



Global Environmental Governance and Rights of Nature Discourses in an Age of Deglobalisation: People, Planet, and Power

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Abstract

This paper discusses the gradual but growing convergence of global environmental governance (GEG) with ideational innovations, specifically focusing on the Rights of Nature (RoN) discourses. The first, uncontroversial claim is that the 20th and early 21st century regime of GEG has failed to resolve the most significant environmental crises of our times. Second, deglobalisation as a period of heightened political contestation and counter-current thinking is also marked by increasing awareness and recognition of non-human actors. This context of continuity and change enables the emergence of conceptual and legal innovations such as the RoN that go beyond anthropocentric and growth-focused conceptualisations of sustainability. Third, although the content of these discourses is not uniform across the world, all variations of the RoN speak to the subjectivity and agency of nature while also invoking legal rights as effective tools for resisting domination by extractive elites and institutional power. The analysis of the impact of RoN discourses on GEG draws on Ranajit Guha's theoretical framework of dominance and hegemony as contingent relations of power. The original framework is developed further to incorporate nature as a new actor alongside suppressed groups who now have greater visibility and influence in an age of pluralism and polycentricity. This analytical lens sheds light on the complexity and fluidity of indeterminate relationships of domination and resistance among elites, subalterns, and nature. Following from this, the fourth claim is that the impact of these discourses on environmental governance is more likely to be meliorative rather than radical. RoN discourses provide a basis for correctives to norms and policies, as well as checks on power instead of creating a new type of global environmental regime. The emergent interconnections between GEG and RoN discourses are thus interpreted as ideational innovation 'writ small', though not as 'rendered ineffective.'

Keywords Global environmental governance · Rights of nature · SDGs · Deglobalisation · Power

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1 Introduction

Environmental degradation as a result of human activity has been a perennial concern for human societies. The context today is somewhat different as we now know that environmental health is not merely a necessary condition for human health and wellbeing but plays a critical role in planetary health. This refers to the insight that the environment is no longer a backdrop to our lives but is a key condition of the habitability of the planet, ensuring our survival and of other forms of biological life. When environmental degradation moves into tipping points that are unpredictable in their outcomes, and are possibly irreversible, it poses an existential risk to life at large. There is growing awareness that human activities do not constitute a one-way direction of impact on the environment, but that the changing conditions of the planet – from the atmosphere to the deep seas – reshape both the material and social circumstances of human lives. Given that ecosystems are not neatly contained within nation states, there is also widespread agreement on treating environmental degradation as a global challenge defined as a collective action problem that requires cross-border coordination of the actions of states and non-state actors. In light of such urgency, the lack of evidence for the ability of the global environmental governance regime, which emerged in the early 1970s, to meet these challenges is dispiriting. The most basic definition of global environmental governance (GEG) is provided by the United Nations' Department of Economic and Social Affairs as 'the sum of organizations, policy instruments, financing mechanisms, rules, procedures and norms that regulate the processes of global environmental protection.'¹ While this definition does not cover the evolution of GEG, it leaves room for detailed analyses of changes within its key components over the past two decades: the proliferation of new actors, of governance mechanisms, and governance levels (Pattberg and Widerberg 2015, p.68) These observable changes within GEG have however not resulted in solutions to environmental crises, whether globally shared or regionally contained. Despite its institutional resilience and despite the willingness of its key actors to be ever more ambitious in their goals to stem environmental deterioration, the aggregate impact of GEG has not been successful. It is not clear that its complex institutions and mechanisms are able to tackle the different but interconnected problems of pollution, water contamination and depletion, land degradation, and biodiversity loss, let alone bring about positive changes. In terms of outcomes and consequences, GEG at large has failed. Many of the criticisms of the effectiveness failures of GEG have to do with its functioning, e.g. institutional complexity and fragmentation, as well as legitimacy and accountability gaps. Other important critiques address the neo-colonialist, capitalocentric, and anthropocentric underpinnings of the regime, raising questions of if and how GEG can be reformed to meet the complex demands of addressing and governing the interactions of humans and their environment, from the local to the planetary. Some answers to these questions are seen to lie outside GEG institutions. Like any other area of governance, it is part of a wider ecosystem of institutions and ideas that can sustain the regime but can also change it, whether in radical or gradual ways.

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/global-environmental-governance-reform-agenda-17063> (accessed 8 May 2026).

One distinct set of critical discourses that attempts to offer alternative imageries to exploitative and extractive relationships between human societies and their environments are Rights of Nature (RoN) discourses, weaving together the abstract liberal language of rights as a tool of resistance to power and domination on the one hand and thick narratives of human-nature relationships that are characterised by equality, balance, respect, harmony, and peaceful relations on the other hand. Notably, these discourses are beginning to find their way into GEG platforms and mechanisms. In this article, I ask the question of whether RoN discourses can effectively change the way the GEG regime functions by changing the ideational foundations, the aims, and the scope of GEG. Specifically, can RoN discourses challenge the heritage of colonial and Western-centred thinking within GEG, its predominantly human-centric goals, and the assumptions of stable planetary conditions against which human societies continue to evolve as if they were separate from their non-human environments? The aim here is not to provide a celebratory account of the gradual but growing bridging of GEG and RoN discourses. While RoN discourses are an opportunity for GEG institutions and mechanisms to reform in ways that would render the regime more effective, legitimate, and accountable, the main aim of this particular analysis is to unpack some of the underlying power relationships that these discourses lay bare but also hide. This, I argue, can serve to prevent the pitfalls of replacing one set of redemptive discourse of progress with another kind of saviourist body of thought.

The analysis focuses on the fluid rather than absolute power relations between dominant and suppressed actors in this era of change. These are now both political and human actors as well as a-political and non-human actors, i.e., ecosystems and its distinct entities. I argue that the fluctuating power relations among these actors show that the emergence of RoN discourses in GEG can play a productive role, though not the role of bringing about radical change. The impact of these discourses is more likely to be meliorative in providing the basis for correctives and checks on power rather than enabling the creation of a new type of global environmental regime. These correctives can come in at various stages: when agendas are set, aims are established, actors are represented and heard, and when institutions, both formal and informal, undertake the implementation of commonly agreed goals, whether at sub-national, national, or supra-national levels. Correctives are about ‘doing different things rather than doing things differently’ (see Dryzek 2022, p.252) but are inevitable for two reasons. The first lies in the fact and norm of pluralism. It is the acknowledgement of the existence of a range of interests, motivations, and values across human societies, and also within sentient non-human societies that are part of ‘nature.’ It also stands for a normative value, i.e. as a descriptor of ontological and epistemological non-hierarchical diversity, thereby motivating openness, curiosity, equality, and recognition of differences. Change is deep-rooted only when grounded in exchange rather than coercion. Exchanges of different ideas among different actors take time and effort and are multi-directional. Second, lessons learnt from relevant analyses of colonial relationships of power show that modes of resistance are rarely, if ever, uniform, but can be unpredictable and patchy in their outcomes. There is therefore much evidence for imperfect learning and change among human societies but not for instances of either total domination or total revolution. It is for these reasons that I interpret the emergent interconnections between GEG and RoN discourses as ideational innova-

