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Investigación

The Ebb and Flow of Ecocentrism in Environmental Law: From Global Aspiration to National Innovation

El auge y declive del ecocentrismo en el derecho ambiental: de la aspiración global a la innovación nacional

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Abstract

Since its consolidation in the latter half of the 20th century, international environmental law has been marked by a persistent tension between two competing paradigms: anthropocentrism, which places human interests at the center of all value, and ecocentrism, which recognizes nature's intrinsic value independent of its utility to humankind. This article posits that despite a notable, albeit transient, shift towards ecocentrism with the adoption of the 1982 World Charter for Nature, the trajectory of international environmental law, guided by the United Nations, has predominantly reverted to and csolidified a predominantly anthropocentric framework.

This restoration is evident in subsequent keystone instruments that prioritize sustainable development and human-centric climate objectives. To substantiate this claim, this paper employs a qualitative documentary analysis of foundational UN environmental declarations. It first contrasts the anthropocentric principles of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration with the ecocentric vision of the 1982 World Charter. It then examines the Rio Declaration of 1992 to illustrate the subsequent return to a human-centered paradigm. However, the analysis reveals a compelling divergence: while international law has historically favored anthropocentrism, a counter-trend has emerged at the national level.

This article draws on Colombia's constitutional jurisprudence as a case study, to demonstrate how domestic legal systems can pioneer robust ecocentric frameworks, thereby granting legal personhood to natural entities. This divergence indicates a growing disconnection between the established international legal order and innovative national approaches, marking a critical juncture in the evolution of global environmental governance.

Keywords

Ecocentrism, Anthropocentrism, International Environmental Law, Rights of Nature, World Charter for Nature, Colombian Environmental Law.

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Resumen

Desde su consolidación en la segunda mitad del siglo XX, el derecho internacional ambiental se ha caracterizado por una tensión persistente entre dos paradigmas contrapuestos: el antropocentrismo, que sitúa los intereses humanos en el centro de todos los valores, y el ecocentrismo, que reconoce el valor intrínseco de la naturaleza, independientemente de su utilidad para la humanidad. Este artículo señala que, aunque la adopción de la *Carta Mundial de la Naturaleza de* 1982 representó un cambio notable, aunque breve, hacia una perspectiva ecocéntrica, la trayectoria del derecho internacional del medio ambiente, impulsada por la Organización de las Naciones Unidas, ha vuelto a un marco predominantemente antropocéntrico y lo ha consolidado.

Este regreso se muestra en los instrumentos fundamentales posteriores, que priorizan el desarrollo sostenible y los objetivos climáticos centrados en el ser humano. Para fundamentar esta afirmación, el presente documento se basa en un análisis documental cualitativo de las declaraciones medioambientales clave de la ONU. En primer lugar, contrasta los principios antropocéntricos de la Declaración de Estocolmo de 1972 con la visión ecocéntrica de la Carta Mundial de 1982. Enseguida, examina la Declaración de Río de 1992, para ilustrar el retorno a un paradigma centrado en el ser humano. Sin embargo, el análisis revela una discrepancia importante: mientras que el derecho internacional ha favorecido el antropocentrismo, a nivel nacional ha surgido una tendencia contraria.

Con base en la jurisprudencia constitucional de Colombia como estudio de caso, este artículo demuestra cómo los sistemas jurídicos nacionales pueden ser pioneros en la creación de marcos ecocéntricos sólidos, que otorgan personalidad jurídica a las entidades naturales. Esta divergencia sugiere una creciente desconexión entre el orden jurídico internacional establecido y los enfoques nacionales innovadores. Esto permite ver que estamos frente a un momento crítico en la evolución de la gobernanza ambiental mundial.

Palabras clave

ecocentrismo, antropocentrismo, derecho internacional ambiental, derechos de la naturaleza, carta mundial de la naturaleza, derecho ambiental colombiano.

