



RIGHTS OF NATURE:

AN INDIGENOUS-LED MOVEMENT FOR CLIMATE RESILIENCE

About the Editors

Shannon Biggs is Movement Rights co-founder and executive director. She is a leader in the powerful U.S. and global movement for the Rights of Nature. She is also a co-founder of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature ([GARN](#)) and member of the Executive Committee, and sits on the Judges Assembly for the [International Rights of Nature Tribunal](#). She has worked on fossil fuels and climate justice for nearly two decades from the local to the global level, including at the United Nations and co-founding the 1,200+ organizational coalition, People VS Fossil Fuels. Shannon is the co-author of two books, [Building the Green Economy: Success Stories from the GrassRoots](#) and [The Rights of Nature: Making the Case for the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth](#). She was a senior staffer at both Global Exchange and the International Forum on Globalization (IFG) and the youngest Lecturer in International Relations at San Francisco State University. She holds a Masters in Economics, Empire and Decolonization from the London School of Economics (LSE).

Julia Horinek a member of the Ponca Nation of Oklahoma, is the Plains coordinator for Movement Rights, as well as the North American organizer for the [Indigenous Council](#) of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. Julia, born and raised in Oklahoma to a family with a long history of activism, has been involved in grassroots Rights of Nature and Human Rights organizing and action as long as she can remember. From marching with Cesar Chavez in the early 1970's as a small child, logistically organizing Indigenous Rights of Nature and Frontline Oil and Gas summit and Movement Rights' [Convenings of the Four Winds](#) in her home State, to a 30 + year career in Tribal Grants and Contracts Administration. She is a member of the Ponca Pa'tha'ta Women's Scalp Dance Society, a proud mother and grandmother.

How Indigenous Leadership and Rights of Nature Can Protect Life on Earth

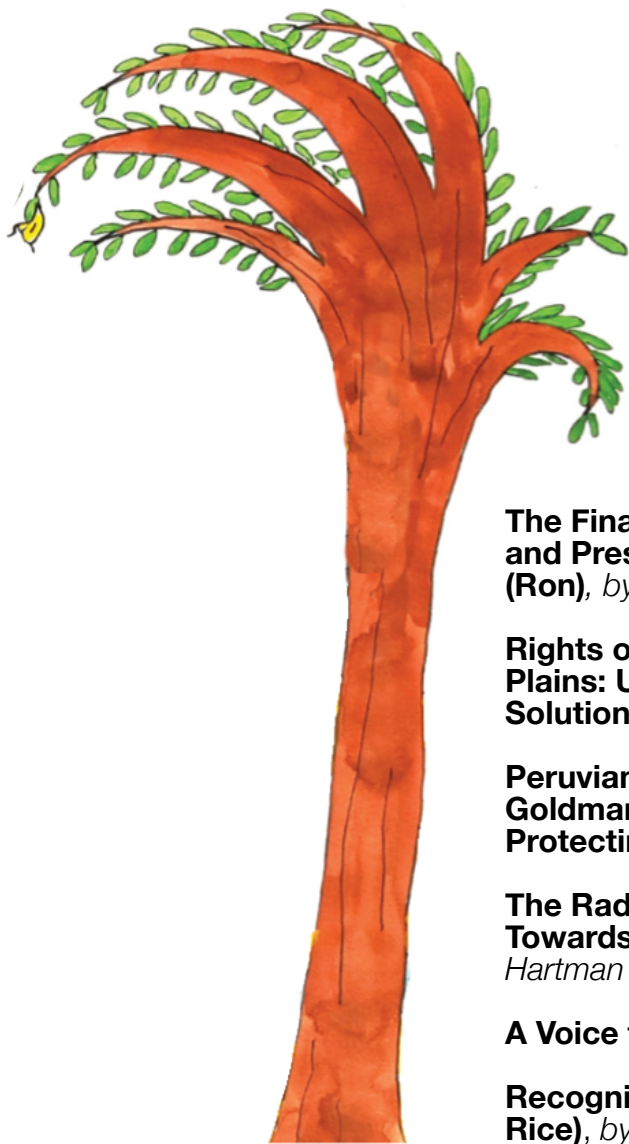
By editors Shannon Biggs and Julia Horinek

Rights of Nature is the fastest-growing environmental justice movement in human history, now [recognized in the laws and constitutions of over 40 countries](#). But it is far more than just a legal innovation. At its heart and with Indigenous leadership, this movement represents a profound shift in how we understand our human relationship with the natural world—not as masters of nature, but as part of the living system of life. By recognizing ecosystems, rivers, mountains, and forests as legal entities with rights of their own, this approach reconnects us to ancestral wisdom and Indigenous cosmologies that have long upheld the sacred balance between humans and the Earth. In doing so, Rights of Nature is not only a legal revolution—it is a spiritual and cultural one as well.

And it is working. Seventeen years after its inclusion in Ecuador's Constitution, the Rights of Nature is demonstrating its efficacy in advancing climate resilience and justice globally, largely driven by Indigenous communities across all continents. In places where it has been implemented and upheld, rights-based laws for Nature have protected whole ecosystems, species and Indigenous ways of life. These laws have stopped mining, fossil fuel projects and other industrial threats by recognizing human communities are part of nature, not separate from it. In Indigenous hands, Nature is not a resource, but a source of life.

Genuine climate solutions arise from honoring and respecting Nature's inherent rights, rather than from attempts to control or exploit it. In stark contrast to this movement's achievements, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations have fallen abysmally short. The 2025 negotiations in Belem, Brazil will mark three decades of unsuccessful endeavors to mitigate the most severe effects of climate chaos and halt global warming. In fact, the UNFCCC continues to put a price tag on what nature “does” for humans, valuing nature in terms of economic services, often called “Nature Based Solutions.” As long as we commodify nature, using a colonial lens as property to be sold for profit, we cannot escape our climate fate.

As the world grapples with destabilizing authoritarian politics and policies exacerbating climate chaos, a path forward exists. Last year at COP 29, [fossil fuel lobbyists](#) outnumbered almost every country delegation. This year, thousands of Indigenous people are expected at COP30 including 1,000 official delegates, more than any in history. This report, featuring authors from both the global North and South, highlights how Indigenous leadership and ancient wisdom provide answers that are working in the modern world. What is needed is a true revolution for the Earth. Indigenous-led Rights of Nature offers a real climate solution.



