

A sociological approach to the rights and dignity of nature: Towards a shared rights framework

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sro**Sarita Malik¹**  **and Mika Peck^{2,3}** 

Abstract

This article offers a sociological analysis of the global Rights of Nature movement, positioning dignity, repair, and socio-ecological justice at its heart. While Rights of Nature has gained traction across environmental law, Indigenous politics, and ecological science, Sociology has largely overlooked its implications, despite the deeply social origins and unequal consequences of ecological harm. To address this, the article integrates Cultural Sociology with decolonial scholarship and Indigenous relational philosophies, situating Lauren Berlant's concepts of slow death and cruel optimism alongside the Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir*. It reframes ecological degradation as an ongoing violation of dignity affecting both human communities and ecosystems. Recognising nature as a rights-bearing subject challenges foundational assumptions about the human-nature binary in rights discourse, presenting an opportunity to broaden sociological research, society–environment knowledge, and socio-political activism. The article makes three core contributions: first, it establishes the Rights of Nature as a necessary object of sociological analysis, showing that existing anthropocentric frameworks are insufficient for understanding contemporary ecological crisis; second, it demonstrates that sociological concepts, particularly those concerning representation, inequality, coloniality, and governance, provide essential tools for analysing and strengthening Rights of Nature frameworks; and third, it develops an original socio-(eco)logical rights framework grounded in dignity and reparations, including a socio-ecological forensics toolkit that enables the diagnosis of harm and the articulation of reparative pathways across human and more-than-human worlds. Together, these contributions reposition

¹Social and Political Sciences, Brunel University of London, Middlesex, UK

²School of Life Sciences, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

³Ecoforensic CIC, C/O West & Berry Ltd, Brighton, UK

Corresponding author:

Sarita Malik, Brunel University of London, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK.

Email: sarita.malik@brunel.ac.uk

Sociology as central to understanding and advancing socio-ecological justice in the context of the global ecological crisis.

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Rights of Nature, dignity, reparations, more-than-human, cultural sociology, socio-ecological justice

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Introduction

The accelerating ecological polycrisis, encompassing biodiversity loss, climate change, deforestation, pollution, and ecosystem depletion, has prompted urgent calls for a transformative shift in how human societies understand, value, and govern the natural world (Fanning and Raworth, 2025). In response, the global Rights of Nature (RoN) movement has emerged as a significant legal and political development, recognising ecosystems as subjects with inherent rights to exist, flourish, and regenerate (Ecuadorian Assembly, 2008; Epstein et al., 2023; Gilbert et al., 2023; Kauffman and Martin, 2021).

The RoN movement exposes a foundational limitation in sociological conceptions of dignity and rights, and the need for a reparative, socio-ecological Sociology. Specifically, Sociology's anthropocentric and Eurocentric foundations have limited its ability to connect with the RoN movement, despite the profoundly social nature of ecological harm.

Sociology is uniquely positioned to show how environmental harms fall unevenly across populations, how power and inequality shape ecological governance, and how new rights frameworks can alter the social order. Cultural Sociology offers valuable insight into RoN as both a legal innovation and a broader socio-political transformation (Kauffman and Martin, 2021). Postcolonial sociological perspectives are critical in this endeavour, as they highlight the disproportionate, temporal, and spatial organisation of harm. This advances a more connected, global future sociology (Bhambra, 2014, 2022) and bridges Sociology and environmental justice movements.

The recognition of Nature's rights raises questions central to sociological inquiry, such as 'Who has the authority to represent more-than-human life?' (Tănăsescu et al., 2024), 'How do state institutions respond to claims made on behalf of ecosystems?', 'How do legal innovations reshape social norms and cultural imaginaries?', and 'How do patterns of environmental injustice constitute ongoing violations of both human and more-than-human dignity?' (Hickel, 2021).

Carter and Charles (2009) argue that Sociology's relevance depends on its capacity to grapple with the relationship between society and the natural world, and the socio-environmental entanglements that define contemporary life. For example, RoN disrupts well-established theoretical notions within Sociology, such as 'dignity', which are identified as relational and socially produced within the discipline. In the development of modern European ideas about the politics of equal dignity, from Immanuel Kant's theory of human dignity to Charles Taylor's (1992) 'The Politics of Recognition', the proposal is

that dignity is an intrinsic, universal characteristic of the human subject to apply equally to all human beings. Charles Mills' 'Black Radical' critique of Kant is a push for reparative and transformative justice, by deploying an 'aggressively antiracist Kantian conception of "dignity"' (Mills, 2018). More broadly, postcolonial and decolonial debates on the limits, hierarchies, and exclusions of dignity, from Frantz Fanon to Walter Dignolo, underscore that dignity is neither universal nor fixed, but historically produced through colonial power and ongoing contestation. RoN intervenes in these debates by disrupting anthropocentric regimes of recognition and extending dignity beyond the human, while simultaneously exposing how colonial violence has structured both the uneven distribution of ecological harm and the dispossession of Indigenous and colonised peoples upon whom the ecological crisis most acutely falls.

Our three core contributions are *disciplinary*, *conceptual*, and *programmatic*. *Disciplinarily*, we establish RoN as a necessary object of sociological analysis, demonstrating the limits of anthropocentric frameworks. *Conceptually*, we reconceptualise dignity as socio-(eco)logical, integrating Cultural Sociology, decolonial thought, and Indigenous relational philosophies. *Programmatically*, we advance a shared socio-ecological rights framework grounded in reparations, including an original socio-ecological forensics toolkit for diagnosing harm and supporting repair.