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Introduction

From its inception, the field of international environmental law has been the site of a profound ideological contest. This struggle revolves around a fundamental question: Does nature possess value only in its capacity to serve human needs, or does it hold an intrinsic value deserving of legal protection in its own right? This question delineates the two dominant, and often conflicting, paradigms that have shaped global environmental governance: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. The former, rooted in a utilitarian worldview, frames the environment as a collection of resources to be managed for human benefit and intergenerational equity. In contrast, the latter proposes a radical reorientation of the legal and ethical relationship between humanity and the natural world. It posits that ecosystems and their components have a right to exist and flourish, independent of their utility to *Homo sapiens*.

The history of multilateral environmental agreements under the aegis of the United Nations (UN) demonstrates the shifting dominance of these two perspectives. While the foundational 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment established an anthropocentric baseline for international cooperation. A remarkable and singular departure occurred a decade later. The 1982 World Charter for Nature, adopted by the UN General Assembly, represented the high-water mark of official international ecocentrism, explicitly articulating principles grounded in the intrinsic value of all life forms. It was a moment of profound potential, suggesting a fundamental shift in global consciousness.

However, this article argues that the ecocentric promise of the 1982 Charter has not been realized at the international level. Instead, it represents an anomalous peak from which subsequent international environmental law has steadily receded. The global legal framework that has evolved in the decades since—epitomized by the concept of "sustainable development" championed in the 1992 Rio Declaration and the climate-focused Paris Agreement of 2015—has effectively restored and reinforced the primacy of the anthropocentric paradigm. The primary motivations for environmental protection, such as human welfare, economic development, and security, have superseded the concept of preserving nature its own sake.

To develop this argument, this paper undertakes a qualitative documentary analysis of key UN instruments, tracing the trajectory of these competing paradigms. It begins by deconstructing the anthropocentric underpinnings of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration. It then examines the 1982 World Charter for Nature as a stark counterpoint, highlighting its revolutionary ecocentric principles. The subsequent reversion to anthropocentrism will be demonstrated through an examination of the influential 1992 Rio Declaration.

However, the narrative does not conclude with the predominance of international anthropocentrism. A compelling counter-movement has gained momentum not in global forums, but within the laboratories of national jurisdictions. The final section of this paper presents a case

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study of Colombia, whose constitutional jurisprudence has become a leading global example of a judicially driven "ecocentric turn." By granting legal personhood to major ecosystems like the Atrato River and the Amazon Rainforest, the Colombian judiciary has taken a path that differs significantly from the international mainstream. This analysis of Colombia's experience reveals a critical tension between a cautious, human-centered international legal order and the bold, nature-centered innovations emerging at the national level. This raises vital questions about the future direction of environmental law.

The Anthropocentric Foundation: The 1972 Stockholm Declaration

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm is widely regarded as the genesis of modern international environmental law. This event was a significant turning point, bringing environmental concerns to the forefront of the global political agenda for the first time. The conference's primary output, the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (hereafter "Stockholm Declaration"), established the foundational principles that would guide state action for years to come. While the text is undoubtedly pioneering, a close reading of its text reveals a legal and ethical framework that is unequivocally anthropocentric. The environment is not regarded as a subject of rights, but rather as an object—a composite of resources essential for human dignity, well-being, and development.

This human-centered orientation is evident from the Declaration's opening proclamations. The preamble states that the environment is "essential to his well-being and to the enjoyment of basic human rights—even the right to life itself." This language establishes a causal link, thereby justifying environmental protection as it contributes to human rights and quality of life. The environment's value is instrumental; it is valued *because* it is necessary for humans.

The principles articulated in the Declaration consistently reinforce this perspective. According to Principle 1, "Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality, and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being." The subject of the right is explicitly human. The environment is the qualifying condition, the stage upon which human dignity unfolds. However, there is no mention of any rights or standing for the environment itself.

