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Governance with the livings

Representing nature and future generations in decision-making

Learning Document
Egregor Community Event
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Governance with the Livings: Representing Nature and Future Generations in Decision-Making

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This learning document comes out of the Egregor community events, monthly gatherings where members of the community come together to explore a shared question, exchange experiences, and think collectively. We don't see ourselves as a think tank. We're closer to a lab: a space for experimentation and open reflection on the future of philanthropy, impact, and a just social and ecological transition.

Our learning documents are not meant to set out absolute truths or final conclusions. Each topic we touch on would deserve much deeper exploration. Instead, these pages capture the conversations that took place among people who are connected to the subject in different ways, with their insights, questions, tensions, and open threads. We share them as a starting point for further reflection, and we hope they invite you to continue the conversation with us.

Guest Speakers

Niels de Fraguier helps organisations transition towards regenerative and equitable practices. He co-founded Vivøices, a not-for-profit organisation that fosters the voice of nature and future generations at the heart of organisations' governance, and co-created the Compass for Regenerative Business, a methodology for organisations moving towards a regenerative future. He lectures at Sciences Po and co-authored *The Regenerative Enterprise*. He also serves as Secretary-General of Veolia's Future Generations Council, which he designed together with Frantz Gault.

Alexandra "Ally" Pimor is an Earth lawyer and Director of Nature Governance, a programme of the Earth Law Center, where she leads the curation of global courses on nature in business and on nature-conscious leadership. She taught public law for more than 20 years, with research on how law and governance relate to spirituality. Her current work is part of a wider effort to move law and governance towards an ecozoic social contract and a regenerative economy grounded in ecocentric principles. She represents nature on the Advisory Board of Purpose Disruptors in the UK and at the Palais de Tokyo in France, and was formerly the voice of nature on the board of Faith in Nature.

Frantz Gault co-founded Vivøices and specialises in representing nature in corporate governance. He represents nature on several boards, including that of the French digital services company Norsys, where nature is also a shareholder. His book *La nature au travail* was published with EPFL. A Sciences

Po alumnus in organisational sociology, he also co-founded Corporate Regeneration, which facilitates the integration of nature into corporate governance bodies.

Moderation

Chris Fitch is a science writer with a specialism in aligning the ambitions of humanity with the limitations of life on a finite planet. He has contributed to brands such as National Geographic, The Atlantic, Bloomberg, and Monocle, and is the author of four books, most recently *Wild Cities: Discovering New Ways of Living in the Modern Urban Jungle*, exploring rewilding projects in cities around the world.

Executive Summary

Organisations **depend on living systems**, yet the way they make decisions rarely reflects this. Governance structures were largely shaped by 19th-century norms in which **nature appears as a resource** and future generations do not appear at all, so decisions with long-term consequences for both are usually taken without anyone in the room whose role is to speak for them. A growing number of organisations are experimenting with ways to change this, ranging from advisory councils to shareholdings held on nature's behalf. These **experiments are still young** and raise questions that remain largely open, in particular about who can speak for nature and what such a voice can actually change.

This event explored what it might take to move forward, drawing on practitioners who sit on or advise boards as representatives of nature or of future generations. A recurring theme was that **formal representation** seems to be **only the starting point.** The speakers described long preparation before a seat is created and ongoing practice once it exists, and suggested that a representative is more likely to have influence when working alongside the rest of the board. Several contributions pointed to **anchoring the commitment** in an organisation's statutes or ownership, so that it does not depend only on the goodwill of current leaders. It also emerged that there are numerous ways in which governance with nature can be approached, and that indeed an agreed upon **joint understanding between representative and organisation** is an important first step in the process of giving nature a seat.

Introduction

Businesses, organisations and public bodies depend on living systems, and among those working in the field the case for giving nature and future generations a voice in governance is rarely contested. The harder question is how such a voice can be built into structures that were never designed for it, and what it can achieve once it is there.

Practice in this area is recent. Since a UK company first gave nature a seat on its board in 2022, a small number of organisations have adopted similar models, ranging from advisory roles to shareholdings. Several difficulties remain. In many legal systems nature has no legal personality, so its representation is usually an arrangement an organisation creates for itself and could later undo, and directors are generally bound to act in the interest of the company rather than on an external mandate. Who can legitimately speak for nature is still debated, and little is publicly known about how these arrangements have changed decisions in practice. Experience with future generations in public governance also suggests that representation without real powers may achieve less than hoped.

The speakers each introduced their approach and presented a case study from their own practice, taking nature representation from the abstract to the substance. Niels described the Future Generations Council he co-designed for Veolia, a consultative body of young leaders who advise the company's leadership. Ally explained how Earth law shapes her role as a voice of nature on boards and advisory bodies, including Purpose Disruptors and, previously, Faith in Nature. Frantz shared his experience at Norsys, where nature holds shares and he represents it with a vote and a veto on the board. Taken together, the cases gave a sense of how differently representation can be designed.