tion ‘writ small’, though not as ‘rendered ineffective.’ Here, ideas are perceived as constituted by a ‘web of related elements of meaning’, e.g. concepts, norms, identities, theories (Carstensen 2015, p.290). Ideational change happens when a set of ideational elements are brought together and an ‘idea is either recast, renewed, or revolutionised (Carstensen 2015, p.294). To explore the connections between GEG and RoN discourses as an open-ended encounter, I draw and develop on the subaltern historian Ranajit Guha’s theoretical framework of dominance and hegemony to bring in nature as a new actor. In Guha’s framework, which reflects a critical take on national-liberal historiographies of Indian colonialism, domination and hegemony are conceptualised as specific conditions of the balance of coercion and / or persuasion by elites and collaboration and / or resistance by subordinates. The use of this framework is underpinned by viewing the GEG regime as an integral part of colonialist worldviews, norms, and institutions.

The next section provides an overview of the key reasons given for the failure of the existing GEG regime to tackle environmental problems. It also discusses how these criticisms are amplified in the context of deglobalisation. In Sect. 3 I then describe how within the realm of counter-hegemonic thinking, RoN discourses have emerged as a promising strand of thought in which nature and / or natural entities become the bearer of rights so far only given to humans. However, while these discourses are often radical in their content, they are also rooted in the human-centric liberal language of rights as one of the most potent tools of resisting domination, understood as the arbitrary exercise of power. In Sect. 4, I look at how RoN discourses are entering the domain of GEG, not as straightforwardly oppositional ideas, but through more complex relationships of domination and resistance among dominant elites, subaltern actors, and nature. I conclude that RoN discourses, which first appeared outside of the GEG regime, can play a productive role within GEG as an important normative corrective, as precautionary principle in policy making, and as opening the door for legal challenges on behalf of nature. The limitations are obvious, namely the enormous difficulty of specifying the way power is exerted upon and exerted by non-human actors who we cannot directly communicate with; the difficulties of scaling up policies in the context of country- and region-specific views of nature; expanding the scope of legal rulings bound within national jurisdictions; and the pressures of limited time to reverse the pace of damages and risks to nature and human societies. Nonetheless, without exchanges of ideas, in this case at the interfaces of GEG and RoN rulings and discourses, shifts in thought and practice will be even less likely.

2 The Global Environmental Crisis and the Crisis of Global Environmental Governance

The global environmental crisis shows no sign of abating. The rapid depletion of the natural world through habitat loss, overexploitation, and climate change constitutes an existential threat for many, if not most of the estimated 9 million species that still exist (Wiens 2023). For humans, it is a grave threat to our species that relies on the planet’s multiple ecosystems for access to food, air, water, fuels, and life sustaining

habitats.² Although ecological awareness – the awareness of the impact of human societies on their environments – is at least as old as the first written human histories, it was the existential threat of anthropogenic climate change that marked an epochal change in the late 20th century and early 21st century. More recent concerns have been with the overshoot of critical planetary boundaries, defined as conditions of the Earth system under which humanity can operate safely (Rockström et al. 2009). While the protection of nature has not had the same level of visibility as climate change, the biosphere has undoubtedly been a growing area of concern over the last two decades (Esty and Ivanova 2005; Shin et al. 2022). Today, environmental challenges are increasingly gaining visibility in public discourses, within states, at inter-governmental bodies, and within various scientific communities. For social scientists who follow the work of Anthropocene geoscientists, new or greater knowledge about the Earth system and planetary boundaries has immense consequences for the future of humanity and human activity on this planet. Dipesh Chakrabarty contends that we are ‘at the conjecture of three (and now variously interdependent) histories whose events are defined by very different timescales: the history of the planet, the history of life on the planet, and the history of the globe made by the logics of empires, capital, and technology’ (Chakrabarty 2019, p.1). The recognition that planetary habitability is a condition of complex biosphere-atmosphere-geosphere interactions is also a recognition of the crucial role of humans’ social and economic activities: ‘Scientific insight into planetary boundaries does not limit, but stimulates, humankind to innovation towards a future in which Earth system stability is fundamentally preserved and safeguarded (Richardson et al. 2023, p.11). As changes in human systems are effectively the product of sociocultural evolution of human societies (see Ellis 2015), knowledge of and contestations about the causal processes of the transformations of the biosphere by human societies have implications for new paradigms and politics. This kind of knowledge foregrounds the primary role of changes to the biosphere as being ‘inherently social and cultural, not biological, chemical, or physical’ (Ellis 2015, p.321).

The evolution of the institutions, structures, and norms of GEG – in itself a human innovation – is a specific response of states and societies to longstanding concerns about the harms of environmental degradation. The cross-border nature of environmental problems such as pollution, deforestation, water contamination, or soil degradation, have elicited calls for international cooperation since the 1970s. While radical environmental ethics focused on the expansion of natural rights and the *liberation* of nature *from* human domination (Nash 1989), international environmental cooperation focused on *including* the environment *within* the context of economic development and institutional changes in the international system (Biermann and Pattberg 2008). The institutional history of GEG is often seen to start with the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, leading to the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). A further marker was the Rio 1992 Summit, which was held to discuss climate change, biodiversity loss and

² A useful overview of the benefits of ecosystems, also referred to as ecosystem services, can be found in the 2005 Millennium Ecosystems Report called for by the UN in 2000: <https://www.millenniumassessment.org/en/index.html> (accessed 4 April 2025).

desertification. The resulting action plan known as Agenda 21 was to be implemented at the global, national and local levels to combat poverty, promote health, strengthen the roles of non-state actors and communities, conserve the resources for development (including biodiversity and fragile environments), and mobilise key tools such as technology transfers, financial mechanisms, and invest in scientific knowledge. Followed by various stock-taking summits, in 2015 the UNGA set out the Agenda 2030, which centred around 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), bringing together the agendas of the Millennium Development Goals of 2000 and the 2012 Rio + 20 Summit, i.e., development and the environment. Yet the current regime has not delivered on these ambitions: the impact of human activities on the environment remains negative; the regime has failed to halt the processes of exploitation of the environment; and has failed to arrive at legally binding agreements that would bring about transformative and rapid shifts in how states, markets, and societies function. Here, failure is primarily defined in consequentialist terms as the accelerated pace of environmental decline. At the level of policy implementation, the failures point to the ineffectiveness of inter-governmental organisations, institutions, and institutionalised summits that form the GEG regime.