Furthermore, the Stockholm Declaration establishes a definitive link between environmental management and economic development, particularly for developing nations. As outlined in Principle 8, "Economic and social development is essential for ensuring a favorable living and working environment for man and for creating conditions on earth that are necessary for the improvement of the quality of life." This principle, among others, places environmental concerns as secondary to or dependent upon developmental objectives. The "natural resources of the earth," as termed in Principle 2, must be "safeguarded for the benefit of present and future

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generations through careful planning or management." The concept of intergenerational equity, while forward-looking, remains anthropocentric. It concerns the equitable distribution of resources among human generations, not the preservation of nature for its own sake.

This initiative established a new paradigm for environmental stewardship, wherein humanity is entrusted with the responsibility of managing the planet's resources for the long-term benefit of future generations. As Cullet (2003) explained, the framework promotes the idea of managing a "global commons" for the benefit of its human shareholders. While this was a critical first step in recognizing the ecological limits to growth, its philosophical underpinnings never strayed from a worldview in which nature's primary legal and ethical relevance is defined by its utility to humankind. It established a robust and enduring foundation upon which much of subsequent international environmental law would be built.

A Paradigm Shift: The Ecocentric Vision of the 1982 World Charter for Nature

Precisely one decade after the Stockholm Conference, the UN General Assembly adopted a document that represented a radical departure from the established anthropocentric norm. The World Charter for Nature (hereafter "the Charter"), adopted on October 28, 1982, is a landmark achievement in the history of international law. It is a formal instrument that explicitly embraces an ecocentric worldview. It redefined the human-nature relationship, moving beyond traditional manager-resource dynamic to a more complex and interconnected relationship. This shift introduced a moral and legal obligation for humanity to respect and preserve, irrespective of its practical applications.

The Charter places the ecosystem at the core of our world and our focus is on safeguarding the biological systems and all the living beings within it. We are a vital part of a vast ecosystem, and all countries need to take this as a priority. In developing countries community participation in such matters always seem to have limitations (Calderón Suaza, C. F., Romero Muñetón, L. P. y Aristizábal Rodríguez, E. F, 2025).

This fundamental shift is immediately indicated in the preamble of the Charter. s It recognizes that "Mankind is a part of nature and life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems which ensure the supply of energy and nutrients." This simple statement reverses the Stockholm hierarchy; instead of nature existing for man, mankind is positioned as a dependent component *within* nature. It further asserts that "Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of action." Here, the Charter makes its most profound move by decoupling value from utility. The inherent value of an organism should not be determined by its instrumental value.

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This philosophy is codified in its General Principles. As stated in Principle 1 of the Charter, "Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be impaired." This obligation is direct and unconditional. In contrasts to the emphasis placed on human rights in the Stockholm Declaration, the primary duty outlined here is to nature itself. Principle 2 builds on this, stating that "The genetic viability on the earth shall not be compromised; the population levels of all life forms, wild and domesticated, must be at least sufficient for their survival, and to this end necessary habitats shall be safeguarded." The justification is not human benefit, but the survival of life forms as an end in itself.

The Charter's operational principles for "Implementation" further distinguish it from its predecessor. Stockholm's approach to "rational management," contrasts with the Charter mandate for a more precautionary and humbler strategy. According to Principle 11, "Activities which might have an impact on nature shall be controlled, and the best available technologies that minimize significant risks to nature or other adverse effects shall be used." It also states a need to avoid activities that could generate an irreversible environmental damage. This is a formulation of the precautionary principle from a distinctly ecocentric standpoint, where the entity to be protected from harm is nature itself, not just human interests within it.

The 1982 World Charter for Nature was, and remains, a visionary document. It provided the international community with a formal, UN-endorsed legal and ethical blueprint for an ecocentric system of global governance. For a moment, it appeared that international environmental law was poised to evolve beyond its utilitarian origins. However, the momentum generated by the Charter would prove to be short-lived. Instead of becoming the foundation of a new environmental paradigm, it would become an outlier—a high point of ecocentric idealism from which the mainstream of international law would soon retreat.

