



RIGHTS OF NATURE:

A Global Legal and Ethical Movement

MEDIA KIT 2026

SECTION 1. CORE BACKGROUND

What are the Rights of Nature?

Rights of Nature is a legal and ethical framework that recognizes Nature as a subject of rights rather than only an object of protection. It holds that ecosystems and species are holders of intrinsic rights: to exist, to persist, to maintain and regenerate their vital cycles, to be restored, and to be represented in the decisions that affect them. It shifts the basis of decision-making from treating Nature as a resource to recognizing it as a living community that humans are part of and accountable to.

Why does it matter now?

Efforts to address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution have renewed focus on humanity's relationship with Nature, and international law is being asked to assess how existing frameworks respond to it. Part of what is being examined is a structural feature of environmental law itself: it protects Nature largely for its usefulness to people, which means harm is addressed once a human interest is affected, and Nature itself has no standing of its own.

Rights of Nature initiatives have been documented in dozens of countries and territories, through constitutional provisions, national and subnational legislation, judicial decisions, Indigenous legal frameworks and other legal and policy initiatives. Their legal form and effect vary significantly.

Between May 2024 and July 2025, three international courts, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the International Court of Justice, issued major advisory opinions addressing climate change and States' environmental obligations from their respective legal mandates. OC-32/25 of the Inter-American Court went further by expressly addressing the legal status and rights of Nature. What has not happened is a structured multilateral conversation that brings these developments together, and that is what Panama is proposing.

What rights are typically recognized?

Because each State defines the scope according to its own legal system, there is no single model. What recurs across jurisdictions are the rights to exist and persist, to maintain and regenerate vital cycles, to be restored after harm, and to representation in the decisions that affect them.

Where has it already been recognized?

Ecuador wrote it into its Constitution in 2008. Bolivia adopted its Mother Earth laws in 2010 and 2012. New Zealand recognized Te Urewera as a legal entity in 2014, followed by recognition of the Whanganui River in 2017 and Taranaki Maunga in 2025 as legal persons. Colombia's Constitutional Court recognized the Atrato River as a subject of rights in 2016 and in 2018 the Supreme Court extended that reasoning to the Colombian Amazon. Spain granted legal personality to the Mar Menor lagoon in 2022, the first in the European Union, following a popular legislative initiative. Panama adopted a national Rights of Nature law the same year. Bangladesh has recognized legal personality for all its rivers since 2019.

These come from very different legal traditions, including Indigenous worldviews, civil law approaches, constitutional innovation and common law stewardship principles. That range is part of the argument for a multilateral conversation: the concept has taken hold in legal systems with little in common, and no single model has been imposed on anyone.

How does representation work?

Nature's interests are represented by persons or institutions authorized to act on its behalf. Depending on the jurisdiction, these may include public bodies, guardianship structures, Indigenous authorities, organizations or citizens acting in the public interest. In Panama, under Law 287, any natural or legal person may act in defense of Nature before administrative and judicial bodies, on the basis of the diffuse interest that Nature represents.

How does this relate to the United Nations process?

Panama proposes that the next Harmony with Nature resolution, at the eighty-first session, include a mandate to launch one: an open, transparent, inclusive and Member State-led intergovernmental process to negotiate a proposed United Nations Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature.

The distinction matters and is the most common point of confusion. Panama is not asking the General Assembly to adopt a Declaration. It is asking for the mandate to begin discussing one.

What role does Panama play?

Panama leads the initiative diplomatically, through its Ministry of Environment, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York. It does so under a domestic legal obligation: Article 16.7 of Law 287 requires the State to promote the recognition and defense of the Rights of Nature in the multilateral, regional and bilateral spheres of its international relations. Panama therefore approaches the international discussion from the experience of having first established a domestic legal framework.

What role does forNature play?

forNature works with Panama's Ministry of Environment under a memorandum of understanding signed on 10 April 2026, which establishes a framework of technical, legal, scientific and advocacy cooperation. Under the MoU, forNature provides technical, scientific and strategic support, and legal advice, to the Ministry in areas including research, international negotiation and advocacy related to the recognition and legal protection of Nature. The MoU is equally explicit about the limits of that role: all activities are subject to the Ministry's prior approval. It creates no delegation, transfer or limitation of the Ministry's public powers, and no relationship of representation between the two. The initiative is led by Panama, with forNature in a supporting role.

What happens next?

