Geneva Policy Outlook

Nature as Diplomat

A Background Paper for the Roundtable at the Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, 25 June 2026

Hugo Slim
Director, Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford

Nature needs a more direct diplomatic presence in multilateral diplomacy. In diplomatic hubs, like Geneva, nature's mountains, lakes, animals, air, plants and insects surround international diplomacy as permanent observers.

But nature should be a more permanent member of the international community and enabled to perform a diplomatic role that conveys its profound significance in international politics and its shared interest in good governance of the Earth. Nature, in its various forms, needs new ways to sit face-to-face with human diplomats.

This paper sets out the necessity and challenge of more direct diplomatic representation for nature of all kinds. It makes the case for diplomatic innovation and describes some possible mechanisms for how it can be done. It also identifies the risks and benefits involved.

The main purpose of the paper and the roundtable is to generate a series of discussions within International Geneva which explore new forms of nature's diplomatic representation as one of several potential innovations in Geneva's changing multilateralism.

It is time for nature to have diplomatic status

For millennia human sovereigns and their diplomatic representatives have used nature to symbolize their political identity and power in flags and insignia: the lions of Judah, Ethiopia, Armenia, Persia and Great Britain; the Eagles of Rome, Russia, the USA and Mexico; the Panda of China; the crane of Uganda; and the many nations, like Ecuador and Kiribati, who use blue stripes and waves to show themselves as ocean people.[1]

It is time we reciprocated this diplomatic custom of using nature to symbolize human political power. Today, nature's power and interests need to be symbolized by humans in new diplomatic forms that put nature at the table to be talked with and not just talked about – an *interlocutor* and not a *topic* in multilateral diplomacy.

Nature's diplomatic credentials should be accepted by states and intergovernmental organizations. In new creative ways, nature should take its seat at the heart of human diplomacy with flags and diplomats of its own. The important practice of mandated environmental agencies simply supplying nature expertise to diplomatic process is no longer sufficient nor fair for two reasons. First, nature needs a more precise political contract with human sovereignties, and more formal diplomatic recognition, than technical groups alone. Secondly, while potentially marginalized human groups like trafficked people, workers, and refugees can organize, protest and campaign to raise their voices, nature needs special diplomatic presence and exceptional representation because it cannot self-organize to lobby, protest and campaign itself in human terms and human processes.

Diplomatic innovation

This is not as radical as it sounds. Multilateral diplomacy has a creative history of recognizing and representing many forms of lived experience that transcend the sovereign interests of a single state. The twentieth century has a long tradition of recognizing new political subjects in international diplomacy and law.[2]

In Geneva, this diplomatic innovation began with the Red Cross representing the needs of wounded soldiers in diplomatic form. The League of Nations then saw diplomacy pioneer new representation for transboundary minorities, trafficked people, workers, refugees, civilians, children, women, indigenous people, and people with disabilities. This diplomatic creativity has brought new visibility and voice to vulnerable forms of human life that were spread across state borders and posed transboundary risks for states.

[1] Tore Fougner, Animals and Diplomacy: On the Prospect of Interspecies Diplomacy, International Relations Vol 37(3), pp449-474; Halvard Leira and Iver B. Neumann, Beastly Diplomacy, The Hague Journal of Diplomacy 12, 2016 pp337-359.
[2] Natasha Wheatley, New Subjects in International Law and Order, in Internationalisms – A Twentieth Century History, eds Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp265-286

The climate and nature emergencies require twenty first century multilateralism to evolve from an "international community" of states to an "earth community" of all life. Geneva can lead the way by piloting and experimenting with different models of all-life diplomacy.

Nature's increasing international persona and prestige

Nature or "the environment" is increasingly accumulating international status. One might even say of rainforests, oceans, whales and swans that they have achieved a certain international prestige, while other species like the malaria carrying mosquito and the Ebola virus have achieved the status of international enemy.

