Ecocentrism and Rights of Nature: Conserving the deep Seabed through Law, Multilateralism, Technology and Collaboration for Posterity

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the ideal of rights of nature can be promoted by conserving the deep seabed. The paper notes that the deep seabed holds immense value for both humanity and nature. It discusses some of the benefits associated with the deep seabed. Despite its intrinsic value, the paper observes that the deep seabed is facing mounting challenges due to unsustainable human activities. The paper discusses some of the key threats in the deep seabed and their impacts on people and planet. In light of underlying challenges, the paper posits that it is imperative to foster ecocentrism and rights of nature by conserving the deep seabed for its intrinsic value. It examines how this ideal can be achieved through law, multilateralism, technology and collaboration for posterity.

1.0 Introduction

It has become increasingly necessary to uphold the rights of nature in light of human activities which are fueling interlinked environmental challenges including climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and the extinction of species, deforestation, land degradation, and increased incidents of environmental disasters[1]. It has been observed that these activities are causing damage and depletion of nature[2]. Consequently, living in harmony with nature has become an imperative and a catalyst for Sustainable Development and requires new ways of thinking to ensure that human progress occurs alongside environmental conservation[3].

Rights of nature has emerged as a crucial ideal towards achieving harmony between humanity and nature for Sustainable Development. This concept acknowledges that nature has an independent and inalienable right to exist and flourish[4]. Rights of nature has been described as a framework that recognizes the intrinsic rights of ecosystems and species, and holds them to the

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[1] United Nations Development Programme., 'Triple Planetary Crisis' Available at https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-11/UNDP-Triple-Planetary-Crisis-Infographic.pdf (Accessed on 06/11/2026)

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[3] United Nations Development Programme., 'In harmony with nature: A path to Sustainable Development' Available at https://www.undp.org/ghana/blog/harmony-nature-path-sustainable-development (Accessed on 06/11/2026)

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same standards of protection granted to natural and juristic persons[5]. Rather than treating nature as property under the law, the idea of rights of nature acknowledges that nature in all its life forms has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles[6]. Rights of nature has been identified as the recognition that our ecosystems and species, including trees, oceans, animals, mountains and others, have rights which need to be respected and protected similar to the protection accorded to human rights[7].

Safeguarding the rights of nature is therefore a vital solution towards moving from treating nature as property to recognising ecosystems and species as living entities with intrinsic value and fundamental rights[8]. Through this approach it is possible to strengthen environmental protection and ensure harmony between humanity and nature including through empowering citizens and communities to act as stewards and representatives of ecosystems, both to prevent harm and to support protection, restoration and regeneration[9]. With the world struggling with numerous environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, deforestation and pollution, recognising and protecting the rights of nature is not only a legal and ethical necessity, but also a pragmatic step towards a more harmonious co-existence between humanity and nature for Sustainable Development[10].

Ecocentrism provides an effective approach towards safeguarding the rights of nature. Ecocentrism is a world view that posits that everything in the natural world has its own intrinsic value and deserves moral and ethical consideration[11]. In particular, ecocentrism emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and places a moral obligation on humanity to respect and conserve the environment for the benefit of present and future generations[12]. By recognising humanity's duties towards nature, ecocentrism is central in efforts to solve environmental challenges facing the planet including climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and pollution

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towards safeguarding the rights of nature[13]. Embracing ecocentrism is therefore key towards safeguarding the rights of nature since this perspective acknowledges the intrinsic value of nature thus advocating for its respect and importance independent of human interests[14].

This paper discusses how the ideal of rights of nature can be promoted by conserving the deep seabed. The paper notes that the deep seabed holds immense value for both humanity and nature. It discusses some of the benefits associated with the deep seabed. Despite its intrinsic value, the paper observes that the deep seabed is facing mounting challenges due to unsustainable human activities. The paper discusses some of the key threats in the deep seabed and their impacts on people and planet. In light of underlying challenges, the paper posits that it is imperative to foster ecocentrism and rights of nature by conserving the deep seabed for its intrinsic value. It examines how this ideal can be achieved through law, multilateralism, technology and collaboration for posterity.

2.0 The Deep Seabed: Opportunities and Challenges

The seabed in general refers to the ocean floor[15]. The seabed has also been defined as the top-surface of earth in seas and oceans, also known as the seafloor or ocean floor[16]. The seabed has been identified as a valuable resource that contains key geological features, marine habitats, and mineral deposits[17]. The United Nations observes that the sea floor, just like the terrestrial environment, is made up of mountain ranges, plateaus, volcanic peaks, canyons and vast plains among other geological features[18]. In addition, the seabed contains most of the same minerals found on land often in enriched forms, as well as minerals that are unique to the deep ocean[19].

Deep seabed refers to the part of the seabed that is situated in Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ)[20]. These are areas commonly called the high seas and comprise parts of the ocean for

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which no one nation has sole responsibility for management[21]. It has been observed that nearly two-thirds of the ocean is in ABNJ which are home to unique species and ecosystems, and key to marine biodiversity[22]. It is estimated that ABNJ reach depths of over 10 km and represent 95 per cent of the Earth's total habitat by volume[23].

The deep seabed holds immense value for both humanity and nature. For instance, it has been pointed out that the deep seabed is home to habitats and species found nowhere else on Earth, and provides essential environmental services[24]. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that the deep seabed is the largest biome on Earth, hosting a vast and largely unmapped web of life[25]. The deep seabed supports unique forms of life adapted to extreme conditions, including high pressure, low temperatures, and complete darkness[26]. This area encompasses vast and largely unexplored habitats, including abyssal plains, hydrothermal vents, cold seeps, and ocean trenches which support marine biodiversity in ABNJ[27]. Marine biodiversity in the deep seabed include fish, corals, jellyfish, octopuses, worms, sponges, clams and crabs among others which are yet to be identified[28].