The originality of our article lies in how we interpret RoN through dignity, slow violence, and reparations rather than governance or legal efficacy alone, and in how we propose ecological forensics as a sociological-ecological (or socio-(eco)logical) interface. We use 'socio-(eco)logical' to emphasise that social and ecological processes are analytically distinct yet empirically entangled, and that dignity must be understood across this nexus if we are to build a shared dignity.

We present three areas of sociological analysis:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the significance of the Rights of Nature movement for Sociology, and how might recognising these rights expand or transform the discipline?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What sociological concepts and methods can contribute to understanding the Rights of Nature and their implications?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What might Sociology's role be in developing a shared rights framework oriented towards restorative justice for humans as part of 'more-than-human' communities of life?

After setting out the context of the ecological crisis and RoN, the article proceeds in two main sections. The first (Sociology's silence and potential) addresses RQ1 and RQ2 by examining the sociological gaps and opportunities accompanying RoN's rise, drawing on environmental science, legal studies, and decolonial scholarship (Gilbert et al., 2023). We bring Lauren Berlant's (2007, 2013) work on *slow death* and *cruel optimism* into dialogue with Indigenous relational philosophies such as *Buen Vivir* (Gudynas, 2011), to illuminate how environmental harms erode the dignity of both humans and ecosystems, and how alternative value systems can unsettle the extractive logics underpinning the current crisis (Fanning and Raworth, 2025). The second (Applying Sociology

to RoN and moving towards a shared socio-(eco) logical rights framework) focuses on RQ3, advancing an interdisciplinary reparative socio-ecological framework through Gurminder Bhambra's (2022) reparative sociology and emerging cultural forensics approaches to harm assessment. Here we draw on the constitutional recognition of RoN in Ecuador (2008). It is significant for its scale, explicit *Buen Vivir* foundation, history of litigation, and tensions with extractivism. We conclude by calling for a renewed sociological imagination; one that embraces the more-than-human world as an essential partner in the pursuit of justice.

Context: Ecological crisis and RoN

Global scientific assessments warn that biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, habitat destruction, and ecosystem collapse are accelerating at rates that threaten the conditions of life for both humans and more-than-human species (Bongaarts, 2019). The proposed new epoch, the Anthropocene, reflects how far human activity has become an Earth-shaping force transforming planetary systems (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2021). Ecological indicators continue to deteriorate despite international agreements, underscoring the inadequacy of regulatory frameworks that prioritise economic growth over ecosystem integrity. Critics argue that environmental laws often legitimise continued extraction under the rhetoric of sustainable development (Bonneuil, 2015), revealing structural limitations within anthropocentric legal systems.

The ecological polycrisis is not experienced evenly. It is patterned by histories of colonial extraction, racialised and gendered inequalities, and uneven geographies of power (Bhambra, 2022). Communities in the Global South bear a disproportionate burden of environmental harm, from deforestation and mining contamination to climate-related displacement and social contamination. By social contamination, we mean the process through which extractivist interventions destabilise historically grounded social-ecological practices, as promises of development displace relational modes of living and intensify environmental degradation. These injustices constitute violations not only of material conditions but also of dignity, autonomy, and the right to flourish. As Jason Hickel (2021) argues, ecological decline is inseparable from economic structures of overproduction and overconsumption that externalise environmental costs onto vulnerable populations.

Amid this crisis, the RoN movement has emerged as a transformative response that reframes Nature not as property but as a subject of rights (Kauffman and Martin, 2021). Legally, RoN asserts that ecosystems possess inherent rights to exist, regenerate, and maintain their vital cycles, rights that stand independently of human interests (Tănăsescu, 2022). With over 409 initiatives in 39 countries (Putzer et al., 2025), RoN represents a profound shift from legal traditions that treat nature as an object of ownership and extraction. RoN initiatives have taken multiple forms globally, often inspired by Indigenous communities whose cosmologies emphasise relationality and responsibilities between humans and the more-than-human world (Tănăsescu, 2024). These developments confront a central flaw in anthropocentric governance: the tendency to treat ecological destruction as legally permissible so long as it is economically justified.

RoN has been recognised across multiple jurisdictions, including New Zealand, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Europe, reflecting diverse Indigenous and legal traditions (Kauffman and Martin, 2021). These cases illustrate its emergence as a global socio-political movement grounded in plural epistemologies.

RoN can also be understood as a critique of existing environmental governance, shifting the normative baseline from regulating acceptable harm to demanding the active flourishing of ecosystems (Peck et al., 2024). This places new obligations on states, requiring not only environmental oversight but also the restoration of damaged ecosystems (Peck et al., 2024). Environmental law is reframed from a tool of mitigation to a framework for ecological care and relational governance.

Mihnea Tănăsescu (2024) argues that RoN represents a broader political reconfiguration of representation, responsibility, and authority. By allowing Nature to be represented in political and legal arenas, RoN disrupts conventional notions of who can make claims and who is recognised as a political subject. It opens new questions about guardianship, legitimacy, and ecological representation that sit squarely within sociological concerns. RoN also signals an emerging terrain of political contestation as climate change becomes, in Tănăsescu's terms, 'one of the most essential structuring elements of politics', reorganising governance systems around ecological vulnerability and interdependence.