> *The health of our ecosystems includes and involves the health of human beings.* **– Niels de Fraguier**

Part I - Niels de Fraguier: A Future Generations Council at Veolia

A council of young leaders

Veolia, a multinational utility with more than 200,000 employees in over 50 countries, entered into a partnership with Vivøices to change their governance structure to give the planet and future generations a voice in its organisation. In response, Vivøices designed a Future Generations Council of 30 young leaders under 30, appointed for three years to speak for human health and wellbeing as well as for planetary health. Members come from academia, start-ups, finance, diplomacy and other fields, and from different continents. Twice a year they meet the CEO in Paris, where they share thoughts on emerging trends, opportunities for collaboration, and agree with leadership on topics to explore further. They then co-design solutions and help implement them with the company's own experts.



The council was designed in about eight months. Business unit heads proposed internal candidates by region and area of expertise, while external members were identified through

research and recommendations, including people active in the COPs and in academic and investment circles. There was no open call, although opening up the process is being considered for the next mandate. The structure is consultative, so its members do not have voting rights. But they add accountability, they can challenge the company openly or resign, and request a meeting with the CEO on any matter. Members sign a confidentiality agreement and receive access to sensitive information about the company's operations and research, so they can take part in its actual activity. Vivøices oversees and reviews the programme as an independent party, and a report on the first year and a half was due to be published in mid-October.

A question was raised about whether it is fair to place responsibility for the future on young people, and how far they can represent even their own generation. Niels acknowledged that he struggles with this. In his view the responsibility belongs to everyone, and the reason for the council is that young people are underrepresented in decision-making today. He argued that giving them space calls for training and for building trust, so that they can work on an equal footing with board members and the CEO and share the responsibility with them.

A growing field and a regenerative ambition

Niels observed a growing awareness about the deep reliance and dependence of organisations on the communities and ecologies that surround them, reinforced by a perception of increased risk among recent geopolitical crises. Some companies approach Vivøices directly, while in other cases the organisation reaches out through lectures and invitations to board meetings. He stressed that it often takes time for leaders to understand what representing nature or future generations involves in practice. In his experience the transformation needs maturity from leaders and oversight from a third party, so that these models do not drift from their purpose.

For Niels, reducing negative impacts is not enough, and regeneration means putting back more than an organisation takes. He described the current economy as one that extracts resources and treats people as human resources, and identified governance and ownership as the two areas that would need to change. In his view an organisation can publish strong CSR reports and still leave the system untouched unless it rethinks its purpose and relationships at the root, including whether living beings take part in its decisions and whether local communities and nature can be among its owners.

> *Regeneration means putting back more than we take.* **– Niels de Fraguier**

Part II - Ally Pimor: Earth Law and Becoming a Voice of Nature

Earth law and the voice of nature

Drawing on two decades of teaching public law, Ally described environmental law as largely anthropocentric, since it permits human and corporate activity on the assumption that nature is a resource. Earth law starts from the Earth itself, which Ally described as far older than humanity and

as having its own principles that humans should align with. She holds that the laws a society creates shape the reality it experiences, and saw rights of nature as one way to change legal systems from within by recognising the Earth as a living being with the right to thrive and regenerate.

She distinguished two approaches. Rights of nature follow a protective logic that draws a red line against harm. Being a voice of nature belongs more to a paradigm of responsibility, in which bringing nature onto a board is a way for humans to take responsibility and rejoin what Thomas Berry, often called the grandfather of Earth law, described as the great conversation with the Earth.

When Ally joined the board of Faith in Nature as its voice of nature, she had to develop an approach that squared her animist, spiritual view of nature with the formal representative role she embodied. While it is natural to feel illegitimate speaking *for* nature, and sees herself as a voice *of* nature because she is, like all humans *of nature*. As she described it, the role is something one grows into and co-creates with the organisation.

Ally noted that while legal structures can already give nature a seat and a vote on a board, this is merely the start of the changes that have to be made. The real crux is whether and how this formal representation then results in substantive change. She has spent at least two years with each organisation before nature joins its board, mainly asking why they want it there and what would be different five years later. With Purpose Disruptors, a UK non-profit helping the advertising industry with its transition, these conversations led the founders to realise that they wanted nature as an advisor for now, because their aim was to change the way they make decisions.

Four models of representation

When asked whether a nature representative mainly acts as an adapter between two systems, Ally described four models:

- a guardian protects and advocates for nature
- an agent facilitates its presence in the room
- an auditor holds the organisation to account
- a designer brings ecological principles into the structure of the organisation so that it works more like a living organism.