In addition to supporting marine biodiversity in ABNJ, the deep seabed provides other environmental, social and economic benefits. For instance, it has been observed that the deep seabed is one of the planet's largest carbon sinks absorbing and storing large quantities of carbon dioxide thus strengthening global climate action[29]. The deep seabed also supports global food systems by acting as a source of seafood[30]. The deep seabed also contains minerals that provide

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[30] Ibid

both environmental and economic benefits. In particular, the deep seabed is increasingly seen as a potential source of critical raw materials needed to support energy transition[31]. UNEP points out that the transition from fossil fuels to clean energy depend on critical minerals such as copper, lithium, nickel, cobalt, graphite and manganese which are essential components in many of today's rapidly growing clean energy technologies, including wind turbines, solar panels and electric vehicles[32]. It has been observed that polymetallic nodules, which are rounded mineral formations found on the deep seabed, contain minerals such as manganese, nickel, cobalt and copper which play a key role in energy transition[33]. Consequently, it has been argued that mining in the deep seabed can support the energy transition for environmental sustainability while also reducing pressure on forests, farmland and communities affected by land-based mining[34].

The deep seabed therefore provides numerous benefits for humanity and nature. However, this region is also facing mounting risks and challenges. For example, it has been observed that destructive fishing practices and illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, and unregulated marine scientific research are some of the human-induced threats in the deep seabed[35]. In addition, it has been observed that irresponsible mining in the deep seabed directly disturbs its geological features and destroys habitats that support marine biodiversity in ABNJ[36]. Mining in the deep seabed can disturb ecosystems that are extremely fragile, slow to recover and still poorly understood[37]. Marine pollution as a result of contamination from land-based sources especially plastics, waste disposal, dumping and impacts of shipping and maritime accidents is also a threat to ecosystems, habitats and biodiversity in the deep seabed[38]. The impacts of climate change including ocean acidification also pose a serious threat to cold-water corals and other deep-water biodiversity in the deep seabed[39].

In light of the foregoing concerns, it is imperative to recognise and conserve the deep seabed for its intrinsic value towards ecocentrism and rights of nature.

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[39] Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Marine and Coastal Biodiversity' Op Cit

3.0 Conserving the Deep Seabed through Law, Multilateralism, Technology and Collaboration

Conserving the deep seabed is a moral and ethical concern for humanity. This area holds immense value supporting marine biodiversity, strengthening global climate action while also supporting humanity by acting as a source of food and minerals[40]. However human activities such as unstainable fishing practices, deep sea mining and pollution are causing damage to the deep seabed with severe impacts on people and planet. Consequently, it is imperative to uphold the rights of nature by recognising the intrinsic value of the deep seabed in order to effectively protect this area.

Law provides a useful approach towards recognising and conserving the deep seabed pursuant to the ideal of rights of nature. For instance, it has been observed that well-designed and implemented pollution control laws and policies are integral in curbing marine pollution and its impacts on ecosystems and biodiversity in the deep seabed[41]. In addition, law can also ensure governance of deep-sea mining in a transparent, accountable, inclusive, effective and environmentally responsible way[42]. Law can also promote effective biodiversity conservation in the deep seabed. For example, the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement)*[43] entered into force on 17th January 2026 in order to strengthen the conservation of marine biodiversity in ABNJ/high seas. The BBNJ Agreement is a legally binding and harmonised framework that seeks to conserve and sustainably use marine biodiversity in the high seas, including the deep seabed, which are areas that cover nearly half the planet but have long remained largely unregulated[44]. It has been observed that the BBNJ Agreement signals a collective commitment by all nations to restore the health, resilience, and productivity of the ocean and marine ecosystems, which are vital for biodiversity, climate regulation, food security, and human well-being[45]. Well-designed and implemented laws can therefore enhance conservation of the deep seabed.

Multilateralism and collaboration is another effective approach towards effective conservation of the deep seabed. In particular, it has been observed that environmental multilateralism involves

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[45] Ibid

strengthening international cooperation and collaboration to address global environmental challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution and waste[46]. Environmental multilateralism is vital in helping develop international measures to preserve and improve the quality of the environment and the sustainable management of global natural resources[47]; and of promoting an international system based on stronger multilateral environmental cooperation and good global environmental governance[48]. In particular, since the deep seabed remains understudied and poor understood, multilateralism can enable countries to collaborate towards addressing common challenges[49]. Multilateralism can promote international and regional collaboration and cooperation towards a clean and healthy ocean through measures such as adoption of a binding international treaty on plastic pollution and governance of deep-sea mining for the benefit of entire humanity[50].

Technology can also ensure effective governance of the deep seabed. For example, it has been observed that digital technologies can effectively monitor and detect threats in the deep seabed thus enabling effective governance. Modern technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI), autonomous underwater vehicles and satellite monitoring are improving governance of the deep seabed by proving solutions to areas where other approaches such as law may not be effective[51]. It has been observed that autonomous and remotely operated vehicles in the ocean, seafloor observatories, instrumented cables and data infrastructures in the deep sea are strengthening understanding on some of the least studied environments on the planet thus improving governance[52]. It is therefore necessary to harness modern technologies towards strengthening conservation of the deep seabed for people and planet.

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4.0 Conclusion

Embracing ecocentrism and rights of nature provides a useful approach towards recognising and conserving nature including ecosystems and species for their intrinsic value. In particular, there is need to strengthen conservation of the deep seabed due to its immense benefits for people and planet. This can be achieved by utilising law, multilateralism through international and regional collaboration and cooperation, and technology.

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