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DAILY SCIENCE

## In a democracy, should nature have a vote?

by [Brandon Keim](#) | Dec 5, 2018

Where political power once belonged to a handful of wealthy men, it's now shared by a great many people: so much so that we have a government of hiccups and fine print. After centuries of liberal democracy, what would it mean to give nature representation even?

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deliberations and decisions include  
representatives of future human generations  
and also Earth's nonhuman inhabitants?

"We propose a fundamental re-imagining of  
what nature protection ought to mean," write  
environmental ethicists **in the journal**  
***Biological Conservation***. "All life," they  
contend, should "have a say in the globe-  
girdling exploits of current human adults."

Written by Adrian Treves and Francisco  
Santiago-Ávila of the University of Wisconsin-  
Madison and William Lynn of Clark

University, the article is the latest in a series  
of critiques of how nature is managed in the  
21st century.

They've previously argued that predator  
management is **unfairly skewed** towards  
the short-term interests of a few hunters and  
ranchers; that conservation decisions should  
**include more perspectives**; and that **the**  
**rights of future people** to a healthy  
environment are routinely ignored, even when  
those rights are supposedly enshrined in law



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salmon yields, to take an example, don't leave many fish for bears to eat. A focus on population- and species-level metrics makes it easy for the well-being of individual animals to be sacrificed. Nature is too often treated as a stockpile of resources rather than a set of communities whose interests are as real and valid as our own.

It's a critique that many conservationists may find frustrating — they're already doing their best in a very imperfect, human-centered world — or simply the latest in an ongoing back-and-forth that a century ago was embodied by keep-it-pure preservationist John Muir and Gifford Pinchot, founder of the U.S. Forest Service. But Treves, Santiago-Ávila, and Lynn don't stop at moral counsel. They offer some specific political suggestions.

It's already customary for institutions such as universities and museums to have trustees charged with making decisions on behalf of future beneficiaries; so might it be with nature. Governments and institutions could feature formal "representation" of non-human or non-human interests rather than receiving acknowledgement, with nature in every decision that



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There's many devilish details to this proposal. Who picks the trustees? How are interests defined? When do interests become rights? What happens when they conflict? And does it even make sense to aspire to such radical political overhaul when, in far too many nations, the very fundamentals of liberal democracy are under attack?

Treves and colleagues point to hopeful precedents. Rwanda's constitution explicitly reserves seats in its legislature for historically disadvantaged groups. Groups of young people in the U.S. and Canada have filed lawsuits against government leaders who they accuse of violating their right a stable future climate. And of course the democracies we now enjoy have evolved to include people — women, non-Caucasian racial groups, non-heterosexuals — who were once disenfranchised.

“We are advocating for the true grass-roots that spring to life each second worldwide,” say Treves, Santiago-Ávila, and Lynn. “Difficulties we face in imagining not make it impossib

**Source:** Treves et al  
*Biological Conserva*

**About the author:**

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freelance journalist specializing in animals, nature and science, and the author of **The Eye of the Sandpiper: Stories From the Living World**. Connect with him on **Twitter, Instagram and Facebook**.

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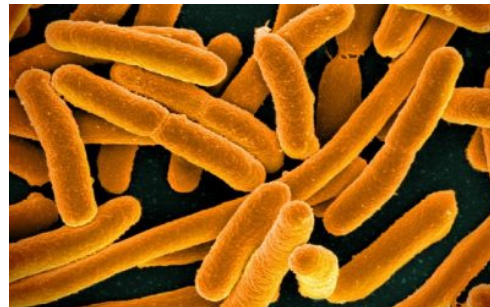
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