These developments foreground the intertwined nature of social and ecological degradation. Environmental destruction produces both material and symbolic harms: loss of land, cultural dispossession, health impacts, and diminished capacity to live with dignity, harms experienced by both human communities and the ecosystems with which they are entangled. RoN thus offers a lens through which to analyse the relational character of dignity and the co-production of human and more-than-human well-being. It advances a vision of justice beyond anthropocentric rights, towards rights understood as shared, interdependent, and relational.

In this context, Sociology plays a crucial role. The ecological crisis is not only scientific or legal but profoundly social, shaped by inequality, power, cultural narratives, and contested representations. The rise of RoN invites the discipline to expand. The following section examines this disciplinary silence and connects it to postcolonial and decolonial critiques (Daniel and Neubert, 2025).

Sociology's silence and potential

While classical Sociology is heterogeneous, an anthropocentric worldview that separates 'Society' from 'Nature' has historically prevailed, with a dominant focus on the organisation of human societies, economic structures, and political authority. Bhambra (2022) argues that classical Sociology's Eurocentric foundations obscured the centrality of colonial extraction and environmental degradation to the making of the modern world, thereby marginalising ecological concerns. This inheritance is, however, not clear-cut. Early thinkers such as Marx recognised the destructive impacts of colonialism and conceptualised human development as integrated with, rather than separate from, nature, helping to establish a critique of colonialism as bound up with political economy. Nonetheless, the dominant anthropocentric trajectory of the discipline has produced a

structural silence regarding the rights of more-than-human beings and the socio-ecological conditions underpinning contemporary crises.

Environmental issues have predominantly been delegated to the natural sciences, environmental law, or political ecology (Kauffman and Martin, 2021; Martinez-Alier, 2009), while Sociology has tended to focus on social institutions, identities, and inequalities. Even environmental sociology, a well-established subfield, primarily examines how environmental degradation affects human communities rather than Nature's potential status as a rights-bearing subject (Schaefer Caniglia et al., 2021). The disciplinary silence is further reinforced by Sociology's historical reliance on Eurocentric knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2020) rather than on Indigenous and relational worldviews. Treating Nature as a backdrop to human social life has limited the discipline's capacity to engage perspectives that see humans as co-constitutive participants in ecological systems (Dunlap and Catton, 1994; Goldman et al., 2011). This marginalisation jars with the RoN movement, strongly informed by Indigenous philosophies emphasising interdependence, reciprocity, and collective responsibility (Gudynas, 2011; Kothari et al., 2020).

These relational ontologies reveal a limitation within mainstream sociological theory, often organised around siloed national sociologies that struggle to accommodate pluriversal understandings of life, rights, and community (Daniel and Neubert, 2025). Applying western social theory in global contexts requires a decolonised Sociology capable of recognising both colonial histories and the pluralism of global knowledge systems (Bhambra, 2022). Since RoN movements are often rooted in Indigenous ontologies, the need for epistemic transformation is clear: as Daniel and Neubert (2025) put it, an 'empirical turn' is required in the decolonisation of Sociology. The discipline must therefore examine its own positionality and consider how its concepts and methods can be adapted to engage respectfully and productively with 'non-Western' frameworks and Global Majority communities.

There is a growing call for better scientific information on the RoN, and for interdisciplinary scholarship to shape understandings of the environmental crisis (Gilbert et al., 2023). Sociology offers substantial conceptual resources that could enrich RoN interventions, scholarly and otherwise. RoN can be understood within a broader tradition of social movements that challenge the parameters of legitimacy and justice (Slavina and Brym, 2020) as well as within the struggle for climate justice, decolonisation, and environmental democracy. Sociology's attention to discourse, meaning-making, and symbolic power provides tools for analysing how Nature is represented within legal, political, and public narratives, and how these representations influence policy and social action. Sociology's methodological diversity further strengthens its potential contribution. Qualitative approaches, such as ethnography, participatory research, and narrative analysis, enable deep engagement with communities that advocate for or are affected by RoN, particularly relevant given the centrality of Indigenous leadership and the socio-ecological entanglements RoN brings into focus.

Sociology can also contribute to the analysis of environmental justice and dignity. Environmental harms such as pollution, land degradation, and biodiversity loss affect identity, community cohesion, resource access, and the ability to live a dignified life. A Cultural Sociology lens on inequality, race, class, and coloniality is therefore essential for understanding both the roots of ecological violations and the barriers to implement-

ing RoN equitably. It can help facilitate dialogue that bridges scientific, legal, and cultural understandings of ecological harm.

We address RQ2 by advancing a theoretical framework that draws on sociological and interdisciplinary perspectives to emphasise the significance of RoN for reimagining rights, dignity, and justice.

