

Six Bowls : Further Information and Resources

Nature as Commons

The commons can be understood as the interconnected elements, species, places and relationships that sustain life, and whose health depends upon collective care, reciprocity and shared responsibility. Rather than viewing nature as a collection of resources to be owned or managed, a commons perspective emphasises interdependence and the shared conditions that make life possible.

Many aspects of nature already function as commons. The atmosphere, oceans, climate system, biodiversity and ecological processes provide the conditions that support all life. Yet the dominant systems through which humans organise land, resources and wealth have often prioritised ownership, extraction and profit over ecological interdependence, reciprocity and long-term care. The result has been the widespread degradation of the living systems that sustain both human and more-than-human communities, while the benefits of this exploitation have frequently been concentrated in the hands of a few.

The condition of these commons is therefore not only an ecological concern, but also a matter of social and environmental justice. As ecosystems decline, so too does the wellbeing of the species, communities and cultures that depend upon them. Commons thinking offers an alternative framework, one that focuses on relationships rather than ownership, shared responsibility rather than extraction and the long-term flourishing of both human and more-than-human life.

Further reading:

David Bollier: A leading writer on commons theory and practice: <https://www.bollier.org/commons>

International Association for the Study of the Commons. Research and case studies on commons governance. <https://iasc-commons.org/>

Commons network: <https://www.commonsnetwork.org/>

Nature and Decision Making

Example models of bringing Nature into decision making/sustainable practice:

Nature on the Board → representation

Traditional Ecological Knowledge → relationship

The River Has Rights → legal recognition

The Commons Tribunal → shared stewardship

Interspecies Council → perspective shifting

Species Solidarity → collective action

1. 'Nature on the Board'

Corporate: Faith in Nature : <https://www.natureontheboard.com/> [Faith in Nature](#).

Arts: Future Everything : <https://futureeverything.org/nature-directed>

Science: the [Scottish Association for Marine Science \(SAMS\)](#) elected 'The Ocean' as a trustee on its board in 2025. (<https://www.sams.ac.uk/news/sams-news-ocean-on-the-board.html>)

<https://www.lawyersfornature.com/> Works with organisations who want to ensure their activities are better aligned with the interests of the natural world. This involves supporting them to change internal governance structures and embed the voice of Nature into their organisations. They work with corporates, charities, public bodies and all third sector organisations to explore how they can bring the voice of nature into their decision making spaces. They advised the [National Infrastructure Commission for Wales](#) following their appointment of a Nature Guardian alongside a published report on Nature Governance Principles in the Public Sector.

2. Indigenous Cultural Model

Reciprocity, knowledge of the ecosystem and mandate to protect the land for all living things.

Example: Clan System of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Clan animals are considered the first teachers of governance, demonstrating how to live in balance and equity. When a council meets to debate a law, resource use, or territory, a Chief cannot speak solely for human convenience. They must carry the specific ecological perspective, traits, and needs of their clan animal into the longhouse. The council is bound by a law stating that any decision made must protect the water, soil, and animal relatives for seven generations into the future.

A framework inspired by these Indigenous ways of knowing, might be The Council of All Beings [Council of All Beings](#). Developed in the 1980s by deep ecologists John Seed and Joanna Macy, this ceremonial practice directly mirrors Indigenous councils. Human participants step outside their human identity, wear masks, and formally speak on behalf of a specific animal, plant, or river to advise on ecological challenges.

3. Legal Personhood of Rivers

The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers was developed in 2017 by the Earth Law Center. It provides a template for legislative drafting which has influenced many civil society movements calling for the rights of rivers to be recognised. This declaration proposes broad rights to which it says rivers should be entitled:

- the right to flow,
- the right to perform essential functions within its ecosystem,
- the right to be free from pollution,
- the right to feed and be fed by sustainable aquifers,
- the right to native biodiversity

- the right to regeneration and restoration.

Legal personhood for rivers is an environmental framework that elevates waterways from "human property" to legal entities holding their own rights, duties, and liabilities.. Because a river cannot physically enter a courtroom or speak, the law appoints human guardians to act as its legal voice and legal representatives.