Although distinctive in its scope, the GEG regime sits within the broader changing landscape of global governance, variously understood as a non-hierarchical and non-state centric steering mode; or as a problem solving mechanism through the creation of new institutions, organisations, treaties, and new financial tools; or as ‘a project of ruling elites’, often Western elites (Biermann and Pattberg 2008). Its key characteristics are the expansion of the numbers and roles of non-state actors, including intergovernmental agencies, INGOs, NGOs, businesses, cities and regions, resulting in a landscape of multi-actor, multi-sector, multi-level modes of governance involving cooperation, coordination, but also competition. Global governance, including GEG, is thus composed of regime complexes defined as ‘an array of partially overlapping and nonhierarchical institutions governing a particular issue area’ (Raustiala and Victor 2004, p.279). There are currently over 250 multilateral environmental agreements³ and several IGOs that act as focal points for the broader environmental regime: UNEP, the UN-based Commission on Sustainable Development, the UN Environment Management Group (EMG, consisting of the independent specialised agencies of the UN, including the Bretton Woods institutions and the World Trade Organization), and the Global Environment Facility (GEF, a multilateral trust fund to support developing countries in implementing international environmental conventions). The establishment of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2012 at the Rio + 20 conference was an attempt to create a central platform for reviewing progress on the SDGs, including Voluntary National Reviews. Yet, despite its far-reaching mandate of agenda setting, orchestration through coordination and review processes, it lacks de facto legal or executive authority (Abbott and Bernstein 2015).

The lack of institutional authority is compounded by conflicts among state and non-state actors over financing mechanisms and finance volumes meant to tackle the range of goals associated with climate change, biodiversity conservation, land degradation, and ocean depletion. The fragmented institutional landscape has resulted in

³ https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/envir_e/envir_matrix_e.htm (accessed 16 April 2025).

uncoordinated environmental financial markets and tools – unaligned trade in carbon and biodiversity credits, green bonds, debt-for-nature swaps, pollution taxes, or pro-nature activities. Overall, regarding most areas of formal agreements on environmental finance, the provision of actual funds is not enough to implement the set goals, the promised funds are not enough, and the time lags between grand promises and meagre disbursement are proving to be catastrophic assuming the overshoot of planetary boundaries (Fanning et al. 2022). Moreover, political differences between the blocs of developed, emerging, and least developed countries have led to other fault lines – whether funds are to flow into future conservation, or into reparations by developed countries’ use of developing countries’ resources, or as a taxpayer payment by transnational companies (Buckley 2024).

These differences show that technocratic goal setting does not supersede power and politics. Instead, as (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019, p.6) point out, what was remarkable about the SDGs was in fact the ‘use of global goal setting to generate norms.’ However, although appearing to be objective and evidence-based, the shift from qualitative notions of socio-political norms to proceduralist governance by numbers ends up being a simplified and ultimately reductionist approach that obscures how powerful interests can distort the meaning of norms, ignore alternative normative agendas, and consolidate their dominance through claims to scientific authority (Fukuda-Parr and McNeill 2019). This is particularly clear in the case of the environment whereby implementation measures were weak and downplayed and environmental goals were modified or ignored in the setting of key economic goals, e.g., industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequality, decent work and economic growth (Elder and Olsen 2019, p.71). The reasons for this are not accidental but lie in an almost universal agreement by most societies on the desirability of ‘development,’ understood as freedom from material constraints on the fulfilment of human needs and wants. There is also widespread agreement that this state can only be brought about through economic growth. Trade-offs between economic goals and environmental goals have therefore long been seen as necessary or deemed to be temporary by proponents of techno-optimism. The latter narrative brings together the belief in technological innovation and in global governance as congruent problem-solving mechanisms, thereby presenting global goals such as the SDGs as a robust framework for ‘sustainable development.’ This framing assumes that economic growth and human development can be decoupled from environmental costs, for instance through sustainable means of production and consumption through greater efficiency and resource allocation. However, when trade-offs are inevitable, choices must be made as to whether the environment is to be prioritised over, balanced with, or relegated to social and economic goals. So far, there are not many signs that governments and other actors are prepared to sacrifice economic growth and social indicators of development for the protection of the environment (Partzsch 2023).

Yet alternative models of how states, societies, and markets should function do exist and are afforded greater visibility than before in the current era of deglobalisation. Considering these alternatives to developmentalist and growth-centric models, why stick with GEG? After all, GEG is part of a liberal internationalist system characterised by economic globalisation and human-rights based democratisation, and which is now under immense pressure by forces of deglobalisation (Kornprobst

and Paul 2021, pp.1309–1310), including challenges to key norms that underpin the regime. There are several reasons for not discounting GEG. In institutional terms, innovations based on new or re-emerging worldviews do not easily replace existing regimes, especially not those that have been and remain norm-and practice generating over a prolonged period. Further, the GEG regime reflects heightened ambitions and ratcheting-up agreements in some key areas such as global biodiversity governance (Rabitz et al. 2025), which might serve to catalyse other areas of GEG in the future. Notably, the complex GEG regime complex, *because of* rather than *despite* its fragmentation, is showing itself to be adaptable, stable, and therefore resilient even in times of shocks to multilateralism and retreats to nationalism and bilateralism (Morin and Kim 2025). The decentralised GEG regime is also open to epistemic shifts in the sciences and social norms that can serve to strengthen rather than weaken its processes. In this regard, although as contested as the term Anthropocene is for its vagueness, overgeneralised metrics, and a focus on an undifferentiated humanity (Montoya et al. 2018), the appeal to respect ‘planetary boundaries’ has become an important motivator for reinforcing the need for an internationally coordinated response to the global environmental crisis (Fransen et al. 2025). The question therefore is not whether the existing GEG regime is likely to be replaced but whether and how parts of it intersect with emergent, and often radically different norms, concepts, and cosmologies.

3 Deglobalisation: Negotiating Human and Non-Human Interests

The multiple institutions, actors, and processes that constitute the wider global governance regime are increasingly under pressure due to policy ineffectiveness and the unequal distribution of the benefits and costs of globalisation (Koenig-Archibugi 2019). 20th century and early 21st century globalisation appears to have now entered a different era. Although there is not one single definition or conceptualisation of globalisation or of deglobalisation, many of the analyses focus on contemporary changes in the West. Various historical accounts of globalisation move between emphases on ‘the qualitative transformations of the new eras and those that search for globalisation in the measurement of flows of people, goods and money over time’ (McKeown 2007, p.220). Markers of Western-centric globalisation consequently find their way into attempts to define deglobalisation in light of qualitative and quantitative shifts from dense global interconnections of people, goods, and norms to more regional and local interconnections; and from economic growth to systemic polycrises of capitalism, environmental crises, and the loss of influence of old centres of socio-economic and political power and global governance institutions to new hegemons (Gills 2010). Dedim Buhari offers a useful typology of existing conceptualisations of deglobalisation: first, as a series of processes of dialing down connections, of greater assertion of state power over economic, political and social affairs, of greater control of territories and borders by states, and the rise of parallel orders to the Western-led liberal international order; second, as an ‘emancipatory project to save the nation, the state, and the individual from the pernicious effects of globalization that reinforce inequalities, deprivation, and violence across nations, regions, classes, and people; third, as part of a *longue durée* wave of hyper-and de-globalisation movements (Buhari 2023, pp.78–

80). Yet caution is called for as neither globalisation nor deglobalisation are even and uniform processes across space and time, i.e., there are multiple varieties and periods of globalisation and deglobalisation (Buhari 2023). Only long-term histories of globalisation allow for rich and comprehensive accounts of co-constitutive movements of homogenisation and fragmentation as well as accounts that move beyond the history of globalisation in Europe and the West (McKeown 2007, p.227).