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Call to Action for Indigenous Peoples, Rights of Nature and Life: All Eyes on Ecuador

By Casey Camp Horinek

Background (Editors' note): *In the early hours of October 12, 2025, heavily armed military forces entered Imbabura province of Ecuador and attacked Otavalo with gunfire and tear gas. This assault follows 19 days of a national strike, during which Indigenous communities have been at the epicenter of state repression. Soldiers forcibly cut the hair of Indigenous Kichwa men — a deeply humiliating and racist act, as long hair and braids are sacred symbols of cultural identity and dignity. More than 112 people have been injured, dozens detained, and at least one community member, Efraín Fuérez, has been killed. We raise our voices to defend Ecuador's legacy as the first country in the world to recognize the Rights of Nature, and to stand with the Indigenous defenders who risk their lives to protect these rights. Defending land, water, and life is a right — not a crime.*

Many years ago, I was introduced to the idea of a movement called Rights of Nature. As a Ponca woman coming from Indigenous traditions, I initially questioned the value of making laws or policy around Rights of Nature and how it could enhance Indigenous Rights or work with our worldview. However, witnessing the Rights of Nature in practice globally and seeing how they align with both the original Ponca teachings and Western law

made it clear to me that the Rights of Nature and Indigenous Rights are interconnected. The recognition in court cases affirmed what we have always known as Indigenous people: humans are not separate from Nature but are part of a single interconnected organism—Mother Earth.



Protest in Otovalo. Mural image is of Kichwa member Efraín Fuérez, killed by military forces. Sign reads "They tried to bury us but we are the seeds." Photo: Sydney Males.

Observing our present-day situation politically, environmentally, and always through an Indigenous lens - more than ever, I understand that Rights of Nature is a path forward for humanity to continue its journey on Earth - we are the endangered species if we continue to deny the rights of Mother Earth and Father Sky to exist, thrive, and continue their relationship with all living things, including humans. The threat to life on earth is very real, and when we turn our eyes to places like Ecuador and see the attack on the Indigenous People, we see it as a continuation of the colonization and financialization of Nature itself. We recognize that history has taught us that we were attacked in the Global North in the same way the Kichwa People of Ecuador are being attacked today — hair cut by force, gas attacks on babies and elders, villages under attack — simply so that the extractive industry can continue its reign of terror.

Ecuador set the standard for Rights of Nature not just in court, but in practical reality - it is the reason the Kichwa are being attacked. As the fastest-growing environmental movement in the modern history of humankind, Ecuador has become a microcosm of the growth of Rights of Nature, the standard for Rights of Nature, and the future of Rights of Nature.

As Movement Rights has always ascertained that it is necessary to align human law with natural law. And so we

stand with the Indigenous Cosmology that has always understood that we are all related and that Indigenous led Rights of Nature is a solution to the climate chaos that we are experiencing. Rights of Nature and Indigenous Rights are indivisible.

Movement Rights Stands with Ecuador - Movement Rights Stands with Nature!

Casey Camp Horinek is an elder and the Environmental Ambassador for the Southern Ponca Tribe of what is now called Oklahoma. She is the Drumkeeper of Ponca Pa'thata Women's Society. In addition to being the founding chairwoman of Movement Rights' Board, she also directs our Ponca Rights of Nature campaign. While serving on the Ponca Business Committee, Casey led her community to become the first tribe to recognize the Rights of Nature in tribal law in the US. Like her brother, the late Carter Camp, who was a leader in the American Indian Movement, Casey has been an outspoken protector and defender of her people and Mother Earth and a global leader in the Rights of Nature movement. She serves as the chair of the Indigenous Council for the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature. As a result of fracking, pipelines and the Phillips 66 Refinery, the Ponca people community live in one of the worst fossil fuel impacted areas in the United States. She calls it "environmental genocide." Casey is also a wife, mother, grandmother, and a working film and TV actress addition to speaking on concerns of Indigenous communities globally.

The Financialization of Nature (Fon) is a Clear and Present Danger to the Rights of Nature (Ron)

Excerpted from a discussion paper by Maude Barlow on behalf of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature

Mother Earth is in peril. It is very well documented that our planetary crisis includes climate chaos due to run-away carbon emissions, rapidly dwindling clean water supplies, warming of the oceans, mass extinction of species and historic biodiversity loss.

There has been an awakening, often led by Indigenous Peoples and their teachings, about the urgent need to protect Nature if we are to survive. While understanding the importance of continuing to fight greenhouse gas emissions and transition to climate friendly energy alternatives, there is a growing understanding that humans must stop seeing Nature as a vast resource for our convenience and profit, but rather the very life source of our planet's existence.

The Rights of Nature movement is founded upon the recognition that Nature is an indivisible living community of inter-related and interdependent beings with inherent rights. With this growing movement, GARN is creating policies and laws that protect Nature and other species as rights-bearing entities and taking rivers, forests and lands under local community protection. RON reflects the Indigenous perspective that Mother Earth is not property to be exploited for our convenience or profit, but is, rather, the source of all life.

Many Indigenous organizations and communities are also strongly opposed to the commodification and financialization of Nature. With more than 28% of global land under some form of Indigenous management or tenure, their perspective is crucial. Indigenous People view themselves as part of the ecosystem rather than apart from it and understand they are the guardians of Nature and biodiversity in their territories. They are sounding the alarm as their lands, forests and waters are divided up to be 'protected' by investors trading in carbon and water markets.



A new carbon market trading scheme in development estimates that collectively whales are "worth" approximately \$3 trillion, based on their perceived value for tourism, and as carbon sinks. Graphic: Shannon Biggs.

We welcome the recent recognition at the highest levels of governments, the United Nations, and other international institutions of the urgency to address the other ecological crises we face that contribute to the climate crisis. All recent international gatherings and UN climate and biodiversity COPs have emphasized the need for radical protection and restoration of watersheds, forests, wetlands and biodiversity, if we and the planet are to survive. We also welcome the badly needed funding being made available for the restoration of watersheds and ecosystems.

However, we are deeply concerned that, backed by the United Nations and the World Bank, powerful players in the private sector have moved in to take control of these funds, transferring the responsibility for protecting Nature from communities and governments to capital markets. Transnational corporations, global equity funds, large agribusiness, energy and chemical companies as well as private water utilities and bottled water companies have taken center stage in creating a growing consensus at the highest levels that the private sector and private finance are the key to saving the planet. And that can only happen if there is a profit to be made in the process.

This is the Financialization of Nature. Its vision: bring Nature into the market, put a price on it, and let the market - not governments - guide the process. Where governments use regulatory measures to protect Nature, the market treats Nature as an asset to be bought, traded

and sold. Carbon trading, water pollution trading, biodiversity credits, nature-based solutions, REDD+, wildlife conservation bonds, nature bonds, green growth, water futures, ecosystem services; this is the new language of the multitude of private interests keen to profit from the growing global commitment to protecting Nature.

