reassessment of the purpose, goal and vision of our societies and economies, and what this means for the relationship between people, between people and power, and between people and nature. This brief considers the critical pathways needed to build a world where all life flourishes and identifies possible avenues to break from the dominant social paradigm fuelling the ecological divide, one of the greatest fault lines of our time.

In 1972 world leaders embarked on an ambitious agenda at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden to make nature a major issue in multilateral cooperation. Fifty years later, the environmental movement converged to take stock of progress. Buried in the recommendations emerging from Stockholm+50 is a call to repair and restore humanity's relationship with nature.

Yet our economies remain blind to humanity's dependence on nature. Instead of investing in the protection, restoration and maintenance of nature, we are bankrolling its destruction to the tune of USD 1.8 trillion every year (Koplow and Steenblik 2022). Our economies are driving the accumulation of wealth for the few (Wilkinson and Pickett 2022) while the rest of us pick up the social and environmental costs of overextraction, pollution and exploitation. Tackling the climate, biodiversity and pollution crises will require making peace with the planet (UNEP 2021) and fundamentally transforming humanity's relationship with nature.

To address the divide between humans and nature, we must recognize the values, beliefs and principles driving this disconnect. Environmental philosophers have put forward diverse theories on the causal factors for the human-nature divide. The anthropocentrism at the root of prevailing paradigms of economic thought is among the primary causes of one of the greatest societal fault lines of our time: the ecological divide (Scharmer 2013; Scull 2017). The ecological divide is essentially the disconnection between the self and nature, where humanity recognizes neither its dependence upon nor connectedness with the natural world.

The schism between humans and nature and the dominant anthropocentric worldview arises from three beliefs that have been in ascendance since the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Huntjens 2021). First, humans came to see themselves as superior to nature. Second, blind belief in the liberal market economy and infinite growth shaped economic design and planning. Third, in this dominant market economy paradigm, people were regarded primarily as consumers, leading to societies premised on individualism and self-interest, materialism and short-term thinking.

Within this anthropocentric worldview, nature is viewed largely in relation to its benefit and utility to humanity. In theory, economists recognize environmental damage as negative externalities that must be addressed. In practice, economies are still largely blind to humanity's dependence upon and reciprocal relationship with nature. Consequently, no one wants to pay for the climate and environmental catastrophe created by economic models that incentivize overconsumption, destroy nature and degrade communal bonds.

This brief explores how to put nature at the heart of a new eco-social contract. It examines the shifts that are needed to move humanity from an ego- to an eco-centric vision. It considers the critical pathways needed to build a world where all life flourishes and identifies avenues to break from the dominant social paradigm fuelling the ecological divide.



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● Breaking with the old social contract

“Nature has had little or no intrinsic value for most (but not all)” modern social contract theorists (O’Brien et al. 2009). As a result, existing social contracts are largely anthropocentric and reproduce or reinforce the ecological divide. While social contract theorists do not usually actively set out to exclude nature, it is an omission rooted in the dominant social paradigm of anthropocentrism.

Existing social contracts reflect the dualism of the dominant social paradigm steeped in anthropocentric visions of the human–nature relationship, such as the human mastery, control and exploitation of nature. Oftentimes, these contracts are largely human rights-based or based on human interest and seek to maintain social order, protect rights and promote social justice (Huntjens 2021) with limited or no recognition of the rights of nature. Modern social contracts have been largely (and for some, necessarily) human centred. This human-centredness is deeply ingrained in the market-based policies and institutions that govern our economies and in the underlying paradigm of Western liberal political thought that centres the individual.

However, demand for a different kind of world, one that is more sustainable, resilient and fair, is increasing. Communities, workers and social groups are seeking to bridge the ecological divide by using a new language that takes into account personal and communal well-being, planetary health and the rights of nature. People are imagining a world where relationships, not between people and power but between humans and nature, are reimagined through the lens of a new, just and inspiring eco-social contract.