Here, following Dipesh Chakrabarty's characterisation of globalisation and its discontents as primarily homocentric (Chakrabarty 2015), I conceptualise the contemporary era of deglobalisation as a period of renegotiating human interconnections and interests. This happens first as a response to the failure of the processes of globalisation to deliver on the promises of just or equitable distribution of political power, of material resources, and of the recognition of non-hierarchical ideational pluralism. Second, these contestations take place in both human-centric modes and non-human-centric modes. This era of deglobalisation is also a period of attempting to understand and integrate into human social systems newly imagined non-human actors, namely the planet, renewed imageries of ecosystems, and individual more-than-human entities that constitute and inhabit these ecosystems. This happens within highly politicised multiscalar spaces, from the local to the national, the transnational, and the planetary. These spaces allow for the assertion of worldviews that, regarding environmental concerns, are in contradistinction to views on the centrality of development through economic growth and the priority of human needs over all others' needs. These types of critiques generalise contemporary globalisation as being universalist, anthropocentric, and neocolonialist in outlook and functioning while mobilising a diversity of cosmologies and worldviews that conceive of the connections between human societies and their environments in non-hierarchical and non-exploitative ways. They reflect overlapping ideas directed against boundless growth and development (versus the acknowledgement of limits and restraint), colonial domination (versus the drive towards self-determination), Western-centrism (versus pluralism as a human condition and as a norm), and anthropocentrism (versus non-anthropocentrism and non-binary thinking). While converging on many issues, they diverge in significant ways. One way of distinguishing between specific projects in the realm of environmental politics is to consider the various kinds of agency that are proposed and the perceived means of change: the central role of human agency to self-reflexively and radically change societies' core beliefs, values, and behaviours; self-reflexive but contingent human agency to steer the outcomes of systemic but complex and unpredictable connections between human societies and their environment; and the agency of non-human actors, thereby replacing relations of asymmetrical power with relations of harmony and equality.

Degrowth discourses are an example for the first kind of critique. The assumptions of minimal or sustainable trade-offs between economic growth and environmental are highly contested by critics of the politics and institutions of neoliberal extractive capitalism, see for example (Hickel 2019; Millán-Acevedo and Gómez-Bruna 2024; Raworth 2018). From critical political economy perspectives, global capitalism is seen to be at the heart of the ecological collapse as the fundamental principles of capital-driven, energy-intensive growth cannot be reconciled with the demands for environmental protection. To be sure, socialist systems too suffered from the effects

of growth-centred models of development and visions of the good life that were indifferent to nature except as a resource to be utilised. The criticisms go beyond institutional efficiency failures and instead focus on systemic failures that cannot be simply reformed by good and effective governance, governments, self-correcting markets, and better technologies. This is to say that all dominant actors - national governments, global governance bodies, and the institutions of capitalism - create the conditions for each other's structures. Degrowth scholarship and social movements point to a need for a shift in values that prioritise social justice and the environment (Hickel 2020; Moranta et al. 2022). However, degrowth discourses, particularly its grounding in ecological economics, are also grounded in a Cartesian separation of humans and nature and prioritise human agency, ignoring the agency of non-human participants in the world (Richter 2019).

Climate science amplified these concerns about environmental limits to growth. However, modern climate change models do not test for limits to economic growth but for the total human impact on planetary systems. As a research agenda, the science of planetary boundaries leaves open the politics and nature of change. As a political narrative exemplifying reflexive but contingent human agency, the concept was swiftly mobilised by Earth system governance researchers who see the complex enmeshment of biogeochemical systems and human systems as the starting point for contestations about the goals and means of steering societies. As (Biermann 2012, p.5) argues, 'Earth system governance builds on the assumption that humankind, having become inadvertently an agent in the earth system over the last 200 years, has now to develop the governing mechanisms to purposefully steer its own agency.' In the Anthropocene, reflections on environmental politics and policies necessarily take place in the context of the blurring of the distinction between humans and nature, sharpened divisions and inequalities within human societies, and conceptual pluralism (Biermann 2021). While these reflections and debates often remain contained within disciplinary boundaries, human societies have a capacity for collective learning. As such, discourses that span specific policy areas, such as the environment, connect with and shape each other, even if the exchanges are not necessarily characterised by better outcomes (Dryzek 2022, pp.253–254). However, better understandings of the ways states, societies, and markets function within and on the Earth system amidst the complexities of the Anthropocene can indeed mobilise both new myths and new frameworks of relationships of humans and nature (Kish and Quilley 2017, p.315).

The RoN discourses are one such framework covering a diverse set of new as well as (re)emerging eco-centric or eco-harmonious ideas. They are part of a changing world of ideas in the era of deglobalisation in which the interests of new legal and political subjects are voiced, contested, and recognised, albeit through different modes in different places. By privileging non-human agency as rights-bearing subjects implying autonomous interests and value, these discourses are often presented as constituting a single, radical movement. Yet the radical content of the RoN discourses sits alongside the enclosing of the recognition of non-human actors within the familiar tool of legal rights. I will next outline the contours of RoN discourses. Following from this, and focusing on the problem of domination, I will apply Ranajit Guha's theory of colonial dominance and hegemony to elites, subalterns, and

nature as actors in new configurations of power relationships within environmental governance. The claims are that abstractions of colonial domination can be mapped onto colonialist relations of domination, resistance, and the agency of nature and social groups representing nature. These mappings also point to the complexities of resistance to elite power. In other words, obstacles to societies' capacities for transformative change are not only deep conceptual differences but are crucially about reconfigurations of relationships of power of old and new actors that can never be complete. Clearly, RoN discourses offer important avenues for expressing the diverse content of historical and contemporary cosmologies, politics, and ethics, as well as avenues for questioning epistemological, ontological, and normative certainties of Western modernity. Yet, when seen as part of normative and institutional shifts in GEG, their impact lies in incremental rather than radical change.

