



# REIMAGINING THE HUMAN- ENVIRONMENT RELATIONSHIP

## Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship Through a Kaleidoscope

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This paper forms part of the volume *Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship* for Stockholm+50. This curated collection of ideas captures, interrogates, and elevates alternative paradigms of the human-nature relationship – existing and new, and from various disciplines and societies – creating a space to recast our relationship with the environment and inform future policymaking.

## About the Authors

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## Introduction

The project Reimagining the Human-Environment Relationship was catalysed by the Stockholm+50 Conference, an event acknowledging 50 years of climate action following the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment. While ostensibly a celebration, the 50th anniversary has been largely overshadowed by the reality of climate failure at a global scale. Recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports<sup>1</sup> indicate that human-driven global temperature rises are accelerating and will almost certainly exceed the crucial threshold of 1.5 degrees over the next 20 years, much earlier than originally anticipated. Indeed, existing levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere mean this crucial mark will be crossed even if all emissions stopped today.<sup>2</sup> Facing a “triple planetary crisis”<sup>3</sup> of a warming planet, massive biodiversity loss, and pollution, global leaders attending the Stockholm+50 conference might well see it less as a celebration and more a funeral pyre for the ambition of 1972.

The need for a paradigm shift on climate has never been more apparent, but the forces of political inertia today seem more entrenched than ever. Fuelled (quite literally) by a form of global capitalism that equates progress with energy consumption, decades of empty promises and unfulfilled commitments have left our collective climate governance system almost by definition unable to meet the existential threat of climate change. Persistent policy horse-trading and beggar-thy-neighbour policies have left much of the world vulnerable to small shifts in global commodity markets and to the economic policies of powerful States. They are left completely defenceless when these changes swing outside of normal ranges—a painful reality for many today as the war in Ukraine drives energy prices to their highest levels in nearly 30 years. However, despite the clear signs of compounding climate-driven crises, the most likely course of action appears to be a continuation of the same forms of political grandstanding, incremental and insufficient shifts to greener energy, and a vague, untested hope<sup>4</sup> that some technological breakthrough might allow us all to continue our lives as usual without destroying the ecosystem we all depend upon for our survival. Worse, the global response to Ukraine has missed a crucial opportunity to shift to sustainable energy and instead appears to reflect a doubling down on military spending and a de-prioritization of climate commitments, with a potential to accelerate the trends that are leading us over the brink.

This collection of essays speaks to the need for a radically different set of perspectives if we are to galvanize meaningful shifts in our approach to the environment. Indeed, if the decades of COP flops<sup>5</sup> show us anything, it is that consensus within the climate science community on the urgency of addressing our planetary trajectory is (absolutely necessary but) insufficient to drive broad behavioural changes. What is needed, and what this project attempts to offer, is a broader range of understandings of the human-environment relationship, a kaleidoscope of views that expose widely differing understandings of the place of humans in our ecosystem, our ethics, our economy, and our galaxy. It is our central argument that today’s Anthropocentric, humanist understanding of the environment is a dangerous form of myopia that fails to capture the different – at times contradictory – perspectives necessary to generate change at a global scale. Instead, we offer a *transdisciplinary* narrative, looking for commonalities across widely divergent practices, including law, ethics, religion, philosophy, resistance politics, complexity science, astrobiology, and indigenous traditions.

## Four Insights

Drawing on these perspectives, we here offer four insights that could help to reframe and redefine the global climate discussion, potentially leading to greater action in the years following Stockholm+50.

The first insight is that **space matters**. Whether Jason Hickel's description of deeply unfair exploitation by the Global North over the Global South, Maritza Paredes' concept of territorial resistance in Latin America, Louis Kotzé's critique of the nationally constrained notions of international environmental law, Workineh Kelbessa's efforts to draw in from the periphery contributions of African philosophy to environmental ethics, or Elena Bennett and Belinda Reyers' proposal for an approach that cuts across local/national geographies, the language of space and territory is crucial to understanding the impacts and responses to environmental change.

Indeed, territory is often the experience of climate change itself. As Paredes' chapter describes, indigenous communities often live on the frontlines of environmental destruction, their forested homelands not only the site of rampant capitalist production, but also the victims of increasing global temperatures and biodiversity loss. The climate justice movement is increasingly understood in these communities as an attempt to thwart the large-scale loss of territory from the combined threats of commercial land use and climate change. Hickel describes this dynamic as a form of colonial appropriation of territory. He estimates that 820 million hectares of embodied land (land embodied in traded goods) is net transferred from the Global South to the Global North each year.<sup>6</sup> However, the story of space and territory is not limited to narratives of conflict, victimization, and struggle. Krushil Watene's exploration of indigenous philosophies highlights how the relationship to land and its past and future inhabitants can serve both as a lens into structural injustices and also a tool for relational repair.

