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Living as Nature: Māori Political Ecology and Bruno Latour's Challenge to Western Modernity

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the emancipatory potential of the rights of nature in Aotearoa New Zealand through Bruno Latour's concept of political ecology. We argue that the legal recognition of entities such as Te Urewera Forest and the Whanganui River as legal persons constitutes a paradigmatic experiment in reconfiguring the modern division between nature and politics. Drawing on Latour's critique of Western modernity and his notion of hybrids and actants, we show how Māori struggles for land, *mana,* and "geographical identity" generate a political collective in which decolonial and ecological motives are inseparably intertwined. Rights of nature function here not merely as environmental protection instruments, but also as devices for redistributing power and legally encoding Māori concepts such as kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, and 'listening to Papatūānuku'. In this sense, ecological and decolonial objectives converge rather than compete. We then contrast these developments with global biodiversity governance, focusing on Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and its Life Framework of Values. While Life framework of values (IPBES) has significantly broadened its conceptual framework—particularly through the recognition of the relational and cultural values of nature—the challenge lies in translating this expanded recognition into governance practice. Policy and decision-making processes still often tend to privilege measurable and instrumental, and benefit-oriented valuation frameworks, which can make the integration of relational values difficult. The New Zealand cases thus illuminate both the radical promise and the structural limits of institutionalizing Latourian political ecology: they realize a non-modern governance of human and non-human actors domestically, while exposing the continued dominance of capitalist modernity at the global level.

Keywords: Rights of nature; Political ecology (Latour); Māori cosmovision; Decolonial environmental justice; Life framework of values (IPBES); Human–nature relationality

1. Introduction

What once appeared to be a radical idea—granting individual rights to natural entities—has become increasingly tangible in recent years. Over 400 initiatives for implementing the rights of nature can be

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identified worldwide, on every continent except Antarctica [1] (p. 90). These initiatives vary considerably from case to case; however, specifically with regard to Aotearoa New Zealand, the rights of nature reforms may generate emancipatory effects. Following Jacques Rancière, emancipation does not primarily denote institutional progress, but the disruption of hierarchical orders of knowledge and authority. Equality, in this view, is not granted from above but enacted through political practice: "Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified" [2] (p. 137).

Accordingly, Māori-led legal transformations such as *Te Awa Tupua* or *Te Urewera* can be understood as emancipatory insofar as they reconfigure the political terms of representation in two interconnected directions: decolonially, by restoring Māori relational authority and legal agency, and ecologically, by extending political recognition to non-human entities as participants in collective responsibility. To uncover these emancipatory potentials, we draw on the analytical framework of the French sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour (1947–2022). Specifically, the notion of modernity, his concept of political ecology, and his vision of a new separation of powers will help us better understand the events surrounding the legal regulation of the Te Urewera Forest, the Whanganui River, and Mount Taranaki. The following thesis guides our argument:

The rights of nature in Aotearoa New Zealand can be seen as a milestone in the establishment of a political ecology, according to Bruno Latour: In recognizing non-human actors as legal subjects, decolonial and ecological motives are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing, emerging from Māori struggles over land, mana, and relational responsibility, while simultaneously generating far-reaching ecological implications. While the rights of nature approach has gained increasing prominence, it is important to acknowledge that it is not without conceptual and legal tensions. Critics have pointed out that attributing individual rights to nature may generate "unsolvable application problems", particularly because it remains unclear which parts of nature should be privileged in cases of ecological conflict [3] (p. 171). Moreover, Ekardt cautions that some strictly ecocentric justifications of nature protection "as an end in itself" are not necessarily an ethically or legally convincing foundation within liberal-democratic orders, which remain oriented toward freedom and its material preconditions [3] (p. 170). In this sense, the New Zealand cases discussed here are not presented as a universal solution, but rather as situated institutional experiments that reveal both the emancipatory potential and the practical limits of extending political and legal recognition beyond the human.

In this article, we will substantiate our claim as follows. First, we will present some theoretical considerations regarding the thought of Bruno Latour. Second, we will use the concepts introduced here to contextualize the events and the rights of nature in New Zealand from a political-theoretical perspective. We will demonstrate that specific decolonial and ecological motives are discernible, which, moreover, reinforce each other.

2. Analytical Framework and Structure of the Article

This article follows a three-part analytical dramaturgy that reflects both our theoretical orientation and the empirical developments in Aotearoa New Zealand. We adopt Bruno Latour's conceptual vocabulary of political ecology as the guiding framework through which the Māori legal innovations can be understood as articulations of a new kind of political collective.

Act I develops the theoretical groundwork by outlining Latour's diagnosis of the modern constitution—its self-deception, its artificial separation of nature and politics, and its resulting epistemological impasse. This section introduces Latour's proposal for a renewed collective in which non-human actants are granted representation. It thus establishes the conceptual expectations against which the New Zealand cases can be assessed.

Act II examines the empirical core of our argument through a political-theoretical reading of Māori-led legal transformations such as Te Urewera, Te Awa Tupua (the Whanganui River), and Taranaki Maunga.