She felt the guardian model can leave the representative isolated and in an antagonistic position towards the rest of the board, as the single nature representative is positioned opposite the other board members while protecting nature from board decisions. Her own approach is closer to that of an agent and mentor, creating a space in which other board members can remember that they too are nature, whether they lead marketing or finance.

Board meetings she facilitates therefore begin with a moment of grounding and a reminder of the organisation's purpose and ecological principles, so that each question is approached from within that frame. She described the results so far as experiential and hard to measure in conventional terms, and like Niels she stressed that this takes practice and cannot happen overnight.

Ally added that the future is shaped by decisions made in the present, so responsibility for future generations rests with people today, who can also learn from earlier generations, an idea she linked to the concept of Sankofa. She argued that we need to move beyond an anthropocentric viewpoint, since this would repeat the same paradigm of separation and dominance.

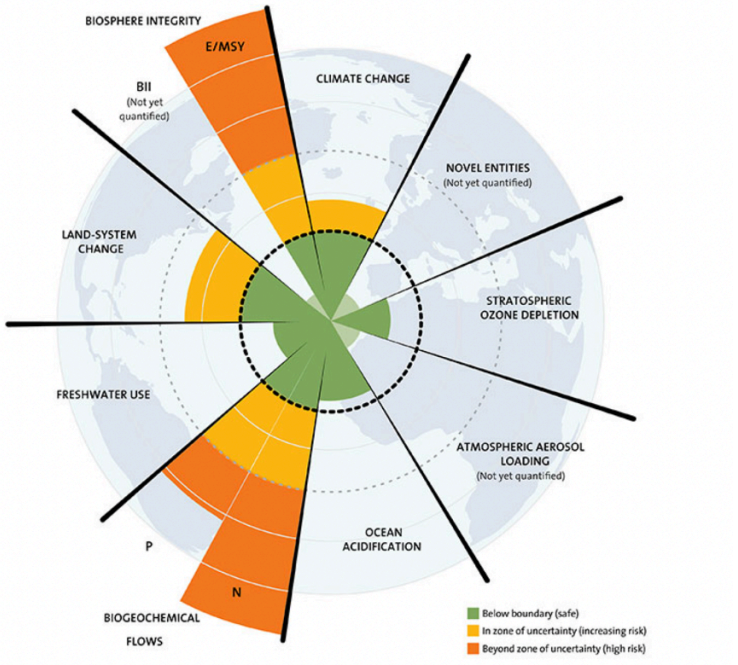
> *When we onboard nature in these organisations, we're not doing nature a favour. We're simply taking responsibility and joining the conversation again.* ***– Ally Pimor***

Part III – Frantz Gault: Nature as a Shareholder at Norsys

Defining nature with the board

Frantz represents nature at Norsys, a French digital services company with about 800 employees whose activity depends heavily on computers and data centres, which makes its relationship with nature less obvious than in a utility or a cosmetics company. He begins each mandate by working with leadership to define nature, offering several definitions drawn from anthropology, in particular Philippe Descola's work on how different cultures understand nature. He chose this route partly because, given France's tradition of laïcité, references to spirituality or indigenous wisdom would be unlikely to be welcome on a French board.

In his view every definition is imperfect, because it involves choosing which parts of nature to protect and which to sacrifice, and he sees this question at the heart of the board discussion. At Norsys the board settled on the nine planetary boundaries, which Frantz noted were originally framed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre with future generations in mind and therefore concern both human and non-human life.



Credit: Steffen, W., et al., CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

Frantz described his approach as pragmatic. Norsys worked with the Stockholm Resilience Centre for several months to understand where its impact on the planetary boundaries lies, and found it concentrated on land use and climate change, largely through the mining needed to produce computers.

Nature as shareholder and director

At Norsys, nature owns 10% of the company's capital, and Frantz represents it as a shareholder with a voting right on the board and, unusually, a veto over matters such as strategy or acquisitions. Because it seemed risky for one person to hold that power over a company of 800 people, he speaks for a group of about ten people, including scientists and other experts, who decide together what position to take. Nature is also represented in other committees and in the company's social dialogue with worker representatives, which gives it a voice in negotiations over day-to-day operations.

Frantz conducted a diagnosis to identify the company's most impactful practices. He then identified alternatives that would reduce the impact. Frantz described this as a modest first step, with the use of AI now the larger question for a company in which AI is unavoidable. He shared an open question he is considering, namely whether delivering a service such as a website with AI might have a different ecological impact from delivering it with employees, and made clear that he had no answer.

Asked how other board members view a nature representative and whether the model can scale, Frantz explained that a vote and a veto bring legal duties towards the company and its employees as well. Nature remains his primary concern, but he weighs it against the interests of others around the table, including the jobs of the 800 employees. He felt that acting in this way has given him good relations with the rest of the board and is what could make the approach scalable. Vivøices has since trained dozens of conventional directors and partnered with established director training organisations in France.