This reimagining requires a reconfiguration of not only the overarching goal of a social contract, but also a fundamental restructuring of how humanity views itself and its relationship with nature. A break between the old and new social contract is urgently needed to address the anthropocentric foundation of our current economies and societies driving the ecological divide (Bogert et al. 2022). The shift from an ego-centric to an eco-centric social contract requires a fundamental reassessment of the purpose, goal and vision of our societies and economies, and what this means for the relationship between people, between people and power, and between people and nature.

Where are the seeds of this new eco-social contract? They are found in new economic visions redefining the purpose and form of our economies and societies and expressed in the beliefs, values and practices of communitarian and other marginalized knowledges and approaches that recognize and reflect the reciprocity between humans and nature (Desai 2022). They exist in governance systems and institutions alert to

the fact that “humankind is one component of a system of life” and that we need a new eco-social contract “where life is sacred, and all are in service of securing its future” (Cullinan 2014). A new eco-social contract exists in the expressed calls for the legal recognition of the rights of nature and for a world where all life prospers.

● Reimagining a new eco-social contract

If a new eco-social contract is to signify a shift from anthropocentric values, principles and beliefs to eco-centric pathways of connection and relatedness they must embrace principles that situate humanity within the broader community of life. This includes respect and care for all life including the more-than-human world, solidarity and togetherness with all life, collective well-being and reciprocity, planetary health and the protection of nature’s rights (Huntjens 2021). Ecological economics, the rights of nature and eco-social relationality represent emerging approaches seeking to establish the eco-centric foundations needed to breach the ecological divide.

Economies in the service of all life

Nature is increasingly becoming a central part of new economic visions, paradigms and pathways. Without nature our economies cannot function, and our societies cannot survive. We need economies that support prosperity within the ecological limits of the planet and allows nature—oceans, soils, rivers, forests, plants, animals—and people to thrive together. New (and old) economic visions are only now beginning to integrate nature into economic models and frameworks, from well-being to post-growth economics. These models and frameworks question the purpose of economic organization and the measurement of economic progress and offer policy proposals to transform our economies and societies in the service of all life.

New economic thinking adopts a broad and critical view of neoclassical and neoliberal economics, both describing the shortcomings of orthodox economic theory and highlighting the “severe consequences of its systemic discounting of the environment” (Boehnert 2018). Indigenous, environmental, post-growth, well-being, sufficiency, regenerative and eco-feminist economics, to name a few, all incorporate one fundamental premise: the economic system is not separate from, but rather embedded within and dependent upon, nature.

While new economics tackle the narrative around growth and environmental limits and propose widespread economic justice, social well-being and ecological regeneration, most still privilege human well-being. While they align with many of the characteristics of eco-social contracts (see figure 1), they often still reflect an anthropocentric view of the superior position of humans in relation to the natural world.

Figure 1. From an old to a new eco-social contract

Overarching goal	From the protection (for example, of property rights) and maintenance of social order and individual freedom	→	To well-being, social and environmental justice, and planetary health
Worldview	From anthropocentric visions of life where people work to earn money and consume	→	To eco-centric visions where people are part of an interdependent ecosystem and work for prosperity within planetary limits
Vision of human behaviour	From <i>Homo Economicus</i> , a rational person pursuing wealth and self-interest	→	To <i>Homo Ecologicus</i> , a person connected with and caring for the well-being of all life on Earth
Basis for social relations	From a utilitarian vision of the social and human–environment relationship	→	To mutual respect, solidarity, togetherness and environmental stewardship
Vision of society	From an individualistic view of society	→	To a view where humans are one part of a social–ecological system
View of nature	From a position where nature is used and exploited exclusively by humans to serve the needs of humanity	→	To seeing the Earth holistically where humans are a subservient (but impactful) part of the planetary ecosystem

Adapted from Huntjens and Kemp 2022.

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Alternatively, Indigenous economics, being implemented through a range of place-based systems such as biocultural heritage, bioregions and territories of life, offer economic models that can help bridge the ecological divide. They do not privilege human economic goals but instead seek to achieve the well-being of both people and the planet together while promoting “sufficiency rather than infinite growth, and equity and redistribution of wealth rather than accumulation” (Swiderska 2021). Recognition and greater adoption of such eco-centric economic visions, including Indigenous or regenerative economics, would help address one of the primary failings of mainstream Western economics: anthropocentrism.