The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature affirms the following principles:

The Financialization of Nature is the wrong model to protect Nature, restore biodiversity and fight climate change.

FON allows governments and international institutions to avoid the hard choices, laws and policies they should be making to deal with the environmental crises they face and commitments they have made. FON takes the responsibility for protecting Nature away from communities and governments and brings it into the market economy where it has to compete to survive. FON is intended to minimize disruption to the existing economic system that promotes growth and does not challenge either the deeply inequitable distribution of wealth or the power of the very extractive corporations responsible for so much ecosystem damage. FON sees Nature as a resource and entrenches an exploitive relationship between hu-

mans and Nature. Where it has been used, FON has spectacularly failed to protect Nature.

The Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) is clear that, in order to ensure an environmentally sustainable future, humans must reorient ourselves from an exploitative and self-destructive relationship with Nature, to one that honors the deep interrelation of all life and contributes to the health and integrity of the natural environment.

In order for this to happen, we need to establish a system of jurisprudence that sees and treats Nature as a fundamental rights-bearing entity and not as mere property to be exploited at will. This “needed system of jurisprudence” is already underway, guided by local communities, municipal councils, Indigenous groups, and in some cases, state, provincial and national governments as well. In order to protect Nature as an entity with rights, we need democratic governance, community oversight and transparency.

The Rights of Nature is the clear alternative vision to the Financialization of Nature

RON sees Nature as a community of life composed of many different beings, each of which has an important role to play. Where FON further promotes our alienation from Nature, RON is motivated by a deep connection to it. RON recognizes that humans are

but one form of life among many, making our role to contribute to the whole Earth Community, not to rule or manage it. RON articulates an alternative vision of Nature, demanding its protection in law, and an expansion of shared protected areas overseen by local guardians, not capital markets. Where FON is a dangerous extension of the enclosure of the commons, shrinking the political space for communities to protect Nature, RON seeks the reclamation and expansion of the commons. With FON, governments and people take all the risks while the private sector gets the profit. With RON, the profit motive is removed from the protection of Nature, replaced by an obligation to honor the sacred.

The Rights of Nature incorporates a rights-based approach to conservation

In the name of conservation, a FON approach to protecting biodiversity - sometimes called 'fortress conservation' - is being used to expel some Indigenous and other rural rights holders off their ancestral lands. Protecting Nature requires an approach that also protects the human rights of those who live on the land. Indigenous Peoples are the guardians of Nature and often the front-line resistance to those interested only in extracting wealth from the Earth to line their pockets. A rights-based approach includes the human right to a healthy environment alongside the Rights of Nature. In the words of the Inter-American Court of

Human Rights, “In our quest to protect and recover the biodiversity and ecosystems that are the life support system of planet Earth and one of the great wonders of the universe, the only effective and equitable path forward is putting human rights and Nature's rights at the very heart of every conservation action that is taken.”

It is urgent that the rights of Nature movement and GARN put forward this alternative vision to the commodification and financialization of Nature. Our vision for the future is compelling and is needed as the centerpiece of deliberations at the climate and biodiversity summits as well as local and national gatherings everywhere decisions and policies affecting humans and Nature are taking place.

*Maude Barlow is a Canadian author and water justice activist. She has served as senior advisor on water to the United Nations General Assembly and was a leader in the campaign to have water and sanitation declared a human right. Maude is the recipient of many awards, including the Right Livelihood Award and has written 22 books. Her upcoming book, *Earth For Sale, The Fight to Stop the Last Plunder of the Commons*, will be published in 2026.*

Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers In the Plains: Upholding the Natural Laws is a Climate Solution

By Julia Horinek

The Roots of Indigenous Peoples run deep, with interconnected belief systems and relationships with Mother Earth and all sources of life. Roots not unlike those of our plant and tree relatives that touch down to the root cap and connects to other plant relatives nearby at the cellular level, sharing water and nourishment that feed our animal relatives. That in turn becomes a part of the life cycle of the human species, growing along the rivers, above the aquifers, and across the plains—the lifeblood of our People, of all People. We are all connected.

The original teaching of the Peoples indigenous to the Great Plains of Turtle Island are a guiding force in Movement Rights' Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers work. We know in our blood, our bones, that we are Nature. Wouldn't it be a crime not to do anything to help our relatives, our kin, if we could? Don't we have a responsibility to speak the language of the colonial systems to, ultimately, transform those systems on Nature's behalf? To shift the foibles and arrogance of existing human law to align with the laws of the natural world? How can we do this while respecting the inherent rights of Mother Earth and Indigenous Rights and Sovereignty? We need a tool, a vehicle to carry the

messages of the trees, the water, the rocks, the minerals, the fins, the footed, the hooved, the flyers, the feathered. We need Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers. At its core, Rights of Nature is a powerful and poetic call to action that blends spiritual, legal, political and ecological dimensions. It centers the worldview of Indigenous Peoples of the Great Plains and ancestral teachings everywhere, echoing a deeper truth: that humanity is not separate from Nature, but part of it.



Movement Rights team of women at the 4th Convening of the Four Winds in Niobrara, Nebraska 2025 hosted by the (northern) Ponca Nation of Nebraska. Photo: Movement Rights

With this vision and the guidance of Tribal Elder, Matriarch, Drumkeeper, and Board Chairwoman Casey Camp-Horinek and the support of Movement Rights, the Ponca Nation of Oklahoma became the first U.S. Tribe to codify the Rights of Nature and Climate Rights into law in 2017, and the Rights of Rivers in 2022. In so doing, the Ponca were at once confronting the colonial legal premise that humans “own” Nature by recognizing the universal truth, that ecosystems have inherent intrinsic rights, that Climate has inherent intrinsic rights, and that those rights are inseparable from human rights. Rights and responsibilities are connected. One cannot exist without the other, thus connecting the fastest growing environmental movement globally, to the Plains of Turtle Island. Following the Ponca’s tribal statutes, dozens of tribal communities and organizations across the country have implemented similar rights-based laws and frameworks.

The Great Plains of Turtle Island are home to more than fifty Tribal Nations. These Tribal Nations are as varied as the landscapes they inhabit—grasslands, rivers, lakes, mountains, deserts, forests, and wildlands. Each hold their own cosmology, traditions, and relationships with the sources of life in the territory that they have stewarded since the beginning of time. With this deep-rooted connection comes a unique understanding of the Rights of Nature and the Rights of Rivers, shaped by their specific histories, geographies, and ways of knowing.

