



OPINION

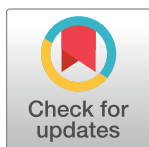
Voices of the absent: The agency of Nature and Future in climate regeneration

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Introduction and background

In the face of escalating climate crises and mounting threats to the delicate balance of our socioecological systems, traditional approaches to participation appear increasingly inadequate to address the complexity of the challenges at hand [1]. It is becoming abundantly clear that to effectively combat climate change and its multifaceted impacts, we must expand the scope of our deliberations beyond conventional boundaries. This necessitates not only considering the perspectives of vulnerable and marginalized social groups but also broadening our conceptualization of stakeholders to include representatives from nature itself and future generations. The crux of our viewpoint lies in the recognition that the interplay between human actions and the natural world transcends temporal, spatial, and species boundaries. Thus, to devise truly effective strategies for addressing climate change, we must enlarge the circle of climate deliberation to encompass the voices and concerns of all affected parties. This inclusive approach holds the promise of amplifying the efficacy of our efforts by drawing upon a diverse array of knowledge, experiences, and expertise.

At both national and international levels, discussions surrounding climate change are increasingly calling for a fundamental reimagining of humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human world [2]. Yet, while the need for such a paradigm shift is evident, the practicalities of how to achieve it remain a daunting challenge. Central to this challenge is the task of not merely integrating marginalized populations into the deliberative process, but fundamentally reconceptualizing our relationship with nature and acknowledging the interests of future generations. Unlike marginalized populations, Future Generations and Nature Representatives face an ontological hurdle—they are often overlooked in deliberative processes, leading to a failure to acknowledge their agency and consider their interests [3]. In this opinion paper, we argue the need to enlarge the circle of climate deliberation. Drawing inspiration from ongoing initiatives such as the H2020 EC project “Phoenix: The Rise of Citizens Voices for a Greener Europe” project, we seek to elucidate the potential for recognizing nature representatives and future generations as stakeholders in shaping climate regeneration. Through this endeavour, we aspire to foster a symbiotic relationship that engenders regenerative practices and socioecological harmony, paving the way for a more sustainable and equitable future.

Incorporating Nature Representatives and Future Generations as stakeholders is a transformative strategy for fostering regenerative change. Granting them legal standing in decision-making processes challenges traditional perspectives and acknowledges their intrinsic value.

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Lessons from the Rights of Nature framework, as seen in legal constitutions like those of Ecuador and Bolivia, demonstrate how this approach is reshaping environmental protection [4, 5]. Similarly, considerations of Intergenerational equity and justice emphasize the importance of our present decisions on future generations. Legal concepts and theories of justice, including those by Brown Weiss [6] and Gosseries and Meyer [7], advocate for policies that account for long-term effects and intergenerational responsibilities. Recognizing the needs of Future Generations in socioecological deliberation involves empowering youth activists and adopting a future-oriented approach to policy-making. Both Nature Representatives and Future Generations contribute to cultural narratives emphasizing interconnectedness and challenging anthropocentric mindsets. Integrating their perspectives into climate resilience efforts fosters transdisciplinary dialogue and envisions socioecological futures capable of addressing unforeseen challenges. Lastly, Ekeli's [8] proposal for 'guardians' or trustees for Future Generations prompts critical reflection on practical approaches to safeguarding their interests within present-day governance frameworks.

Voices of the absent: Lessons from Phoenix project

The Phoenix project brings together a diverse group of partners from seven European countries to explore new methods of participating to support a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable ecological transition for all [9]. Among numerous initiatives, the project envisions the establishment of Territorial Commissions for Co-Design (TCCD), which would carry out many democratic innovations to promote the ecological transition at various scales. However, as previously indicated, selecting, identifying, and including Nature Representatives and Future Generations in deliberative processes presents considerable challenges. This challenge was also highlighted by certain Phoenix partners during a preliminary diagnosis, particularly the former.

