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Intergenerational equity can help to prevent climate change and extinction

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Sidney, British Columbia, Canada: The global crises of climate change and extinction imperil all life on Earth, including present and future human generations – i.e., our children and grandchildren. A new scientific publication suggests that powerful means to address these looming threats already exist but are largely overlooked. This commentary by a prominent international team of conservation scientists, environmental ethicists, and legal scholars published today in the science journal *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, shows intergenerational rights to a healthy environment are protected by the constitutions of 144 countries or 75% of the world's nations. Collectively, these countries emit most of the atmospheric CO₂ and host most of the world's biodiversity. Adherence to these explicit constitutional obligations and similar, ancient principles of sovereign public trust holds enormous but untapped potential for sustainable protection for the planet. That these provisions have not been used fully represents a lost opportunity and inadequate enactment of fiduciary duties. "Many governments and many conservation practitioners overlook the ethical and moral obligation to give youth and legitimate representatives of future generations an equal say in how we use and preserve nature," said lead author Adrian Treves, professor at University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Founder of the Carnivore Coexistence Lab.

There are promising examples highlighting the potential of existing constitutional provisions assuring a habitable environment for present and future generations. For example, settlement talks are ongoing in Uganda, where citizens used inter-generational equity obligations of their constitution to petition the government to adhere to international climate treaties, noting the obligation to protect children (i.e. future generations) from adverse impacts of climate change and that "every Ugandan has a right to a clean and healthy environment". Similar ongoing and successful-to-date legal challenges have been brought forward by youth in the USA who are demanding action on climate change, arguing inaction impinges on the rights of future generations that are protected by the unenumerated inter-generational provisions of the country's constitution.

Notably, there is precedence for an intergenerational approach and its strong associations with sustained relationships to local ecologies. "Sovereign Indigenous nations and the intergenerational equity traditionally

embedded in their governance and management of environmental assets offer lessons that could prove critical in addressing global climate change and mass extinction,” said co-author and Senior Scientist for the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Dr. Paul Paquet.

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Link to article

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41559-018-0465-y.epdf> 

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