Māori-led Rights of Nature reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand encompass not merely symbolic landscapes, but territorially extensive ecological polities. One prominent example is Te Urewera, a former national park forest covering about 821 square miles (≈2127 km^2), which has been legally reconstituted as a rights-bearing entity and thereby gives statutory expression to Māori relational obligations toward land [4] (p. 143). Similarly, the Whanganui River's catchment extends over approximately 761,100 hectares (≈7611 km^2), illustrating the wide geographic and ecological scale of Te Awa Tupua as a political–legal subject under Rights of Nature legislation [5]. These figures underline that the innovations discussed here are not confined to abstract legal symbolism but involve vast landscapes and waterscapes that remain central to Māori identity, governance, and customary environmental stewardship.

Here we show, first, that these cases can be interpreted as juridical manifestations of Latour's "actants", and second, that their motivational structure is shaped through decolonial struggles over mana, geographical identity, and long-standing forms of relational responsibility, which simultaneously articulate ecological commitments rather than standing in tension with them. Ecological concerns are not external to this process but are co-produced through it, forming a convergent political–ecological project rather than a separate or subsequent rationale. In this sense, Māori actions constitute a radical and lived form of political ecology.

Act III contrasts these local successes with global sustainability governance, focusing on the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). While the IPBES Life Framework of Values conceptually acknowledges plural ways of relating to nature—including those resonant with Māori cosmovision—its implementation remains constrained by modern, instrumental logics ("living from nature") and the persistent separation of facts and values. This contrast illustrates both the potential and the limits of Latourian political ecology at the global level. Together, these three acts provide a structured argument for understanding the rights of nature in Aotearoa New Zealand as a decisive step toward a political ecology that is simultaneously decolonial and ecological, and that challenges the core assumptions of Western modernity.

3. Bruno Latour and the Self-Deception of Western Modernity

If one were to attempt a holistic, scientifically comprehensive understanding of our modern world (e.g., in Germany), one would likely examine this society from various perspectives. For instance, sociologists would be commissioned to investigate social behavior and societal structures, while legal scholars would analyze the legal system. Political scientists, in turn, might examine the characteristics of the political system relative to those of other political systems. The list of different "slices" of our society could be extended indefinitely; however, it becomes clear that we seek to understand the constitution or structure of a political order through different approaches—we always only have a partial view. Within the study of indigenous populations, this approach is less common. Latour writes in this context: "Every ethnologist is capable of including within a single monograph the definition of the forces in play; the distribution of powers among human beings, gods, and non-humans; the procedures or reaching agreements; the connections between religion and power; ancestors; cosmology; property rights; plant and animal taxonomies. The ethnologist will certainly not write three separate books: one dealing with knowledge, another with power, yet another with practices" [6] (p. 14).

For Latour, the self-understanding of Western modernity is characterized by the constant imposition of divisions. In terms of the history of ideas, this can be traced back to Plato and, above all, his allegory of the cave. As is well known, Plato distinguishes here between a cave world, in which mere shadows appear to us as real, and a world of transcendental ideas. The cave myth "allows a Constitution that organizes public life *into two houses*. The first is the obscure room depicted by Plato, in which ignorant people find themselves in chains, unable to look directly at one another, communicating only via fictions projected on a sort of movie screen; the second is located outside, in a world made up not of humans but of non-humans, indifferent to our quarrels, our ignorances, and the limits of our representations and fictions" [7] (pp. 13–

14). What Latour describes here is the founding myth of the separation between science and society, which became entrenched in specific ways over time, especially from the 17th century onward, which, for example, motivated Max Weber (1864–1920) to make the following remark: "The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'". Weber [8] (p. 155) Latour argues that the self-understanding of Western modernity is still constituted by the separation, already present in Plato's allegory of the cave, between a non-human natural world with objective facts and a human social world with contested values. The defining characteristic of modernity, therefore, lies in the separation of values and facts, culture and nature, object and subject, *etc*. The "moderns" boast that they have succeeded in rationalizing the world by learning to distinguish indisputable facts from superstition and ideology. This separation, Latour argues, has far-reaching political implications, as he discusses in his essay *We Have Never Been Modern* as Latour states in 1991: "the representation of non-humans belongs to science, but science is not allowed to appeal to politics; the representation of citizens belongs to politics" [6] (p. 28). According to this thesis, politics primarily represents human interests. At the same time, Latour criticizes this self-understanding because it is obvious that the dichotomy cannot be realistically maintained. There are borderline cases that defy this duality: the embryo in a test tube, the genetically modified plant, or the nuclear reactor are difficult to categorize unambiguously within this division. In this respect, the separation remains purely rhetorical because, in reality, mixtures, which Latour calls "hybrids", are commonplace. Thus, we have never been modern—as the title of the essay of the same name makes clear—because we have never truly separated what we believed we had to separate, and yet we cling to this distinction. Latour criticizes this and introduces his opposing concept of a political ecology. The French philosopher understands this as an attempt to abandon the old separation of powers between facts and values and to transform it into a collective in which actors (human beings) and so called actants (non-human beings) exist. This, in turn, implies that "speech is no longer a specifically human property, or at least humans are no longer its sole masters" [7] (p. 65). Accordingly, a balance of interests between actors and actants occurs in the new collective; it is thus the principle of representation that compels a more ecological political order. Against this backdrop, the ecological rights of Aotearoa New Zealand can be understood as a step towards such a collective, because now not only actors are represented, but also the interests of actants. The motivational background for the implementation of ecological rights, however, was the long struggle for the recognition of the specific form of the good life of Māori. This is only possible for them if they can connect with the land they consider sacred.

