



## What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

*Nature and Democracy*

# Democracy Remade: Regeneration as Civic Practice

## An Inheritance of Disconnection

We are living in the age of broken inheritances. The systems we have received—political, economic, ecological—were not built for the world now unfolding. Every generation inherits a set of arrangements it did not choose, and ours has inherited their unraveling. Democracies fail under the weight of deep disconnection; ecosystems collapse under the strain of unrelenting extraction. What links them is not coincidence, but cause.

We have learned to separate what cannot be separated: economy from ecology, governance from the governed, human thriving from the health of the living world. These fractures, carried forward through centuries of conquest and control, have hardened into the institutions that organize daily life. We manage nature as though it was external to us and govern people as though they were interchangeable parts in an abstract machine. The result is a double erosion of the planet that sustains us and the democratic capacity that binds us together.

The same habits that degrade ecosystems—extraction, exclusion, control—also thin the social fabric of democracy. When participation narrows to a performance rather than an ongoing practice, when people lose agency over the places they inhabit, both civic and ecological commons begin to collapse. The consequence is not only environmental degradation but a quiet corrosion of meaning: a loss of shared purpose, of belonging, of the sense that collective life is something we shape rather than endure.

Too often, this dual crisis is misdiagnosed as a matter of policy or technology. But its roots lie deeper—in the relationships we have neglected, and in the systems that taught us to treat both people and places as expendable. What we face is not merely the decline of institutions, but the depletion of relationship itself. To heal one, we must learn to heal the other.

That work begins with renewal, by rediscovering reciprocity between people, place, and power. *Sustainability* once tried to name this effort, but the word has grown thin beneath the weight of compromise. What we need now is not preservation but restoration; not balance, but the capacity for continual revival. In a word: regeneration.

Regeneration is not the management of decline but the living practice of strengthening and rebuilding. It asks how societies can thrive by nourishing the systems, both natural and civic, that



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make life possible. Scholars have long recognized that such renewal cannot be imposed or easily quantified; it must emerge through collective imagination, through the reconstruction of futures that are both viable and meaningful (Robinson, 2004; Hammond, 2019).

This reorientation transforms both ideas at the heart of our crisis. Regeneration ceases to be a fixed outcome and becomes a continuous practice of reciprocity—among people, and between people and the more-than-human world. Democracy, in turn, becomes more than a mechanism for managing competing interests. It becomes the cultural capacity to negotiate the terms of our shared existence not once, but continuously, learning to adapt while remaining anchored in relationship. It is, as Hammond writes, “the only political system capable of enabling a culture of sustainability”—or what we might now more accurately define as a culture of regeneration.

A democracy capable of regeneration is not a luxury to be pursued after the planet stabilizes; it is the condition of stability itself. The question before us is no longer whether democracy can survive ecological crisis, but whether anything enduring can exist without it.

### **Toward a Democracy Capable of Regeneration**

If regeneration depends on democracy, then we must ask what kind of democracy can sustain the culture of renewal our moment demands. The one we have inherited was designed for another age, one that valued order over adaptability, hollow representation over meaningful relationships. When communities are invited to participate in environmental decision-making—and so often they are not—they are asked to respond to questions already framed, within processes built to constrain rather than cultivate imagination. A public hearing scheduled midweek at two in the afternoon. A 300-page technical document awaiting a three-minute public comment. A survey that asks residents to rank preselected priorities. These are not practices of power-sharing; they are performances of legitimacy, carefully packaged to preserve the authority of those already in control.

A democracy capable of regeneration must begin somewhere else entirely. It must create room for public life to breathe, for deliberation to emerge before decisions harden, for meaning to be made collectively rather than managed administratively. This means engaging communities not as data points or distant stakeholders but as co-authors of the future, inviting them to articulate what they value, what sustains them, and what possibilities they are willing to build together.

When democracy begins from values rather than problems, participation takes on new depth. A restored watershed becomes more than an ecological victory—it becomes an expression of belonging, safety, continuity, and care. Environmental restoration and civic renewal are revealed not as separate projects but as parts of the same endeavor: the regeneration of relationship.

What makes this form of democracy regenerative is not its outcomes but its practice. It thrives on reflection, reciprocity, and the slow work of rebuilding trust. It is less about choosing between fixed options than about cultivating the shared capacity to adapt, to revisit assumptions, to learn, and to evolve together without losing coherence. A regenerative democracy understands that the health of a society lies not in the perfection of its institutions but in their permeability, in their ability to respond to lived experience and to make meaning in common. In such a system, citizens do more than participate; they shape the very conditions of participation itself. They become co-authors of the rules, narratives, and relationships that allow democracy to live and breathe.

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Yet even this vision cannot endure without a reimagining of inclusion itself. Regeneration depends on more than opening the gates of participation—it requires changing the channels through which influence flows, so that knowledge and authority circulate freely rather than pooling in the same familiar places. Equity, in this sense, is less about access than permeability: the continual movement of power between institutions and the people they claim to serve. For young people in particular—those coming of age amid climate crisis and civic collapse—participation must carry real consequence. It must offer the authority to set priorities, direct resources, and reimagine the systems they will embody. Only then can democracy become a site of genuine belonging rather than performance.

