



What's Next For Nature: Perspectives on Political Ecology

Nature and Democracy

Democracy and an invitation to dream

Standing near a battered railing inside the Little Colorado River Navajo Tribal Park, I watch as a dozen ravens draft upward in thermal air currents, swirling and rising until they tumble in a controlled fall, chasing each other in pairs back over the canyon rim. A Diné woman speaks to our small group about the noxious weed program she helps to manage for the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the Navajo Nation. She just recited the simplest description of the [NEPA process](#) I've ever encountered from a government official. In three short sentences she explained how a project would change the land, what the recovery process would look like, and then asked for consent to move forward, as if you were sitting in a doctor's office preparing for surgery and the procedure requiring NEPA approval was an incision into your own skin.



By Jordana Barrack
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I could physically feel why I should care, why I should participate, and why the process was so important to have in place.

As she turned to walk away, the back panel of her black NTVS branded hoodie had a large Navajo print profile of Darts Vadar. I couldn't help but wonder if that was connected to the clarity she held for such a complex decision-making process.

Learning to Dream

Earlier this year I stumbled down a rabbit hole while researching the environmental and civil rights movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. As our federal systems see change to long standing policies and programs, I was curious to better understand what moved the masses back then and thereby created the majority needed to pass such policies in the first place. A favorite California rancher once said to me, "you need the money, or you need the many" to make change. Yes, the movements of our past had "the many," but behind that were a handful of people willing to lead others through a difficult and long process. What was it about those people that gave them the confidence to do hard things?

In 2023 a global study was released from BE Works called [Illuminating the Climate Era Mindset](#), where "creative mindsets" were highlighted as a key quality for people willing to take on complicated problems, like tackling climate issues. I filed that away in the back of my mind under "intriguing insights," unsure how to specifically draw that into my work in the philanthropic sector. But now, as I dig into civil rights leaders from previous decades and of today, there is a character quality that continually catches my eye: a profound love for science-fiction story telling.

Star Trek, Star Wars, Octavia Butler, Indigenous Futurism. These are just a few story sources and concepts that provided the utopian, and also dystopian, vision for the goals of the civil rights movement. For example, Star Trek first aired in 1966, and it is said that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was influential in changing the career course of actress [Nichelle Nichols](#), who played the black female lieutenant Nyota Uhura on the USS Enterprise, a groundbreaking role for the period. King and Nichols mutual inspiration for each other's story fueled cultural change and possibility for the rest of us.

Mostly a reader of nonfiction, I became curious about what I had missed all these years by trying to learn, instead of trying to dream. So I picked up an Octavia Butler book. And then another. Visions of a difficult future, written in the 80s and 90s, have accurately captured pieces of current events we experience today. I then read Rebecca Roanhorse, a modern Indigenous author, and noticed how Native American fantasy writing could describe pending events like drought, border walls and sea level rise, all while superheroes transformed through lightning strikes during a dry desert thunderstorm. Stories where the language of the future inspires belonging.

I then realized that science-fiction storytelling was about the ability to imagine the future and know exactly what items were in your backpack, what your community of allies could be called to do for you, what kind of food was brought out when you needed nourishment, and why you cared enough to go out and save the world.

Shared struggles lead to speculative imagination

People come together when they need to achieve something better and it's only possible to get there with the involvement of more people. Coalitions form in the Intermountain West after a fire, drought, or other natural disaster sweeps through a community. Collaboration rises from trauma as people realize they need to work together to prevent the next problem. Looking back, each gathering to rebuild and recover is a small exercise in democracy.

'Imagining the future' as an activity to do together in our society is easier said than orchestrated though. It won't be the first reason we find ourselves in a room together. But carving out time to play with different scenarios, picturing the items in our backpack or the differing characteristics of our allies, this is the interesting work of our time.

How many of those items exist today? What do we need to invent? What do we need to acquire? What relationships do we need to build? We need to do the dreaming now so we can begin the process of reverse-engineering the steps it will take and the people we need to get there.

"It is normal for our imagination of the future to seem ridiculous, overly positive, or dystopian." Nikolas Badminton, author of [Facing Our Futures](#), recommends envisioning a time frame distant enough, 10 or more years, to create separation from our existing systems operationally and culturally, but close enough in time where we can still connect with the current purpose for our existing system, under 30 years.

[Systems don't collapse](#) when they have room to evolve. Part of the imagining activity requires "a deep comfort with experimentation and failure, an ability to incubate new ideas, and a willingness to be flexible on what success looks like." Sounds similar to the journey on [How a Bill Becomes a Law](#), and the collective negotiation of many ideas colliding together for shared governance.

Social reformer and philosopher John Dewey said, “imagination is the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise. The ability to wonder...what if.”