Nature and non-human life have become increasingly present in international affairs since the nineteenth century. Weather was diplomatically recognized as an international phenomenon with the creation of the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) in 1947, born out of an earlier international NGO formed in 1873. The rise of environmental summitry and diplomacy from the 1970s onwards has seen climate and environment, ocean and air, ice and desert, animals and insects endowed with significant international persona.[3]

In a succession of treaties, these different forms of life have been politically acknowledged and accorded intense legal protections, even legal personality in national constitutions like that of Ecuador. In the Geneva Conventions, the environment is given immunity from deliberate attack in war which attributes it with civilian status.[4]

Much of this political recognition comes from increasing appreciation of the value of nature in world order. This value has been internationally described by UNEP and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, or IPBES.[5] Inspired by both, states have agreed that nature has *intrinsic value* in its own right, *instrumental value* as useful and essential to human life, and *relational value* as bonds of friendship, association and responsibility between humans and nature.[6]

In reality, many governments and businesses lean into the instrumental and economic model of nature as "ecosystem services". This tends to commodify nature in strictly anthropocentric terms and deprives it of its intrinsic and relational worth. This diminished model of nature downplays the authentic and social life of nature. It prefers to view nature as a human activity, like trade and capital flows, in international society when, in truth, it is a wide variety of life and being.

This instrumental bias in current international perceptions of nature is itself good reason for increasing nature's diplomatic status and persona to affirm its wider life and value as a social phenomenon in human society.

[3] For the history of environmental diplomacy, see: Pamela S. Chasek et al, Global Environmental Politics, Ninth Edition, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2026.
[4] ICRC, Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict, Geneva, 2020.
[5] IPBES was set up in 2012 as the IPCC equivalent expert body for the Rio Convention on Biodiversity.
[6] IPBES, The Diverse Values and Valuation of Nature, 2022.

Nature as neighbour

Indigenous peoples and their traditional cosmologies have always lived in social recognition of animals, insects, mountains, plants, rivers and sea as worthy of respect and understanding as neighbours on this earth. For the indigenous worldview, nature's rich presence and critical importance to human life demands that humanity and nature negotiate the world with one another to live in harmony together. Mainstream environmental law also recognizes deeply the vital mutualism between humanity and nature in the theory and practice of its jurisprudence.

The diplomatic world must recover this relationship with nature as a neighbour of social and political significance, just like any neighbouring human state, and diplomatically recognize our overlapping territories and pooled sovereignties with the natural world. Successful cohabitation of the earth between humanity and nature is vital to the continuity of the earth as it is needed by all life, and good diplomatic relations between humans and nature are existential to peace and security.

This means it is important for nature's own overlapping spheres of sovereignty to be diplomatically seen and recognized in some way in a wider understanding of international society that extends to include all life.[7]

To do this well, diplomacy needs new ways to recognize, hear and understand the "voice" and interests of nature in its formal diplomatic systems, and to recognize its presence. Such all-life and interspecies diplomacy is essential if we are to "make peace with nature" and cooperate with it as a joint partner in the survival and sustainability of life on earth.

How can nature be a diplomat?

In a sense this is just as strange a question as: how can the entirety of India, its people and its places, be a diplomat? All political representation requires an element of imagination, performance, agreement, and procedure.[8] Meeting an Indian diplomat requires me to recognize them as their government and their country in a way that is necessarily fictional as well as factual. Representation is intrinsically symbolic (and insufficient) by making present something that is absent.[9] Yet, still we say "it is good to have India and Norway in the room" when, of course, they are actually in the Asian subcontinent and the North Sea.

But the difficulties are real. A diplomatic encounter with an Indian Ambassador has the advantage of human continuity between what is represented (a human government) and who is representing it (a human diplomat) and who agrees to recognize it (another human). The whole diplomatic process can

[7] For a more detailed analysis of this view, see The Multispecies Constitution Project led by Jonathan Blake and Claire Isabel Webb at the Berggruen Institute at https://berggruen.org/eu/projects/the-multispecies-constitution-project
[8] Paula A Diehl and Michael Saward eds, Bodies, Spaces, Claims: The Theory and Practice of Performing Political Representation, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2024.
[9] Hannah Pitkin, The Concept of Representation, University of California Press, 2023.

and does exist in human heads and human form and is explained in human voices and human texts. This is obviously not the case if I announce that I am representing a forest, a river or a dolphin.

Although the challenge of non-human and interspecies diplomacy presents hard problems of ontological separation, cognitive difference, and speechlessness, it is still possible to imagine new practical mechanisms for nature to have distinct diplomatic presence and political persona alongside human states. As with diplomacy between states, most nature representation will depend on some form of human person and performance, and the imagination of those agreeing to respect it. Equally, just as state diplomats take instructions from capital and diplomatic superiors, nature diplomats can take instruction from science, indigenous knowledge, and their own interspecies relationships and bonds.