> *Each definition of nature is a choice to protect part of nature and sacrifice other parts of nature.* – ***Frantz Gault***

Part IV – Community Discussion

Public bodies and the law



Chris Fitch described projects he encountered while writing *Wild Cities*, such as Tallinn's Pollinator Highway, a corridor across the city that supports native pollinators and is run by the city administration. He asked whether public bodies might find it easier to represent nature, since many already include it among their objectives. Ally's experience with councils and governments suggested that a good deal of education is still needed, because nature is often understood within a sustainability frame that may simply sustain

the existing system. She observed that related work is happening in several European countries, including the UK and France, although it is rarely named as such and nature has not yet been given her own place in it.

Ally and Frantz both noted that directors who represent nature carry fiduciary duties. Ally suggested that a seat on the board is therefore not sufficient by itself, and that an organisation's founding documents may need to include an obligation to look after nature. Faith in Nature and Purpose Disruptors have taken this step. A US venture capital firm she worked with added such a clause to its articles of association so that directors would be protected from shareholders opposing decisions made for the good of nature, which she saw as particularly important where shareholder primacy prevails.

Participants also asked whether Earth law could eventually operate in the way international law does. Ally saw Earth law as already present at every level from local to international, with the task being to recognise it. She mentioned the Earth Law Center's work with municipalities and national governments, including its support for Panama in bringing rights of nature into its constitution, and current efforts to amend companies' acts.

Indigenous knowledge and culture

A question about the place of indigenous wisdom drew different responses. Niels noted that Frantz's book draws on field research with indigenous leaders and that these governance models take inspiration from ancestral practices in many regions outside the Western world. Ally works closely with indigenous communities and uses Two-Eyed Seeing, a framework that holds Western scientific and indigenous ways of seeing together, much as two eyes give depth of vision. In response to a point about European indigenous wisdom, she suggested that indigeneity takes different forms, including in Europe, and that it is worth asking which indigenous voices are relevant to a given place.

The discussion turned to which qualities and forms of education might make people more receptive to nature's place in governance. Chris suggested that normalisation may matter more than rules, pointing to the small Shinto shrines and green spaces that sit in dense Japanese cities as an ordinary part of urban life. Frantz added that some natural elements, such as certain trees and mountains, are considered sacred and associated with the spirits of the dead, so destroying them would be comparable to building over a cemetery.

Cross-Cutting Insights

Representation is a practice that takes time

Niels and Ally both stressed that bringing nature or future generations into governance cannot happen quickly. Preparation can take months or years, and the work seems to continue long after a

seat or council is created, through the way meetings are run and the way relationships between representatives and leaders develop.

Defining nature is part of the work

Ally's point about how nature and humans can be distinguished from each other, and Frantz's practice of defining nature with each board, both suggested that the definition is a choice with consequences that an organisation may need to make explicitly.

Representation tends to be shared

Ally's concern that the guardian model can isolate a representative and Frantz's emphasis on acting as a responsible director pointed in a similar direction, towards working with the rest of the board. The speakers also described representation as something carried by more than one person. Frantz speaks on behalf of an assembly of experts, and Ally aims to help the whole board speak as nature.

Structures can protect intentions

A seat or council may depend on the goodwill of current leaders. The speakers mentioned several ways of making the commitment more durable, including clauses in articles of association, shareholding by nature, oversight by an independent party and representation beyond the board in committees and labour relations.

Context shapes the sources of knowledge

The speakers drew on different traditions to understand nature, from Earth law and indigenous knowledge to anthropology and planetary science. The setting appeared to influence the choice, as Frantz's reference to laïcité in French boardrooms showed.

Conclusion

The event moved between the personal work of becoming a voice of nature and the formal structures through which nature and future generations can enter governance. The cases discussed ranged from a consultative youth council to a shareholding with a veto, and they showed how differently representation can be designed, as well as how much seems to depend on preparation and on the relationship between representatives and the rest of the organisation. Questions remain about how these models might scale and how representatives are best chosen. For organisations that recognise their dependence on living systems, the discussion suggested that giving nature and future generations a voice may also mean rethinking how decisions are made and who owns the organisation that makes them.

> *The future doesn't exist, the present does. The present determines whether we even have a future and what kind of future we have.* ***– Ally Pimor***

Want to continue the conversation?

Reach out to our moderator and speakers Chris Fitch (chris.fitch@outlook.com), Niels de Fraguier (niels@vivoices.org), Alexandra Pimor (apimor@earthlaw.org), Frantz Gault (frantz@vivoices.org) or Egregor President Guillaume Soto-Mayor (guillaume@egregor.net) and Egregor COO Inés d'Haultfoeuille (ines@egregor.net) .



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