

Current Debates in Climate Justice

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Where do non-human beings sit at the Climate Justice table?

“I have amazing news for you. Man is not alone on this planet. He is part of a community, upon which he depends absolutely.” (Quinn, 2009)

Introduction

The first block panel addressed ‘current debates in climate justice,’ highlighting debates between legal, activist, and ethical approaches. Discussions went from philosophical questions regarding climate justice – who and where is considered a legitimate victim of climate change – to activist efforts aimed at protecting (semi-)natural ecosystems and forests from Western ontological frameworks that view nature primarily as a resource for human use and benefit. The panel also examined ongoing legal disputes of marginalised communities and affected groups speaking out against governments and corporations threatening the ecosystems upon which they rely. Building on this final point, this essay invites reflection on a neglected dimension of climate justice: the question of justice for those unable to represent themselves within existing legal and political systems. Specifically, it focuses on non-human beings whose interests remain largely unrecognised within existing justice frameworks.

Beyond human exceptionalism

Despite the growing urgency of the climate crisis, everyday climate justice debates remain centred on human experiences. While recent philosophical work has begun to enlarge the conversation toward non-human beings, the dominant frameworks continue to prioritise vulnerable,

displaced, or politically marginalised humans. This focus is necessary, but it also reinforces a boundary that excludes non-humans from the moral and legal sphere of justice.

As the HEKS legal advisor mentioned during the panel discussion, justice remains closely linked to legal systems. Legal frameworks around climate justice are expanding, but as Foerster (2019) argued, they largely respond to the global human consequences of corporate activity. Non-humans have no place within existing legal structures and thus are denied recognition as victims. This exclusion leaves non-humans outside the law, with no formal way to protect their interests. As Johannes Wendland argued during the panel, philosophy can offer important insights, but it is often seen as “too weak” to make a legal impact. As a result, animals, plants, and ecosystems are treated more like background elements or resources rather than as victims of climate change.

Palmer (2011) critiques this anthropocentric viewpoint by saying that non-human animals are clearly capable of suffering due to climate change and, therefore, deserve moral consideration. Yet, despite the well-documented links between biodiversity loss and climate change, there is still no sufficient legal recognition of the interests of non-human beings. This gap emerged in class discussion, where it was questioned whether these ecological damages are only addressed when they threaten human interests. Legal cases such as those explained by Joie Chowdhury to defend Indigenous territories or the activism of WaldStattRepression in protecting forests near Zurich may provide a broader recognition of nature in legal frameworks. However, it remains unclear whether these actions truly represent non-human rights and interests or if they instrumentalise nature within the eco-capitalist sustainable agenda.

that ultimately serves human benefit.

Conclusion

For instance, the argument presented by Moellendorf (2015) is not just anthropocentric, it is also based on principles that, though necessary, further reinforce the exclusion of non-humans from climate justice discourses. If, as Palmer (2011) argued, harm is morally significant, then ignoring non-human victims is ethically indefensible.

The concept of 'care' might offer an argument for expanding the boundaries of justice. Writing about the criminalisation of environmental defenders Gordon (2024) describes acts of protection as grounded in "solidarity and care." Although the focus remains on human activists, Palmer (2011) might help in extending this notion of care beyond human boundaries. When acts of care, such as defending a forest or resisting ecological destruction, are criminalised, what is being punished is not only the individual activist but also the recognition of non-human life as something worth protecting. In this sense, Gordon (2024) protection of such actions may already suggest a deeper, emerging recognition of justice for non-humans.

As we have just begun to consider the inclusion of the right to survival within legal frameworks, as raised in the opening of the panel discussion, it becomes critical to ask: survival for whom? If we view climate justice as a matter of ethics and fairness, it is essential to look beyond merely human interests. Given that non-humans are also profoundly affected by climate change, including their interests within the legal framework of justice could help to create policies that sustain justice for all beings.

The roots of this change are already present. Acts of environmental protection, such as those discussed by Gordon (2024) and seen in movements like WaldStattRepression, reflect a growing moral awareness that forests, animals, and ecosystems are not just passive actors in the human experience of the world but active participants. This leads to a final question: Can our existing legal systems truly represent the voiceless, not just the politically marginalised, but the biologically silent? And if they cannot, what would it take to build new ones?

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