What are *Rights of Nature?*

Even though we are taught to believe that our laws and courts have the final say, we at CELDF have learned over the 25-plus years of working on advancing Rights of Nature laws that in the end, Nature will prevail.

Environmental degradation is advancing around the world. The United Nations has warned that we are heading toward “major planetary catastrophe.” For this reason, there is a growing recognition that we must fundamentally change the relationship between humankind and nature.

Making this fundamental shift means acknowledging our dependence on nature and respecting our need to live in harmony with the natural world. It means securing the highest legal protection and the highest societal value for nature through the recognition of nature’s rights and associated human rights.

Among the legal rights recognized by *Rights of Nature* laws developed by CELDF are these: the inherent right to exist, to flourish, to regenerate when disturbed, and to naturally evolve.

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Does Rights of Nature Mean ‘Personhood’?

One common misconception – including within elements of the Rights of Nature movement – is that organizers are advancing legal personhood for ecosystems. The truth is more complex.

Indigenous Traditional Knowledge

Aboriginal nations and communities retain sovereignty and knowledge over the natural ecosystems they have evolved with. To recognize and follow the natural laws of nature necessitates the elevation particularly of the Traditional Knowledge of local indigenous communities.

For More Information go to
https://celdf.org/rights-of-nature/

Recognizing enforceable rights for Nature is a legal theory first suggested by Professor Christopher Stone to his law students. He proposed a thought experiment that asked the question: what if non-human things had legal rights of their own? He developed the idea into a short book, published in 1972, titled "Should Trees Have Standing?" Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, referencing Stone's book, opined in his dissent to the *Sierra Club v. Morton* decision (405 U.S. 727 (1972)) that *"The critical question of "standing" would be simplified and also put neatly in focus if we fashioned a federal rule that allowed environmental issues to be litigated before federal agencies or federal courts in the name of the inanimate* [sic] *object about to be despoiled."*

- In 2006, senior staff at the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) decided it was time to do more than think about recognizing legal rights for ecosystems. An opportunity to enact such a law arose in the Pennsylvania coal region town of Tamaqua. On September 19, 2006, Tamaqua became the first government on earth to recognize legally enforceable rights for ecosystems. Since then, CELDF has drafted and consulted in the enactment of Rights of Nature laws in dozens of U.S. communities, including Pittsburgh, PA.

- In 2008, Ecuador became the first nation on Earth to enact a constitution recognizing the inherent rights of Mother Earth, CELDF participated with consulting services.

- In 2010, CELDF participated in creation of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN). At the October, 2022 GARN gathering in Siena, Italy, representatives from 16 nations gathered to report on their many successes and continuing challenges. CELDF was there.

- In 2019, by a 61 percent margin, voters in Toledo, Ohio approved the popularly initiated *Lake Erie Bill of Rights* amendment to the city charter. CELDF provided the community with legal, organizing, drafting, and strategic planning assistance in this historic event referred to as LEBOR. Mother Jones magazine described the new law this way: *"LEBOR would authorize individuals to bring lawsuits against activities that infringe upon Lake Erie's potential right to 'exist, flourish, and naturally evolve'—including pollution from farming activities. It would also put Toledo right in line with a growing global movement on the rights of nature."*

- In February of 2022, New York State Assemblyman Patrick Burke introduced legislation that will create a *Great Lakes Bill of Rights* with the goal of securing legal rights for the entire ecosystem, recognizing that all of the Great Lakes are interconnected, and any harm done to one, affects them all. The language was drafted with the assistance of CELDF at the invitation of Assemblyman Burke's office. The bill was reintroduced in 2025 as the Great Lakes and New York Waters Bill of Rights because all residents and waters of the state deserve the right to exist, flourish and naturally evolve. (A05156)

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