

Recognizing the ocean as a living being is increasingly important for global sustainability, claim researchers

February 8 2023, by Chantal Vallis



Ocean-centered principles to guide Ocean governance transformation. Interconnected relationships between Ocean-centered governance principles of justice, data sovereignty, rights, protection, and relationality rippling out from the key understanding that the Ocean is living. Transformation in Ocean governance requires action across all 5 principles. Credit: *PLOS Biology* (2022). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.3001828

The ocean is the largest of Earth's systems that stabilizes climate and

supports life and human well-being. Despite its vital role in our ecosystem, the ocean has been gravely degraded and historically underrepresented within international climate change agreements. However, the tide is changing.

The United Nations has declared a Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development from 2021 to 2030 outlining 10 challenges to be tackled over 10 years with the goal of advancing efforts to reverse the [ocean](#)'s decline and improve conditions. The declaration has added to a growing movement calling for the development of a new ocean ethos—one that allows for greater representation and recognition of the ocean's vital role.

Dr. Kelsey Leonard, Canada Research Chair and professor in the School of Environment, Resources and Sustainability, is part of an emerging field that identifies recognizing the Rights of Nature as a crucial pathway for achieving these goals.

The ocean is its own legal entity with rights

The Rights of Nature is one branch of Earth law that promotes greater respect for all living things on our planet by recognizing that nonhumans have inherent rights and value, merely by existing. In this framing, the ocean is its own legal entity. To illustrate, the Chicama wave was granted [legal protections](#) under Peruvian national law in 2016. This law now prohibits changes to the coastline and seabed that would alter the integrity of the wave, which is the longest left-breaking wave in the world.

Recognizing the ocean's rights is an important distinction that moves away from assuming "nature is a subject" or "service provider" that is commonly embedded in our current global attitudes which are rooted in colonialism and place humanity above nature. Adopting an ocean-

centered governance approach that prioritizes the ecological needs and interests of the ocean will shift this longstanding anthropocentric lens to put the ocean first.

To guide this approach, Leonard and her research colleagues, Michelle Bender and Rachel Bustamante, put forward five principles to guide the transformation:

- Ocean rights (including the right to life and restoration)
- Ocean relationality (creating a balanced and reciprocal relationship between humans and the ocean)
- Ocean data sovereignty (producing an accessible technological infrastructure for observing ocean trends)
- Ocean protection (accepting collective responsibility to protect and preserve the ocean)
- Ocean justice (ensuring the democratization and equitable access to ocean spaces and resources).

Informed by Indigenous peoples' perspectives and worldviews

Overall, the approach and its [paradigm shift](#) are informed by Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and worldviews. For Leonard, this is closely tied with the work happening in the Shinnecock Nation.

"As a Shinnecock scientist my research is committed to ocean protection and re-writing the legacy of ocean grabbing and colonialism towards an ocean-centered ethic of hope," says Leonard. "These efforts were further championed by the designation of Shinnecock Bay by Mission Blue as an Annóösu Chohkag (Hope Spot)."

Hope Spots are special places that are scientifically identified as critical

to the health of the ocean and championed by local conservationists. Shinnecock Bay is named for the Shinnecock Nation, who have stewarded those waters for millennia despite colonization and genocide. Shinnecock means "people of the stony shore," and it speaks to the wealth of Indigenous knowledge of this unique waterscape filled with shore protectors.

"Shinnecock Bay is part of our ancestral territory that we still care for today, and we are part of it—woven together across time and generations. We have not only witnessed each other's trauma (colonization, pollution, climate change) but also our shared moments of hope."

Although the ocean-centered governance approach is deeply connected to Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and worldviews, Leonard and her colleagues note that many Indigenous Peoples do not express their relationships with other humans and the natural world in terms of rights. Therefore, care is needed in considering appropriate ways to engage with law due to the role that western law has played in the colonization and subjugation of Indigenous Peoples, lands and waters.

Shifting our relationship and recognizing the ocean as a living being is increasingly important for repairing the devastation that humanity has created. Adopting an ocean-centered governance approach and its principles will allow governments, businesses and citizens to realize solutions to the challenges the United Nations identified, like tackling marine pollution, increasing resilience to ocean hazards and developing an equitable ocean economy.

The work is published in the journal *PLOS Biology*.

More information: Michelle Bender et al, Living in relationship with the Ocean to transform governance in the UN Ocean Decade, *PLOS*

Biology (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.3001828](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3001828)

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