4 21st Century Rights of Nature Discourses

There is now growing interest in RoN discourses in the fields of transnational law, in particular international environmental law and earth systems law, but also in national law and constitutional law, as well as in the disciplines of political theory, global governance, and ethics. (Kauffman and Martin 2021, p.4) note that the term refers to two different categories: a legal philosophy known as Earth Jurisprudence and 'legal provisions that codify this philosophy by recognizing ecosystems as subjects with rights.' Earth Jurisprudence leans on science, i.e., evidence-based knowledge of how the natural world works, with human societies comprising a subset of nature rather than standing apart from and above nature. The implications of the latter view, which stems from Western modernity (in theory and practice), are anthropocentrism, a belief in nature being part of humans' property and an object of ownership, and a belief in the right to limitless and continuous economic growth. The former view sees the human species as one part of an interdependent and multispecies ecosystem, thereby making both an ontological as well as normative argument about how ecosystems and / or its distinct entities operate on their own terms and therefore have self-interest and intrinsic value (Michaels 2026, p.54).

One route along which the concept of the RoN emerged was through critiques of existing environmental laws of the 20th century, considered as insufficient in addressing the environmental crises of an industrial age. Traditional anthropocentric or human rights-based approaches that required states to ensure a healthy environment for humans in the end did not translate into effective protection of ecosystems. Most modern states grounded their legitimate authority in developmentalism through economic growth to be pursued by governments and corporations. Resource extraction is thus an imperative rather than choice. Countering this dominant view, in a 1972 landmark case in the US known as *Sierra Club v. Morton*, Judge William O. Douglas asked the question of the proper standing of nature to be able to sue for its own preservation in light of public concerns about nature's equilibrium (Borràs 2016, p.130). The roots of this biocentric turn in Western legal and philosophical concepts can be found in 'deep ecology' thinking. This line of thinking put forward the relational image of humans *as* nature rather than humans *in* nature and was linked

to an influential philosophical and normative programme set out by Arne Naess. Denouncing the ‘Shallow Ecology movement’ that aimed at preserving ‘the health and affluence of people in the developed countries’, (Naess 1973, p.95) argued that only a ‘total-field’ image of deep ecology could touch on ‘principles of diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism, and classlessness. These normative principles are drawn from the partial knowledge we have of the functioning of the biosphere of which we are an integral part, but science alone cannot restructure society. In social systems, this means approaching seemingly universal environmental and social crises at both the global level and at the regional level (Naess 1973, p.100). This period marked the beginning of the ‘rights-based approaches to RoN’, which entailed the expansion of rights-holders over time from male property-owners to women, children, enslaved people, corporations and states, and now nature (Michaels 2026, p.56).

While rights-based approaches to the RoN are generally based in Western legal traditions, a second route of emergence of the RoN has been through the rise of so-called non-Western as well as subaltern perspectives. These form the basis of more radical and decolonising ‘nature-based approaches to RoN’ (Fleischer et al. 2026, p.55). One such perspective critiques the centuries-old exclusions of many social groups and other entities that were closely associated with nature. These groups included women, indigenous people, and black people. In this dualistic worldview that was dominant in the West since the 17th century, there is a natural split between nature and humans and between the mind and body. Consequently, only certain humans matter, namely those who are thinking, rational, propertied beings, or as the only bearers of dignity accorded by God (de Sousa Santos 2023, p.622). As (de Sousa Santos 2023, p.636) claims, we are now in a different era, which is one of the destructions of human and non-human life but also of counter-hegemonic transitions in which alternative worldviews that are based on different cosmological imageries are (re)emerging. These imageries vary among social groups and geographical regions but converge on an understanding of the subjectivity of nature as a reality that stands outside of humans’ socio-political and legal constructs. That said, this understanding does not and cannot signify a simple return to an imagined past. It can however be the basis of the shaping of new political and legal orders characterised by more just and balanced relationships between humans and nature. One step in this direction is the through the consolidation of the concept of the RoN. Even though ideas of a holistic, non-anthropocentric world have long been integral to communities and cultures of the global South, especially among Indigenous communities, what is new is that these views can now be codified through the modern instruments of international conventions, constitutional reforms, and national laws by recognising the importance of various peoples’ cultural and spiritual links with the territories they live in, and by recognising some of the substantive principles and meanings of these symbolic connections in legal terms.

RoN initiatives – regardless of their genesis and successes in terms of adoption – are now rapidly spreading across the world, ranging from legislation, court cases, declarations, constitutions, civil society declarations, civil society tribunals, Indigenous declarations, Indigenous law, position statements, policies, to private sector governance (Kauffman et al. 2026). Together, these initiatives gained huge pace since

2000, with ca.500 counted initiatives in early 2025. At the global level, the uptake of the RoN is primarily in soft law, supporting the diffusion of eco-centric norms and setting new agendas in GEG, e.g. for SDG working groups. Nation-level RoN initiatives are reflected in constitutional amendments and statutory law, aimed at greater impact through enforcement measures through laws and policy making. Yet RoN initiatives are more often to be found at various sub-national and local levels of authority through modes of civil society participation and stewardship.

Surveying the general developments in this area, (Putzer et al. 2025) note that two-thirds of the initiatives are to be found in the Americas but very few are featured in Africa and Asia, raising questions about how these initiatives are documented in these regions. Second, initiatives in Europe are quickly gaining pace, although many countries of the global North remain resistant to the idea of the RoN, whether for cosmological, philosophical, political reasons, or because existing human-centred environmental laws and policies are considered adequate for addressing environmental crises once properly implemented. The slower pace of the global North to integrate RoN ideas is also related to perceived power asymmetries. The originators of most RoN initiatives are global South and peripheral countries, i.e. not a core part of powerful states of the contemporary international system. Within these countries, RoN initiatives emerged independently at sub-national and national levels, also reflecting changing power relations in which the modern, often post-colonial state and its elites increasingly encounter instances of resistance to its economic and political systems by grassroots movements, indigenous peoples, and other subaltern actors. The first case of this kind was Ecuador's adoption of a new constitution in 2008 that referred to the notion of *Buen Vivir* as a way of life that is in harmony with oneself, society, and nature. This concept has its roots in Andean-Amazonian traditions of the indigenous people living there. Bolivia followed suit by recognising the Rights of Nature in its national legislation in 2010 (Mother Earth Rights Law) and 2012 (Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well). Further cases of note are the *Te Urewera* Act of 2014 in New Zealand, which granted legal personhood to the *Te Urewera* Forest. Legal personhood was also granted to the *Whanganui* River in 2017, which entailed the river's right to regenerate freely under the guardianship of the *Māori iwi*. The *Rio Atrato* in Colombia was recognised as having personhood in 2016. Following from these landmark rulings were the recognition of personhood of the Indian rivers *Ganges* and *Yamuna* in 2017, and the river *Turag* in Bangladesh in 2019, leading to similar efforts in Nepal and Pakistan. In Europe, RoN rulings have been late to emerge, but in 2024 Spain's Constitutional Court granted legal personhood to the *Mar Menor* lagoon and its surrounding basin.