The eighty-first session of the General Assembly opens in September 2026 and negotiations in the Second Committee run October to November 2026 with adoption of the resolution containing the mandate expected in December 2026. If adopted, the President of the General Assembly would appoint two co-facilitators, one from a developing country and one from a developed country, and consultations would follow. Anything beyond that depends on what Member States decide.



SECTION 2. ONE-PAGE EXPLAINER

The four pillars

1

Humans are part of Nature

Not managers of a resource to be used or exploited.

2

Nature has intrinsic value

It matters independently of its usefulness to people.

3

Nature has inherent rights

To exist, persist, regenerate its vital cycles and be restored.

4

Nature has a right to representation

Not managers of a resource to be used or exploited.

Where it exists

Ecuador, constitutional recognition, 2008. Bolivia, national laws, 2010 and 2012. New Zealand, legal personality for Te Urewera 2014, the Whanganui River 2017 and Taranaki Maunga 2025. Colombia, Atrato River, 2016, followed by the Amazon in 2018 and a series of further rivers and ecosystems. Bangladesh, all rivers, 2019. Panama, national law, 2022. Spain, Mar Menor lagoon, 2022.

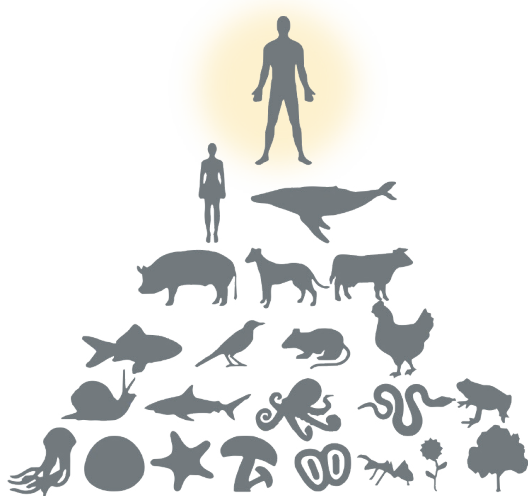
What this is

A legal and ethical framework. A shift in how decisions get made. A movement with momentum at national and international levels.

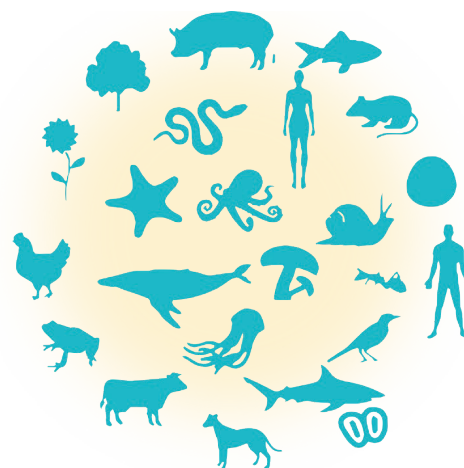
What this is not

Not a claim that people and ecosystems are identical under law. Not a binding UN treaty, and not at this stage a treaty of any kind. Not a replacement for existing environmental law. Not anti-human and not anti-development.

The Rights of Nature - A Paradigm Shift



ANTHROPOCENTRIC



ECOCENTRIC

SECTION 3. UN PATHWAY BRIEF

Harmony with Nature: the existing program

The General Assembly established the Harmony with Nature dialogue in 2009 through resolution 64/196. Since then it has adopted fifteen resolutions, most recently resolution 79/210 of 19 December 2024, alongside thirteen reports of the Secretary-General. The program is supported by a Knowledge Network of experts, annual interactive dialogues that since 2011 have developed shared knowledge on Earth jurisprudence, Earth-centered law and ecological economics, and the observance of International Mother Earth Day each 22 April, established by resolution 63/278 of 2009.

Fifteen years of dialogue have generated a substantial body of knowledge and experience, without establishing a formal intergovernmental process to consider a possible universal instrument. The proposal now is to open such a process.

The resolution window

The Harmony with Nature resolution is negotiated in the Second Committee between October and November 2026, under sub-item 18(h) of the agenda, with adoption expected in December.

What the proposed mandate would do

Panama proposes to include the following Operational Paragraph in the upcoming Harmony with Nature draft resolution:

- *Requests the President of the General Assembly to appoint, upon adoption of the resolution, two co-facilitators, one from a developing country and one from a developed country, to lead an open, transparent and inclusive intergovernmental negotiation process to be launched in the eighty-second session of the General Assembly, with the meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, aimed at preparing a proposed United Nations Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature.*
- *Stresses that the negotiation process shall be intergovernmental and State-led, with Member*

States retaining ownership of and responsibility for its conduct and outcome, while ensuring the open, transparent, structured and meaningful participation of relevant stakeholders, including civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and the scientific and academic communities, in accordance with the rules of procedure and established practice of the General Assembly.

