



graphic: Matt Wuerker

## Toward Old Growth Democracy

Sustainability is not a fun concept for most Americans. It brings up thoughts of limits and cutting back on desires. As Americans we have always associated "growth" with all the good things in life. Growth is about more. Growth is chocolate cake. Sustainability is a diet.

Growth is for the young, sustainability for the mid-aged. Or perhaps the mature. Growth can be sustainable, or it can be uncontrolled—mature or immature.

For something to be sustainable, all the factors including growth must be balanced. Balance is also a mature concept involving careful weighing and trade-offs. When we balance a budget we must give up some of our immediate desires in favor of the reality of our bank account. The alternative is to borrow and go into deficit spending. And that is what Americans have chosen: personal and global deficit spending. We are also deep in debt to the planet itself, and the bank of nature is nearing collapse.

Maturity, balance, and sustainability are marks of a healthy old-growth forest. In its younger days the forest had its flings with different kinds of shrubs, a variety of birds and animals, and was thinned by the occasional forest fire and drought. But once it reached maturity things settled down. Trees don't grow taller forever, the species that fit stay, the others move on. Balance is achieved. That does not mean things are not alive and growing, just that they have reached sustainable growth.

Human beings are a young species and the U.S. is a young (some say adolescent) country, but it is now time to grow up. As humans and Americans we have progressed through stages of development—often two steps forward, one step back. We are still facing issues of human rights but are making steady gains.

After over 200 years of struggle, U.S. law prohibits slavery and recognizes all citizens—regardless of race, sex, color or religion—as legal persons with rights in the Constitution. Our democracy is growing, maturing, and achieving balance. Two steps forward.

But along the way, the Supreme Court gave corporations personhood and other constitutional rights, throwing our democracy out of balance once more. One step back. We need to remove these rights from corporations to continue our progress towards a balanced, mature, growing democracy. But it can not end there.

When we work to create sustainability, we need to consider more than human rights. It would be a big step forward to give constitutional rights to nature. Recognizing the rights for all the aspects of nature to survive, to fulfill their roles in the ecosystem, to be recognized and protected by human law as more than mere resources, will go a long way to restoring balance and achieving ecological sustainability in the U.S. and beyond. This will be an American Ideal worth spreading.

In America we are engaged in an experiment called democracy. Like the forest, we have had our ups and downs. For our society to mature into a healthy old-growth democracy, which is balanced and sustainable into the future, we should seek out the ideas that bring balance and let go of those that upset the scales. Maturity brings wisdom. If you doubt this, just take a walk in an old-growth forest.

*Jan Edwards is the creator of the "Tapestry of the Commons," which is online at [www.TheAllianceForDemocracy.org](http://www.TheAllianceForDemocracy.org). She is a member of the Redwood Coast Chapter of the AfD.*

**We are deep in debt to the planet itself, and the bank of nature is nearing collapse.**

### Q&A On Rights of Nature

**Question:** How do we recognize Rights for Nature and still use nature sustainably?

**Answer:** We are all still grappling with this. Rights for Nature will need to grow and mature as a concept. Thomas Berry gives a good list of how the rights could be conceived (see *Justice Rising* vol 2 #4). The book *Wild Law*, by Cormac Cullinan, fleshes out these ideas. And there is a new college in Florida, The Center for Earth Jurisprudence, where details will be discussed and strategy developed.

But for example, let's say the Colorado River has the right to fulfill its historical geological and biological role in the ecosystem. It could be argued the river should be allowed to flow all the way into Mexico and eventually into the ocean. That would require a certain amount of water, maybe removal of dams or other obstacles humans have placed in the way. Extra water when available could be used by humans, but not so much that the river cannot complete its mission. Same thing with a forest. Each individual tree does not have the right to not be cut, but the species has the right to not be made extinct, and the ecosystem of the forest in question has the right to continue to function as it has and complete its role in nature.

Will this be an easy thing and cause no arguments? Of course not. But now we will be discussing a different concept: What is the historic, biological and geological role/mission of this aspect of nature and how can its rights be protected? We will have shifted the basis of the conversation.