With this conception, Movement Rights goes only where we are invited. Never forcing a one-size-fits-all solution to

climate chaos, fossil fuel extraction, pollution, poisoned waters, or endangered ecosystems. And through this deep commitment to the Tribal Nations and the Indigenous Peoples, we listen deeply. And we share examples from Indigenous peoples and partners we work with who are leading the global movement for Nature's Rights.

Prior to and following the Ponca's laws, Movement Rights held many events in Oklahoma, hosted discussions and Intertribal Rights of Nature (IRON) Forums and more. From these, the [Convenings of the Four Winds](#) was created. Between 2022-2025 Movement Rights held a series of four Indigenous-led Convenings hosted by different tribal communities, bringing together hundreds of Plains communities. These events bring together tribal nations and allies to strategize and act on environmental issues through ceremony, workshops, and panels rooted in each tribal community's traditions and needs. As the Plains are a fossil fuel epicenter, oil and gas have been a main feature of the discussions and organizing. While important events on their own, these gatherings were also critical first step toward something bigger—a way to build unity and understanding toward the formation of an Alliance of Indigenous Peoples and allies across the Great Plains. An Indigenous-led Alliance that upholds the Natural Laws as a Climate Solution. An Alliance that utilizes Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers to speak on behalf of Nature in the colonial court systems—upholding Indigenous Rights and the Rights of Mother Earth. This exciting work is just beginning.

Our work goes beyond the adoption and codification of laws; it is a deep and abiding relationship. Changing law and shifting culture must come hand in hand. We're all in this together.

Through our work with the Ponca PaThaTa Women's Scalp Dance Society, we support Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers, but we also support reclamation of traditional indigenous knowledge and practices; food sovereignty, cultural rematriation, land back, and Indigenous led Just Transition. We provide education and understanding of the deep levels of rights-based environmental work on a global level—upholding the principles of UNDRIP (United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples) and FPIC (Free Prior and Informed Consent). We participate and sponsor Rights of Nature Tribunals—ethical tribunals, where land defenders, traditional stewards and others, take the responsibility of speaking on behalf of Nature particularly where ecosystems are in peril from human activities. We are active in developing forums in and around the Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers movement, and diving into the world of “False Solutions” from Greenwashing, Bluewashing, Carbon Scams, and other commodification bad ideas deceptively labeled “Nature Based Solutions.” Movement Rights leads and supports from the belief and knowledge that we all live downstream—what happens in one territory affects the people of the next territory—the circle is without end.

Indigenous led Rights of Nature and Rights of Rivers works. Indigenous Peoples safeguard biodiversity and are essential guardians of Mother Earth. In the face of environmental genocide, fascism, greed, and colonial constructs, the Indigenous Peoples of the Plains will continue to protect the waters, air, and lands, to be the voice of nature, and work towards the ecological balance that we as the human species must reach to survive - our blood and bones are the soil, our spirits are the air and the stars, and our heartbeats are synchronized with the heartbeats of Mother Earth.

To learn more about our work in the Plains, with the Ponca, and the Convenings of the Four Winds, visit www.movementrights.org.

Julia Horinek is a member of the Ponca Nation of Oklahoma, the Plains Coordinator for Movement Rights and the North American organizer for the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature's (GARN) Indigenous Council. She is also the co-editor of this report.

Peruvian Rights of Nature Defender Wins Goldman Prize for Precedent-Setting Work Protecting an Imperiled River

Interview with Mari Luz Canaquiri Murayari

By Katie Surma

**A version of this article first appeared in the April 21, 2025 issue of Inside Climate News*

Mari Luz Canaquiri Murayari, an Indigenous Kukama leader from the Peruvian Amazon, has been awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her decades-long fight to protect the Marañón River, home to her peoples' ancestors and a lifeline for rainforest ecosystems that keep the world livable.

Canaquiri Murayari, 56, grew up along the Marañón's banks in the village of Shapajilla, a biodiverse area home to pink dolphins, macaws, giant river otters, jaguars, manatees and more than 150 species of fish. The lifeblood of the region is the sinuous Marañón, which flows over 1,000 miles from glaciers in the Andes and, after joining with the Ucayali River, into the Amazon River.

Kukama and other Indigenous peoples' territories line the Marañón River basin, where for generations they have

lived interdependently with the waterway and its surrounding rainforest. Fish and fruits from the forest form the backbone of their diets, and the river is entwined with their distinct cultures and rich [ecological knowledge](#).

But that relationship, knowledge and the communities' health have become [imperiled](#) by more than 50 years of oil extraction and contamination. A succession of international and Peruvian oil companies drilling for fossil fuels have fouled the land, air and water here with toxic drilling waste and other pollution. A [2021 analysis](#) that looked at government data from 2000 to 2019 found 189 oil spills in the [production lot](#) imposed on Kukama territory.

Companies have largely evaded accountability, leveraging [laws that prioritize economic growth](#) and treat pollution as someone else's problem. Those laws also [treat the Marañón's](#) life-giving ecosystems as lifeless property, like a car or toaster.

After a disastrous oil spill in 2000, Canaquiri Murayari and other women [gathered together](#), questioning how oil projects could be imposed on them without their consent. They founded the Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, or "Working Women" federation, focused on protecting their land and ways of life. Talking with lawyers at the Peru-based [Institute of Legal Defense](#), Canaquiri Murayari posed a straightforward question: Why didn't the Marañón have rights the same way people do?

In 2021, the Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana federation filed a lawsuit to make that happen. The case, against various Peruvian ministries, sought recognition that the Marañón River has rights to exist, flow and be free from pollution, among other protections. Canaquiri Murayari became the face of the effort, which came at great personal risk and cost. She was ridiculed, threatened and harassed, including by her own government, [she told Inside Climate News last year.](#)

In March 2024, a Peruvian trial court recognized the Marañón River's rights and ruled that Indigenous organizations and government agencies are the river's guardians, allowing them to speak on behalf of the ecosystem in court and in other situations, like government permitting processes. Last fall, the ruling was affirmed on appeal.

Still, oil has continued to flow in the region, with operation expansions planned. Now, the Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana federation and Indigenous groups from across the region are preparing to enforce their landmark judgment.

Inside Climate News talked with Canaquiri Murayari about this step and about Kukama culture, women's role in protecting nature and new threats facing the Marañón, including plans for a multimillion-dollar dredging project that would turn the river into a shipping highway.