4. The Case of New Zealand: Decolonial and Ecological Potentials

While the discourse on the rights of nature often foregrounds ecological concerns, the New Zealand case demonstrates how ecological and decolonial justice issues are structurally entangled and politically co-constitutive. In the following discussion, we will first examine the decolonial potential of ecological self-rights and then address their ecological opportunities.

4.1. Decolonial Potentials

Any assessment of the transformative potential of Rights of Nature must also consider the social actors who practically give institutional voice to these entities. The Māori population provides the human *voice* for these natural entities through governance roles. According to the 2023 Census by Statistics New Zealand, 887,493 people identify as Māori (approx. 17.8% of the total population) [9]. Furthermore, 978,246 people are of Māori descent (approx. 19.6%), representing nearly one-fifth of the nation's population [9]. This demographic weight is crucial to implementing the Rights of Nature, as iwi members act as the legal guardians (Te Pou Tupua) of these entities.

In his work *Understanding the Rights of Nature: A Critical Introduction* (2022) Mihnea Tănăsescu clearly states: "The rights of nature are not primarily about nature" [10] (p 15). According to this view, the focus is increasingly on power relations that can be altered through the exercise of rights of nature. We will take this consideration as the starting point for our following discussion, interpreting the rights of nature against the backdrop of decolonialism in New Zealand. In this article, *decolonial* is used in the sense articulated by Mignolo, who explicitly distinguishes decoloniality from postcolonial approaches. While both share a concern with the enduring effects of colonialism, they differ in their genealogies and epistemic orientations. Postcolonial theory emerged primarily from the experience of British colonialism and has been largely institutionalized within Euro-American academia, whereas decolonial thought originates in Latin American, Afro-Caribbean, and Indigenous intellectual traditions and foregrounds the geopolitics of knowledge. Decoloniality thus denotes not only an analytic critique of the colonial matrix of power, but also a prospective project aimed at epistemic delinking and the coexistence of multiple worlds and knowledges beyond dominant modern frameworks [11] (pp. 57–59).

Two things need to be highlighted and related to each other in the following: firstly, the role of ancestral lands—be they forests, rivers, or mountains—for the self-understanding of individual iwi and hapū must be made plausible; secondly, it must be clarified how colonial practice negatively influenced this and thus endangered the identity of the Māori. This then provides the motivational background for the compromise represented by the rights of nature.

Before the Europeans reached New Zealand, there was no unified Māori identity; rather, it is a colonial umbrella term used to describe the approximately 40 iwi and hundreds of hapū communities, providing them with a collective identity. Such colonial naming is misleading because the self-descriptions of the individual iwi and hapū are inextricably linked to the mountains, lakes, and rivers surrounding them, indicating significant and subtle differences among the various indigenous groups. This is also manifested linguistically; for example, "Ko wai au?" can be translated as both "Who am I?" and "Who are my waters?" All tribes possess such a "geographical identity" [12] (p. 216), which primarily corresponds to the obligation of each tribe to manage their surrounding and identity-forming environment carefully. This is particularly evident in the concept of Kaitiakitanga, a central concept of the Māori cosmovision. As McAllister/Hikuroa/Nacinnis-Ng (2023) emphasize, this concept can hardly be adequately translated as "stewardship" or "guardianship", because these translations only highlight aspects of the concept, such as responsibility and protection. While these aspects are accurate, they do not do justice to the complexity of kaitiakitanga, as the spiritual, intergenerational, and genealogical dimensions are not expressed. This can be generalized to a plea for translations that do not simply consider and translate individual words in isolation, but rather understand them within the context of the indigenous terminology and place them in a broader overall context [13] (pp. 1–2). Such a simplifying translation is achieved by McAllister et al. (2023), but also because the "western conservation ethic" views humans and nature as separate, "which is in direct conflict with kaitiakitanga and the Māori conservation ethic" [13] (p. 7). Katherine Sanders argues similarly, writing: "Kaitiakitanga is not simply an 'environmental ethic' then, but rather a socio-environmental ethic. It is about the relationship between humans and the environment, humans and their gods, and between each other" [14] (p. 212).