An original theoretical assemblage: Slow death, cruel optimism, and Buen Vivir. We develop a conceptual framework that examines the structural, affective, and epistemic dynamics underpinning the ecological crisis. We uniquely bring together three theoretical strands to interrogate: the structural conditions through which environmental harm becomes ordinary, systemic, enduring, and normalised (Berlant's concept of *slow death*); how societies remain bound to destructive models of prosperity and attachments to dominant social imaginaries that hinder transformation (Berlant's concept of *cruel optimism*); and how alternative value systems in which relationality, sufficiency, and ecological integrity become the foundations of, and offer pathways for, socio-ecological flourishing (the Indigenous relational philosophy of *Buen Vivir*). While slow death and cruel optimism have been used to analyse neoliberal subjectivities, and *Buen Vivir* in debates on development and post-growth, bringing them into dialogue around RoN allows us to reconceptualise dignity as socio-(eco)logical and reparative. Unlike environmental sociology and political ecology, our Cultural Sociology approach foregrounds the hierarchical basis of dignity and the decolonial case for reparations that can contribute to the RoN movement.

Our conceptual vocabulary is deliberate rather than incidental, and we understand it to extend the sociological tradition. Because RoN requires an account that dissolves the Society/Nature binary and recognises the non-human, we mobilise and develop sociological resources to demonstrate the discipline's generative capacity to theorise socio-ecological relations. We speak of an assemblage to extend sociological structural analysis beyond bounded, function-integrated wholes to the contingent, emergent relations that bind heterogeneous human and more-than-human elements. We build, for example, on Max Weber's recognition of affectual action, relocating affect from the level of individual, non-rational motivation to the trans-subjective and durable attachments that structure collective life, as in Berlant's cruel optimism. And we prefer more-than-human to 'environment' or 'non-human' because it keeps human life within, rather than outside, the relational field whose dignity this article seeks to theorise.

Slow Death and the Ecological Polycrisis: Lauren Berlant's (2007) concept of *slow death* is expanded by Jasbir K. Puar as 'the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering' (Puar, 2017). Berlant and Puar's subsequent intervention challenges crisis narratives that frame harm as extraordinary, arguing instead that certain populations live in chronic precarity normalised within political and economic systems, a form of attritional harm that accumulates gradually rather than erupting in crises. While initially developed to theorise bodily deterioration under neoliberalism, the concept offers a compelling lens for understanding the ecological polycrisis and socio-ecological dignity. Harm unfolds through incremental, sustained pressures that weaken ecosystems, analogous to the slow attrition experienced by marginalised human populations. These conditions result not from discrete events or sovereign acts but from diffuse, systemic

operations: colonial land regimes, urbanisation, agricultural intensification, and fossil fuel dependence. The ecological crisis, in this sense, represents the slow death of the more-than-human world and a sustained violation of the dignity of both human and more-than-human communities. It is the gradual wearing down of ecosystems by ordinary economic activity and governance systems that render environmental harm permissible or invisible. Conceptualising the crisis as slow death foregrounds its structural nature and challenges narratives that frame environmental decline as unforeseeable or exceptional.

Cruel Optimism and the Capitalist ‘Good Life’: If slow death describes the structural conditions of ecological deterioration, Berlant’s (2013) later concept of *cruel optimism* helps explain the affective attachments that sustain these conditions. Cruel optimism refers to situations in which individuals or societies remain attached to ideals or objects that impede their flourishing. Cruel optimism can help explain resistance to RoN: how attachments to growth and technocratic fixes block the uptake or radical potential of RoN frameworks. In capitalist societies, the dominant model of the ‘Good Life’ involves, and constitutes such an attachment. These ideals promise stability and fulfilment while simultaneously contributing to ecological collapse. Attachments to this capitalist Good Life persist because they organise social meaning, identity, and aspiration, offering affective coherence in an unstable world, even as they reproduce the very conditions that threaten long-term well-being (Berlant, 2013). Efforts to address the ecological crisis are often channelled through this framework, yielding technocratic solutions, green-growth agendas, corporate ‘social responsibility’, and market-driven environmentalism that preserve existing structures. The burden of action is routinely shifted to the Global Majority, while exploitative and neoliberal practices continue (Bhagat and Kenis, 2026). These manoeuvres operate as forms of cruel optimism, hopeful gestures that delay structural change and deepen ecological slow death.

Cruel optimism thus helps illuminate why societies struggle to transition away from extractive systems, even when ecological degradation is well understood. The attachment to established models of prosperity makes it difficult to imagine alternative futures or adopt transformative policies. It clarifies the conditions under which RoN emerges: an attempt to rupture entrenched attachments and reconfigure the normative foundations of law, governance, and social life (Kauffman and Martin, 2021).

Buen Vivir as an Alternative Framework for Flourishing: The Andean philosophy of *Buen Vivir* (or Sumak Kawsay, Quechua for ‘plenitude of life’) offers a relational conception of well-being grounded in Indigenous cosmologies. *Buen Vivir*, often inadequately translated as ‘Good Living’, emphasises harmony, reciprocity, and interdependence between humans and the more-than-human world. Rather than equating wellbeing with individual accumulation or continuous economic growth, it asserts that flourishing depends on the health of collective social, ecological, and spiritual relations (Tănăsescu, 2022). While elements of this critique resonate with western liberal and socialist traditions, particularly their critiques of inequality and growth, *Buen Vivir* advances a distinctively different theoretical orientation. First, it is grounded in a relational ontology that decentres the human as the primary subject of value, underpinning the extension of dignity and rights to ecosystems themselves. This departs from liberal and socialist frameworks, which largely retain an anthropocentric orientation even when

advocating environmental protection or redistribution. Second, *Buen Vivir* rejects productivist assumptions shared across both capitalist and many socialist traditions, articulating flourishing in terms of reciprocity, sufficiency, and ecological balance rather than expanded production, consumption, or redistribution. Third, it advances a pluriversal epistemology, rejecting the universalist assumptions of western development paradigms in favour of multiple, territorially grounded ways of living well that respect ecological limits and cultural specificity (Kothari et al., 2020). In this sense, *Buen Vivir* is not only a critique of capitalist modernity but a reconfiguration of the conceptual foundations of ‘the good life’ itself, challenging the universality, anthropocentrism, and productivism that underpin both liberal and socialist imaginaries. It is precisely this shift that provides a normative and ontological grounding for the RoN, where dignity, justice, and flourishing are understood as relationally constituted across human and more-than-human worlds (Tănăsescu, 2022).