The the Marañón River. Photo: Wikimedia User [Waterloo1883](#), [CC-by-sa 4.0](#)

This conversation has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

KATIE SURMA: What does the Marañón River mean to you, and what is your relationship with it?

MARI LUZ CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: For us, the river isn't just a body of water. It's sacred. It's fundamental. The river is full of spirits. In our worldview, all beings—fish, birds and plants—have spirits. The river is like a mother, because it gives us life, and like a father, because it nourishes and feeds us.

If the river gets sick, we all get sick. That's why we protect it. We have to keep the river and its spirits healthy. These spirits in the river are not mythological

creatures. They are real. The mother of the river is the biggest spirit in the Amazon, the Purawa. Without her and other spirits that live under the water, there would be no fish. If contamination affects these spirits, those spirits are damaged and all the fish disappear. That's why when something happens to the river, it isn't just an environmental issue, it affects everything.

SURMA: How is the Marañón River and surrounding region being affected by pollution?

CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: The river has been polluted by many activities. Oil pollution has been happening for over 50 years. There is also pollution from mining and nearby cities dumping garbage into it.

There are other threats: There is a project to turn the river into a water highway. There are hydroelectric dams. There are new extractive concessions being granted in the river basin.

These are serious threats to the Marañón River and to the Amazon rainforest—and for us Indigenous people who live in these territories. We focus on protecting our rivers, forests and water. It is important to protect those things, to take care of them, because they are part of our lives. We do this not only for us, but for all of humanity and all beings.

SURMA: It was women—you and your fellow Kukama women—who won this landmark legal victory declaring the Marañón River a rights-bearing entity and se-

curing protections for its ecological integrity. Why is it that, so often, it's Indigenous women on the front lines defending nature?

CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: Women are the most vulnerable and have been treated like objects before—without rights, disrespected and dismissed. But now, we are empowering ourselves. We are taking action not just for ourselves, but for our children and future generations. People say the Amazon is the “lungs of the world.” If it's sick, we must heal it. We are uniting now, women and men. We must protect it. We're setting an example for our children to continue respecting and caring for nature.

Everything in nature has a spirit and a role. So we must respect all of it.

Plants are spiritual beings too. Every plant has a function. When we need to heal someone, we need to know the spirit of the plant and we ask the plant's permission before using it. If those plants disappear because of contamination, we can't heal anymore. We lose that healing knowledge and power.

When a plant dies, it's like a person dying. That's why we ask for permission before harvesting it for medicine. We respect it. We honor it.

SURMA: Many people here in the United States see nature as something separate from themselves. But I've heard you and other Indigenous leaders say that you are nature defending nature. Can you explain that?

CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: We are not separate from nature. We are part of it.

In our name, Kukama, “Ku” means Earth and “Kama” means breast. Mother Earth provides everything. She is like a breast that feeds us. She provides everything for us and for all living beings—animals, birds, fish. We all feed on our mother’s breast.

Her rivers are important because we all consume water. Not just humans, but plants, trees and animals. Water is also a right for them because without water they cannot live. A plant drinks water when it rains. Animals, birds and insects drink too. Bees drink water, too. They are great pollinators. They make our fruits, our apples. Everything, no matter how small it is, has a function. Even the smallest beings are very important.

If someone is damaging Mother Earth, they’re damaging me. We must live in balance and connection with all living beings. The Karuara, or “people of the river,” live under the water. Sometimes they form families with humans. They are part of our stories, our understanding of the world. These spirits are like family. That’s why we must protect them. We live because of them. We eat, we drink and we owe so much to the rivers and their spirits.

SURMA: You and other Kukama women are working to enforce the legal judgment you won. Can you talk about that? What's happening now?

CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: We won a legal ruling, but that's just the beginning. We are working toward its implementation. We're organizing, holding meetings and workshops, and preparing to meet with the government.

To make this real, we need technical advice, and we need funding so we can bring in Indigenous leaders from around the Marañón River basin. We want them to take an active role as well. We will have meetings and workshops to prepare the leaders.

Then, we'll present a united proposal to government institutions, asking them to respect the ruling.

We have three main concerns. First, we want the government to respect and implement the court decision. Second, we want the government to do maintenance on the Northern Peruvian pipeline. Third, we want them to conduct proper consultations with communities before new projects, like new oil development in our territory, moves forward.

SURMA: Is there anything else you would like to say?

CANAQUIRI MURAYARI: I want to send a message to the world. For us, it is fundamental that we come together to protect what we have. We still have time. I am very happy when I see young people join us. They

are going to be the ones who are going to protect the rest of us. Elders need to be an example for them and show they are strong. To show they will not allow themselves to be defeated. To show that they fight for their children and for nature. We have to respect nature. Humans have to respect it because it is life. I always say protecting rivers and territories is protecting our own lives.

Katie Surma is a reporter at Inside Climate News covering the rights of nature movement and international environmental justice. Her work has a strong focus on the intersection of human rights and the environment. Before joining ICN, she practiced law, specializing in commercial litigation. Her journalism work has been recognized by the Overseas Press Club, the Society of International Journalists, the Society of American Business Editors and Writers and others. Katie has a master's degree in investigative journalism from Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, an LLM in international rule of law and security from ASU's Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, a J.D. from Duquesne University, and was a History of Art and Architecture major at the University of Pittsburgh. Katie lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The Radical Optimism of Youth: Working Towards Protecting Herring—and Renewal

By Hartman Deetz

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For Wampanoag, like many other New England, or Dawnland, Natives, herring are sacred. They bring with their springtime migration the return of life to the land after a long winter, paving the way for planting. They fill the stream with multitudes that in times gone by would be described as turning the rivers black. Early colonists wrote that “you could walk across the river on the backs of the fish.” The fish would reach the freshwater ponds at the tops of the river and spawn the next generation, which would swim out to the open Atlantic to one day return and continue the cycle of life, death, and renewal. What will it look like, the world we leave to our children? Will we have drinkable water? An ocean with fish? Will “fire season” replace autumn? The youth will bear the burden of the procrastination, the apathy, the lies, and the greed that have fueled our society for far too long. For the youth, there is no other choice than renewal. For many Tribes, youth are encouraged to speak up and are regarded as important future leaders to listen to. They are often optimistic and uncorrupted. Teenagers tend to be idealistic and lean into the quest for solutions, the hope, the idea

we should at least try. When adults maintain these qualities, it is called “radical optimism.”