The rejection of the Western separation effort can be seen particularly well in the Te Awa Tupua Act, which describes the Whanganui River as an "indivisible and living whole, comprising the Whanganui river from the mountains to the sea, incorporating all its physical and metaphysical elements" [15] (Te Awa Tupua Act, Art. 12). Such a holistic perspective, however, clearly contrasts with the Western perspective on rivers, forests, or mountains, or how Mihnea Tanasescu pointed out "For Māori, however, Te Awa is an ancestor, a powerful being whose separation into riverbed, water, tributaries, and so on, they have always opposed" [10] (p. 88). It thus becomes clear, firstly, that the self-understanding of every iwi is determined in direct relation to its environment, and secondly, that the distinction between man and nature made by

Latour for Western modernity is already blurred here. This in itself would not be particularly spectacular—which is what Latour already seeks to express through the concept of hybrids—only the recognition of hybrids within a legal framework is what is specifically innovative. In other words, if rivers, mountains, and forests were understood as relatives and granted legal recognition, then the modern dictum of self-deception would already be called into question.

Let us now ask what influence British colonization had on this "geographical identity". It should be noted that the European settlement of New Zealand, which began in the 18th century and intensified rapidly, raised questions regarding land use relatively quickly. For the newly arrived British in particular, the question of ownership rights was central; it had to be clarified who owned what in order to then make decisions about how the land could be used. The intensifying conflicts over land also created a need for a binding agreement on the part of individual iwi and hapū. For this reason, a treaty was drafted to resolve the sovereignty issue. This Treaty of Waitangi, signed on 6 February 1840, by representatives of the British Crown and more than 500 rangatira (chiefs) of Māori tribes, did not, however, pacify the situation. There were several reasons for this; for example, the two contracting parties were presented with versions of the treaty that differed in content. While this was probably unintentional, as the translations were done by laypeople and there were considerable problems finding equivalent English terms for words in Te Reo Māori (the Māori language) and vice versa, the consequences are still felt today. For example, the English version granted the British Crown far greater sovereign rights than the version distributed to representatives of the individual tribes. The Crown's claim to sovereignty was translated as kawanatanga, which, however, is closer to the weaker concept of governmental authority. The Māori representatives thus believed that the treaty strengthened their authority and that they could also rely on the Crown's support [16] (pp. 42–43). The differing interpretations of the document led to ongoing debates; one bone of contention relevant to our considerations concerned the modalities surrounding the buying and selling of land. This needs to be addressed briefly because of the marginalization of Māori directly related to this. The Māori assumed that land had to be sold to the Crown first, and if there was no interest from the Crown, it could be sold on the open market. However, the British only tolerated sales to the Crown [16] (p. 43). As a result of the signing of the treaty, the Crown bought up much land, but there were also cases in which land was confiscated from the Māori on dubious grounds. The consequence of this "aggressive acquisition policy" [16] (p. 43) was an expansion of British influence in New Zealand, coupled with the marginalization of the Indigenous people. By 1930, they had lost approximately 86 percent of their ancestral lands, the remaining lands being unsuitable for agriculture. For this reason, many Māori migrated into urban areas and lost their connection to their homeland and its traditional customs [4] (p. 144). Systematically, this is one of the reasons for the ongoing political activism of the individual iwi and hapū, because their primary concern was to resonate with and reconnect with their ancestral land [4] (p. 145). In summary, one can therefore say that the marginalization of the identity of Māori is clearly linked to the land acquisition policy of the Crown. We should keep this in mind when trying to understand the genesis of the rights of nature in Aotearoa New Zealand and draw appropriate conclusions. Beyond this property-related dimension, there are other forms of colonial oppression here. Broadening our perspective, the rights of nature are also a reaction to the marginalization of Māori thought, their terms and concepts. Here, rights can be understood as a tool for legally validating the terms and concepts of the Māori cosmovision, which have long been scorned by Pākehā (*i.e.*, New Zealanders who are not Māori). A striking example of the denigration of Māori culture in the second half of the 20th century is the so-called *Haka Party Incident* (1979). The haka has many dimensions of meaning, but primarily manifests as a dance that, for a long time, was performed to intimidate warriors. Today, it also serves to welcome distinguished guests or to recognize special achievements, and thus is an expression of cultural identity. For decades, students of the engineering faculty at the University of Auckland performed a "mock haka"—a parody of the traditional haka—as part of their graduation ceremonies. They wore grass skirts, painted their bodies with obscene drawings, and distorted Māori

