

067 Living in harmony with rivers through the rights of nature and ecocentric law

REVERING the essential role that rivers play in sustaining life, as the lifeblood of the planet;

DISTRESSED by severe harms caused to rivers from dams, diversions, excessive groundwater withdrawals, climate change, pollution and habitat loss;

ALARMED BY the 85% decline in freshwater wildlife populations since 1970 revealed by the Living Planet Report 2024;

ACKNOWLEDGING the need to shift from viewing rivers only as resources and property to living in harmony with them as integral members of a shared community of life;

FURTHER ACKNOWLEDGING the intrinsic value of rivers, their basins and the biodiversity they sustain;

NOTING that river degradation harms human environmental rights and the rights and values of those to whom rivers are living entities, relatives, sacred or integral to their way of life;

GUIDED BY the growing number of governments and laws, and the quantity of jurisprudence recognising the Rights of Nature, rights of rivers and other ecocentric law approaches;

FURTHER GUIDED BY legal concepts advanced through civil-society-led declarations, including the Universal Declarations on the Rights of Mother Earth, Rivers, Wetlands and the Ocean;

RECOGNISING that the rights of rivers have been a focal point and catalyst of the larger Rights of Nature movement;

INSPIRED BY the development of legal guardianship bodies for waters, giving them legal standing and personality;

ALSO INSPIRED BY the critical role of nature's traditional guardians, including Indigenous stewards, whose relationships with and responsibilities to sacred waters have long safeguarded them;

WELCOMING support for the 'Rights of Nature' (or Mother Earth) in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), including funding for "Mother Earth centric actions" under Target 19(f) and recognition of the diverse value systems of nature in Section C, Point 7(b);

RECALLING Resolution 5.100 *Incorporation of the Rights of Nature as the organisational focal point in IUCN's decision making* (Jeju, 2012); and

HIGHLIGHTING IUCN's role in advancing environmental and water law, as well as legal concepts to protect and restore Nature to health;

The IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025, at its session in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates:

1. RECOMMENDS that IUCN Members and Commissions promote the protection and restoration of rivers and wetlands through:

a. supporting the work of the World Commission on Environmental Law (WCEL) on rights of nature, and related initiatives;

b. facilitating collaboration and knowledge-sharing;

c. harmonising the protection and restoration of rivers with other rights-based campaigns for nature; and

d. ensuring that Indigenous peoples, including those represented by IUCN Indigenous Peoples' Organisations, as well as local communities, play a central role;

2. RECOMMENDS that WCEL work with proponents of the Declarations on Rights of Rivers and Rights of Wetlands to develop guidelines on their complementarity;

3. URGES IUCN Members to thoroughly examine the rights of rivers and wetlands, and other ecocentric approaches, including relationship-based frameworks, to provide technical, financial, and policy support, and to integrate these principles into freshwater ecosystem protection and restoration and land-based conservation;

4. INVITES States to implement legal frameworks protecting and restoring rivers and establishing mechanisms to give them a formal voice; and

5. ENCOURAGES States and financial contributors, including public and private entities, according to KMGBF Target 19(f), to prioritise financial support to advance the rights of rivers and other 'Mother Earth centric' actions.