In Mashpee, Native Environmental Ambassadors (NEA) are leading the way for the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe in advocating for solutions. Described as “a group of Native youth who protect Native homelands from the effects of colonization,” or, alternatively, “a bunch of Mashpee Wamp kids protecting our homeland with Rights of Nature,” the group has so far been able to pass two Tribal resolutions in the Tribal Council. The first was a resolution declaring a state of emergency for the herring, whose populations have been in serious decline. In this resolution, the Tribe will act as the advocate for the herring and their rights. The second is a resolution to support enacting the Rights of Nature into the Tribal bylaws.

NEA member Amayah Balbuena, 15, is learning how to navigate policy and procedure. When I asked her how she got started with Rights of Nature work, she said, “We went to Washington, D.C. for a Tribal sovereignty summit, and one of the activities was to make posters about what our Tribe struggles with. And we saw that so many of us had the same struggles with our waters and polluters.” Fellow NEA member Isaiah Peters, 16, remembers learning from the Tlingit people in a cultural exchange in Alaska. “It was a real opportunity to learn what other people are doing with their herring runs and was inspiring to us for how we could rebuild ours,” he said. Since the passing of the Tribal resolutions, NEA became the first

youth-led organization doing Rights of Nature work on Turtle Island, according to Shannon Biggs of Movement Rights and the Global Alliance for Rights of Nature. Many environmental conferences and programs have invited them to speak locally in the New England area as well as at powwows and cultural events like the Namasket Herring Festival, InterTribal Paddle on the Charles, and the Indigenous Peoples Day celebration in Newton.

In September, the youth of NEA were asked to sit on a panel at the annual Bioneers conference, hosted by the Agua Caliente Tribe in California. With over 80 Tribes represented in the audience, this was the biggest spotlight they had seen so far. After the event, Balbuena said, “So many people came up to us saying what a good job that we are doing and how they are proud of us, and the support just felt absolutely amazing.” Peters commented, “We got to meet a lot of cool Native people and the work they are doing, and to see how much support there is for these kinds of ideas really boosted our morale.”

The youth of NEA are making many of us in the older generation of Mashpee proud, making our voices heard and our presence seen. They have met a who’s who of the Native environmentalism world, such as Pennie Opal from Plant of Movement Rights and Tom Goldtooth (Diné/Dakota Bdewakantonwan Hunka) of the Indigenous Environmental Network, each of whom has dedicated their lives to working for Indigenous Peoples and the environment. Balbuena recalls meeting Goldtooth and “learning

how they worked to change things for the next generation like us.” They also met Casey Camp-Horeneck (Ponca), whom they excitedly recognized as “The Grandma from *Rez Dogs!*”



Learning traditional skills by building a wetu, a Wampanoag seasonal house. Photo: Hartman Deetz

NEA has also done work with their peers from Houma, Louisiana, the Alaskan Yukon, and Hawai'i. Together they have learned about Tribal law and the resolution process, and also each other's cultures. Peters recalls how much he liked the "Bird Songs," a distinct style of singing, from southern California Tribes. For Balbuena, the most memorable exchange was learning lei-making from the Hawaiians.

The youth of NEA are also learning about their culture and our traditional stewardship of the environment through programming with the Mashpee Tribes Education Department. The property of Maushop Farm abuts the Santuit River, and NEA youth have worked to clean up this stretch of the river while learning to identify plants on the property that have cultural uses, as well as the wildlife and its habitats. In cultivating cattail reeds, for example, they learn about how these plants help to clean the water, and can also be used as a source of food as well as a material for weaving waterproof mats for roofing of our traditional houses. On the farmland, they have worked with Tribal member Danielle Hill to grow and cultivate our ancestral corn variety, King Philip's Corn, a seven-row, red flint corn varietal, which is uniquely suited to the environment after generations of adaptation. They also have started to practice traditional methods of encouraging wild growth through selective clearing.

The other project happening on the property is the construction of a traditional contact period homesite, led

by Tribal member Darius Coombs. The small home and accompanying shade arbor are being built with local materials harvested from Tribal lands. When I asked Peters how this activity was connected to environmental work, he talked about harvesting and processing materials for a home. “We get to be there hands-on with the resources and see where it comes from, and what we have to protect; it gives us more connection to it,” he explained. Balbuena echoed the sentiment, saying, “It gives us the background understanding to know why what we are doing is important.”

As herring move up river they eventually reach Mashpee Pond, the body of water that defines our community as Mashpee People. For the past four years, the pond has closed earlier and earlier due to the buildup of cyanobacteria. Recently, NEA helped work to pass a proposal in the Mashpee town government to permit a full cultural homesite museum on the property, referred to as 12 Acres, which sits on Mashpee Pond. The town approval for this Land Back action will fulfill the promise of the 12 Acres property, which was the designated site of a museum as far back as the 1970s. Having a cultural museum on the shores of Mashpee Pond will create a powerful space to discuss the impacts of our lives on the herring and our overall ecosystem. When I asked Peters about the future, he said that he sees “more hard work, a lot to learn, and a lot of info to spread.” But, he added optimistically, “We have time. We’re young.” Balbuena articulated a more specific set of goals: “We need to get

the state to rebuild the herring runs, we need to stop building so close to the water, we need to stop allowing boats to come and rinse the salt water from the ocean. I don't think people understand the harm that they are doing." These youth are taking concrete actions. We should let them lead with their radical optimism. It is, after all, their future. We should follow our youth, and the herring, to renewal.

Hartman Deetz is a Mashpee Wampanoag who has been active in environmental and cultural stewardship for over 20 years. This stewardship is based on his spiritual foundation in his Native traditions that value the earth as a living being. Deetz is also returning to his work with the Wampanoag Language Reclamation Program as a student and teacher. Deetz is a traditional artist as well as singer and dancer, having shown his art in galleries from coast to coast across the US. Deetz is currently engaged with advocacy work for the Charles River Watershed Association advocating for the health and restoration of the Charles River as well as other campaigns around native rights to access waterways. and the protection and restoration of Mashpee water quality and water quality in general for the future of mankind.

A Voice for Antarctica

By Danii Kehler

Imagine taking a deep breath of fresh air and having that unpolluted taste on your tongue while you are listening to the natural undisturbed sounds of Mother Earth. Nothing but the waves of the ocean crashing into shorelines or echoes from the heartbeat of mountain peaks, while animals chatter in their natural habitats and the wind singing her songs of freedom. A magnificent landscape that is so beautiful and enchanting that belongs to no one, nor does it have a human Indigenous population. Most people would believe this place to not exist in our world, but then again, most people of the world have never been to Antarctica.