The RoN movement is an overarching conceptual, legal, and political framework, yet it is indisputably polycentric in nature. The initiatives cover many different types of rulings; they have a broad scope; they include a wide range of subjects of rights – from entire ecosystems to distinct entities (Mother Earth, rivers, mountains, lagoons, lakes, certain species of animals); and they involve a multiplicity of actors. Overall, there are significant increases to be seen in national and transnational grassroots movements across the world acting as pressure groups aiming at codifying their demands within local laws and policies, national laws and constitutions, and international agreements and treaties. Many of these movements are also making cases

for the inclusion of new legal concepts such as ecocide (Borràs 2016). While most environmental pressure groups include different expert groups and voices, such as those of scientists, scholars, youth groups, faith groups, and indigenous groups, the early 2000s saw an increasingly important role of courts of law and lawyers in shaping conversations at the intersection of science, law and ethics (Kersten 2017). These conversations are continuing in the emerging fields of climate law, earth governance law, and in updated environmental law (Reid 2022; Preston 2023; Kotzé et al. 2024).

This shift is significant. Law courts' recognition of the RoN not only marks the gradual mainstreaming of the idea but also of legal systems becoming a focal point for transparent and documented contestations and deliberations on the meaning of the RoN. At a general level, there is not one definition or concept of nature that covers the diverse meanings it has been invested with. The status of nature, however conceptualised and / or codified, is constantly questioned at theoretical and practical levels. For example, in the cases of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna, they are paradoxically deified as goddesses that are 'living beings' and infantilised as they are in the end accorded the status of legal minors (O'Donnell 2018). This in turn asks the question of who can legitimately, authoritatively, and effectively represent the respective interests to the benefit of the entity or ecosystem in question. A complicating factor is that ecosystems often cross jurisdictional boundaries, implying that different parts of the system in question are spoken for by different collectives with different interests.

Conceptualising entities such as mountains and rivers as 'living beings' also entails reimagining orthodox views of rights and obligations. Non-human entities cannot be held to account for not fulfilling corresponding obligations or are able to directly plead or petition or ask for these rights from others. These questions do not necessarily pose insurmountable complications. Solutions such as drawing on the idea of assisted autonomy as enshrined in the 2008 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities have been flagged but would require further debates. Other issues at stake are the practicalities of implementing the rulings on the RoN with regard to conflicting interests between the RoN and human rights to development (O'Donnell 2018, Tănăsescu 2025). Yet these are not the only kinds of conflicts or trade-offs to consider. Questions also pertain to intra-nature conflicts, e.g., whether members of invasive species are to be protected as living entities when conceived of as rights-bearing non-human individuals. Here, the conflict is also highly conceptual, i.e., whether the RoN signify an extension of liberal rights accorded to each non-human individual as the primary locus of harm or rights, or to ecosystems and distinct groups of species. These debates are well under way, and the complexities of these discussions should not deflect from the importance of generating new and creative ideas about the human condition in or alongside nature. The pluralism and polycentricity inherent in RoN debates and movements as well as the fact that these are emerging rather than consolidated ideas allow for the kind of experimental politics that are necessitated by the uncharted territory of existential risks.

In this context, both the Anthropocene politics of the planet and the politics of the people in the era of deglobalisation are about foregrounding the agency of new and (re)emerging actors. This is to say that novel legal subjecthood mobilises and legitimises agency. Conversely, the assertion of agency, whether through the expansion of the range of rights-bearing actors or the recognition of actors as already existing

prior to political society, enables the formal creation of subjecthood or personhood. Two key elements of the rights of subjects are protection from harm and the right to self-preservation. What are the implications of these developments for environmental governance? For some observers and proponents of radical understandings of the RoN, this concept can be saviourist in a cosmopolitan tradition. As (Kauffman and Martin 2021, p.3) argue, the discourses are the coming together of ‘community activists, lawyers, judges, scientists, government leaders, and ordinary citizens from around the world (who) formed a global movement to advance RoN as a solution to the environmental crises facing the planet.’ However, given its emplaced emergence in different states, regions, and societies, it is necessarily constituted by a diverse of set movements. Moreover, contrary to vision of global collective action expressed by Kauffman and Martin, others argue that the RoN do not have a singular ideological expression, but can also be co-opted or appropriated by particular political groups, including the state but also other authorities who are empowered to articulate and shape political imageries according to their own interests (Kinkaid 2019). The overarching discourse is therefore not necessarily counter-hegemonic in its foundations or in its realisations in politics and policies. Yet even if it does not constitute a global movement implying homogeneous worldviews and aims, it is certainly a globalising movement in terms of the horizontal spread of the concept and its vertical movement of influence from national to international law and vice versa. As such, it is not surprising that there are now signs of sporadic but intensifying interconnections between RoN frameworks and GEG institutions. In the following section I will set out some of the main routes of impact of RoN discourses on mainstream GEG.

5 Rights of Nature and Global Environmental Governance

Two ideational developments specific to the late 20th and early 21st centuries offer an important shared ground between RoN discourses and global governance discourses. One is the de-prioritisation of rationality and free will as the basis for the recognition of rights. The other is a heightened focus on vulnerabilities and threats to security at multiple levels. While concepts such as the climate crisis and planetary overshoot evoke notions of shared vulnerabilities and therefore of shared responsibilities, there are equally strong messages for more localised control and protection of interests. Underpinning both views, i.e., those of ontological and epistemological pluralism and of the plurality of realms of political action as distinct from ‘overlapping communities of fate’ (Held 1997, p.264), are norms that are positively associated with diversity, multiplicity, and pluralism. These are now dominant ideas that lend legitimacy to polycentric political and also legal processes and systems, similar to the roles the universalising concepts of modernisation and development played in the post WWII era of global institution building. There is therefore a crucial level of openness to the representation of different perspectives in various fora, including heterodox ideas. Moreover, the diversity of institutions and policies is seen to be instrumentally useful for innovations, ‘including policies, technologies, procedures, and ideas’ (Biermann and Pattberg 2008, p.285). It can also be the basis for institutional checks and controls, diffusion of power, and for learning.