In many respects, a rigid understanding of the environment as bounded political space is deeply problematic, as Kotzé points out in his critique of international environmental law. Embedded in our Westphalian notions of national sovereignty, the evolution of international environmental law has largely focused on national obligations to protect separate pieces of the environment within a given state. Here, state-driven, command-and-control approaches treat the environment as a set of 194 discrete entities, each with a different jurisdiction and set of applicable rules. And given that States are largely set up to ensure short-term human well-being, the environment is thus treated as a resource for human consumption, a good that can be exploited by sovereign States for the benefit of their own people. Kelbessa, Watene and Kotzé reject this instrumentalist and anthropocentric view of the environment. Kotzé instead offers a "planetary boundaries" framing for international environmental law, a single jurisdiction with a common set of moral (and eventually legal) obligations. Indeed, he advances the term *Lex Anthropocenae*<sup>7</sup> that might serve as the genesis of an "Earth System Law" that would provoke a more rapid normative evolution away from today's self-destructive use of the planet. Kelbessa traces the fundamental concept of humanness in African philosophical thought to mean more than a concern for humans alone, but for fellow human beings, nonhuman beings, and nature. His work and Watene's explanation of the concept of Kaitiakitanga in Māori philosophy support Hickel's arguments for a radical shift away from private ownership of the environment towards a philosophy of stewardship.

Other chapters also propose a crossing of territorial boundaries, either by scaling up or down, or by reducing the flows of resources from poorer to wealthier regions. Hickel proposes that highly

indebted countries take steps to reduce their dependency on foreign powers and currencies to allow for a break in the colonial relationship between Global North and South, intentionally defaulting on external debts if necessary. Bennett and Reyers propose a “cross-scale, supra-sectoral” approach to the Anthropocene, looking to generate global impacts via highly localized, networked actions. In a complex system such as our biosphere, their proposals suggest that change can start well below the national level, spreading as a contagion or a series of positive feedback loops until it generates a global effect. Greta Thunberg’s school boycott and the dramatic rise in climate litigation around the world are but two examples of the scalability of individual actions. They speak to the role of the human individual in a complex system – a single node generating transformative change with a cascading impact that grows exponentially. In this context, Iyad Abumoghli’s call to heed the universalism of world religions in this call to care for the planet is another transboundary push in our relationship with(in) the environment.

Finally, Adam Frank takes us quite literally into space, where recent advances in astrobiology offer us a 21<sup>st</sup> century Copernican Revolution. With the discovery that billions of billions of galaxies exist, not only is the likelihood of life extremely likely, it can be simulated and described. By modelling the co-evolution of energy-harvesting species and a range of different planetary conditions, Frank’s team of astrobiologists come to a startling conclusion: once a community of beings begins to draw energy from its environment, it is extraordinarily difficult to maintain a state of equilibrium over a long period of time. But crucially, his models show that it is possible for energy-dependent beings to reach that balance, and that often such a balance is more the result of what he calls “planetary intelligence” than any other set of conscious decisions. By treating our planet as an intelligent being whose collective responses can take the form of conscious action – much in the same way a colony of bees can act intelligently beyond the capacity of its individual members – we can begin to understand ourselves as part of a single system that will survive or die out based on whether it can reach balance.

Frank’s Copernican Revolution leads to the second insight of this collection, which is the need for a **post-humanist** approach to the Anthropocene. Since the Enlightenment period, our world has largely been dominated by the push for human progress, human thriving, and an approach to the environment as a source of potential resources for human consumption. Our authors directly challenge this paradigm. Kelbessa traces the history of a broad range of “non-anthropocentric ethics, lending support to the claim around which many authors converge and articulated succinctly by Kotzé that “the Cartesian divide between Man and Nature is no longer.” In place of humanism, they offer concepts of human entanglement, complex ecosystems, and an understanding of human beings as deeply contingent upon the broader system of which they are only a small (but generally quite dangerous) part.

Post-humanism is not a new discipline,<sup>8</sup> but our authors build on it to offer a set of perspectives that directly challenges today’s global governance systems. Kelbessa explores a range of ideas, including holism, and different indigenous worldviews that see humans as inseparable from their environment, which he neatly summarizes as a metaphysics of interdependence (in contrast to the dominant atomic metaphysics implicit in Western philosophy). Paredes’ description of indigenous resistance to the destruction of their ecosystem is based upon a traditional understanding that such communities are one with their environment. The destruction of their forests and biodiversity is not (just) a form of theft, it is more akin to a maiming or murder of a part of their body. Using the framing of intergenerational relational discourse (*intergenerational-facing*), Watene highlights



the unique value of indigenous understandings of responsibility through time and accountability for environmental destruction. Intergenerational facing is not only about justifying our behaviour to those living today. We are called on to face past generations by reflecting on their struggles, feats, failures, and intentions, and to face future generations not as a powerless generation of descendants but as a community that will one day evaluate our hopes, aspirations, and actions and define how we are remembered. Seen this way, the concept of ecocide takes on new meaning.<sup>9</sup>

This leads to a head-on critique of the capitalist system underpinning the Anthropocene, challenging the assumption that capital is necessary for human thriving. As Hickel points out, the essential trait of capitalism is its need for continuous growth, for the generation of more capital over time. By definition, capitalism cannot stop increasing and, despite all of our technological advancements, that growth ineluctably relies on greater resource use and environmental destruction. However, Hickel points to the hypocrisy of this model of infinite growth, as it necessarily undercuts the system upon which we all rely for our well-being (and survival in the long-term). His proposal for a new economy for a sustainable planet rejects today's dominant assumptions about the possibility of "green growth" and demands that, in addition to pursuing technological change, we also reset our collective objectives. His call for "degrowth" in high-income economies, to reduce less necessary forms of commodity production and focus instead on human well-being, is perhaps the most radical of all the policy options in this volume, but it may be the one we must adopt now if we are to draw back from planetary tipping points.