The constitutional recognition of the RoN in Ecuador (2008), which we discuss, draws directly on this philosophical foundation, embedding principles of reciprocity and ecological dignity into legal frameworks. In this way, *Buen Vivir* offers an alternative imaginary to the cruel optimism of growth-centred development, providing a normative anchor for rights-based ecological protection. This concept not only informs Ecuador’s constitutional provisions but also provides a normative grounding for the shared rights framework we propose.

Integrating the assemblage: RoN as a transformative intervention. Within this framework, RoN can be understood as a productive rupture that interrupts ecological slow death by challenging the attachments that sustain extractive logics and by institutionalising relational ontologies of care and reciprocity.

When Nature becomes a subject of justice, assumptions about sovereignty, property, and political community can no longer be taken for granted. RoN therefore demands sociological attention not as a legal novelty, but as a challenge to how rights and responsibilities are organised in social life.

Our framework grounds the following analysis of Sociology’s contributions to RoN: a programmatic analysis for the discipline’s future engagement with ecological crisis: a shared socio-(eco)logical rights framework. We identify four key contributions Sociology could make to such a framework: representation, inequality, governance, and knowledge.

Representation and the Politics of Voice: One of the most profound sociological questions raised by RoN concerns representation. If ecosystems possess rights, who represents them? On what grounds? And through which institutional mechanisms? As Tănăsescu (2024) argues, RoN fundamentally reconfigures political representation by extending it to more-than-human entities. This shift destabilises classical sociological assumptions about political subjects, authority, and legitimacy. Sociological traditions concerned with representation, ranging from symbolic interactionism to theories of the public sphere, are therefore essential for analysing how guardianship is enacted, contested, and institutionalised. These questions are cultural and epistemic, concerning voice, legitimacy, expertise, and authority, and require engagement beyond legal analysis. They require sociological insight into how social authority is constructed, how claims are validated, and how power operates within institutional, cultural, and epistemic fields.

Inequality, Coloniality, and Ecological Dignity: Sociology is also vital for understanding how environmental harms produce inequalities in dignity, both human and ecological. Environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalised communities, particularly in the Global South, where extractive industries, pollution, and climate vulnerability (Hickel, 2021) combine to produce what Bhambra (2022) identifies as ongoing colonial harms. These harms are not only material but relational, cultural, and political, eroding people's ability to live well and communities' relationships with their environments. RoN foregrounds these dignity violations by recognising ecosystems themselves as subjects capable of suffering harm (Tănăsescu, 2022). Sociology's thematic concern with dignity, justice, and inequality offers ways to analyse how ecological degradation intersects with race, class, gender, and coloniality. This can help identify how environmental harm becomes normalised within governance systems, how power imbalances shape access to protection and restoration, and how RoN might redistribute political and ecological agency. Such an intersectional perspective shows RoN is not simply an environmental doctrine but a socio-political movement reframing both human and more-than-human vulnerability.

The State, Governance, and Institutional Change: RoN also raises fundamental sociological questions about the role of the state and the structure of governance (Kauffman and Martin, 2021). Unlike traditional environmental law, which models Nature as property and treats harm as tolerable, RoN imposes positive obligations on states to respect, protect, and restore ecological systems (Kauffman and Martin, 2017). Sociology can analyse how states interpret and implement RoN; how institutional cultures, bureaucratic routines, and political interests shape ecological outcomes; and how RoN requires governance that centres care, precaution, and ecological well-being. This extends to conflicts between state agencies, corporations, Indigenous communities, and civil society that reveal the political contestation inherent in transforming Nature into a rights-bearing subject. Such analysis also highlights the limits of legal transformation: RoN laws can be undermined by extractivist economic priorities, weak enforcement structures, or institutional inertia. Sociological frameworks of organisational behaviour and institutional change are therefore essential for understanding why RoN succeeds in some contexts and struggles in others.

Knowledge, Epistemic Pluralism, and the Art of Listening: Another key sociological contribution lies in its methodological commitments. Sociologists have long emphasised plural ways of knowing: experiential, relational, and community-based knowledge systems. For example, Les Back's (2007) *The Art of Listening* offers a vital orientation for RoN, grounded in the lived relations between (marginalised) communities, ways of knowing, and ecosystems. Sociological methodologies such as ethnography, participatory research, narrative analysis, and community co-production enable researchers to understand how communities articulate ecological harm, document Indigenous and relational knowledge, trace how RoN is enacted in practice, and reveal the narratives that shape public understandings of Nature's rights. Sociology has pioneered work on decolonising knowledge production (Noxolo, 2017) and advocated co-produced 'lived theory' models to engage communities routinely cut out of research conversations (see Malik et al., 2020). Such approaches help bridge the gap between legal texts and lived socio-ecological realities, recognising that communities hold critical expertise about both the harms they experience and the pathways to repair.