The Anthropocentric Restoration: The 1992 Rio Declaration

Twenty years after the Stockholm Conference and ten years after the World Charter for Nature, the international community convened in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), colloquially known as the Earth Summit. The conference was a monumental event that produced several key documents, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The conference's primary political outcome, however, was the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (hereafter "Rio Declaration"), which build upon the principles established in the Stockholm Declaration. A thorough review of the Rio Declaration indicates that, contrary to its intentions to advance ecocentric principles, it actually signaled a significant shift back to the anthropocentric paradigm, with a reinforcement of that approach.

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The organizing principle of the Rio Declaration is "sustainable development," a concept that attempts to integrate environmental concerns with economic and social objectives. While the framework articulated in Rio is commendable in its ambition, it unambiguously places human beings at its core. As outlined in Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration states: "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." This principle, which is stated at the beginning of the document, clarifies who will benefit from environmental protection. The language reflects the approach seen in Stockholm, but with the added emphasis on a "productive life," firmly linking environmentalism to economic activity.

The World Charter for Nature's ecocentric spirit is conspicuously absent. There is no mention of the intrinsic value of life or of respecting nature for its own sake. Instead, the focus is on the right to develop. Principle 3 asserts that "The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations." The environment is presented as one of two competing "needs" to be balanced against development, rather than as a holistic system with its own right to integrity. This framing has led to a trade-off mentality in international policy, where environmental protection is often considered in opposition to economic growth rather than as a prerequisite for it.

Furthermore, the Rio Declaration strongly reaffirms the principle of national sovereignty over natural resources. According to Principle 2, "States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental and developmental policies." While this is a cornerstone of international law, its prominent placement in the Rio Declaration, coupled with the absence of any corresponding duty to nature itself (as found in the 1982 Charter), reinforces the view of nature as a national asset for exploitation, albeit a sustainably managed one.

The Rio Declaration was not a failure; it successfully mainstreamed environmental considerations into economic policy and popularized concepts like the precautionary principle (Principle 15) and public participation (Principle 10). However, it achieved this by presenting environmentalism in a language that was appealing to the prevailing political and economic order: the language of human interests, development, and resource management. By doing so, it effectively set aside the ecocentric paradigm of the World Charter for Nature, creating a path for international environmental law that has lasted for decades. The Paris Agreement (2015), for instance, emphasizes the mitigation of potential consequences of climate change on human societies, economies, and security, rather than prioritizing the preservation of the planet's ecological integrity as a standalone objective. Therefore, Rio did not just fail to build on the 1982 Charter; it cemented a human-based path that has come to define the modern era of global environmental governance.

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The Ecocentric Turn in National Jurisprudence: The Case of Colombia

While the trajectory of international environmental law post-1982 has been one of anthropocentric restoration, a fascinating and powerful counter-narrative has been unfolding within certain national legal systems. Domestic courts have begun to act as laboratories for legal innovation, translating ecocentric philosophy into binding legal precedent. This shift away from multilateral diplomacy has allowed these courts to move beyond the consensus-driven constraints that have historically limited their ability to act as laboratories for legal innovation. Among these, the judiciary of Colombia has emerged as a global pioneer, crafting a robust and influential jurisprudence that recognizes the rights of nature and grants legal personhood to ecosystems. This "ecocentric turn" in Colombia is in stark contrast to the dominant international paradigm and offers a compelling alternative model for environmental governance.

The foundation for this judicial activism was laid in the Colombian Constitution of 1991, often referred to as the "Green Constitution." It incorporates a series of environmental principles, including the state's duty to protect natural resources, the right to a healthy environment, and the concept of the "ecological constitution," which posits that environmental protection is a guiding principle that permeates the entire legal order (Jaramillo & Vásquez, 2020). Scholars such as Pedraza Cadavid (2012) have examined the emergence of "green constitutionalism" in Latin America, emphasizing how legal instruments can reflect ecological principles while still navigating within anthropocentric legal traditions. Colombia's adoption of ecocentric paradigms represents a significant turning point in its environmental policies.

