

Why support the Rights of Nature?

Rev. Dr. Bob Shore-Goss

*We abuse land because we see it as a commodity to belonging to us. When we see it as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect...*Aldo Leopold

The New Hampshire Conference will consider a proposed Resolution for the Rights of Nature at its annual meeting on October 17th. (See the Resolution and supplemental study materials https://www.ucc.org/rights_of_nature_resources)

I want share some thoughts why it is important to publicly support the Rights of Nature. Most non-fundamentalist Christian denominations realize that their responsibility to nature and Creator are essential to their faith practice. The Enlightenment intended to achieve human liberation by dominating Nature, and European colonizers used the Doctrine of Discovery to declare that the lands of the Americas were discovered and that indigenous peoples were not using or working the land for profit. Thus, from a religious perspective, indigenous were wasting the land. Indigenous peoples shared the biblical Hebrew perspective (lifeways) that the land, water, and air could not be owned. (Psalm 24:1) Our European ancestors ignored our biblical heritage that God owns the land and that the land is God's gift bestowed to us as tenants (Leviticus 25:23). God calls us to co-live responsibly with the land specifically and the Earth as a whole. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes how Israel understood that the land belongs to God and was gifted to the Hebrews. God owns the lands, for the land is for sharing.

When the Creator God is eliminated from the question of the land/creation, then the land is characteristically resolved...on the basis of power, without any question of legitimacy. Thus, in a large scope it is fair to say that the story of ownership, control, and governance of the land is a narrative of strength against vulnerability. (*Remember When You are Dust*)

And moreover in Genesis 1:1- 2:4, the priestly poet affirms that creation is good and finally very good. Then God hallows creation. That means that creation is beloved and sacred. Humans are part of that creation and have kinship with the more than human life on the planet. This recognizes a universal principle of all religious traditions that both humans and the natural world are interrelated. This mutuality not only impacts human relationships with humans but human relationship with Nature and the Earth. There is a biblical ecological principle that what affects one affects all in some fashion.

The proposed Resolution for the Rights of Nature attempts to restore the sacredness of Nature and ourselves to God's beloved community within Creation. The New

Hampshire UCC Conference has the opportunity to pioneer a declaration of The Rights of Nature and bring this Resolution to the UCC General Synod 2021. The UCC has the prophetic opportunity to become the Christian polity to affirm the Rights of Nature. To date, Pope Francis stood before the General Assembly of the United Nations, "It must be stated that a true 'right of the environment' does exist." Several Christian environmental ethicists and theologians have articulated the Rights of Nature. Indigenous peoples around the world have fought for the Rights of Nature. (See the study guide on the Rights of Nature movement and the UCC Environmental Justice Council Webinar on the Rights of Nature <https://youtu.be/TUJbCJe-N28>). As we approach our business meeting, five UCC churches, outside the Conference, have endorsed the Resolution. I am expecting that number to rise.

We have reached a kairos moment or critical urgency in 2020, both in our election to vote environmentally and to prophetically counter a trajectory to climate catastrophe.

Let me list a few concerns.

Our country has pulled out the global Paris Climate Accord and continues to pollute the atmosphere with carbon and toxic gases, damages the waterways and bio-regions. Many species are becoming extinct, and we are losing biodiversity. During the last several three plus years, over a hundred EPA regulations that protect the environment and people as well. These protections of environment were essentially for protection of and the welfare of human and more than human life. Arctic drilling for oil and gas have just allowed. But ultimately these protections of the environment have repealed, and Nature does not have rights, but corporations have been given the same rights as people

A number of municipalities have enacted rights of nature to protect their land, water, and air from pollution and corporate damage. In New Hampshire, Barnstead, Barrington, Nottingham, and Atkinson have enacted bills of rights for water to protect their water from corporate extraction or pollution. All UCC Environmental Resolutions of Prophetic Witness that have been adopted in previous Synods with the intention to protect Nature from human destructiveness and greed and to commit ourselves to defend Nature.

Nature is understood as mere property, serving only our benefit, for profit, trashed and damaged recklessly. Nature is without any inherent legal rights. But corporations are given the legal rights of a person. Human beings, who are part of the environment, speak up for themselves and for the ecosystem that are unable to assert their rights. Biblical theologians Norman Habel, David Roads and Paul Santmire claim: "If God

knows the fall of every sparrow, 'who speaks for the sparrows?'" (*The Season of Creation*, 2011)

We have an opportunity before us: The Resolution, entitled "Who Will Speak for the Trees?" repeats the question of Dr. Seuss' Lorax. The citizens of Barnstead, Barrington, Nottingham, and Atkinson have spoken up for Nature. Will the UCC Churches of New Hampshire now speak up for Nature, join the citizens of the above New Hampshire township ins speaking up for Nature, join with the indigenous peoples globally in decolonizing the Earth, and community of environmental rights movement?