



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

*Nature and Democracy*

### Democracy and Conservation: Integrity at the Edge



By Karina Ugarte &  
Lorenzo de Rosenzweig  
January 2026

In the long march of planetary evolution, nature has experimented endlessly, generating, refining, and discarding entire ways of living. What is usually called the biosphere is less a finished masterpiece than a restless mosaic, always in motion, shaped by tension, disturbance, and adaptation. Life's most intricate achievements—old-growth forests, thriving wetlands, coral reefs—emerge not from stability alone but from the dynamic interplay of countless species and feedback across scales.

Human societies, too, are products of this crucible of change. Across generations, institutions arise, transform, and sometimes vanish as communities struggle to organize coexistence amid diversity and conflict. Among these inventions, democracy remains one of the boldest experiments: a way of governing complexity by safeguarding plural voices, enabling coexistence, and nurturing a shared public good.

When democracy works at its best, it closely resembles an ecosystem in a state of high integrity, like a wetland at the peak of its powers or an ancient forest dense with hidden connections and mutual dependencies. Neither system is defined by mechanical perfection, but by wholeness: the ability to absorb shocks, adapt to novelty, and sustain life's rich possibilities over time. Contemporary work in ecological democracy underscores this analogy, arguing that only those political systems that are flexible, inclusive, and open to learning from disturbance can endure in the long run.

#### The anatomy of integrity

In ecology, integrity refers to a system's capacity to maintain its vital functions—energy flows, species interactions, hydrological cycles—even as external conditions change. An ecosystem with integrity has not only its key components in place, but also the relationships among them that allow for self-organization, resilience, and the emergence of new patterns of life. It is this coherence across scales—soil microbes, plants, animals, climate—that makes a forest or wetland more than the sum of its parts.

When integrity is affected, the system's capacity to provide benefits erodes: species and populations disappear, functional connections are lost, feedback loops weaken, and resilience

---

gives way to brittleness. Collapse rarely arrives as a single dramatic event; more often it is a gradual thinning, one broken link at a time, until the system can no longer sustain abundance or recover from disturbance. In such landscapes, scarcity spreads, and conflicts over dwindling resources intensify.

Democratic integrity is similarly relational. It does not reside in rules and constitutions alone, but in the web of trust, participation, and accountability linking citizens, institutions, and shared projects. A democracy with integrity protects pluralism and diversity of perspectives, distributes power, and preserves mechanisms of feedback so that grievances, innovations, and needs are heard and can translate into reform. When those feedback loops remain alive, legitimacy is renewed, and societies can adapt to crises without abandoning their core commitments to sustain public goods.

### **Parallels between ecosystems and democracies**

The parallels between ecological and democratic integrity are not simply metaphorical. In both domains, diversity underpins resilience: a range of species or a plurality of voices provides alternatives when conditions change, and prevents domination by a single, rigid element. In a forest, this might mean multiple pollinators or seed dispersers; in a democracy, multiple parties, vibrant civil society, and independent media.

Both systems depend on distributed functions rather than control from a single center. Healthy ecosystems organize themselves through local interactions and feedbacks that no single actor directs; healthy democracies decentralize decision-making and encourage deliberation across many arenas, from local councils to national legislatures. In each case, robustness comes from redundancy, polycentric governance, and the freedom of different actors to experiment and learn.

Crucially, both ecosystems and democracies require time and continuity to build integrity. Old forests, like mature democratic institutions, are the outcome of long processes of accumulation: of norms, practices, relationships, and tacit knowledge. They can be felled or hollowed out quickly, but they cannot be rebuilt overnight. This temporal dimension reminds us that conservation and democratic practice are intergenerational responsibilities, not short-term projects.

### **Why systems fail**

Failing ecosystems, just like the human body, often look deceptively normal until a threshold is crossed. Before the final collapse, there are early warnings: loss of keystone species, erosion of soils, contamination of water, the simplification of food webs. These are, in essence, breakdowns of feedback—signals that no longer reach managers or communities in time to prompt corrective action.

Democratic breakdown follows a similar path. The most visible crises—authoritarian turns, civic unrest, institutional paralysis—are usually preceded by quieter losses: declining participation in elections, exclusion of marginalized groups, erosion of independent oversight, concentration of power in fewer hands. Public trust thins, citizen bonds weaken, and the space for collective problem-solving narrows until the system can no longer mediate conflicts or distribute rights and responsibilities fairly.