- *Requests the co-facilitators to submit to the General Assembly at the end of its eighty-first session an Elements Paper containing recommendations and possible elements for the negotiation of a proposed United Nations Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature, for consideration by Member States, within existing resources.*
- *In addition, Panama supports the following Operational Paragraphs of the Harmony with Nature resolution, with limited proposed amendments:*
- *Requests the President of the General Assembly to convene at the eighty-first session of the Assembly a one-day high-level meeting on Harmony with Nature and Living Well, through existing resources, to be held on 22 April 2027 at the plenary meetings during the commemoration of International Mother Earth Day, with participation of the United Nations system and multi-stakeholder participation from independent experts, civil society, academia, and in particular Indigenous Peoples and local communities, that continues to reinforce multilateralism through the discussion of alternative holistic approaches based on diverse world views that may contribute to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*
- *Encourages the experts of the Harmony with Nature Knowledge Network to continue their study of the evolution of international, regional, local and national initiatives on the protection of Mother Earth and the recognition of the rights of Nature, as applicable, and to make it available as a contribution to the consultative process established under the present resolution, and to be considered by the Secretary-General in his report on the implementation of the present resolution.*

Why the resolution can point to a shifting legal landscape

The draft resolution acknowledges a growing tendency in legislation and case law to recognize Nature as a subject of rights, reflected in judicial decisions at regional and global level and in the domestic law of several countries, and notes that some countries are already discussing the possibility of considering a declaration on the protection of Nature.

It notes Advisory Opinion OC-32/25 of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, adopted 29 May 2025 and notified 3 July 2025, on the climate emergency and human rights. The Court recognized Nature as a subject of rights, becoming the first international court to do so, moving beyond frameworks that treated Nature as property or as an exploitable resource, and affirming its role in sustaining the ecological balance that makes the planet habitable. It builds on the same Court's Advisory Opinion OC-23/17 of 2017, which had already recognized components of the environment as legal interests in themselves.

It also recalls that the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework expressly recognizes diverse value systems, including, for countries that recognize them, rights of Nature and rights of Mother Earth, as integral to its implementation.

The co-facilitator model

The General Assembly has repeatedly used co-facilitated processes to support dialogue, identify areas of convergence and prepare recommendations on emerging international issues before formal negotiations begin. The pairing of a developing and a developed country co-facilitator is standard practice, not an arrangement designed for this initiative. The Declaration on Future Generations, adopted in 2024 as part of the Pact for the Future, followed this model and was co-facilitated by the Netherlands and Fiji, later succeeded by Jamaica.

The sequence



Important note

There is currently no negotiated draft Declaration and no agreed date for adopting one. What is on the table in December 2026 is a mandate to begin a process, and the pace of that process is for Member States to determine.

Why a non-binding declaration matters

As a General Assembly Declaration, it would not in itself create treaty obligations for Member States. Its function, like that of previous General Assembly declarations, would be to establish shared reference points, promote coherence across existing instruments, encourage the exchange of national experience, and give States a common vocabulary for cooperation.

What success looks like

In the short term, the adoption in December 2026 of a resolution containing the mandate, with co-facilitators appointed. In the longer term, a multilateral conversation that draws on diverse legal traditions, Indigenous worldviews, scientific knowledge and national experience, and that Member States themselves choose where to take.

SECTION 4. PANAMA PROOF-OF-CONCEPT BRIEF

Panama legislated at home first

On 24 February 2022 Panama adopted Law 287, the first general law in Central America to recognize Nature as a subject of rights. Article 10 establishes six minimum rights, among them the rights to exist, persist and regenerate vital cycles, to the diversity of living beings and ecosystems, and to timely and effective restoration. Under Article 5, any natural or legal person, acting individually or through an association, has standing before administrative and judicial bodies by virtue of the diffuse interest that Nature represents, without needing to be appointed by anyone. The law entered into force one year after promulgation, in February 2023.