Different mechanisms for nature as diplomat

Communities, governments and businesses are exploring a variety of ways in which nature can be more directly represented and have greater agency in human politics and governance. These can be grouped into several types of representative activity with each one inevitably involving human mediation, interpretation, and communication of nature's interests and "voice".

All these mechanisms rely on the common craft of **nature connectedness**. This is a commitment and skill which develops deeper emotional, psychological and cognitive "bonds" with the wide variety of nature around us to empathically and scientifically represent nature's interests, needs, and importance.[10] Nature connectedness is similar to the cognitive and emotional empathy required by diplomats to understand the point of view of other states and societies around them, and convey them objectively to capital. Such connectiveness is the core diplomatic task of listening and communicating in human and interspecies diplomacy alike.

Nature Guardians

The practice of nature guardians who understand, look out for, and represent particular species, landscapes, or waters is widespread in various forms, some informal and many formal.

Environmental Defenders are one kind of community endorsed or self-mandated guardians of nature. So too are many CSOs, NGOs and international organizations who speak and work as guardians and protectors of nature.

[10] Matthew Pritchard et al, Catalysing transformational change through compound nature connectedness interventions, Ambio, December 2025.

Perhaps the most famous example of a formalized guardian role is the legal recognition of the Whanganui River in New Zealand.[11]

In 2017 after decades of campaigning by Māori communities, the Whanganui River in New Zealand – including its surrounding mountains, its river basin, its river and its entry point into the sea – was recognized as a full legal person, *Te Awa Tupua*, by the New Zealand Parliament with an official office of two guardians, *Te Pou Tupua*, appointed to act as the custodians, "human face" and legal voice of the river.

Nature Councils and Embassies

Ecologists have begun to develop informal "councils" or "embassies" to imagine and represent a variety of species or a specific landscape or seascape. In England, Phoebe Tickell pioneered the *Interspecies Council* in 2021 which uses a combination of moral imagination and scientific knowledge to shape a conversation "from the point of view of nature" with local communities or government authorities in any given setting across the country.[12] Sitting in a circle, each person is asked to understand and empathize with the life and interests of a particular species and represent it in a local planning discussion.

A similar approach of nature perspective-taking and representation is the Embassy of the North Sea which was founded in the Hague in 2018 by ecologists, scientists and artists. This is an experimental platform to "listen to, speak with, and negotiate on behalf of the plants, animals, microbes and people of the North Sea". Its ultimate purpose is to "represent them in the cultural, legal and political public domain". The Embassy promotes a "biodiverse democracy" and speaks and performs on behalf of the North Sea on the fringes of a variety of governmental and diplomatic events.

A wide variety of interspecies perspective-taking and representation was on show at the *Nordic Summit of Species* in Aarhus in Denmark in 2025, where participants could imagine "becoming bat" and living the life cycle of a virus, or learn techniques to cultivate a deeper appreciation of the sounds and landscapes of nature.[13]

Animal Diplomats

In his pioneering 2022 work, *Wild Diplomacy*, Baptiste Morizot uses his long experience of tracking and understanding wolves in France, and negotiating the tense interaction between humans and wolves, to develop a theory and practice of interspecies diplomacy.[14]

[11] Klaus Bosselmann and Timothy Williams, The River as a Legal Person, Heinrich Boll Stuftung, 29 January 2025, at https://www.boell.de/en/2025/01/29/river-legal-person-case-whanganui-river-new-zealand
[12] See the Interspecies Council at https://www.moralimaginations.com/interspecies-council
[13] The Nordic Summit of Species at https://summitofspecies.org/program/
[14] Baptiste Morizot, Wild Diplomacy – Cohabiting with Wolves on a New Ontological Map, State University of New York Press, New York, 2022.

Morizot sees himself as a wolf diplomat. His deep knowledge of wolves and lived experience of being near them enables him to engage diplomatically between humans and wolves as a very practical intermediary and problem solver in the interests of both species. In his extensive wolf walks on foot and skis, he maps and respects the territorial sovereignty of wolves, which overlaps with French human sovereignty, and suggests how these two neighbouring groups must necessarily pool and trade their sovereignty in various ways to ensure peaceful coexistence and cohabitation.

