

# Should Nature Have Rights?

There is a growing movement to recognize and protect rights for the land we live on, the water we need to live and the air we breathe.

**The effects of climate change and the global water crisis continue to wreak havoc around the world, causing droughts, famine, floods, forest fires and ravages that indicate Mother Nature is fighting back against humanity's carelessness with the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the Earth on which we live and depend.**

**As humans continue to take this world for granted, with a global economic system that is based on growth and consumption no matter what the price to nature, we are now faced with the question: should nature have rights?**

The rights of nature – also referred to as the rights of Mother Earth – is a concept embraced by a growing movement of people and organizations that are fighting for binding legal instruments that recognize and protect the Earth as a living entity, giving it rights to ensure its protection from pollution, damaging extraction and resource plundering.

In 2009, countries came together for the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark (COP15). It was clear during this Copenhagen Summit that governments were not willing to make the difficult, binding commitments needed to halt and reverse the devastating effects of climate change. Feeling the urgent need for change, more than 32,000 people converged in Bolivia the following April for the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. They sent a clear message that there is an urgent need for a new way forward if humanity is going to move towards a safer, sustainable future. At the People's

Conference, activists drafted "The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth" recognizing that our planet is a living being and a source of life, and that humankind cannot exist without acknowledging the interrelated bond between ourselves and the Earth we live on.

Cormac Cullinan, an environmental lawyer from South Africa, describes it this way: "The Declaration recognises that all natural entities that exist as part of Mother Earth, including plants, animals, rivers and ecosystems, are subjects that have the inherent and inalienable right to exist and to play their role within the community of beings. The international community and most countries recognise and defend human rights, but do not recognise that other beings also have inherent rights that humans must respect. This has created an imbalance in the relationships."

The movement for the rights of nature is making strides internationally. On April 22, 2010, the entire United Nations General

Assembly proclaimed the day "Mother Earth Day." One year later, Bolivia led a United Nations dialogue on the topic of "Harmony with Nature," bringing activists, advocates and others involved in the movement for the rights of nature – including the Council of Canadians – to speak to UN delegations. Demands to recognize the rights of nature will be central to upcoming UN climate talks in Durban, South Africa, and at the Rio +20 Earth Summit in 2012.

Actions for the rights of nature are also taking place in communities. There have been 125 municipal ordinances recognizing the rights of nature that have enabled communities to stand up to the corporate destruction of their land, air and water. The most recent example is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which became the first U.S. city to recognize the legally enforceable rights of nature. When passing an ordinance banning hydraulic fracturing, city council members included the following statements: "Natural communities and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, wetlands, streams, rivers, aquifers, and other water systems, possess inalienable and fundamental rights to exist and flourish within the City of Pittsburgh. Residents of the City shall possess legal standing to enforce those rights on behalf of those natural communities and ecosystems."



The Council of Canadians is part of the growing movement for the rights of nature. This April, along with Global Exchange and Fundación Pachamama, we launched the book *The*

*Rights of Nature: The Case for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth* as a tool to help educate and encourage discussions and actions for the rights of nature. (See the back cover of this issue of *Canadian Perspectives* for more information.) The book brings together the voices of acclaimed authors, progressive thinkers, political leaders, and environmental and community activists from around the world, who share their passion and insights about the Declaration, the rights of nature and the urgent need to recognize the unbreakable link between respecting ourselves and respecting the planet. The authors all reflect on the important question: What would our world look like if nature had rights?

It's a question we should all be thinking about.