Article 8 sets out six governing principles: a) the higher interest of Nature, grounded in its intrinsic value; b) in dubio pro natura, which requires that in cases of doubt, legal gaps or contradiction, decisions favor the least harmful alternative for Nature; c) in dubio pro aqua, its equivalent for water-related disputes; d) prevention; e) precaution; and f) restoration. The law also provides that Indigenous worldviews and ancestral knowledge form an integral part of how these rights are interpreted and applied.

The law itself instructs Panama to act internationally

Article 16.7 obliges the State to promote the recognition and defense of the Rights of Nature in the multilateral, regional and bilateral spheres of its international relations. This is the answer to the question most often asked about motive. Panama’s initiative at the General Assembly is not a discretionary diplomatic choice, but the execution of an obligation its legislature imposed on the State in 2022.

From framework to a named species

On 1 March 2023 Panama adopted Law 371, one of the first national laws in the world to recognize rights for a marine species. It protects sea turtles and their habitats, connects marine biodiversity to the Rights of Nature framework, and incorporates prior consultation with Indigenous Peoples.

Implementation across the Executive and Judicial branches of the State

EXECUTIVE:

In 2022 the National Aeronaval Service adopted a resolution creating an Environmental Committee that integrates the Rights of Nature into Panama’s maritime authority. In 2024 a ministerial resolution established the Saboga Wildlife Refuge, whose stated objectives include ensuring that the ecosystems within it are treated as subjects of rights under Law 287. In March 2026 an executive decree created the Sierra Llorona National Park, 16,436 hectares in Colón and Portobelo, citing Law 287 in its recitals.

JUDICIAL:

Law 287 was cited by the Plenary Chamber of the Supreme Court in its landmark 27 November 2023 constitutionality ruling. The Administrative Law Chamber of the Supreme Court recognized environmental legal personality for a Panamanian ecosystem in its 24 June 2024 preliminary injunction, citing Law 287.



Recognition and reach

In 2025 Law 287 received the World Future Policy Award, presented by the World Future Council in partnership with IUCN and the Inter-Parliamentary Union at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi. It was one of eight instruments recognized out of forty-one nominations from twenty-one countries, and the only one from the Americas. Spain's Mar Menor law and New Zealand's Te Awa Tupua Act were among the other winners.

Panama has more than 32 percent of its terrestrial territory and 54 percent of its marine area under protection and is one of the few carbon-negative countries in the world. It has proposed managing the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor under a Rights of Nature framework, which would be the first application of the framework to a transboundary marine area.

The recognition traveled beyond Panama

In Advisory Opinion OC-32/25 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights observed a growing tendency in legislation and case law to recognize Nature as a subject of rights, reflected in judicial decisions at regional and global level and in the domestic law of several countries of the Americas. Panama's Law 287 is part of that landscape.

Why domestic credibility matters internationally

Panama offers Law 287 as national experience rather than a model for export and is not asking other States to adopt it. What it can do is answer, from its own record, the questions States ask when the concept is new to them: What changes administratively, how courts have handled it, what it has and has not affected. Those answers come from having done it, which is not the same as arguing for it.

SECTION 5. FORNATURE ORGANIZATIONAL PROFILE

forNature is a global initiative founded by National Geographic Explorer and marine biologist Callie Veelenturf to advance the Rights of Nature legally and culturally, working at the intersection of science, law, policy, and advocacy to support practical pathways for implementation. The initiative grew out of Callie's fieldwork with critically endangered leatherback sea turtles in Panama, where she saw firsthand how legal systems that treat Nature as a resource rather than a living system fail to protect it. Callie brought her findings to two Panamanian political leaders, and those conversations became the foundation for Panama's landmark Rights of Nature law. That success led Callie to build forNature and to create an institutional home for the mission; a 501(c)(3) organization in the United States and its legal name is the Callie Veelenturf For Nature Foundation (dba forNature). The organization was conceived and created with the support of the Alfred Kobacker and Elizabeth Trimbach Fund (AKET), which funded its legal and organizational establishment and continues to provide substantial operating and strategic support.

forNature's mission is to use science, community empowerment, and ethical advocacy to combat extinction, protect endangered species and threatened habitats, and advance and recognize the Rights of Nature around the world, in pursuit of a future in which Nature is recognized as having inherent rights rather than protection at humanity's discretion. In April 2026, forNature entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Panama's Ministry of Environment establishing a framework for technical, scientific, legal and strategic cooperation related to Rights of Nature, including Panama's strategy to advance a possible Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature at the UN General Assembly. Panama retains full leadership and decision-making authority over the diplomatic process while forNature provides the technical support and Rights of Nature expertise. That advocacy is backed by a dedicated science program also called forNature run in partnership with the National Geographic Society: ten Explorer-led projects spanning five continents, each generating research that supports legal recognition of the rights of plants, animals, and ecosystems to exist, persist, regenerate, and thrive.