A striking example of animal diplomacy is the work of Sacha Dench, former UN Ambassador for Migrating Species. A biologist known as "the human swan", Sacha flew regularly with swans along their vast transboundary migration routes to achieve greater empathy and insight into their way of life and experience of the world. She then represented their interests and those of other migrating species as their ambassador in UN processes.

This kind of animal diplomacy requires considerable interspecies fieldcraft. Interspecies diplomacy like this requires deep nature connectedness by the human diplomat in an almost meditative practice of more-than-human perspective-taking.

Nature on the Board

The idea of "putting nature on the board" is growing in certain sectors of business, NGOs and government.[15] This goes beyond the routine implementation of ESG policies and a board Director responsible for ESG, to have a director deliberately thinking as nature and performing as its direct representative in all boardroom discussions and decision-making.

Nature as Shareholder

Ecological economists are exploring ways to give nature economic agency by constructing ecosystems and particular species as financial shareholders in their own resources. Owning and profiting from its own production directly gives nature political and legal personality along with significant economic power. At scale, this can then translate into diplomatic power in the hands of human guardians.

The Rights of Nature

A more explicitly legal mechanism for the nature representation is emerging in the movement for the rights of nature (RoN). This either gives nature legal rights in law or full legal personality as a subject of law.

Several states have adopted the rights of nature approach in their constitutions to various degrees, notably Ecuador. At local level communities and local authorities in many parts of the world are starting

[15] Simeon Rose, Nature's Boardroom – Giving Nature a Voice and a Vote, Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2026.

to recognize the rights of a river or a forest, so giving nature legal personality and status in a variety of ways – as in the example from New Zealand above.

The risks of nature as diplomat

There are three main risks in creating new forms of political presence and diplomatic performance for nature: competition, capture, or a failure of true representation.

- **Competition** – new centres of diplomatic power create new contest and conflict, so potentially destabilizing the international system. The move to give nature more direct diplomatic presence and persona changes it from being a topic of multilateral policy to becoming a diplomatic force in its own right whose earth interests will clash with the national interest of states and need to be negotiated and resolved. This risk could see states deliberately sidelining, undermining, and overpowering new forms of nature as diplomat despite paying lip service to nature's new diplomatic status.

- **Capture** – new political movements can be captured by bad faith actors. Nature's new diplomatic mechanisms could be dominated by a clique of guardians or animal diplomats who do not seek harmony between humanity and nature but have very different interests of their own. For example, they might pursue an extreme deep ecology agenda which views humanity as a dangerously invasive species that should always be subservient to the needs of other life. Alternatively, they may seek only to profit from nature at the expense of states and their citizens.

- **Representative failure** – the inability to understand and communicate what is truly good for nature. The concept of "responsiveness" is key to human representation of all kinds. This is the principle that representatives must understand and practically respond to the needs and interests of those they represent. Here, the big ontological difference and lack of common language between humans and nature is a genuine risk although responsiveness often fails in human representation too.

The problem of competition is the very essence of diplomacy just like its corollary challenge of cooperation. Competition always exists in diplomacy and is not a problem in itself.

The risks of capture and failed representation share a distinct problem of **interspecies ventriloquism** in which humans pretend to speak as non-human life but, in fact, simply repeat scripts and interests of their own, like the ventriloquist putting words into the mouth of their dummy. In this case, nature has no direct capacity to respond and confront the distortion. Other humans can respond on its behalf if the science is clear and they are free to speak out. This may not always be the case.

An experiment worth trying

Greater presence, status, and direct representation of nature in multilateral diplomacy is vital to shape a new multilateralism for the era of climate change and nature emergency. Many governments and billions of citizens across international society agree that humans should urgently find new ways of paying attention to other life and including nature's presence, interests, agency, and beauty into the rituals and practices of world governance. A major step forward along this road must be to recognize nature as a diplomat in more powerful and influential ways.

The Geneva Graduate Institute and the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice at Oxford are ready to help International Geneva and UN Member States to design and pilot new experiments in nature as diplomat to further explore different mechanisms, risks and opportunities of a new approach to nature diplomacy.