words—a denigration of a central cultural expression disguised as "fun". After complaints from Māori organizations had been ignored for over twenty years, the activist group He Taua confronted the students directly in May 1979, resulting in a physical altercation. This incident alone led the university to ban the ritual. At the same time, the incident sparked a broader societal debate about everyday ("casual") racism. This *Haka Party Incident* reflects a shift in New Zealand's public consciousness, which is still ongoing, from a disdain for indigenous culture to a slowly growing understanding of cultural sensitivity and equality. Nevertheless, various stereotypes persist to this day, such as, firstly, the notion of the "Māori as the comic Other", which implies a "childlike simplicity coupled with a fun-loving disposition", secondly, the belief that they are "primitive natural athletes", or the idea that Māori are "radical political activists" [17] (pp. 42–44). However, the spiritual aspects in particular were often misunderstood and held in contempt; Māori were often described and perceived as "the spiritual/irrational environmentally aware tribesperson" [17] (p. 41), which, to use Latour's terminology, suggests that their worldview is pre-modern. At the same time, since the 1970s and 80s, there has been an intensifying debate about colonial practices in New Zealand. This is institutionally marked, among other things, by the *Treaty of Waitangi Act* of 1975, which established the Waitangi Tribunal. This is a commission of inquiry that uses the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) as a framework for evaluating claims of Māori vis-à-vis the New Zealand state. Although the tribunal formally only has a recommendatory character, it is by no means powerless, as it can be said to have a significant influence on public opinion [18]. This follows accusations of systematic discrimination against the New Zealand state in relation to the claims of Māori. The rights of nature must also be understood in this context, as they signal "that law can be used creatively to find redress solutions in the quest for reconciliation" [12] (p. 221). They are thus part of a larger emancipation process, because, as Nēpia Mahuika states, "colonial oppression […] is still ongoing in New Zealand" [19] (p. 26). Therefore, if we want to understand the rights of nature in New Zealand properly, we must not view them solely through an analytical lens, or, to quote Tanasescu again: "The most useful frame for understanding the rights of nature is political, not legal" [10] (p. 16). A key political concern here is the acceptance of Māori-Identity with all its practices and traditions.

4.2. Ecological Potential: The Diversification of the Human-Nature Relationship Through the Critique of Property

Recent developments within the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), an intergovernmental body that provides scientific advice to policymakers on biodiversity and ecosystem services, indicate a significant broadening of how human–nature relations are conceptually framed. In contrast to earlier ecosystem service approaches that predominantly emphasized instrumental values, IPBES has increasingly acknowledged relational, cultural, and non-material dimensions of human–nature interactions. This shift is particularly visible in the IPBES Conceptual Framework, which explicitly seeks to connect nature and people by integrating diverse knowledge systems and value perspectives, including Indigenous and local knowledge systems [20]. Importantly, this conceptual move does not imply a rejection of instrumental valuation per se, but rather an attempt to situate it within a more pluralistic framework that recognizes multiple ways of relating to nature. At the same time, however, this conceptual expansion has not automatically translated into an equally pluralistic orientation in the policy-relevant outputs derived from IPBES assessments. While relational and cultural values are increasingly recognized at the level of framing and assessment, policy recommendations and decision-support tools continue to rely predominantly on valuation logics compatible with ecosystem services and cost–benefit reasoning. This tension has been explicitly addressed by Díaz et al. [21], who argue that sustainability assessments systematically underestimate the role of cultural meanings, ethical relations, and non-instrumental contributions of nature to human well-being. Their critique does not target IPBES as a legislative or executive actor, but rather highlights structural limitations in how scientific knowledge is translated into policy-relevant narratives that remain intelligible within dominant governance paradigms.

Against this backdrop, the Māori-led legal recognition of natural entities in Aotearoa New Zealand can be interpreted as a practical and institutional response to precisely this gap between conceptual pluralization and political implementation. The rights of nature do not merely add new values to existing decision-making frameworks, but legally stabilize relational ontologies in which rivers, forests, and mountains appear as subjects embedded in enduring networks of responsibility. In this sense, Māori political ecology does not contradict the plural valuation agenda advanced by IPBES, but radicalizes it by embedding relational values in binding legal arrangements rather than treating them as supplementary considerations. The convergence between Indigenous political practices and the evolving IPBES framework thus lies less in shared policy instruments than in a common challenge to reducing nature to instrumental value alone.

The ecological implications of Indigenous land governance discussed above extend beyond the Māori context and are increasingly supported by global empirical research. Recent empirical research on Indigenous land governance further supports the interpretation advanced here that decolonial political projects and ecological outcomes should not be analytically separated, let alone hierarchically ordered. A global spatial analysis by Garnett et al. demonstrates that Indigenous Peoples—although constituting less than five percent of the world's population—manage or hold tenure rights over more than a quarter of the Earth's terrestrial surface, including approximately forty percent of all protected areas and a disproportionately large share of ecologically intact landscapes [22]. Crucially, the authors do not frame these conservation outcomes as the result of an explicitly environmentalist agenda. Rather, they emerge as the by-product of long-standing institutions of land stewardship, relational responsibility, and collective self-governance. This finding resonates strongly with the Māori cases discussed in this article. It suggests that ecological protection and biodiversity conservation are not external goals imposed upon Indigenous political struggles, but are co-produced through them. From this perspective, the recognition of Māori legal concepts such as kaitiakitanga and whakapapa does not displace ecological concerns; instead, it embeds them within a broader political ecology in which social justice, territorial authority, and environmental sustainability converge. According to the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform (IPBES), people can live "from, with, in, and as nature"—a typology that visualizes different cultural and epistemic ways of relating to nature. We can "live from nature", for example, by harvesting timber from a forest or cultivated grain; we can live "with nature" by, among other things, respecting the reproductive cycles of fish stocks in rivers. We can live "in nature" by, for example, relying on the health-promoting and mood-enhancing effects associated with spending time by the sea or in the forest. The fourth relationship we can have with nature is "living as nature". The scientists at IPBES understand this to mean the embedding of humans in the overall natural context. It is important to note that this typology is not a purely descriptive view of different relationships. Rather, it is a normative concept for sustainability policy. IPBES assumes that the dominant Western perspective, which understands nature primarily as a resource (*living from nature*), is too narrow to address the complexity of ecological crises. By recognizing other ways of relating to nature—living with, in, as nature—the repertoire of human action expands. Greater sustainability then becomes more likely because, firstly, different dimensions of value in nature are made visible (material, relational, spiritual, cultural); secondly, indigenous and local knowledge systems are systematically valued and integrated as equally valid forms of knowledge; and thirdly, ethical and emotional connection with the environment is strengthened, which in turn can have a transformative effect on behavior. This is formulated by the IPBES as follows:

> The IPBES emphasizes that more sustainable behavior becomes more likely when people perceive nature as valuable to their lives in a variety of ways. By distinguishing between a life *from*, *with*, *in*, and *as* recognizing that nature is diverse, the framework advocates for a pluralization of human relationships with nature, one that also includes non-Western cosmovisions. This diversity of references, according to the IPBES authors, can strengthen the protection of biodiversity and

> ecosystems by making emotional, cultural, and spiritual connections to the environment politically visible [23] (p. 56).

Accordingly, effective nature conservation depends significantly on our ability to cultivate diverse human-nature relationships. Nature should therefore not be viewed simply as a supplier of raw materials; rather, scientists advocate for a pluralization of the human-nature relationship. Of particular importance is the relationship between humans and nature, described as "life as nature". Here, humans are not seen as separate from nature, but as part of it. In this sense, humans, animals, and plants are understood as components of a shared web of relationships. Sustainable ecological behavior is thus more likely if we consider nature valuable to our existence in multiple ways. When we refer to this recommendation from the IPBES, we are not asking how the rights of nature have been addressed in New Zealand so far. In fact, rather than addressing potential sustainability aspects, we are attempting to theoretically justify the societal benefit of ecological self-rights. Also, from the side of the Māori it is often criticized that the West views nature too much in terms of property relations, thereby unduly one-sided its understanding. Interestingly, this very concept of property and the debate surrounding it marked a crucial turning point in the negotiations on restitution between the Māori and the Crown. In 2011, the Crown realized that the demand of Māori—in this case—was not for regaining land in the sense of ownership, but for caring for it in accordance with time-honored customs and traditions. For Tūhoe, nature cannot be possessed, "[r]ather, they asked for the return of the land, which they do not equate with ownership" [4] (p. 146). The rights of nature are now a technical-legal compromise that primarily means the government does not have to return the land to the Māori in the sense of ownership, as this had meanwhile caused resentment among the Pākehā, while the Māori retained access rights to the natural entities under negotiation. The bone of contention regarding the concept of ownership is relevant here, as it marks one of the reasons for the ecological potential of ecological rights in New Zealand. To substantiate this, we must ask why ownership is rejected as a concept for defining the relationship to nature. This is particularly clearly articulated by Tāmati Kruger, a well-known Māori negotiator, in the interview "Down that way, glory waits" [24]. He laments, among other things, the disintegrative effects of ownership. This leads to an artificial hierarchy of people based on their acquired possessions, which has a decidedly negative impact on the sense of community within local groups. On the other hand, he criticizes the "beneficiary syndrome" associated with property ownership, which undermines the sense of responsibility for the surrounding environment that is constitutive for Māori culture. Kruger puts it this way: "Let someone else take care of it. I pay my taxes, so it's the government's job" [24]. In a way, the concept of ownership, with all its implications, alienates individual iwi from their long-standing way of life, which consists primarily of a continuous responsibility for the environment. Kruger sees the reappropriation of this specific "sense of responsibility" as one of the most pressing tasks regarding his community. Similarly, Kirsti Luke—a well-known Māori figure from Waikato-Tainui—problematizes the concept of ownership:

> Ownership represented a major challenge and hurdle, standing in the way of a Tuhoe way of life. Ownership and the owning of Te Urewera has been a mechanism to destroy belonging and care, and therefore community. Ownership grants entitlement without having earned it. It grants rights without having earned them. Ownership does not value kinship with the things around us, which means we do not innately care enough, it does not let us see wide enough our impacts then that we therefore have on the land. Rather, it feeds and nurtures self-interest. It effects our idea of time, it reduces this idea of time to one of MY time—a short time and not a long time. The impact of this is that it breeds very transactional relationships between humans and the land, and the very thing that breeds transactional relationships between humans and each other—transactional relationships do not grow community [25].