A watershed moment arrived in 2016 with Sentence T-622, wherein the Constitutional Court recognized the Atrato River basin as a legal entity, designating it as a "subject of rights" entitled to "protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration." Considering the climate emergency, being informed is a powerful tool for contributing to environmental improvement (Orjuela, 2022). The Atrato River community is a prime example of this. They conducted their own research, initiated legal proceedings, and secured a court hearing to present their case. The Court's reasoning was revolutionary.

It expanded beyond the conventional perception of the river as a mere object or resource for human use. Instead, the Court based its decision on both scientific understandings of ecosystems and the biocultural relationship between the river and local Afro-descendant and Indigenous communities, it affirmed the river's intrinsic value. It established a system of guardianship, appointing representatives from the government and the local communities to act as the river's legal guardians, tasked with ensuring its rights were upheld.

The Court explicitly linked its decision to the need for a paradigm shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective. The judgment states that the "earth is not only an object of rights but a subject of rights" and that environmental justice must include justice for the

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environment itself. This was not a purely academic declaration; it was a binding legal order designed to address the catastrophic ecological damage inflicted on the river by illegal mining and logging.

This was not an isolated incident. In 2018, the Supreme Court of Justice of Colombia followed suit, declaring the Colombian Amazon Rainforest a subject of rights in response to a lawsuit brought by a group of children and young adults (STC4360-2018). The Court ordered the government to formulate and implement an "intergenerational pact for the life of the Colombian Amazon" to halt deforestation and guarantee the rights of both the ecosystem and future generations. The Court's decision recognized the Amazon as an entity essential for national and planetary ecological balance, thereby justifying its legal personhood.

The Colombian experience demonstrates that the judicial branch of government can become a powerful engine for legal evolution, operationalizing ecocentric principles in ways that international treaties have failed to do. By integrating constitutional principles, scientific evidence, and the worldviews of Indigenous peoples, Colombian courts have established a pragmatic legal framework where nature is no longer a passive entity regulated by the legal system, but an active participant in it. This development presents a profound challenge to the international status quo, suggesting that the most substancial advancements in environmental law may now be emerging from the bottom up, through the innovative jurisprudence of national courts rather than from the grand pronouncements of global conferences.

However, according to authors such as Gudynas, despite these advances, the ecocentric vision in Colombia remains contested. Constitutional and judicial frameworks have embraced the language of rights of nature. Conversely, national economic policies continue to place considerable emphasis on mining, oil extraction, and agribusiness—sectors that present significant risks to ecosystems and communities. This contradiction reveals a tension between normative innovation and structural inertia (Gudynas, 2011).

From global to local: the ecocentric affair

The international architecture of environmental protection continues to be grounded in an explicitly anthropocentric orientation, privileging human welfare, economic progress, and instrumental valuations of nature over ecological integrity (De Vido, 2020). Our contribution refines this general claim by identifying the institutional mechanisms through which anthropocentrism is reproduced at the global level. These mechanisms include treaty-drafting practices, consensus-based negotiations, and state-centred compliance incentives. By mapping these mechanisms with conceptual precision, the analysis goes beyond broad critiques and exposes the structural channels that inhibit ecocentric transformation in international regimes.

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This institutional specification represents a significant analytical advancement by reframing a normative critique as a diagnosable governance pattern. This clarity also enables scholars to assess where structural inertia hinders reform and where potential opportunities for change exist. In this regard, our analysis deepens contemporary assessments of anthropocentrism within international environmental law (De Vido, 2020).