Applying sociology to RoN and moving towards a shared socio-(eco)logical rights framework

The emergence of the RoN movement does more than expose the limitations of existing environmental governance; it also reveals theoretical and methodological shortcomings within Sociology itself. If ecological harm is relational, ongoing, and unequally distributed, as RoN frameworks insist, then Sociology's historical separation of society and Nature becomes increasingly untenable.

We apply our analysis to Ecuador's constitutional Articles 71–74 (Ecuadorian Assembly, 2008), among the most developed RoN provisions globally and thus a concrete site for sociological analysis (Figure 1). The Ecuadorian constitutional framework provides a critical empirical site in which relational ontologies associated with *Buen Vivir* are translated into institutional practice; through litigation, the RoN become a terrain of contestation in which dignity, rights, and socio-ecological relations are actively redefined, rather than merely codified in law.

Article 71 recognises Nature's right to 'integral respect', foregrounding collective stewardship and the cosmology of Pacha Mama. This principle has been operationalised in cases such as the Vilcabamba River ruling (Provincial Court of Loja, 2011), which mandated remediation after ecological damage. Sociologically, these cases demonstrate how rights claims enable citizen litigation and produce new forms of legitimacy grounded in recognising Nature as a subject of justice.

Article 72 emphasises restoration as a core legal obligation. In Vilcabamba, the court required the Provincial Government to implement ecological rehabilitation, while subsequent Constitutional Court jurisprudence has reinforced restoration as a priority even where it constrains other rights (Provincial Court of Loja, 2011). These rulings extend repair beyond compensation, supporting a sociological analysis of restoration as relational and justice-oriented rather than purely technical.

Article 73 mandates the prevention of species extinction and ecological disruption, embedding precautionary governance. This is central to the precedent-setting Los Cedros case, where mining was blocked in a biodiverse cloud forest, based on the risk of irreversible biodiversity loss and scientific uncertainty (Peck et al., 2024). Such cases highlight how courts negotiate risk, expertise, and uncertainty, offering insight into the sociological dynamics of governance and technoscientific authority.

Article 74, incorporating *Buen Vivir*, situates well-being within ecological relations. In Los Cedros, this was reflected in the Court's articulation of a biocentric framework linking the RoN to collective well-being and ecological integrity. This aligns with sociological perspectives on equity and welfare, but reframes them through relational and more-than-human conceptions of dignity.

Through these examples, Sociology demonstrates its capacity to interpret RoN not just as law but as a reconfiguration of social norms, relationships, and responsibilities. In summary, Sociology is crucial to the development and implementation of RoN, while RoN functions as a 'pressure-point' that forces Sociology's transformation. The discipline brings conceptual tools to interrogate power, inequality, representation, and dignity; methodological approaches that foreground relational and community-centred knowledge; analytical frameworks capable of revealing how RoN reshapes governance

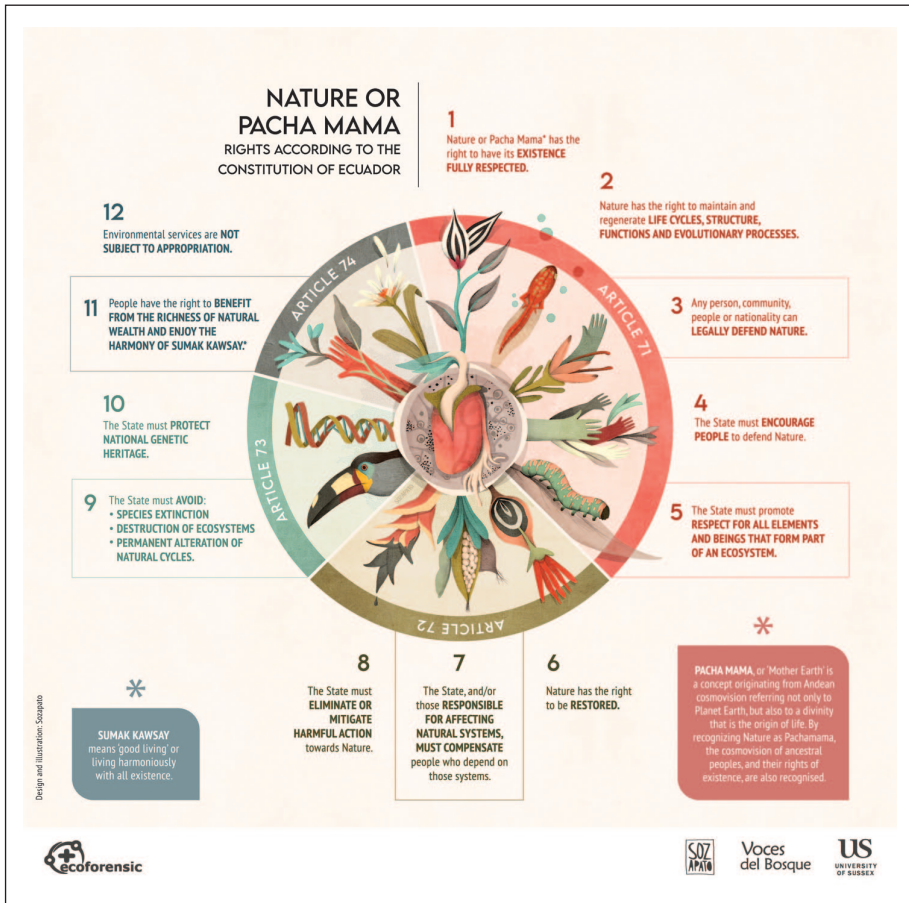


Figure 1. Ecuadorian constitutional Rights of Nature articles.

and social norms; and critical insights into how socio-ecological justice movements challenge entrenched political-economic systems. We emphasise that Sociology can not only enrich RoN but also expand its own disciplinary horizons. At the same time, the RoN movement forces these disciplinary limits into view, precisely because it refuses to separate social, ecological, and political harm on which much sociological analysis still rests.