At the level of international environmental laws and governance, the main advocates for the RoN are transnational civil society alliances. The 1982 UN World Charter for Nature was followed by an Earth Charter in 2000, drawn up by NGOs that formed the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) in 2010.⁴ GARN is a one of the main civil society pressure groups that is involved in tribunals, partnerships, and advocacy campaigns at both national levels and at international fora. The efforts of such multi-actor alliances to bring the RoN idea to the international level can be seen in a growing range of explicit commitments to the RoN, starting with Bolivia's UN Ambassador's address to the UN SG on the first Peoples' World Conference on Climate Change and Rights of Mother Earth. This was followed by position statements in the 2022 UN SG Report on Harmony with Nature and the 2022 Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) Summary for Policy Makers. Other types of international eco-jurisprudence tools that highlight the RoN are *civil society tribunals* (International Rights of Nature Tribunal, Ecuador 2014; International Rights of Nature Tribunal, France 2015; International Rights of Nature Tribunal, Chile 2019; International Rights of Nature Tribunal, Scotland 2021), *civil society declarations* (European Citizens Initiative (ECI) draft directive on Rights of Nature 2017; the ASSEGAIA Declaration for the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites 2020; the International Rights of Nature Tribunal Declaration: A New Pledge for Mother Nature, Brazil 2025), *general declarations* (IUCN World Conservation Congress Resolution 100, 2012: incorporating rights of nature into decision-making; the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 2022; the IUCN 2025 Motion 054: operationalizing rights of nature in territories; the IUCN 2025 Motion 070: integrating science, rights-based approaches, and ecological recovery), *court cases* (Inter-American Court of Human Rights Advisory Opinion 32/25: climate emergency and human rights), as well as *private sector governance initiatives* (Prince Charles of Wales Terra Carta Charter 2021).⁵

Beyond advocacy and jurisprudence, various action networks on specific SDGs have formed partnerships with governments, Indigenous Peoples, members of the scientific community, and future generations delegations, explicitly addressing the impact of the Rights of Nature movement.⁶ The RoN align directly with SDGs 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), 15 (Life on Land), and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Conversely, as goals can set norms (see Sect. 2), it is conceivable that the spread of the radical content of the RoN is also helped by majoritarian goal setting. This is to say that universal goals and the contents of universal rights are moving away from teleological views of developmentalism, Western-centrism and anthropocentrism, as well as from self and property ownership-based personhood. These feedback loops are likely to become even more pronounced in the coming years with the entrenchment of the RoN as a normative tool that can translate into various processes of environ-

⁴ <https://www.garn.org/> (accessed 22 April 2025).

⁵ https://ecojurisprudence.org/?post_type=ejm_initiative&ejm_eco_jurisprudence=rights-of-nature&ejm_eactor=all-nature&ejm_gov_level=international&ejm_country=int (accessed 27 February 2026).

⁶ <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/rights-nature-catalyst-implementation-sustainable-development-agenda-water#description> (accessed 26 February 2026).

mental governance, from agenda influencing to agenda setting, and localised codifications and implementation. These conceptual interconnections are therefore part of a narrative of GEG that has normalised the environment as an extension of society to the point that GEG has ‘augmented into a complex, sprawling enterprise with both civic and democratic properties.’ At the same time, the constant extension of humanity’s ‘hegemony’ and failures to actually effectively govern the environment means that governance might be about holding back, i.e., tempering ambitions of expansion and extraction, implying radical transformation but also the possibility of going into ‘more cynical, denialist direction’ (Sörlin et al. 2025, pp.1283–1284).

For now, the eco-centric focus of RoN discourses situates the intersection of GEG and RoN within the politics of hope as opposed to the politics of despair (Kotzé and French 2018). As such, the concept of the RoN appears salvationist, not in the least as the success of 21st century GEG set within the wider context of the Anthropocene seems to hinge on eco-centrism as a guideline for actions that ensure that nature can be properly protected. Notions of the self-interest of nature and its entities to be free from domination and exploitation do not seem controversial. Yet domination does not end with the greater visibility of alternative concepts. The rapid spread of the concept of the RoN is thus also viewed by critics as being part of ‘Eurocentric colonial concepts of rights and legal personhood’ (Viaene 2022, p.193; Fleischer et al. 2026, p.88). These concerns are further amplified by scholarship suggesting that various indigenous conceptualisations of nature and the RoN are in fact recent constructions, which serve to continue the project of colonial domination of nature and minority societies rather than challenge it.

Here I aim to make a case for more fluid and open-ended relations of power between hope and despair, building on Ranajit Guha’s theoretical lens of ‘dominance without hegemony’ that can be developed to include nature as an agent. While the idea of nature can be instrumentalised by colonialist interests - denoting a continuous period of colonialism, post-colonialism, and neo-colonialism – and also by minorities pitted against dominant groups, there is a strong case to be made for not entirely subjugating nature to the realm of the social and cultural. Instead, negotiating human-nature relationships beyond hyper-separation and hyper-assimilation is part of the work to be done on recognition of ‘others’ in a non-hierarchical way that is respectful of independent autonomous agents (Plumwood 2001). RoN discourses therefore have a role to play in this project of recognition, which nevertheless is rooted in a context of power relations. Power entails a relationship of domination and subordination. It is, according to Guha, ‘a concrete historical relation informed necessarily and irreducibly both by force and consent’ (Guha 1997, p.23). The abstraction of domination and subordination becomes concrete when it is unpacked as dynamic relations in historical time and within specific social relations. The dynamic elements arise out of breaking down dominance into a relationship of coercion and persuasion on the one hand, and subordination into a relationship of collaboration and resistance on the other hand. Guha argues that ‘*hegemony stands for a condition of Dominance (D), such that...Persuasion (P) outweighs Coercion (C)*. Defined in these terms, hegemony operates as a dynamic concept and keeps even the most persuasive structure of Dominance always and necessarily open to Resistance....Since hegemony...is a particular condition of D, and the latter is constituted by C and P, it follows that there can

be no hegemonic system under which P outweighs C to the point of reducing it to nullity.’ Following from this, hegemonic dominance appears when persuasion outweighs coercion and dominance without hegemony is the condition in which coercion outweighs persuasion. Subordination contains the constitutive pair of C* (collaboration) and R (resistance) (Guha 1997, p.21). According to Guha, while domination and subordination is a universal feature of power, the other relationships are contingent and indeterminate.

The regime of GEG is often described as colonialist, entailing the reification of social hierarchies and inequalities, the collusion of interests of dominant groups across borders, the exploitation of human labour and natural resources, and the centring of property rights vis-à-vis nature (Arney et al. 2023; Fuentes-George 2023; Kütting and Godek 2025). As such, it exercises institutional, normative, and ideological power over subordinated or subaltern actors. Institutional modes of dominance include agenda setting, goal setting, and the assertion of authority of state-centric bodies of political and legal power. Dominant norms are anthropocentric standards that drive principles and outcomes, i.e., prioritising human wellbeing and welfare. Ideological power comes in the shape of liberal beliefs in the possibility of symbiotic state-market-civil society relations that can be harnessed towards achieving stated goals of environmental protection and norms of human flourishing. At the same time, histories of colonialism do not show uniformity or unidirectionality of domination as elites and non-elites, or subaltern groups, encounter each other in varying ways. In light of the failures of GEG to wholly persuade or coerce, and in light of the failures to achieve the promised outcomes, there are changes in the ways the subaltern actors of nature (groups seen as close to nature and nature itself) are recognised. The boundaries of persuasion, collaboration, and resistance can be porous in the case of a highly decentralised regime in which non-elite participation is both celebrated and enabled at the level of high-level summits, declarations, and agreements. The convergence of RoN discourses with the role of indigenous peoples in GEG is reflected in the growing empirical literature on their participation and representation. To be sure, these analyses are often framed as critiques about the reductive essentialisms implied in the relationships of indigenous groups with nature, and about capacity barriers, knowledge hierarchies, weak networks, and barriers to the implementation of agreements (Gustafsson and Schilling-Vacaflor 2022; Lindroth and Sinevaara-Niskanen 2013; B. J. Richardson 2008; Zurba and Papadopoulos 2023).