---

In both realms, failures often stem from narrow, short-term interests overriding broader values. When conservation decisions focus only on immediate economic gains, or when political agendas serve only present-day constituents while ignoring future generations, the result is over-extraction, social fragmentation, and the weakening of institutions that hold communities together. Long-term integrity demands attention to the rights of future citizens and non-human communities alike.

### **Conservation as democratic practice**

If democracy can be understood as a kind of political ecosystem, then conservation can be reimagined as decentralized renewal. This means moving beyond top-down models of environmental management toward participatory processes that rebuild trust, common purpose, shared responsibility and continuous learning. Conservation, in this view, is not only about protecting species or landscapes, but about restoring the norms and institutions that make collaboration and coexistence possible.

Such an approach changes the questions we ask. Instead of asking only how many hectares can be kept under protection, we must ask who defines priorities, whose knowledge counts, and how benefits and burdens are distributed. The legitimacy and durability of any conservation effort depends on the extent to which affected communities are recognized as true stakeholders, not just beneficiaries or obstacles.

This is where the analogy between ecosystems and democracies becomes more evident. Just as restoration ecologists seek to re-establish missing functions and connections in degraded landscapes, democratic conservation seeks to restore social feedback loops: inclusive deliberation, transparent information, mechanisms for accountability and redress. The goal is a social-ecological system that can learn and adapt, rather than one that rigidly enforces a fixed blueprint from above.

### **CBC North: a biological and cultural corridor in construction**

The emerging initiative known as the Corredor Biocultural Emblema Frontera Norte (CBC North) in northern Mexico, offers a living laboratory for this convergence of conservation and democracy. Conceived as a vast biocultural corridor, CBC North aims to link millions of hectares of ecosystems and cultural landscapes across a region marked by ecological richness as well as deep social and political complexity.

CBC North's innovation does not lie only in its spatial scale or biocultural ambitions, but in its democratic architecture. From its inception, the corridor has been framed as a participatory project, inviting local communities, Indigenous peoples, municipal and state governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and private actors to co-design its governance, priorities, theory of change and programmatic interventions. Rather than treating participation as a late-stage consultation, CBC North positions it as the core mechanism of flexible and collaborative co-design.

This approach reflects lessons from both practice and research: that conservation built through plural governance is more likely to endure and to generate equitable benefits. In CBC North, the construction of trust networks, shared diagnostic processes, and joint decision spaces precedes

---

large-scale implementation. Like an ecosystem assembling through succession, the corridor is being built layer by layer, beginning with the relationships and rules that will allow it to adapt to future challenges.

### **Eco-democratic governance in practice**

CBC North aspires to embody what eco-democratic theorists describe as polycentric, relational governance. Instead of a single command center, the corridor's governance model envisions multiple nodes—community assemblies, inter-municipal platforms, technical committees, cross-border partnerships—linked by flows of information and shared norms. Each node carries a piece of the whole, much like different habitats or species groups in a landscape.

In practical terms, this means beginning with listening: mapping local priorities, histories of conflict and cooperation, and existing conservation practices before imposing external models. It means recognizing Indigenous and rural communities as holders of territorial knowledge and as political subjects with the right to shape regional futures. And it requires transparent mechanisms for resolving disputes, monitoring outcomes, and revising decisions as new information emerges.

CBC North is still in its design phase and much remains to be tested on the ground. Yet even at this early stage, its participatory logic offers a generative blueprint: conservation as a shared, negotiated experiment that mirrors the adaptive, feedback-rich dynamics of resilient ecosystems. By rooting conservation in democratic practice, the corridor seeks not only to protect nature, but to strengthen the social fabric needed to sustain protection over time.

### **Lessons from breakdown and renewal**

Looking across cases of ecological restoration and democratic reform, a common lesson emerges: renewal rarely comes from replicating past structures; it arises from recombining elements in new configurations that restore integrity. Forests recovering from fire do not return to their exact previous state; they assemble new communities of species that can cope with altered conditions. Likewise, democracies emerging from crisis often depend on new institutions, coalitions, and narratives that expand the circle of belonging.

The interaction between large cities and the ecosystems that surround them also represents a good metaphor for nature. The complex arrangement of life forms in an ecosystem shapes and supports the needs and aspirations of the human communities that surround them and yet their continued flourishing depends on the ability of those same communities to democratically govern their human and more-than-human relationships. Improving this democratic relation between cities and resilient landscapes is one of the most promising new frontiers of conservation.

In both realms, the work of renewal is fundamentally participatory. Ecosystem restoration requires the involvement of local stewards, scientists, landowners, and authorities; democratic repair demands the engagement of citizens of large urban settlements, once excluded or silenced from conservation-related decisions. What emerges, when successful, is not a return to an idealized past, but the creation of a more inclusive and resilient whole.