Here too, the rejection of the concept of property is justified by its damaging effects in two directions: first, on the community, and second, on the relationship to nature. The aforementioned resonance relationship, however, is conceived very concretely; for example, the long-term shift in the flowering time of some plants or the change in animal populations must be understood as signs from nature calling for action. Kruger speaks of this when he explains: "Those kinds of things. Signs that nature is providing for us. Those who love the land and see it as their parent, notice these things. They inform us Tūhoe people, telling us what we must consider and what we may do" [24]. As this quote illustrates, the need for care is specifically motivated by considering natural entities such as rivers, lakes, and mountains within a broader, familial context. By not perceiving them as separate from one's own lifeworld, but rather as related, the likelihood of sustainable stewardship increases. Furthermore, this concrete reference offers a significant advantage: the care of a specific river or forest, embedded in various narratives constitutive of the community, is easier to manage from an action-theoretical perspective than the care of "nature" understood as an abstract entity.

Let us return once more to the relationship between nature and the environment that the IPBES proposes as a target. Here, too, it is striking that the value of nature can be conceived intrinsically or instrumentally. The latter notion of "life as nature" may seem particularly worthy of justification in Western countries, not least because of the distinctions associated with the concept of modernity. But what, then, are the ecological potentials with regard to Aotearoa New Zealand? To clarify this, it seems advisable to consider the concept of the rights of nature in a definitional way:

> According to the Rights of Nature doctrine, an ecosystem is entitled to legal personhood status and, as such, has the right to defend itself in a court of law against harms, including environmental degradation caused by a specific development project or even by climate change. The Rights of Nature law recognizes that an ecosystem has the right to exist, flourish, regenerate its vital cycles, and naturally evolve without human-caused disruption. Furthermore, when an ecosystem is declared a 'subject of rights', it has the right to legal representation by a guardian—much like a charitable trust designates a trustee—who will act on their behalf and in their best interest. This guardian is typically an individual or a group of individuals well versed in the care and management of said ecosystem [26].

Two aspects seem particularly important to us in this context: On the one hand, natural entities are granted individual rights to protection and existence; on the other hand, the interests of these entities must be represented by intentional actors. The existence of quota systems in New Zealand, which allow Māori to act on behalf of, for example, the Whanganui River or the Te Urewera Forest, gives political weight to the specific Māori worldview. In this context, and with regard to the Te Urewera Act, which governs the personal rights of the Te Urewera Forest, it is worth recalling that a body representing the forest's interests was established. For the first three years after the Act's ratification, this body was composed equally of representatives from the Pākehā and the local Tūhoe tribe, but thereafter structurally favored the Tūhoe tribe's votes. This strengthens the ability of indigenous groups to exert influence over their ancestral territories. This operational approach, coupled with the codification of significant spiritual concepts in legal texts, allows the specific "listening to Papatūānuku" ethic to take effect, that is, an orientation towards the Māori understanding of the earth as a living ancestor [12]. Ruru demonstrates that the integration of indigenous concepts such as whakapapa (genealogical connection) and kaitiakitanga into law serves as a conscious codification of key concepts. This, in turn, necessitates an institutional anchoring of "life as nature", because the indigenous people of New Zealand operate according to their inherited traditions. This, in turn, necessitates an institutional anchoring of "life as nature" because the Indigenous peoples of New Zealand operate according to their long-standing traditions. Therefore, allowing nature to be represented by actors

who reject the separation between nature and society, which is constitutive for us, can represent an important step towards a more pluralistic human-nature relationship and thus pave the way for greater sustainability.

5. Conclusions

The rights of nature in New Zealand are the creative product of a long-standing political activism that brings together two motivational strands. The legal framework intertwines decolonial and ecological concerns in a way that reflects their historical co-emergence in Māori political struggles and their contemporary convergence in environmental governance. The descriptive term "decolonial" seems appropriate in this context because the reclaiming of the right to have a say over sacred land is a constitutive condition for a good life. We are moving in this specific context on the path to political ecology in the sense of Bruno Latour because it ostentatiously rejects the self-understanding of modernity, which consists primarily of the separation of culture/society and nature. Crucially, this involves the legal recognition of hybrids. Once this conceptual hurdle is overcome, it then becomes possible to interpret natural entities as actants with their own agency, whereby it is particularly important that the representing agents of individual iwi and hapū exercise a special form of care—kaitiakitanga. In this respect, Christopher Stone's idea of the legal recognition of natural entities is justified in a completely different way than he originally intended. The ecological potential now arises from this legal construct and, above all, from the idea that just any actors do not represent nature, but by those who have a self-understanding in which the human-nature relationship is conceived in a pluralistic way, where human life is thought of as "of", "in", "with" and especially "as" nature.

The radical legal framework for nature in Aotearoa New Zealand, which concretely implements Latour's political ecology in the recognition of the Whanganui River as an agent, finds its limits in the global governance structure of the IPBES. While the Global Assessment [27] largely relied on ecosystem service frameworks that often emphasize instrumental benefits—despite ongoing efforts to incorporate cultural and relational ecosystem services with a cultural dimension—it still remained partly within the modern separation of values and facts a significant conceptual shift emerged in response to sustained interventions by Indigenous peoples and allied actors across diverse political and geographic contexts, who articulate alternative valuation frameworks that challenge dominant assumptions of capitalist modernity.