RQ3 addresses how Sociology might contribute to a shared rights framework oriented towards restorative justice for both human and more-than-human beings. We argue that Sociology, especially in its reparative and decolonial strands, plays a critical role in shaping these transformations. Understood through the lenses of slow death, cruel optimism, and relational alternatives such as *Buen Vivir*, the work of repair necessitates transforming the social structures, epistemologies, and legal systems that have enabled ecological harm.

We outline how a socio-(eco)logical perspective on reparations can inform RoN implementation and propose a ‘socio-ecological forensics’ toolkit integrating sociological and ecological methods (Peck et al., 2024) to diagnose harm and support repair. What is specifically sociological about it, as we conceptualise it, is the integration of narrative, relational, and justice-oriented dimensions.

Reparations as a Socio-Ecological Imperative: Calls for reparations have gained prominence in Sociology, particularly through Bhambra’s (2022) argument that they are necessary to address the historical and ongoing harms of colonialism and the indignity of the colonial world. Environmental degradation is one such structure, produced through colonial extractivism, resource depletion, plantation economies, and capitalist development models that generate disproportionate ecological harms in regions least responsible for global emissions and biodiversity loss (Hickel, 2021).

We connect this focus on reparations to Mills’ (2018) call, as previously mentioned, to extend Kantian principles of dignity for racial and corrective justice, and to the RoN movement’s provocation to extend dignity to Nature and to those most impacted by its slow death. Our invocation of Kant is critical rather than affiliative, supporting Mills’ position that Kant’s own universalism was complicit with colonial and racial exclusion. We also depart further than his reconstruction allows. Even a deracialised Kantianism retains an individualist, anthropocentric conception of dignity, whereas we treat dignity as relational, unevenly structured by inequality, colonialism, and governance, and extending beyond the human. We mobilise its language not to assimilate Nature into a liberal rights paradigm but to transform that paradigm through a relational, socio-ecological account. RoN frameworks make this connection explicit by recognising that ecosystems and the communities intertwined with them are not only materially harmed but also deprived of dignity, autonomy, and the capacity to flourish (Tănăsescu, 2022). Treating Nature as a subject of rights and dignity therefore repositions ecological destruction as a violation that demands redress. A socio-(eco)logical reparations approach treats repair as restoring ecosystems, redressing social inequalities, and transforming the political-economic structures that sustain extraction. It broadens reparations beyond human victims to a shared rights framework grounded in the interdependence of human and ecological dignity. Sociology helps articulate this expanded lens, moving past human-centred notions of dignity and analysing how reparations can avoid reproducing the colonial logics that generated both social and environmental harm (Damodaran, 2025).

Reciprocity, Relationality, and the Ethics of Repair: If slow death and cruel optimism reveal how societies become attached to harmful systems, repair must be conceived not simply as technical restoration but as the transformation of relationships. Indigenous philosophies such as *Buen Vivir* and relational ecologies emphasise circularity and reciprocity as the ethical foundation of socio-ecological life. Reciprocity entails giving back, restoring balance, and acknowledging mutual dependence within more-than-human communities (Tănăsescu, 2022). Sociology’s insights into relationality, interdependence, and collective responsibility can help articulate a reparative ethics that moves beyond compensatory models of restoration. Traditional environmental governance often treats damage as a calculable loss that can be offset or compensated. RoN, by contrast, centres restoration as relationship, requiring that ecosystems be returned to conditions that support their integrity and connections with human communities (Kauffman and Martin, 2017).

This reorientation aligns with sociological traditions that emphasise care, solidarity, and mutual obligation (Tronto, 2020). It also challenges political economy frameworks that view Nature instrumentally and assume harm can be balanced through market mechanisms. A sociological understanding of reciprocity thus frames repair as an ongoing, collective, relational practice rather than a one-time settlement.

Socio-Ecological Forensics as a Tool for Identifying Harm: To enact reparations, harm must first be identified and understood. Here, a socio-ecological ‘cultural forensics’ toolkit is fundamental. The new transdisciplinary field of ‘Ecological Forensics’ (Peck et al., 2024), already used to assess ecosystem-level impacts (Peck et al., forthcoming), can be expanded through sociological methods to capture the full spectrum of socio-ecological harm. An interdisciplinary socio-(eco)logical toolkit might incorporate the following:

- Ecological indicators: biodiversity loss, disrupted cycles, pollution pathways, species extinction risks, and risks to evolutionary processes;
- Social indicators: socio-ecological contamination, spiritual contamination, internal conflict, community displacement, loss of livelihoods, cultural dispossession, impacts on health, and well-being;
- Narrative and experiential data: testimonies, ethnographies, oral histories, and community accounts of ecological change;
- Governance diagnostics: institutional failures, policy gaps, regulatory capture, and political economies of extraction.