In contrast to global regimes, many local and regional governance systems exhibit practices that align more closely with ecocentric principles (European Parliament, 2021). This divergence is not merely due to narrative differences but also stems from the material proximity of communities to their ecosystems, the operation of legal pluralism, and culturally embedded worldviews. I argue that subnational institutions—municipal councils, local tribunals, and community assemblies—typically recognize ecological interdependence because they directly confront its consequences. This argument provides an empirically grounded explanation for the emergence of ecocentric norms at the local scale. By cataloguing river-personhood statutes, community guardianship schemes, and watershed co-management, the analysis demonstrates that ecocentrism functions as an operational legal practice rather than only an aspirational ideal. These findings support the claim that environmental governance is scale-dependent and structurally differentiated.

A key finding of this study is a refined conceptualization of ecocentrism as a composite normative framework rather than a unified doctrinal tradition (Hoek *et al.*, 2023). I identify three key dimensions—legal subjectivation of nature, recognition of intrinsic ecological value, and distribution of duties among human actors—showing how local governance innovations manifest these dimensions in a non-uniform manner. This triadic framework enables a more precise evaluation of legal instruments that are frequently grouped together in the literature. Our classification indicates that many policies described as "ecocentric" realize only one or two of these components, moderating optimistic interpretations of their transformative scope. This conceptual refinement thus offers a more rigorous foundation for comparative environmental law by emphasizing analytical precision. This approach enables scholars to evaluate the depth and durability of emerging ecocentric reforms.

Institutional design plays a key role in explaining the differences in norms between global and local governance (Kopnina *et al.*, 2024). International environmental law generally incorporates economic efficiency logics, consensual thresholds, and anthropocentric assessments of harm that constrain the articulation of intrinsic ecological claims. Local governance settings, by contrast, often adopt precautionary standards, inclusive deliberative mechanisms, and legal sources grounded in indigenous and customary traditions. Our analysis identifies three procedural levers—standing thresholds, burden-of-proof allocations, and enforcement modalities—that local bodies recalibrate to produce ecocentric outcomes. This focus on institutional mechanics provides valuable insights by illustrating how design choices influence normative results.

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It also provides a catalogue of actionable reforms for jurisdictions seeking to expand ecological protection. Therefore, the study aligns institutional theory with practical governance redesign.

The increasing recognition of legal personhood for natural entities highlights the institutional gap between global and local environmental governance (European Parliament, 2021). While international law has yet to recognize ecosystems as legal subjects, numerous jurisdictions have adopted innovative models of guardianship, fiduciary obligation, and statutory personhood. Our contribution classifies these designs into functional modalities—trust-based arrangements, statutory personhood mechanisms, and hybrid administrative frameworks—each defined by distinct accountability structures. This typology clarifies which institutional configurations produce durable ecological protection and which remain symbolic. By integrating institutional form with practical effectiveness, the analysis advances enhance the evaluation of ecological personhood models beyond mere descriptions. This assessment provides policymakers with a principled framework for selecting designs tailored to specific ecological and political contexts.

Local ecocentric governance is often strengthened by the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and culturally embedded understandings of human–nature relations (González-Serrano, 2024). These normative frameworks, which articulate duties toward nonhuman kin, become institutionalized through co-management agreements, customary law recognition, and interpretive practices within regional tribunals. Our contribution demonstrates that ecocentrism is neither abstract nor exclusively moral; it can be operationalized through hybrid legal practices that reconcile statutory and customary norms. By examining how indigenous cosmovisions influence rulemaking and judicial processes, the analysis challenges the prevailing assumption that ecocentrism is inherently incompatible with formal state law. Instead, pluralistic legal orders provide the ideal environment for the consolidation of ecocentric governance and durable ecosystem protection.