That said, these spaces are also about voice and resistance. To some extent, RoN discourses are helping move environmental governance mechanisms from ‘dominance without hegemony’ to ‘hegemonic dominance’ in the case of intra-human or intra-societal relations. With the appearance of nature as an actor, whether in narratives of neo-colonialism and intra-societal injustice or of liberation and recognition of both nature and its guardians, these relations take on an added dimension of fluidity. This is to say that nature, having been seen as a voiceless object, is now also a subaltern actor and can act as an independent force upon human societies as evidenced by environmental crises. Yet nature remains a subaltern actor that cannot directly resist, be persuaded, or speak with a political voice, although it can be dominated by coercion and can communicate and respond to human activities in its own ways (Dryzek 2022, p. 258). Elites, subalterns, and nature are therefore triangulated in their rela-

tions to each other. This view also highlights the underplayed aspect of intra-subaltern contestations and power asymmetries. In this regard, the history of colonialism is highly instructive when read through the lens of subalternity rather than simply domination and subordination or colonial domination and resistance by national elites who speak for the nation as a uniform whole. The same imagery applies to the realm of the environment, which remains a space for contestation among those who claim to legitimately use or control it or speak for it to protect it. First, like many subaltern groups in colonial states or states of coloniality who created their own structures and relationships of power outside of the reach of the colonial state, it is important to recognise that ecosystems and non-human entities retain significant levels of autonomy and agency. Second, the fora at which RoN discourses appear also overlap with the fora for greater representation of interests of marginalised groups who are seen to speak for nature, who actively seek to speak for nature, but who also represent their own self-interests, which can clash with the perceived self-interest of natural entities. In such cases, which often have to do with needs for resource use or extraction or with developmental goals in the interest of social justice, subaltern groups can also act as dominant elites vis-à-vis nature. Within key GEG fora for participation there are clear overlaps of commitments to the RoN and the interests of indigenous groups, in particular under the UN umbrellas of the UNFCCC, CBD, and COPs, but also at the ILO, WIPO, and IPBES (Zurba and Papadopoulos 2023, pp.87–88).

It is unlikely that these relations can ever be harmonised in light of Guha's analysis of the 'necessity of contingency.' Earth system sciences and other sciences that consider the complexities of the relationships between the planet, its habitable environment, and its inhabitants, do not have the answers to micro-meso- or even macro-level tipping points and changes. Societies too struggle for conclusive and systemic answers to both perennial and time-bound problems for human societies. The RoN are therefore only one lens through which relations of power among varying interconnected groups can be analysed. However, these discourses should be of interest to even those who do not subscribe to its normative foundations or radically different cosmologies and ontologies. Given the open-endedness of these relations that are necessarily in flux, the connections between GEG and RoN discourses are useful in bringing in new kinds of governance mechanisms and new actors. The value of the RoN concept lies in gaining a better understanding of competing worldviews (whether old or new), greater demands for state, society, and private sector elites to be held accountable for their activities in and towards nature, more effective avenues for resistance by old subalterns and new elites, greater procedural legitimacy underpinning nominally shared goals, agreements and treaties, as well as supporting the precautionary principle by taking the idea of harm to nature as seriously as human needs. However, these aims have to also be seen through the lens of power, including the construction of essentialising narratives of certain groups' relations with nature, as well as competing interests. One of the implications of this analysis would be for conflicts of interests to be interrogated prior to when nature is spoken for through participation of its nominal representatives in formal and informal governance, in courts of law, and in pressure groups. While society-specific systems of checks and balances are tried and tested methods of containing power, more effort has to go into building

in self-critical self-reflexivity within institutions and social groups, especially when speaking on behalf of nature.

6 Conclusions

In this paper, I considered late 20th and early 21st century thinking on the RoN as a concept that seems to offer a promising route to changing social systems and challenging norms justifying the plunder of natural resources. These ideas and practices have undoubtedly led to the ongoing environmental crises across the world, with harmful implications for people, places, and the planet. However, the leveraging of RoN discourses should be to neither solely criticise our species and its social systems, nor to merely criticise the dominant Western-centric systems of the modern, industrialised, and post-industrial era. It should also not be used to simply to add to Western ideas by including - and potentially romanticising - a range of non-Western ideas. Borrowing from Navnita Chadha Behera's work on the decolonial project within International Relations Theory, these discourses should ideally create new forms of knowledge that do not 'seek primacy or an exclusive epistemic ownership.' As (Behera 2021, p.1594) notes, this can only happen when the first step is to 'decode the rules of the game of knowledge creation.' As rules are shaped by relations of power, the aim here was to think through some of the ways in which the epistemic power of GEG as one type of problem-solving social system is being reshaped by new ontologies and by new actors, human and non-human, and the power of old and new elites. In this light, the shift from anthropocentric to non-anthropocentric discourses is not about constructing new binaries. Instead, the RoN can be seen as a useful placeholder concept that is invested with a diversity of meanings as a first step towards contestations and deliberations on directions of change. Guha's framework of domination and hegemony is a further move away from thinking about power through binaries. In deconstructing the terms into aspects of coercion and persuasion by elites and collaboration and resistance by subordinates, it works as a helpful tool for mapping changing power relations within concrete contexts, such as GEG. It can also be developed to embed new actors, i.e., nature as a rights-bearing subject, into this framework. Further research will be needed on how these relationships of power and interests play out across different institutions and fora of GEG, but also across different scales, from the local to the global. While the influence of large-scale or globalising conceptual (re)innovations like the RoN can be tracked through the aggregate use of the term, tracking concrete relations of power between the relevant actors will yield better insights into opportunities and obstacles for implementing processes meant to protect nature, natural entities, and social groups from domination and harm. As RoN discourses, like the GEG regime, are globally diffused, these insights will not necessarily lead to ideal-type understandings of human-nature relationships or universally agreed upon goals. Nonetheless, although the practical impacts are likely to be meliorative rather than radical, there are grounds for optimism in the growing connections between RoN discourses and GEG, which can go far in invigorating learning about and experimenting with different kinds of environmental politics and policies today.

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