From diagnosis to restoration: Reparative pathways. Once harm is identified, the challenge is how to repair it in ways consistent with RoN’s vision of ecological dignity. Our framework goes beyond improving governance within existing systems, as in progressive–liberal approaches, and instead locates ecological harm in relational, ontological, and political–economic conditions that must be transformed. Sociology contributes through the following ways:

- Participatory governance: not merely inclusion, but reconfiguring authority to include more-than-human interests and Indigenous custodianship, challenging the state as the sole legitimate environmental arbiter;
- Restorative justice: not compensation but repairing damaged socio-ecological relations – through land restitution, cultural revitalisation, and renewed reciprocal obligations between humans and ecosystems;
- Monitoring and accountability: not just policy evaluation, but tracking ongoing violations of socio-ecological dignity, including cultural and relational harms beyond economic metrics;
- Preventive institutional reform: not regulatory adjustment but interrogating how state–capital relations reproduce extractive conditions, with RoN as a site of structural contestation rather than administrative reform.

These pathways recognise that ecological repair is inseparable from social repair. Unlike progressive–liberal mitigation within existing systems, this framework treats

restoration as transforming the relations that produce harm – colonial dispossession, extractivist economies, and dominant development imaginaries.

A shared rights framework thus affirms the intertwined dignity of human and more-than-human life while displacing anthropocentric and productivist assumptions in liberal and socialist traditions. It does not seek compatibility with existing political-economic arrangements, but challenges their underlying colonial, capitalist, and extractive logics.

This 'empirical turn' moves from epistemic inclusion to epistemic transformation, pushing Sociology to engage multiple knowledge systems and confront its own Eurocentric and anthropocentric limits. Its role becomes not only analytic but interventionist: exposing how socio-political structures sustain ecological harm and helping reconstitute relations, institutions, and imaginaries for alternative futures.

In practice, this includes analysing 'social contamination', where dominant 'Good Life' models displace relational philosophies such as Sumak Kawsay, and tracing how extractive industries reshape not just environments but meaning, identity, and dignity. Distinct from standard risk assessments, it foregrounds dignitary and relational harm, recognising ecological degradation as the erosion of shared modes of existence.

By integrating decolonial Sociology, relational philosophies, and ecological forensics, this approach advances socio-ecological reparations beyond liberal environmental governance. Rights are reconceived not as regulatory tools but as expressions of shared relational orders, requiring ongoing repair, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Sociology thus becomes not only a means of understanding ecological crisis, but an active participant in transforming the conditions that sustain it.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the RoN movement constitutes a significant, yet under-engaged, terrain for sociological inquiry. Against the backdrop of the ecological polycrisis, RoN is not a marginal legal innovation but a direct challenge to the anthropocentric assumptions that have long structured sociological thinking about rights, dignity, and political subjects. By recognising ecosystems as rights-bearing entities, it redefines the boundaries of the social world and foregrounds the relational character of harm, justice, and repair.

Drawing on Cultural Sociology, decolonial scholarship, and Indigenous relational philosophies, we have reframed ecological degradation as an ongoing violation of dignity affecting both human and more-than-human worlds. Through the theoretical assemblage of slow death, cruel optimism, and *Buen Vivir*, the article has shown how ecological harm becomes normalised, why dominant responses fail to disrupt it, and how alternative socio-ecological imaginaries can reorient both analysis and action.

Building on this, we have advanced a shared socio-(eco)logical rights framework grounded in reparative justice. This framework extends beyond technical or legal approaches to environmental governance by conceptualising repair as relational, structural, and ongoing. Integrating reparative sociology with socio-ecological forensics, it positions Sociology as a co-producer of knowledge capable of diagnosing harm and informing pathways towards restoration.

This article's contribution can be summarised in three key takeaways. First, it demonstrates that the RoN are not peripheral to Sociology but require a rethinking of its foundational assumptions, particularly the anthropocentric framing of rights and dignity. Second, it shows that Sociology offers essential analytical resources, especially regarding power, inequality, representation, and knowledge, for understanding how RoN operates and for shaping its development in practice. Third, it develops an original socio-(eco) logical framework of rights and reparations, through which ecological harm can be understood and addressed as a violation of shared human and more-than-human dignity. The central takeaway is clear: without a relational, more-than-human conception of rights, dignity, and repair, both Sociology and environmental governance will remain inadequate to the realities of the ecological crisis.

ORCID iDs

Sarita Malik  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0985-5246>

Mika Peck  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0461-0001>

Ethical considerations

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Consent to participate

Informed consent procedures were not applicable.

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Author biographies

Sarita Malik is Professor of Media and Culture in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Brunel University London. Her research examines issues of inequality and culture in shifting sociopolitical, cultural, and technological contexts. Her work draws on collaborative, interdisciplinary, and participative research methodologies.

Mika Peck (Ecoforensic.org/University of Sussex) is working at the intersection of ecology, law, and constitutional theory. His work focuses on practical implementation of Rights of Nature through empirical socioecological evidence, developing methods that translate ecosystem data into legally relevant signals. His research emphasises transdisciplinary analysis, ecological integrity, and practical tools for environmental governance.