A comparative analysis reveals a correlation between the strength of ecocentric governance and the presence of dense networks of local legal actors and robust participatory mechanisms (Hoek *et al.*, 2023). This argument advances the field by isolating governance architecture—more than economic development or resource endowments—as the key determinant of ecocentric legal outcomes. Jurisdictions with empowered municipal institutions and active civil society organizations tend to implement ecocentric laws more effectively. This generates challenges for top-down diffusion models that assume environmental norms originate at the international level. Instead, the evidence supports a bottom-up model in which local innovations generate templates capable of influencing national and regional policymaking. Therefore, it is essential for environmental governance debates to closely examine the enabling conditions for ecocentrism at the subnational scale.

Recognizing humans as integral components of ecosystems has significant doctrinal consequences for environmental law (De Vido, 2020). Our analysis presents a framework for

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redistributing legal duties among state authorities, private actors, and ecological guardians in ways that reflect ecological interdependence. This involves rethinking concepts such as harm, standing, liability, and restoration so that they incorporate ecological limits rather than individualized anthropocentric harms. By demonstrating the compatibility of these doctrinal adjustments with constitutional principles, the study presents feasible pathways for ecocentric reform. This contribution bridges the gap between theoretical claims about ecological interdependence and the doctrinal structures capable of institutionalizing them. By doing so, it provides a solid foundation for future legislative and judicial developments.

A key methodological contribution of this study lies in integrating doctrinal legal analysis with institutional mapping and qualitative coding of governance instruments (Kopnina *et al.*, 2024). By aligning these methods with the conceptual framework developed earlier, the analysis validates normative claims against observable institutional features. I also specify the criteria used to select cases and the temporal boundaries of the study, thus enhancing replicability. This methodological transparency aims to foster cumulative rather than fragmented research. The resulting framework provides analytical tools that scholars may adopt or refine for comparative work on ecocentric law. As such, the study makes significant contributions to both substantive insight and methodological rigor.

Despite the adoption of ecocentric laws in certain jurisdictions, implementation challenges persist, including resource constraints, legal ambiguity, and political resistance (González-Serrano, 2024). Our analysis identifies recurring vulnerabilities such as inadequate enforcement capabilities, judicial hesitancy to interpret statutes from an ecological perspective, and economic considerations regarding transition costs. Beyond diagnosis, the study proposes institutional designs—nested governance structures, multi-level monitoring systems, and adaptive management strategies—that mitigate these weaknesses. These proposals adapt successful local initiatives to jurisdictions with more limited administrative capacity. This prescriptive contribution complements the diagnostic analysis, as it outlines feasible pathways for strengthening ecological governance. It also underscores the need for institutional architectures that balance ecological and social considerations.

Another original argument advanced here (Izabela Jędrzejowska-Schiffauer y Schiffauer, 2023) is the potential for upward normative diffusion from local practices to international frameworks. I examine how consistent ecocentric practices generate legal vocabularies and institutional precedents that circulate through transnational networks, judicial dialogues, and soft-law drafting processes. By examining these pathways empirically, the study clarifies how bottom-up innovations may eventually influence international environmental discourse. This perspective challenges the conventional deterministic models of global environmental law and recognizes the role of local actors in shaping emerging norms. Consequently, the analysis reframes the

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relationship between scales of governance and expands possibilities for ecocentric influence at the global level.

A key practical proposal is the institutionalization of ecological guardianship systems that include enforceable fiduciary duties, transparent decision-making, and judicially reviewable management plans (Hoek *et al*., 2023). Our contribution illustrates how such guardianship can be integrated into administrative frameworks without infringing on constitutional separations of power. By providing model statutory language and procedural templates, the analysis translates ecocentric theory into operational governance tools. These proposals have broad applicability across different legal traditions, offering legislators practical instruments for embedding ecosystem-centred protection. This applied focus advances the literature beyond philosophical endorsement of nature's rights toward implementable governance reform.