A non-humanist mindset is nowhere more apparent than Frank's suggestion that there may be nothing particularly special about our species in the (much) broader view of the galaxy. Perhaps every planet with a biosphere (i.e. containing life) must go through a similar process of gradually achieving balance with its inhabitants. Indeed, he suggests there may be a way to understand the evolution of the biosphere alongside the "technosphere," the systems we as human beings have established to consume energy and survive. Based on his modelling of other potential planets, Frank suggests our planet's technosphere-biosphere relationship is just immature, still in a state of unbalance and flux. The threat implicit in this model is clear: some planets may exit their "cosmic adolescence" by reaching a state of equilibrium that does not require a technosphere. Human existence is not a necessary condition for a functioning biosphere – we humans might merely be a growing pain of a maturing planet that may cast us off when we become too uncomfortable.

A post-humanist paradigm demands that we **reimagine the norms and rules needed to govern our relationship among ourselves and our planet**. Some of our authors propose a transgressive first step, such as intentionally defaulting on debts, directly resisting laws that permit exploitation, or rejecting many of the assumptions underpinning liberal institutional world order. If one of the driving forces of our self-destruction is deeply entrenched rules and norms that allow the Global North to strip the world's resources for their own capitalist dominance, then breaking those rules may be the first step to resetting world order on more equitable, sustainable ground.

The need for new rules and norms is equally clear in Kotzé's description of an outmoded set of international environmental laws. With roots in 18<sup>th</sup> century conservation, today's international law is designed to protect natural habitats, to regulate consumption in a way to allow for biodiversity and territories to thrive. While well-meaning, this regulatory approach breaks the environment into discrete arenas, each needing different forms of protection. The siloed regimes that have resulted cause inherent tensions – for example the need to protect fisheries while granting exclusive

rights to offshore fishing for States – and force us to prioritize one environmental problem over another. But Earth does not recognize or respond to those boundaries: our planet is a complex, interrelated ecosystem where changes to one part may have disproportionate impact elsewhere. A generation of hairspray-induced fashion statements and inefficient air conditioners can create enough chlorofluorocarbons to rip a 9.6 million square mile hole in the ozone layer.

In this context, even the most ambitious of today's environmental law practices appear insufficient to curb the levels of energy consumption that are driving our planet beyond its boundaries. Instead, Kotzé's proposal for an "Earth system law" would ground our legal doctrine in an understanding that our planet is interconnected and cannot be regulated via 194 separate jurisdictions. Instead of attempting to govern the planet as a set of distinct resources, our laws may need to foster a form of co-existence based on what Kim and Bosselmann call "ecological integrity."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, our rules and laws will need to operate in what Bennett and Reyers call a "multi-scalar" manner, moving from highly localized action to global movements. We will all need to become more conversant with complexity theory and the ways complex systems change in non-linear ways via emergent behaviour.

These three insights suggest a final consideration, captured by Frank's description of **story as technology**. The stories we tell ourselves about the environment not only reflect our view of our place in the world, they also help shape it. By referring to nature as a "resource," we position our own ecosystem as a commodity that can be traded, exploited, or managed. By referring to the world as a grouping of sovereign territories, we allocate unfettered rights to use the environment regardless of the broader impact it may have on the interconnected ecosystem. By speaking of "human development" we ignore the simple fact that we are entangled beings through longer spans of time and part of the Earth, not apart from it.

Our view is that stories are indeed "technologies" in the Foucauldian sense as well: they help to define and allocate power. The stories powerful States tell themselves about the panacea of liberal Western democracy – the so-called "end of history"<sup>11</sup> – actively shape a distribution of power that disenfranchises the Global South, treats nature as a stepping stone for wealth generation, and may ultimately lead to our collective demise. At its worst, the dominant story of the West suggests that power is the result of successful capitalism, something to be sought and fought over, without a meaningful examination of the responsibilities and harms it generates. Commitments to gradually decarbonize and reduce our dependency on fossil fuels are easily ignored, or quickly dropped, as the US did this year in the face of the Ukraine crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Here, the narratives in this volume are an attempt to retell our relationship with the environment and begin to recalibrate how power is distributed. Rather than a single lens, they offer a kaleidoscope that resists a unified story of truth and instead attempts to reflect the plural realities of our planet. Whether it is Hickel's clear call for a disruption of capitalism, Paredes' push for collective resistance to environmental exploitation, or Abumoghli's reminder of metaphysical sources of authority, the message is clear: the story of this planet may well go on without us unless we radically expand our worldviews today.

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