



Does Nature Have Rights?

OVERVIEW

Does Nature Have Rights? explores conservation efforts in Ecuador, the first country to grant wild species legal rights to exist in its constitution. The film introduces several hopeful and impassioned conservationists and landowners, who are using the Ecuadorian constitution to enforce the rights of nature and protect Ecuador's biodiversity. Additional information can be found on [this episode's webpage](#).

KEY CONCEPTS

- Legal protections play an important role in conserving species and habitats.
- Ecosystem services, ways in which humans benefit from ecosystems, are essential for human health and well-being.
- Collaboration between different people and groups is essential for effective conservation.

BACKGROUND

Almost all of Ecuador, a South American country near the equator, is a critical **biodiversity hotspot**: an area with an exceptionally high number and diversity of species that is also experiencing unusually high rates of habitat loss. The country has a wide variety of habitats — including tropical forests, cloud forests, and the Galápagos Islands — that are estimated to support twice as many plant and animal species as the United States and Canada combined. While many new species are still being identified, they are threatened by extractive industries (like oil, mining, and timber), unsustainable agriculture, and climate change.

In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to enshrine the “rights of nature” in its constitution: to establish that species other than humans have their own legal right to exist. The constitution includes the following principles:

- Nature has the right to exist. Anyone can call on public authorities to enforce the rights of nature.
- Nature has the right to be restored.
- The government will prevent and restrict activities that could harm nature.
- People have the right to benefit from nature and “enjoy the good way of living.”

The film illustrates how conservation groups are working together with farmers and landowners to uphold the rights of nature. People/groups highlighted in the film include:

- Conservation organizations that purchase key habitats for nature reserves and support more sustainable farming practices.
- Local farmers who are switching to more environmentally friendly crops.
- Political scientists and legal professionals who have helped establish and uphold the rights of nature.

BIODIVERSITY THREATS

Five of the biggest threats to biodiversity are represented by the acronym **HIPPO**: **h**abitat loss, **i**nvasive species, **p**ollution, **p**opulation growth (of humans), and **o**verharvesting. The HIPPO threats shown in this film include:

- **Habitat loss:** Large amounts of habitat in Ecuador have been lost due to farming, mining, and other human activities.
- **Population growth:** Growing human populations have contributed to extractive industries (like oil, mining, and timber), unsustainable agricultural practices, and climate change — all of which negatively impact biodiversity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- (*Before the film*) Ecosystem services, ways in which humans benefit from ecosystems, are essential for human health and well-being. Examples include when bees pollinate crops or when wetlands clean water. Describe three additional ecosystem services that you can think of.
- How does the idea that “nature has rights” differ from the idea that we should just limit how much humans can *harm* nature?
- How do sustainable farming practices, such as the vanilla farming shown in the film, benefit both farmers and the environment?
- Describe some strategies that conservation groups like EcoMinga are using, or could be using, to convince the public that conserving biodiversity is important.
- The film mentions that we have identified only about two million of the Earth’s possibly nine million species. How can we justify protecting the rights of species that we do not even know exist?
- Collaboration between different people and groups is essential for effective conservation. Describe some specific examples of collaboration in the film and how they have been successful.

REFERENCES

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CREDITS

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