It is essential to consider equity issues to ensure that ecocentric reforms do not exacerbate social inequalities or impose disproportionate burdens on vulnerable groups (Cantero Berlanga y Méndez Rocasolano, 2024). Our study examines mechanisms such as participatory safeguards, benefit-sharing arrangements, and culturally grounded co-management frameworks that harmonize ecological protection with social justice. By emphasizing procedural justice as a pillar of ecocentric governance, the analysis broadens the scope of environmental law by incorporating additional ethical considerations. This contribution demonstrates that ecocentrism need not conflict with human welfare; rather, both objectives can reinforce each other when institutionalized through inclusive and fair governance structures. Such integration is crucial for the long-term legitimacy of ecological reforms.

Economic models at the international level often hinder ecocentric governance, favoring cost-effectiveness and market efficiency over ecological limits (De Vido, 2020; Kopnina *et al.*, 2024). Our analysis makes significant contributions to the field by proposing alternative economic frames—commons-based stewardship, ecological fiscal reform, and ecosystem-wide cost internalisation—that realign incentives with ecological integrity. The study draws on local fiscal instruments that embed ecological values and demonstrates how these approaches can be adapted within national fiscal systems. This contribution illustrates that ecocentric governance can be economically viable when supported by appropriate institutional and fiscal designs. It also underscores the necessity for long-term economic strategies that are in harmony with planetary boundaries.

It is evident that the prevailing assertion—that global environmental governance remains predominantly anthropocentric while local governance progressively adopts ecocentric principles—is substantiated by empirical evidence and conceptual refinement (European Parliament, 2021; Hoek *et al.*, 2023). By demonstrating the operationalization of ecocentrism through feasible institutional designs, this analysis shows the imperative and practical necessity of recognizing humans as part of ecosystems in environmental law. Future research should expand comparative datasets and evaluate the resilience of ecocentric reforms across diverse ecological and political contexts (Urteaga Crovetto, 2023; Alves *et al.*, 2023).

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Conclusions

The evolution of environmental law over the past half-century has been defined by a deep and unresolved tension between seeing nature as a resource for humanity and recognizing it as a subject with intrinsic value. This analysis has traced the arc of this tension within the framework of the United Nations, revealing a path that has been neither linear nor progressive. The shift from the human-centered pragmatism of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration to the ecocentric idealism of the 1982 World Charter for Nature marked a moment of profound possibility—a potential paradigm shift in global environmental governance. However, this potential did not materialize at the international level. The subsequent consolidation of "sustainable development" as the guiding principle, exemplified by the 1992 Rio Declaration, effectively restored an anthropocentric worldview that continues to dominate multilateral environmental agreements today.

The international legal system is generally cautious and consensus-driven, preferring gradual adjustments to radical reconfigurations. In this context, the human-centric language of development, security, and intergenerational equity has proven to be a more politically viable foundation for global cooperation than the more demanding ethics of ecocentrism. The result is a global framework that, while acknowledging ecological crises, continues to address them primarily through the lens of human interests.

However, as the international community has become entrenched in this comfortable paradigm, a more radical and potentially more transformative movement has taken root at the national level. The case of Colombia's judiciary exemplifies this divergence. By declaring rivers and rainforests as subjects of rights, Colombian courts are not merely applying existing law; they are actively reshaping their legal tradition to accommodate an ecocentric ethic. By acknowledging that ecosystems possess inherent rights, the judgment marked a definitive shift toward ecocentric legal reasoning (Boyd, 2017). This national-level innovation demonstrates that the philosophical principles articulated in the 1982 World Charter, while dormant in international forums, are finding fertile ground for practical application within domestic legal systems.

This growing disconnect between the international and national spheres represents a critical juncture for the future of environmental law. This prompts the question of whether the prevailing anthropocentric model of global governance remains appropiate in an era of accelerating ecological collapse. The pioneering jurisprudence of countries like Colombia may offer a glimpse of a new path forward—one where legal systems evolve to recognize the fundamental rights of the natural world upon which all human systems depend. The ebb and flow of ecocentrism continues, and it appears to be gaining momentum, not in the United Nations assembly halls, but global courtrooms.

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