This led to the introduction of the Life Framework of Values in the Values Assessment [28], which acknowledges a cultural relativization and pluralism of nature valuations, particularly through the categories of "living as" and "living in nature", which reflect the holistic cosmovision of the Māori. This conceptual bridge creates a synergy of social and ecological justice, as the "guardians of biodiversity" (often indigenous and local communities) are politically empowered. While the most recent Transformative Change Assessment [29] (IPBES 2024) reaffirms the need to promote this culture-nature synergy, it also identifies deep-seated political and economic obstacles (such as the dominance of short-term profits and the concentration of power) as root causes of biodiversity loss. The IPBES reports thus confirm the theoretical legitimacy of the non-modern Māori model, but show that at the global level—due to the persistence of capitalist modernity—the realization of Latour's concept of binding governance of actors has not yet been achieved.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the emancipatory and relational dimensions highlighted in the New Zealand cases are not an isolated interpretive move, but resonate with broader debates within contemporary Rights of Nature scholarship. Recent contributions in this Special Issue likewise stress that RoN should not be reduced to a narrowly ecocentric legal instrument but should be understood as a transformative governance framework that simultaneously reconfigures ecological responsibility and political inclusion. Gwambene and Miigo, for instance, describe Rights of Nature reforms as challenging anthropocentric paradigms by recognizing ecosystems as rights-bearing entities, while also addressing the marginalization of local and Indigenous communities [30]. In this sense, the Māori-led legal

transformations discussed here can be situated within a wider emerging convergence of ecological protection and socio-political justice, rather than being framed as a hierarchy between environmental and decolonial objectives.

6. Analytical Findings

Our analysis yields three central findings.

First, Latour's critique of modernity illuminates how the separation of nature and society—long treated as a foundational epistemic achievement—operates instead as a self-deception that obscures the hybrid constitution of contemporary political life. Latour's notion of political ecology, which seeks to bring human and non-human beings into a single representative collective, offers a conceptual framework capable of diagnosing this failure and reimagining political agency beyond the modern divide.

Second, the legal innovations in Aotearoa New Zealand—most notably the recognition of the Whanganui River, Te Urewera, and Mount Taranaki as legal persons—constitute an empirically robust instantiation of Latour's political ecology. These arrangements manifest non-human actants as juridical subjects. Yet the Māori case simultaneously introduces a crucial differentiation: the driving force behind these transformations is not primarily an epistemic insight into hybrid ontologies, but the long-standing decolonial struggle to restore mana, whakapapa, and geographical identity. The Māori model, therefore, represents a politically enacted, lived form of relational ontology, in which care, responsibility, and interdependence are constitutive dimensions of collective existence.

Third, situating these findings within global governance reveals both convergence and limitations. On a conceptual level, the IPBES "Life Framework of Values" aligns with Māori relational ontologies by recognizing multiple modes of human–nature relations ("living from, with, in, and as nature"). However, practical implementation at the global scale continues to be constrained by the dominance of instrumental valuation logics and the persistence of the modern separation of facts and values. As a result, while IPBES affirms the legitimacy of plural valuation systems, it has not yet realized a Latourian political ecology in practice.

7. Discussion

These findings demonstrate that the rights of nature in Aotearoa New Zealand represent a unique convergence of decolonial politics and ecological innovation. The Māori case forces political theory to reconsider the conceptual architecture of modernity, revealing a political community in which non-human beings are not external objects of management but participants in a shared, genealogically grounded collective. Through the notions of kaitiakitanga, whakapapa, and mana, Māori political ecology offers a relational ontology that challenges central pillars of Western political modernity—particularly the separation of culture and nature, and the proprietary logic that structures human–environment relations.

The broader significance of this case lies in its theoretical and institutional implications. The legal recognition of natural entities demonstrates that political institutions can be designed to include non-human actants, thereby operationalizing Latour's call for a new separation of powers that integrates ecological agency. At the same time, the Māori experience shows that such institutional changes cannot be reduced to ecological reasoning alone: they are inseparable from historical injustices, land dispossession, and the pursuit of decolonial justice. Political ecology thus emerges not merely as an environmental project, but as a political and ethical transformation grounded in the recovery of Indigenous worldviews.

The comparison with IPBES highlights a structural obstacle for global sustainability governance: while conceptual pluralism is increasingly recognized, transformative change is hampered by entrenched economic interests and the epistemic dominance of modern scientific rationality. The Māori case suggests that meaningful ecological transformation requires the institutional empowerment of those communities

whose worldviews already embody relational ontologies. In this sense, the New Zealand example offers not only a legal innovation but a conceptual horizon for rethinking political ecology beyond modernity.

8. Materials and Methods

This article employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in political theory, legal analysis, and conceptual reconstruction. Primary sources include New Zealand legislation (the Te Awa Tupua Act and the Te Urewera Act), reports by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and relevant Māori statements and interviews. Secondary literature includes works by Bruno Latour and scholarship on political ecology, decolonial theory, and Indigenous governance. No software, preregistration, or computational methods were used.

Statement of the Use of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process. During the preparation of this work the authors used GPT-5.2 to synthesise text written by the authors, format references, and polish the language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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