Lewes District Council: Passed the UK's first Rights of River Charter for the River Ouse in 2025.

The River Wye became the first river in the UK to be given cross-border rights covering it from source to sea May 2026

Also see: <https://www.riverchar.org/uploads/1/4/0/0/14002490/rightsofriversguide-final.pdf>
<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10496/CBP-10496.pdf>

Note: These motions represent a shift in environmental advocacy but they act as policy charters and do not currently grant rivers formal legal personhood under UK national law

4. Valencia River Council

The Valencia River Council—officially known as the [Water Tribunal of the Plain of Valencia](#) (Tribunal de las Aguas)—is the oldest continuously operating court of law in Europe and the oldest democratic institution in the Western world designed to settle human water disputes and protect the River Turia ecosystem.

The tribunal governs the Huerta de València which depends entirely on water diverted from the River Turia through an intricate network of irrigation canals. The council consists of eight jurists. Each is a working farmer democratically elected every two years by their respective canal community. In an unbroken tradition spanning over a millennium, the members gather every Thursday at exactly 12:00 PM outside the Door of the Apostles at the Valencia Cathedral. The judges sit in a circle on 17th-century wood-and-leather chairs, wearing traditional black blouses. The Council operates entirely on customary law and oral proceedings. It is renowned for its speed, accessibility and zero-paperwork. Complaints are presented aloud in the regional Valencian language. There are no written files, lawyers or court fees.

The tribunal is highly celebrated as a real-world example of Common-Pool Resource Management. The river is managed as a "commons".

5. Interspecies Council

<https://www.moralimagination.com/interspecies-council>

A nature-centric governance tool designed to bring the voices, needs, and perspectives of non-human beings into human policy-making, community planning, and corporate decision-making. (Phoebe Ticknell 2021) Developed as a structured methodology by the UK-based organisation [Moral Imagination](#), it functions similarly to a citizens' assembly. Rather than treating nature as a passive resource to be managed, it invites human participants to step entirely out of their human identities, and advocate directly as a specific animal, plant, river or ecosystem.

By encouraging decision-makers to experience a temporary, empathetic worldview shift, the model aims to construct an eco-democracy where human survival, corporate business and multi-species flourishing are weighted with equal, intrinsic value.

Example: DEFRA and the River Roding, UK (2024)

The UK Civil Service "Policy Lab" and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) hosted the [first-ever government-backed experimental interspecies council](#). Focused on freshwater system architecture post-2043, 24 policy makers, scientists, and community organizers gathered on the banks of London's River Roding. Civil servants adopted the roles of voles, local fish, and water systems to inject long-term, eco-centric thinking directly into state land-use consultations.

6. River Nith Trade Union Banner Project

An art project promoting Solidarity Between Animal Species using the model of Trade Unions. The project works with communities along the River Nith to engage with river species and make trade union style banners to represent and advocate for these species. The communities and banners come together at Nithraid in Dumfries in August 2026. <https://nithraid.org>
Commissioned by EcoArt. Artist Betty Stephenson

The concept of trade unions is creatively adapted to promote the idea of solidarity between animal species. Trade unions, traditionally formed to advocate for workers' rights, offer a framework for advocating for the shared well-being of animals across ecosystems.

Other links:

Ecological Jurisprudence <https://ecojurisprudence.org/> This is an approach to law that recognises humans are part of Earth's living systems, and challenges traditional legal models that treat nature as property. It encompasses Rights of Nature, environmental personhood, Earth Law, Wild Law, policy informed by ecological science and place-based governance, as well as Indigenous law, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, and other non-Western legal traditions. There are growing global and legal innovations where ecosystems and rivers (e.g. in Ecuador, India and New Zealand) are granted legal "personhood".

<https://mothlife.org/> MOTH is an interdisciplinary initiative dedicated to the advancement of rights and well-being for humans, nonhumans, and nature. Using the tools of the law, MOTH offers answers to key questions raised by a host of disciplines including science and technology.