

Economic & Social Policy and International Affairs #3

Subject: Rights of Nature

Authored by: Twila Jacobsen

Submitted by: SEIU 503 Retirees Local 001 (for the Climate Justice Committee)

WHEREAS, it is evident in conditions throughout Oregon that our environmental regulatory system has failed to adequately protect our natural ecosystems upon which our health and lives depend.

WHEREAS, the regulatory system is not the only method at our disposal for protecting nature. Rights of Nature (RON) exists as a shared worldview and legal theory to understand and protect ecosystems and natural entities in countries around the globe and here in the United States.

WHEREAS, every U.S. resident has a right to clean water and a healthy environment. Flourishing natural systems nourish and sustain us. Our rivers, lakes, streams, springs and wetlands are the very lifeblood of our existence, our security and our future stability.

WHEREAS, Rights of Nature embraces an indigenous philosophy of interdependent relations, an ecological wisdom needed more than ever in this heightened time of humankind's delusion of our separation from nature.

WHEREAS, It logically follows that recognizing the rights of our domestic natural ecosystems is both correct and necessary to help safeguard a healthy future for all our communities, for our children and grandchildren.

WHEREAS, SEIU 503 OPEU supports that any public or private employee, including any part time, full time, temporary, or contract worker, shall be entitled to protection and compensations accorded by Oregon laws pertaining to whistleblowing, including all such laws in ORS Chapter 659A. Employees shall be entitled to compensation for any damages suffered as a result of reporting violations of the Rights of Nature secured by ordinance due to actions by their employers.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, SEIU 503 OPEU will enter into a coalition where available to support the adoption of local, state, and federal laws which recognize the legal rights of natural communities and ecosystems – including wetlands, streams, rivers, aquifers, and other water systems – to exist, flourish, regenerate, naturally evolve, and be restored.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, SEIU 503 OPEU supports the inclusion in those laws of the ability of people and communities to file legal actions in the name of the affected natural community or ecosystem, and for courts to require restoration of the natural community or ecosystem as close as possible back to its pre-damaged state.

References for Rights of Nature

1. <https://ecojurisprudence.org/initiatives/yurok-tribe-ordinance-establishing-the-rights-of-the-heyhl-keek-we-roy-klamath-river/>
2. <https://gp.us.org/other/platform-2017/chapter-iii-ecological-sustainability-add-new-section-rights-of-nature/>
3. <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/environmental-rule-law-tracking-progress-and-charting-future-directions>
4. https://www.protectlanecountywatersheds.org/read_ordinance
5. <https://www.centerforenvironmentalrights.org/tribal-rights-of-nature-program>
6. <https://www.centerforenvironmentalrights.org/who-we-are>
7. <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/democracy-earth-rights-and-the-next-economy/>
8. https://psyche.co/portraits/suzanne-simard-says-indigenous-knowledge-must-save-the-earth?utm_source=Psyche+Magazine&utm_campaign=6babe240a-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2026_04_03&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_8e23a7006c-73109463

IMPACT STATEMENTS

Financial: No fiscal impact

Equity: The impact of this resolution is unclear as currently written. It is unknown how the rights of workers would be impacted by its implementation.

Legal: No legal impact

Political: This resolution would require SEIU to join a future coalition and lobby in support of laws recognizing the legal rights of ecosystems. As written, it's not yet clear what those laws would look like or how they would be defined, implemented, or enforced — the resolution calls for citizen "legal actions" and court-ordered restoration, but doesn't specify standing, process, or how damage and restoration would be determined. Our primary concern is for our members. SEIU represents hundreds of members whose jobs involve stewarding natural resources or implementing environmental regulations, including at ODFW, DEQ, ODA, ODF, DOGAMI, OPRD, OWEB, and WRD. Because the resolution's mechanisms aren't yet fully defined, we can't be certain how it would affect those members' work — and there's a real possibility that a "legal action" could be brought against members themselves, or the agencies employing them, simply in the course of doing their jobs.