Recognizing and upholding the rights of nature

In July 2022, the United Nations adopted a resolution on the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental human right. At present, over 150 nations have already included some form of this right in their constitutions. A handful of nations are even advancing ecological constitutions where not only the human right to a healthy environment exists, but the rights of nature and ecosystems to exist, flourish and naturally evolve are being enshrined into law.

In 2008, Ecuador was the first country to include the rights of nature within its constitution. This vision is built on the country’s Indigenous Peoples’

vision of well-being, *sumak kawsay*, where nature exists not as an object, but rather as a rights holder. Articles 71–74 of Ecuador’s constitution recognize the rights of nature to respect; the maintenance and regeneration of its functions and processes; its restoration; the limitation or prevention of activities that, for example, might lead to species extinction or negative effects on ecosystems or natural cycles; and the right for people to benefit from the environment (Republic of Ecuador 2008). Ecuador’s courts have upheld this constitutional right on a few occasions, most recently in 2021 when its highest court ruled that plans to mine for copper and gold in a protected cloud forest was unconstitutional and violated the rights of nature (Greenfield 2021). The court extended this right to the entire country, a landmark victory for understanding nature protection beyond formally protected areas.

A duty of care for nature, largely in the form of “do no significant harm” legislation, exists in the environmental policy and regulatory systems of most countries. While ecological constitutions may be viewed as the gold standard in its recognition of the rights of nature at the highest level, these rights will only be meaningful if those in breach of these rights are held accountable. While Ecuador, Bolivia and Uganda are currently leading constitutional reforms that recognize the rights of nature, scores of lawsuits have successfully

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defended the rights of nature or ecosystems by granting nature legal personhood. For example, the rights of rivers have been championed in New Zealand, India and Bangladesh (Westerman 2019). While the adoption of legal personhood is rooted in eco-centric traditions and wisdoms, environmental defenders are using anthropocentric mechanisms and institutions, constitutions and courts to defend nature's rights. This differs from the ways in which the rights of nature are expressed in many traditions, cultures, beliefs and practices, such as the protection of sacred places.

The rights of nature movement “recognises and honours that nature has rights, that ecosystems—including trees, oceans, animals, mountains—have rights just as human beings have rights and that all life, all ecosystems on our planet are deeply intertwined” (Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature 2022). The movement has led to legal and governance reforms where nature, rather than being viewed as property under the law, is being recognized as having a legal right to exist, thrive and regenerate. This movement—while a central component of any new eco-social contract—still reflects an anthropomorphic, if not an anthropocentric, worldview. How can humanity connect with nature in reciprocity and in partnership as an equal participant in life?

Building eco-social relationality

A new eco-social contract requires a shift from anthropocentric to eco-centric visions of life where people are one part of an ecosystem; from human-centred individualism to humans as part of a social-ecological system; and from using, exploiting and managing nature to serving the needs of the Earth as a whole. Anthropocentrism seeks to reduce “nature to a function of humanity,” while eco-centrism reduces humanity to nature

(Scott 2003). However, humans are also a part of nature and in partnership with nature. Nature has its own status, not under humans but rather beside humanity, the two working together in a dynamic process of interaction and mutual development. Humans are also participants in nature, not just biologically, but with a sense of belonging, connectedness and relationality (de Groote and van den Born 2007).

An eco-social contract “embraces the reality that humans are an integral part of the whole living community...and that, in order to flourish, we must govern ourselves in ways that accord with the laws of that community” (Cullinan 2014) within planetary boundaries while being cognizant and respectful of the rights of nature. Reformulating the human-nature relationship around reciprocity, partnership and connectedness lays the foundation for a new eco-social contract where people and nature thrive together. Anthropological and sociological literature has traced the intimate relationships between humans and animals in India (Dave 2014; Govindrajana 2018), arguing that human-nature dialogues generate “microcosms of nature-culture” (Baviskar 2011). Elsewhere, land and nature as relational agents are shown to help Indigenous communities connect with ancestral experiences, one's own body as well as dreams and spirituality (Datta 2015). Morally, Bendik-Keymer (2020) argues that understanding land as a relational agent can also help humans achieve emotional and relational maturity while working through community disagreements and acknowledging legitimate histories of hurt, distrust and trauma. This eco-social relationality challenges anthropomorphism and requires humanity to learn to relate to nature rather than imagining nature as a mirror image with human characteristics.