Antarctica is often imagined as a distant land that has no connection to the rest of the world creating the illusion that the continent is remote from everyday human life. Despite Antarctica's remote location she is a crucial regulator of the planet's climate and holds immense significance for the well-being of all forms of life on Mother Earth. The continent, a largely pristine wilderness that belongs to no country, is not only home to a wide range of fauna and marine species, but she also contains approximately 60% of the world's fresh water; and water is life.

Indigenous people across the world hold ancestral knowledge systems that are deeply rooted in reciprocity and recognize that everything in creation has a spirit; from the

rocks on the shorelines, to the rivers that flow and to the land we all live on. The Earth is not just a lifeless rock; she is the source of all life which interweaves ecosystems and humanity together. Reciprocity and respect are the pillars of Indigenous knowledge systems, if we nurture and care for Mother Earth she will in turn take care of us. This worldview showcases the close relationship humanity has with all forms of creation such as the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and most importantly it highlights our complex relationship with Mother Earth.



Photo: Danielle Kehler

Creation stories are a vital part in the history of Indigenous people around the world; they are not just “myths” but living philosophies that are foundational to Indigenous cultures and its teachings. Oral traditions often include

natural laws and responsibilities on our relationships with all forms of creation and the spirit world. There are Indigenous nations in the Southern Hemisphere that have cosmologies and oral histories that resonate with the elements of Antarctica's environment, one element that is sacred amongst all peoples of the world is water. Our relationship with water is essential for life to continue to flourish, the interconnectedness of the world's water systems rely on Antarctica to help regulate Mother Earth's temperature along with the ocean currents. Water and Antarctica are interwoven together, and it is our shared responsibility as humanity to care for and uphold this relationship which grants us the precious gift of life.

One way to conceptualize Antarctica is to describe the continent as a living untouched part of Mother Earth's soul; to recognize Antarctica as a living autonomous entity with legal rights. This is the concept behind Antarctic Rights which is a global initiative that stems from Indigenous Knowledge Systems to campaign for the recognition of Antarctica as a living entity and to have representation in global decision-making processes.

Antarctic Rights is working to build worldwide support for the adoption and implementation of an Antarctica Declaration which calls on all nations and international bodies to recognize Antarctica as an independent legal entity with the right to be represented in decision-making that affects the continent — such as climate change negotiations — and to regenerate and evolve free of human

disruption. The Antarctic Declaration aims to complement existing treaties and would establish ethical standards for assessments and reform of current governance structures. Antarctic Rights is currently seeking organizations and individuals to join the group to form an Antarctic Alliance that will help to collectively address the pressing challenges facing Antarctica.

This initiative is part of a rapidly growing global Rights of Nature movement which stems from Indigenous Knowledge Systems transforming how humans relate to Nature. Over 200 laws and policies that recognize Nature's rights already exist in nearly 40 countries. For example, the Constitution of Ecuador, and laws in Aotearoa / New Zealand recognize that rivers, mountains, and forests are not property to be exploited, but legal subjects which humans have a legal duty to respect and protect. Antarctic Rights can be used as a tool to advocate for the continent's best interests and inspire pivotal paradigm shifts in governance structures/policies.

The Antarctic Treaty System is another example of a successful tool which addresses issues regarding Antarctica, its primary purpose is to ensure that Antarctica is used for peaceful purposes only, to prevent international conflicts and to promote scientific cooperation. Although the Antarctic Treaty System was revolutionary and has been successful in the preservation of Antarctica there are gaps within the initiative that have limited ability to prevent harmful activities or hold violators accountable.

Antarctic Rights doesn't aim to replace the Antarctic Treaty System; its purpose is to work alongside one another for Antarctica's well-being. Visualize two canoes paddling beside each other down the stream of a river and the destination is ensuring ethical standards in the protection and preservation of the Antarctic. One canoe is Antarctic Rights, and the other is The Antarctic Treaty System, both are useful tools in creating accountability for actions harming Antarctica and yet are very different in structure. Even though these initiatives are similar in nature they are ultimately different from one another but they both share the same goal; each canoe is traveling down a shared path in unity to ensure the protection and preservation of the entire continent and its waters.

For decades, the effects of climate change have been more visible in the Antarctic due to the glaciers and ice shelves melting and breaking off prematurely. Sea ice is disappearing which critically disrupts ecosystems, food chains and rises global sea levels. If these patterns continue within the next century it will lead to catastrophic and unimaginable changes to our world, our coastal cities and our populations. Antarctic Rights have successfully purposed Motion 055 to the IUCN for the "Recognition of the Rights of Antarctica", and they will vote at the 2025 IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi to pass this motion. This monumental step forward seeks to ensure that Antarctica's voice is heard and respected.

Antarctic Rights represents more than a legal or political framework; it is supporting global climate initiatives that recognizes the continents irreplaceable ecological and scientific value. Most importantly it promotes living in good relations with our surrounding ecosystems and binding together nations in a shared responsibility of stewardship between humanity and the natural world we all live in. By joining the Antarctic Alliance, you can help ensure that Antarctica is protected and remains a symbol of collective stewardship that is essential for the well being of Mother Earth. Protecting and respecting Antarctica is not only a matter of justice, but it is also essential to building a livable climate future for the next seven generations and beyond.

Danii Kehler is a Plains Cree woman from Kawacatoose First Nations in Treaty 4 territory in Canada and is an Indigenous Artist and the Researcher/Policy writer for the Autonomy department at the First Nations University of Canada. She is a founding member on the executive committee for Antarctic Rights and a judge on the International Rights of Nature Tribunal. Danii has been advocating for Indigenous representation in various sectors to create holistic and sustainable solutions for the betterment of Mother Earth.

Recognizing the Rights of Manoomin/Psín (Wild Rice)

By Gina Peltier

For the Anishinaabe, Manoomin/Psín (Wild Rice in Anishinaabe/Dakota), holds great significance in their culture. Manoomin/Psín is a vital food source that's been around since time immemorial and has enormous ecological and economic value by providing habitat for mammals, fish, waterfowl, and other aquatic life. Manoomin/Psín cleans Water, stabilizes shorelines, reduces harmful algae blooms and acts as a bioindicator for clean Water. Manoomin/Psín is a keystone species that is more than just a food, it's a part of Anishinaabe identity, a link to the land, to Water, to the traditions that have been passed down for thousands of years. The Manoomin/Psín beds that once thrived across Minnesota are disappearing. Southern Minnesota, once rich in these wetlands, has seen a tragic loss due to the transformation of the land and its natural hydrology. With this loss of Manoomin/Psín has come a loss of culture and traditions for our Dakota relatives. And in the north, where Wild Rice still grows, it's under siege from climate change, industrial pollution, invasive species, and reckless development. The protections in place are insufficient and once respected, Manoomin/Psín will last for infinite generations to come.