CBC North points toward this kind of forward-looking renewal. By connecting fragmented landscapes, it addresses ecological breakdown; by weaving together historically separated social

actors, it addresses democratic fragmentation. Its promise lies less in any single protected area or policy instrument than in its commitment to cultivate a living, learning network capable of evolving with the region's challenges.

### **What's next for nature—and democracy?**

The converging crises of biodiversity loss, climate disruption, and democratic erosion make the question "What's next for nature?" inseparable from "What's next for democracy?" Decisions about land use, water, energy, and climate adaptation are already reshaping political orders, just as institutional decay and social polarization are shaping environmental outcomes. Treating these spheres as separate is no longer tenable.

The analogy between ecosystems and democracies is not a rhetorical exercise; it is an invitation to rethink both. If democracy is the most promising political ecosystem humanity has devised, then its health must be measured not only by formal procedures, but by its capacity to support diverse forms of life—human and more-than-human—over generations. And if conservation is to be worthy of its name, it must conserve not just species and landscapes, but the conditions for just and inclusive coexistence with humans.

There is no final, stable answer to what comes next. Integrity, whether ecological or democratic, is never a given; it is a practice, continuously made and remade through conflict, cooperation, and learning. The path forward lies in embracing this unfinished quality: designing conservation as democratic experimentation, and democracy as a form of ecological exchange.

If there is hope at the edge of our current crises, it lies in this intertwined renewal of wholeness and resilience. By aligning the health of our institutions and urban infrastructure with the health of our ecosystems, and by treating participation not as a procedural box to tick but as the lifeblood of both, it becomes possible to imagine a future in which nature and democracy do not merely survive together but co-evolve toward greater integrity.

#### Bibliography

- Lafferty, William M. "Democracy and Ecological Rationality". *Globalization, Governance and Identity*, edited by Guy Lachapelle and John Trent, Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2000, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pum.14856>.
- Mendonça RF, Veloso LHN, Magalhães BD, Motta FM. Deliberative ecologies: a relational critique of deliberative systems. *European Political Science Review*. 2024;16(3):333–350. doi:10.1017/S1755773923000358.
- Manuel-Navarrete, David, James J. Kay, and Dan Dolderman. "Ecological Integrity Discourses: Linking Ecology with Cultural Transformation." *Human Ecology Review* 11, no. 3 (2004): 215–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24707715>.
- Couperus, S., & van de Grift, L. (2022). Environment and Democracy: An Introduction. *Journal of Modern European History*, 20(3), 276–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16118944221113271> (Original work published 2022)
- Corredor Biocultural Emblema Frontera Norte de Mexico. *Terra Habitus*, julio, 2025.

## About the Authors



**Eva Karina Ugarte Acosta** is a conservation strategist and communications specialist with over 20 years of international experience in environmental governance, multi-stakeholder coordination, and sustainable development. Drawing on a Master's degree in Environment, Culture, and Society from Lancaster University, as well as diplomas in Environmental Management, Social Entrepreneurship, and Corporate Strategic Communication, she has led initiatives at organizations including BirdLife International, the Mexican Fund for Nature Conservation (FMCN), and the Latin American and Caribbean Environmental Funds Network (RedLAC). Her work focuses on resource mobilization, cross-sector collaboration, and strategic communication to maximize social and environmental impact, and she serves on the board of Red de Observadores Ciudadanos La Paz Waterkeeper in Mexico.



**Lorenzo de Rosenzweig** is the founder and CEO of Terra Habitus, A.C. and a global senior advisor in conservation finance, collaboration, conservation project design and systems thinking. He helped found the Mexican Fund for the Conservation of Nature, the Mesoamerican Reef Fund, and the Network of Environmental Funds of Latin America and the Caribbean. Lorenzo has pioneered the creation and implementation of innovative conservation finance models and earned the support of government agencies, international organizations, and private donors. His direct fundraising efforts have resulted in more than \$500 million in grants for conservation in México and Mesoamerica. He has more than 40 years of experience in the field of conservation and conservation finance, has participated in 100+ different publications and manuals on the subject, chairs three conservation organizations and participates as board member in seven more.

*Disclaimer: We are pleased to share this material from an external expert, presented as a contribution to public discourse. The thoughts expressed herein belong solely to the author, reflect the judgment of the author as of the date of publication, are subject to change, and do not necessarily represent the official views or values of the Salazar Center.*