If a new social contract is to take an eco-social turn, it must bridge the ecological divide and create the conditions necessary for all life to flourish. However, humans are an impactful part of the planetary ecosystem, altering planetary systems and placing all life in peril. Oftentimes due to our environmental footprint and level of consciousness, humans have a larger responsibility than other living beings to act for the planet. We live in a world imagined and shaped by human minds and hands. Can we reimagine a world where we act in equal partnership with nature, hearing the cries of the Earth and becoming the voice that speaks for nature? Can we craft a new eco-social contract premised on a new understanding of the human–nature relationship?

Reimagining an eco-social world

Environmental degradation is advancing around the world with scientists warning that we are headed toward a major planetary catastrophe. This has spurred the recognition that we must fundamentally alter the relationship between humankind and nature while “securing the highest legal protection and the highest societal value for nature” (Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund 2022) in our visions of a new social contract. In *Le Contrat naturel*, French author and philosopher Michel Serres presents readers with the challenge to “look outside the narrow frame of the social contract to what, to our peril, it excludes: nature” (Watkin 2020).

Renegotiating an eco-social contract requires engagement with the diverse values and visions of the human–nature relationship, including the beliefs, narratives and cultures that shape our economies and societies. Processes of social contract formation at multiple levels, while context-specific, are characterized by path and goal dependencies as well as worldviews. The values and visions behind these worldviews, as well as the technological and institutional innovations for an eco-social world, matter equally.

Five areas needing further exploration to deepen the human–nature relationship and guide the formulation of a new eco-social contract are:

1. **How do we decentre the individual as the political agent and central focus of social, economic and political thinking? What does it mean for humans to represent nature in economic and governance systems without instrumentalizing nature?** Engaging with the life-affirming principles of environmental imaginaries and knowledges, old and new, that build a relational understanding between people and nature can help ‘represent’ nature authentically

in new eco-social contract formulations, as seen in ecological constitutions.

2. **What can economic models that pursue human well-being in ways that contribute to the health and integrity of the Earth look like?** New economic models that measure what matters: health, prosperity, dignity, happiness and the well-being of all life, already exist. How can we expand and champion Earth-centred economics so we design economies in the service of all life?
3. **How do we embrace the principles of the rights of nature movement to shift away from nature-as-object and commodity to nature-as-subject and community?** The application of rights of nature visions, in bioregionalism, biocultural heritage or territories of life, show how rights of nature can be applied in practice and in places. The budding nature-positive movement should be underscored by this deeper and more meaningful understanding of human dependence and connection with nature.
4. **How do we mobilize social demand and build a movement to advance the rights of nature and to make this a central part of a new eco-social contract?** Civic mobilization around the ecological emergency, such as people’s assemblies for nature, are connecting and motivating people to think about and act for nature.
5. **What does an eco-centric approach mean for global social contract formulations such as the UN Charter of Human Rights, the Earth Charter and the Paris Agreement?** Inter-governmental agreements and processes help set the tone and mobilize national and regional action on the nature and climate crises. These must be used more effectively to build an eco-social world where nature matters.

We have the knowledge, wisdom and understanding needed to reframe our relationship with nature. For decades, scientists have been reporting on the rapid decline of the health of nature and the impact this will have on the planet, now and in the future. Traditions and wisdoms across the world have long called for, and are alerting the world to, the impact humans are having on nature. We can no longer ignore the voices from economics, ethics, cultures, politics, religion, law and science urging humankind to change course. These voices are getting louder and are converging making a convincing case that without flourishing nature, we will not survive.

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