Together, this network of scientists, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and government partners reflects forNature's approach: to be an organization built to generate the science, storytelling, and coalitions that make systemic change possible.

FOUNDING AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

The Alfred Kobacker and Elizabeth Trimbach Fund has served as a founding institutional and philanthropic partner of forNature. AKET provides continuing support for forNature's operations and has enabled key elements of its growth, including its digital and organizational infrastructure, strategic communications and major programmatic initiatives. AKET supported the forNature Program within the National Geographic Society through a \$2 million grant. AKET has also guaranteed funding for forNature's work in support of Panama's effort to advance a possible Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature at the United Nations.

forNature's leadership pairs field-tested science with deep Rights of Nature advocacy. Founder and Executive Director Callie Veelenturf, a National Geographic Explorer and marine biologist, leads the organization's strategic and scientific direction. Rafaela Iturralde, Director of Strategy and Operations, brings over a decade of experience in the Rights of Nature movement, including work with the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) and the International Rights of Nature Tribunals. Alfred Kobacker, a long-time American entrepreneur and philanthropist, serves as President of the Board. Through the Alfred Kobacker and Elizabeth Trimbach Fund, he helped create and capitalize the foundation that provides forNature's institutional home and has been a principal source of its philanthropic and operating support.



SECTION 6. SPOKESPERSON BIOS



Callie Veelenturf

Is a marine biologist, National Geographic Explorer, and Rights of Nature expert, as well as founder and Executive Director of forNature and The Leatherback Project. She brought forward the idea for Panama's landmark Rights of Nature law and now works to advance Rights of Nature globally through science, law, and community leadership.

Areas of Expertise:

Marine biology, sea turtle conservation, Rights of Nature law and policy, community-based conservation, ocean conservation.

Languages:

English (Native), Spanish (Proficient)

Relevant Geographies:

Panama, United States, Oceans/ marine ecosystems globally

Prior Media Experience and available topics:

- The Rights of Nature movement and how it works in practice
- Drafting and passing Panama's Law 287 and Law 371
- Sea turtle conservation and giving species a voice in governance
- Bridging science, law, and storytelling for conservation
- Building forNature and scaling Rights of Nature globally



Rafaela Iturralde

Is an Ecuadorian advocate for Indigenous rights and the Rights of Nature, serving as Director of Strategy and Operations at forNature and Director of the Fund for Nature. She brings over a decade of experience working in the Rights of Nature movement and supporting Indigenous-led initiatives in the Western Amazon region, working at the intersection of Rights of Nature, Indigenous-led conservation and international advocacy.

Areas of Expertise:

Indigenous rights, Rights of Nature, Western Amazon region, youth leadership, movement building.

Languages:

Spanish (Native), English (Fluent)

Relevant Geographies:

Ecuador, Amazon Basin, Latin America, Global RoN movement

Experience and available topics:

- The growth of the Rights of Nature movement
- Indigenous-led conservation in the Amazon / Rights of the Amazon Basin
- Empowering youth leadership in the Rights of Nature movement



Xiomara Acevedo Navarro

Is a climate justice leader, Rights of Nature advocate, and campaign strategist working at the intersection of biodiversity, climate action, gender equality, and community-led governance. As Campaign Strategist at forNature, she designs global advocacy campaigns and has over a decade of experience building coalitions among grassroots communities, Indigenous Peoples, women's organizations, and governments to drive policy change.

Areas of Expertise:

Climate justice, biodiversity policy, gender equality in environmental movements, multilateral negotiation spaces, Rights of Nature, coalition and movement building.

Languages:

Spanish (Native), English (Proficient)

Relevant Geographies:

Colombia, Latin America, the Caribbean

Prior Media Experience:

14 years of experience representing Barranquilla+20 and global movements / constituencies in media and high-level spaces, including interviews at international forums such as the UNFCCC, UNCCD, and regional climate justice summits.

Available topics:

- Climate justice at the intersection of gender and youth movements
- Mobilizing communities and institutions around UN Rio Convention processes
- Designing global advocacy campaigns for Rights of Nature
- Advancing the Rights of Nature Subnational Strategy in Nariño, Colombia.