A regenerative democracy, then, must hold both reform and reinvention at once. Existing institutions can evolve, but they cannot remain the sole custodians of public will. What is needed instead is an ecosystem of democratic practice: interconnected spaces where people deliberate, experiment, and build civic capacity together. Within this ecosystem, intermediary organizations play a vital role. They serve as translators between local knowledge and institutional process, making space for new voices to enter and for old systems to listen. Their purpose is not to supplant governance but to make it porous again—to restore the flow between people and power, between decision and the life it shapes.

In some places, that flow is beginning to return. Along the edge of a Vancouver inlet, a quiet experiment in climate democracy is revealing how inclusion and stewardship can reshape both civic life and the water itself.

### **Where Democracy Meets the Tide**

The tide moves quietly through False Creek, a restless seam between the city's glass and the sea's salt. Pilings are rimmed with barnacles, herons stand in the shallows, and beneath the surface, small schools of anchovies have begun to dance again, offering a shimmering silver light show to passersby. The silent sediment looming below remembers decades of industry and neglect, a story it sputters out each time boats slow to moor. This waterbody is a place of quiet insistence, a whisper saying *I'm alive*.

False Creek is also a place defined by contradiction—a living estuary entangled in layers of jurisdiction and history. Once the site of Sə́nəʔqʷ, a Squamish village, it became one of Vancouver's most polluted inlets, its tidal heart dredged and its cultural memory buried beneath concrete. Today, multiple levels of government and agencies share authority over its waters, yet few share a cohesive vision for its renewal. The result is a kind of civic stillness: an ecosystem caught between care and control, between what it was and what it might yet become.

I first met the leadership of the [False Creek Friends Society](#) in May during a “Creeky Cruise” organized for participants of the Salazar Center for North American Conservation's Symposium for Conservation Impact in Vancouver. As we moved slowly through the inlet, they spoke of the difficulty of moving beyond advocacy and education toward collective vision. Since then, the [Climate Democracy Initiative](#) and the False Creek Friends Society have been working to imagine a different way forward. The aim is not to fix a singular problem already defined, but to create space for the community to define what renewal itself might mean. This is the heart of the False Creek Climate Democracy Initiative: a living experiment in how democratic regeneration can enable ecological regeneration.

In September, we held the first of what we hope will be many participatory workshops. It was a small but remarkable gathering of Indigenous representatives, business owners, educators, nonprofit leaders, and residents each bringing a different connection to the inlet. We did not begin with policy or plans, but with values. Participants spoke about belonging, reconciliation, and the hope of seeing salmon return and children play safely by the shore. They mapped shared assets and relationships, exploring what collective action might make those values tangible. By the end, every participant committed to stay involved—a quiet affirmation that connection, once rekindled, has the power to grow.

What is emerging in False Creek is still fragile, still forming. But it gestures toward a democracy spacious enough to hold complexity. Here, ecological regeneration and democratic regeneration are unfolding together: each strengthening the other, each teaching what it means to live responsibly in a shared place. It reminds us that renewal begins wherever people choose to act together, and that every community holds the possibility of democracy remade.

### **An Invitation**

The questions and ideas raised here are not only for False Creek, or for those of us already working in the space between democracy and the environment. They belong to every community that has ever wondered what it means to live well with one another and with the places that sustain us.

Wherever you are, there is a conversation waiting to begin about the futures we want to shape together. I invite you to start it. And if we can be a partner in your journey, we would be honored to walk alongside you.

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to the False Creek Friends Society and to every participant in our first civic workshop for the generosity of their time, their stories, and their imagination. This work is still unfolding, and I carry immense gratitude and anticipation for all the learning, listening, and reimagining that lies ahead.

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## About the Author



**Natalie Montecino** is an educator, international researcher, and rural community development champion working at the intersection of climate action, democracy, and inclusive leadership. She currently serves as Executive Director of the Climate Democracy Initiative, where she leads programs that amplify local voices in energy transition, strengthen environmental civics education, and shape just climate policy across rural and historically underrepresented communities.

In addition to her role with the Climate Democracy Initiative, she is the Instructor for the [Stanford University e-Minamata Program](#), which examines environmental justice, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and U.S.–Japan relations. Natalie brings a global perspective to her work, grounded in cross-cultural experience. She was selected as a Davos50 Delegate—one of 50 young leaders from around the world recognized for their rising potential to shape the future—to attend the [2025 World Economic Forum Annual Meeting](#) in Davos, where she spoke on a panel about inclusive leadership and the strengths of neurodiverse governance. That same year, she was named an [Aspen Ideas Festival Fellow](#), joining a cohort of emerging global changemakers recognized for advancing meaningful impact in their fields.

Previously, she completed a Fulbright Fellowship in Japan, conducting field research on rural revitalization and community resilience in partnership with Okayama University. She has served as an invited lecturer at both Tokyo University and Okayama University, and her rural revitalization research has been published in numerous Japanese academic journals.

Natalie has represented the United States in several high-level international forums, including the [Young Trilateral Leaders Summit](#) (Japan–Korea–U.S.) and a Department of State Media Literacy and Democracy Seminar in South Korea.

Natalie holds a B.A. in International Studies from Colorado State University, where she graduated summa cum laude. She currently serves on the City of Fort Collins Energy Board and is a member of the [World Economic Forum's Longevity Economy Taskforce](#).

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