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Almost everyone would acknowledge that people have certain rights - even though there is not always agreement on exactly what those rights are, and even though there are places where people still are deprived of basic human rights.

But what about the rest of the living things on earth? Do any of them have rights? If so, which ones? And what kind of rights?

Can one say that food cattle have at least the right to be humanely slaughtered? That hundred-year-old redwood trees have a right to continue to survive? That a turtle has the right to survive long enough to lay its eggs?

Or is everything on planet earth subject to humans, and what they want?

Science has taught us about eco-systems - biological communities together with their environment that function as a unit, to use the definition in the *American College Heritage Dictionary*, 4th edition. To date, the concept has usually been applied to plants and animals in specific areas. Human beings aren't usually thought of as being members of an eco-system - though they can affect, or establish, or study ecosystems.

In ecosystems, each part, each member of the community, serves a function that supports the continued survival of the system as a whole. If one component fails, disappears, doesn't perform as usual, the whole system is thrown off-balance, and the eco-system itself can be said to have failed, died, to no longer exist in its former state.

The CNMI's near-shore marine ecosystem, for example, is no longer in balance because over-fishing has reduced the fish population, which has, at least in part, allowed the algae to grow, which has reduced coral growth, which has reduced both habitat and food for fish and other marine life. Due to human intervention, the parts no longer support each other to keep the ecosystem balanced, functional.

Human intervention has destroyed many ecosystems around the world, as people looked at nature as their own private bank, so to speak - available for the withdrawal of goods and services without limit and without any consideration of the effect the withdrawals might have on anything else. As a result, there are deserts that weren't there before, rivers that don't flow any more, icebergs that are melting, hundreds of species that no longer exist, hundreds more that are disappearing.....

In the face of these calamities, an awareness is growing that perhaps humans do not have proprietary rights to nature, but are, instead, just one element of a larger ecosystem that includes nature as one of its components. ♦

The Earth is a self-regulating system made up from all life, including humans, and from the oceans, the atmosphere and the surface rocks, ♦ according to Cormac Cullinan, writing in the January/February '08 issue of *Orion* magazine who reported that a thousand scientists signed this declaration as early as 2001.

This would place nature - living beings other than humans - in the position of itself having a role in the continued survival of the mega-eco-system of which it is a part. And would put humans - as a part of that system - in the position of being responsible for making sure that nature remains strong and healthy enough to do its share. For, says Cullinan, "human welfare is directly dependent on the health of our planet and cannot be achieved at its expense."

Warns Cullinan, "Any legal system designed to give effect to modern scientific understandings (or, indeed, to many cultures ♦ ancient understandings) of how the universe functions would have to prohibit humans from driving other species to extinction or deliberately destroying the

functioning of major ecosystems. In the absence of such regulatory mechanisms, an oppressive and self-destructive regime will inevitably emerge. As indeed it has."

Viewing the earth as an all-inclusive eco-system, then, does not nature - and all that it encompasses - also have rights? The right to exist, to reproduce, to remain strong and healthy? What would that mean? How would that work? The Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund drafted an ordinance for Ecuador incorporating that concept. In its draft form, it read, in part: "Statement of Law: Rights. Natural communities and ecosystems possess inalienable and fundamental rights within the Town of _____". These rights include:

1. The right to exist, flourish, and evolve;
2. The right to habitat or a place to be;
3. The right to maintain its identity and integrity as a distinct, self-regulating being;
4. The right to be free from degradation, pollution, and contamination of its natural genetic systems;
5. River systems have the right to flow and have water quality necessary to provide habitat for native plants and animals, and to provide clean drinking water;
6. Aquifers have the right to sustainable recharge, flow, and water quality; and
7. Species have the right to exist, flourish, and evolve."

The establishment of marine protected areas, mitigation banks, wildlife preserves are all steps in the right direction. But the muddy lagoon after heavy rains, the continued poaching of turtle eggs and fruit bats, the threat of development in Marpi, are proof there's still a long way to go before nature's rights are fully recognized in the CNMI.

More of Cullinane's writings can be found at: <

<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/500/> >, and <

http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/530 >.

Short takes:

- With no public notice, Guam's *Pacific Daily News* ceased home delivery on Saipan on June 27, and seemingly cut back on its distribution to local stores as well - it is no longer available at any of the JoeTen stores, nor will its Saturday or Sunday editions be available anywhere on Saipan. An on-line edition is available by subscription that promises to offer the paper "in its entirety." The *PDN* also maintains a non-subscription site which offers more limited content at < www.guampdn.com >, from which the e-edition can also be ordered. I miss the comics, the "Dear Abby" columns, and the confirmation that our southern neighbor faces many of the same issues that the CNMI does.

- The Saipan Higher Education Financial Assistance agency's reduced budget raises some interesting issues of its own. SHEFA is considering not funding incentive and field-of-study scholarships in the future, but only the "grants-in-aid" category. The question: who is more deserving? Who can contribute more to the CNMI in the future? What criteria are being used to make the decision?

- *The Mystery of Nan Madol*, a children's book described in the *Saipan Tribune* 7/13 issue, not only raises archaeological issues, but also "transports young readers to a place that holds different values and different cultural norms than what the average 11-13-year-old American student knows." What Pacific Islanders need is books that tell the story in reverse - introducing them to places with values and cultural norms different from what they are accustomed to - to help them understand why what they take for granted - warm weather, warm waters, sandy beaches, beautiful views - has such value, deserves protection, holds such an attraction for non-islanders (potential tourists).

- Why don't retirees speak up about the growing threat to their benefits? There's probably an underlying belief that surely the legislature, the Retirement Board, won't cut benefits to the elderly, to their parents, relatives, friends. But there's also the problem of the complexity of issues: stock market earnings, investment apportionments, lump sum COLA payments vs annualized ones, the basis of government contribution calculations, etc., etc., etc. To give retirees an understanding of the issues and how those issues affect them would require an intense and prolonged public education campaign carefully crafted to match local levels of interest and understanding - a challenge it is unlikely the Retirement Fund can meet.

- For those who might be interested, the past two weeks' hiatus was due to a visit from my older daughter, not health reasons.