Why recognizing the Rights of Manoomin/Psín is so important?

Manoomin/Psín faces multiple existential threats from colonialism, climate change and invasive species. The health of Manoomin/Psín and clean Water are tied together, and the same is true for humans; without clean Water, we will cease to exist.

Recognizing the Rights of Manoomin/Psín is an example of applying the broader Rights of Nature legal philosophy, which grants legal standing to ecosystems and species, rather than treating them as property. This principle allows for the right of Manoomin/Psín to exist, flourish, and regenerate, ensuring its protection from pollution, climate change, and genetic engineering, thereby integrating Indigenous worldviews and treaty rights into the legal system.

Recognizing that Manoomin/Psín has a right to exist and thrive, independent of rights created by government or society, provides a framework to shift hearts and minds as we explore solutions to protect and repair our planet for future generations. The perusal of protections for Manoomin/Psín through legislation brings these ideas into a state-level that gains leaders and communities attention, shifting from western ideology to Indigenous wisdom. This approach challenges the legal status quo and addresses environmental injustices that have historically harmed all of our relatives.

Progress of the Rights of Manoomin/Psín Legislation in Minnesota

The pursuit of Manoomin/Psín protections through legislation has been uniting our communities by centering the cultural, spiritual, and economic heritage of Indigenous peoples, which fosters broader collaboration on environmental stewardship. By working to protect this sacred and environmentally vital resource, different groups, including tribal nations, local residents, government agencies, and advocacy groups, find common ground. Protecting and preserving Manoomin/Psín, Corn, Buffalo, our Water, each other, non-human and human relatives and Indigenous lifeways and wisdom are all critical to ensuring the next generations have a livable world.

A small working group began meeting in the fall of 2023 to explore this idea. Given the short window before the legislative session, the group decided to introduce a “Resolution” instead of a bill. A resolution was drafted, modeled partially after the 2018 Rights of Manoomin statutes codified by White Earth Tribal Government.

The Resolution was introduced during the 2024 legislative session. Although the resolution did not move through committees by the necessary deadlines, there was general support from legislators and there was interest in moving this forward as a bill instead of a resolution.

Through tribal consultation and input from community members, scientists, Department of Natural Resources and Indigenous law scholars a bill to protect Manoomin/Psín was drafted.



Manoomin/Psin/Wild Rice, Red Lake Nation. Photo: Nedahness Rose Greene Photography

In 2025 the Wild Rice Act was approved to move forward at the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council Meeting in January and a letter of support was provided. The Wild Rice Protection Act (SF1247/HF2134) was then introduced and formalizes the state's responsibility to protect Manoomin/Psin (Wild Rice) and the freshwater resources it depends on.

The Rights of Manoomin/Psin legislation acknowledges the sacred and central role Wild Rice plays to the health of Indigenous peoples in Minnesota as well as the health and identity of all Minnesota citizens and ecosystems by recognizing the rights of Manoomin/Psin to exist, and thrive in Minnesota. It would also provide protections to help uphold those rights.

The legislation brings Indigenous wisdom into a political context by ensuring that the rights of this natural relative are respected. Plants, animals, and water give us life; without them, we cannot survive. This legislation brings that culture of respect for the natural world to all of Minnesota and forges a stronger connection with the land around us by recognizing that all of our relatives have a right to exist, not just two-legged.

Over the course of this movement thousands of people contacted their lawmakers in support of the Wild Rice Act. Hundreds more wrote Minnesota Governor Walz asking him to veto any changes weakening the Wild Rice sulfate standard and reactive mine waste rule.

Many organizational sign-on letters containing signatures were submitted to the legislature totaling over 70 organizations and community groups from across Minnesota and the nation that support this movement. Citizens showed up to the Minnesota state capital and packed rooms when it came to committee hearings and meetings with their representatives regarding supporting SF 1247 and protecting Manoomin/Psiñ.

SF 1247 made it through the environment committee and was laid over for inclusion in the Omnibus bill, the budget and policy were separated and only the budget moved forward as it was a budget year. The authors of the bill have stated that because the bill made it that far last legislative session it leaves us with a good starting place for next year.

Consultation, Consent & Organizational Support

There is active consultation with each of the tribal governments within the geographic boundaries of Minnesota. Input is also sought by indigenous-led organizations not just in Minnesota but in Wisconsin and Michigan as well. Coordinated action is needed as the threats to Manoomin/Psín are regional in scope, requiring a collaborative, multi-state response.

The push to recognize the Rights of Manoomin/Psín represents a profound paradigm shift, one that challenges the Western legal framework that treats nature as property. By integrating Indigenous wisdom into state-level law, this movement not only seeks to protect a keystone species but also invites all people to forge a deeper, more respectful connection with the land and water. This is more than a legal battle; it is an effort to change hearts and minds, acknowledging that our own existence is inseparable from the health and survival of our non-human relatives.

The success of this movement thus far is a testament to the power of collective action, consultation, and consent. The thousands of individuals and dozens of organizations who have supported the Wild Rice Act have shown that a unified voice can bring environmental and Indigenous justice to the forefront of political discourse. Their continued engagement provides a strong foundation for the 2026 legislative push, proving that with broad and sustained community involvement, meaningful change is possible.

Gina Peltier is Anishinaabe from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. She is the board chair for Mukwa, an Indigenous Women led non-profit focused on uplifting Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous leaders and she is also the Tribal Relations Director with the Rise and Repair Alliance. Gina is an Indigenous Revolutionary and her work exemplifies the power of community-led action. She's a vocal advocate for Indigenous sovereignty, inspiring others to find their voice.

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We are a women and Indigenous-led organization that is both frontline-led and movement-building. Our mission is to align human laws (and culture) with the laws of the natural world through the lens and leadership of Indigenous cosmology. Our work is led by an Indigenous board of frontline defenders focusing on climate justice, Indigenous Rights, and the Rights of Nature. We are in the streets and in the news, providing research and reports, convening strategic gatherings, providing legal support, speaking at the UN, community meetings, regulatory hearings, and more. We provide legal and organizing support for our primary projects including drafting statewide and tribal Right of Nature legislation. For highlights of our work see: [Celebrating a Decade of Action for Mother Earth](#) and visit www.movementrights.org

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Movement Rights

1446 Market Street San Francisco CA 94102, USA

www.movementrights.org • shannon@movementrights.org



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