What if... our midwestern row crops could be returned to prairie rangelands? Could we then have enough land to sustainably maintain our American beef production and our family’s veggies too? Ecdysis Foundation, a regenerative agriculture research nonprofit is willing to consider the potential, thanks in part to the data coming out of their “1000 Farm Initiative.” Founder, Jonathan Lundgren, shared with me his research on social movements, and how “a social movement needs 3% of a population to get behind it in order for the movement to be able to stand on its own.” So, 1000 farms. Sustainable farming is now a social movement.

Another what if. What if... conservation easement values were determined by what we find underground verses the view we see above ground? ‘Funga’ is now recognized by [National Geographic Society](#) as a distinct kingdom of wildlife, alongside Flora and Fauna. Biodiversity hot spots of fungal mycorrhizal networks have been correlated to greater carbon sequestration potential in our soils. [“And yet, they’ve been almost entirely absent from climate risk models.”](#) The Society for the Protection of Underground Networks, another nonprofit with the courage to dream, is out to change our perceptions of conservation value, and have proven in their lab how [plants and fungi implement their own ‘trade networks’ without a brain.](#)

And what if... democracy was a verb? An action. An activity we do together every day. Routine as brushing our teeth, but as dynamic and engaging as an action film where we all identify as supporting characters. What does that version of the future look like?

Clearly, I have more questions than answers when it comes to imagining the future. Imagination is a skill set we must not lose. We are stifled by what is happening in the world today. Think of how it feels to be stifled. My creativity is suppressed and I am unable to do the thinking required to find solutions. If we don’t prioritize making time to dream our way forward, the future will be further.

Returning to the ground

Up where the shortgrass prairie meets the Ponderosa–Juniper foothills, my husband and I search for mule deer, with a bow. We are learning to hunt this year. We have no family to teach us the way, no outfitter, no horses or ATV’s. But our boots are well worn, and my pack feels like a comfort blanket as I slip it over my shoulders to head out into the field. Cinching down the waist belt, the weight centers on my hips and firmly hugs my spine and sides. It triggers a sense of confidence. Confidence to walk into the wilderness and have enough strength to walk back out again.

For the first four decades of my life I thought hunting was an activity reserved for tough men and gun enthusiasts. Not the environmentalists I more closely identified with. I grew up in an urban city where you hunted for your red meat at the local grocery store and harvested beans from the canned food aisle. My parents were small business owners who worked seven days a week and specialized in take-out food to raise their children. A skill I still channel when swamped with work on weeknights.

Despite my urban upbringing I discovered the wide-open landscapes of the western United States. Skiing Rocky Mountains, rafting wild rivers, hiking desert canyons, and lately, birding on the

eastern Colorado grasslands. I love these places, most of them an experience our public lands provide me. But nothing prepared me for the emotional journey I would travel while learning to hunt. My body knows I belong here. My mind knows we won't have these wild places without a collective agreement to protect and manage them. Being a hunter is a weird intersection of humanity's past and the battle for its future.

I am struck by the curiosity involved in hunting. A drive to deeply understand another species, another individual being. Where else in our daily interactions do we seek with such effort to understand another? In the field, all our human senses are activated, we spend hours learning the name of a shrub a deer might graze on, or watching how a small herd nudges the confidence in each other as they move down to an exposed riverbank, one step back for every two steps.

We are learning their culture. We do not speak a shared language, but still, we are trying to listen.

Learning to Listen

Back on the plains, I am watching two dozen pronghorn sprint across the land, strides wide open at full speed. It is mesmerizing. But even more impressive is the turn they just made together, navigating around a drainage without breaking distance between shoulders or losing a member of their family in the ditch. It makes me think of humans, millions of them, moving about in our cities and highways, funneling their voices into the polls on an election day. What an incredible thing to move the masses.

When the wind moves through the cottonwood trees, thousands of teardrop shaped leaves rustle independently from their positions, but collectively their sound is as strong as a wave crashing on the coast. Their presence on the landscape is heard. Standing here in my new black NTVS Darth Vader hoodie, I can see the voices that aren't yet represented in our systems and the land's temptation to transform. The fungi, the rangeland, and the humans are all connected. What does a future look like with governance that honors our connections to nature and language that says we all belong to this dream? When I ask 'what if,' I can physically feel why I should care, why I should participate, and why we need this process to listen at all. This is the work of our time.

Democracy is extraordinary.

About the Author



Jordana Barrack is the Executive Director of Mighty Arrow Family Foundation, a grantmaking and impact investing entity that works on climate solutions, land stewardship, regenerative agriculture and civic engagement initiatives across the states of Colorado and California. Jordana dedicates her time to advancing a culture of care within the philanthropic relationships she maintains with the foundation's grant partners, and amplifies the stories and best practices they have developed over the 12 years of funding in the impact space. Jordana participates on several nonprofit boards, including American Rivers and the Coalition for the Poudre River Watershed, and previously served as a Larimer County Planning Commissioner. Water has always been a common thread through Jordana's career and personal passions. If not in the office, she can be found exploring rivers on a whitewater raft with her husband.

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