In the case of including a representative of Future Generations in the TCCD, partners are willing to accommodate. Only two out of ten Phoenix partners demonstrated, in this first diagnosis, willingness to include a representative but are unsure how to do so. Given the uncertainty, it is critical to help in locating a representative who can be included in the TCCD. However, when it comes to including a Representative of Nature in the TCCD, the answers differ slightly from those for a Representative of Future Generations. Although six partners are willing to include a Representative of Nature in their TCCDs, two are unsure how to do so. Additionally, five partners have no view on this issue. This shows a chance to provide support and information to those partners who are experiencing challenges or doubts regarding the integration of a Representative of Nature. Due to this need, we have identified through literature review and conversations with Phoenix partners the main challenges of incorporating Representative of Nature and Future Generations as stakeholders in climate change deliberations. In the case of Representatives of Nature, the main challenges identified were:

- **Lack of Legal Personhood for Nature:** Granting legal personhood to nature and its elements is a challenge as legal systems primarily recognize human interests and rights [5];
- **Communication and Representation:** Nature representatives cannot communicate in traditional human language, making it challenging to express their interests and concerns effectively in deliberation [10];
- **Conflicts with Human Interests:** Nature's interests may sometimes conflict with human interests or economic goals, leading to difficulty in balancing conservation and development considerations [11].

In the case of Representatives of Future Generations, the main challenges relate to:

- Time Horizon Considerations: Future generations' interests may be overlooked as decision-makers often prioritize short-term goals, making it challenging to address long-term environmental issues [12];
- Lack of Representation and Voice: Future generations' interests may be overlooked as decision-makers often prioritize short-term goals, making it challenging to address long-term environmental issues [13];
- Intergenerational Equity: Balancing the needs of the current generation with the needs of future generations presents a challenge in ensuring fairness and justice in environmental decisions [14].

Despite being different challenges, both cases have in common institutional barriers, since existing political, governance and social structures may not be equipped to accommodate Nature Representatives or the long-term interests of Future Generations [15]. This was the first step to identifying opportunities to address these challenges and to propose a model based on the lessons learned from this project (Fig 1).

This proposed model acknowledges that incorporating the voices of Nature and Future Generations transcends mere technicality; it demands reflection on beliefs, values, and local perspectives, a sociocultural transformation. Therefore, adaptation and flexibility are essential to ensure these voices receive due consideration, expressed by the contextualised recognition as stakeholders which underscores the importance of tailoring legislation and ethical principles to local beliefs and contexts, thereby fostering a sensitive and culturally nuanced approach. This is crucial for establishing an inclusive governance framework, as it adjusts decision-making structures to accommodate cultural diversity. In this sense, flexible government structures are necessary to embrace cultural and ecological diversity, adjusting laws and regulations to safeguard the interests and rights of Nature and Future Generations. This can only be achieved through a multifaceted and adaptable dialogue that recognises and respects various ecological and cultural viewpoints and, most importantly, promotes adapted communication methods beyond traditional ones. Due to the nature of this paradigm shift, continuous reflection and evaluation among all stakeholders involved are imperative for monitoring and adjusting the model's implementation in response to the socio-cultural nuances of each context.

Some remarks for representing the voices of the absent

Climate action in the context of the ecological transition demands an expansion of participation horizons in decision-making. This expansion entails more than including diverse voices; it requires reconstructing to incorporate and reframe so that the entire web of life can be recognized morally and ethically. Inspired by the legal recognition of Nature and Future Generations as legitimate stakeholders, a pivotal milestone in redefining species and time relations, as well as drawing from our experience in the European project H2020 Phoenix, we seek to contribute with an approach that enables this reframing, incorporating the voices of Nature and the Future into climate deliberation and regeneration.

This reframing also involves a reshaping of communication methods, integrating traditional and ancestral cultural knowledge into contemporary dialogue. The integration of this knowledge can enrich discussions on the major contemporary socio-ecological challenges we face and enhance the understanding of Nature's and Future Generation's needs. To do so, institutional flexibility and sensitivity to cultural diversity are necessary to create not neutral spaces, but governance spaces adapted to local specificities that do not hide differences but



Fig 1. Proposed model for integrating nature representatives and future generations as stakeholders in climate deliberation.

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recognize and value them. To achieve this, building bridges between different cultures and perspectives, along with empowering new leadership, is crucial, requiring epistemic openness to learn from Nature and the Future and its various forms of expression. These future horizons require more than mere intentions. They require concrete, collaborative, and committed actions from all of society, challenging us to rethink our role in the world and calling us to build a more harmonious coexistence between all and to give space for the voices that have been absent from climate deliberation.

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