

Eco-Constitutionalism and Climate Justice: Evaluating Green Rights Through Judicial Trends and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

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ABSTRACT

Eco-constitutionalism has emerged as a progressive legal response to the escalating global ecological crisis, emphasizing the constitutional recognition of environmental rights as fundamental to human survival. The growing discourse on climate justice further reinforces the need for legal systems to safeguard not only the interests of present communities but also those of future generations. This paper examines the trajectory of green rights through judicial trends across diverse jurisdictions, highlighting how constitutional courts have progressively integrated ecological concerns into fundamental rights jurisprudence. In addition, it underscores the critical role of indigenous knowledge systems as pillars of sustainable environmental governance. Drawing on case law, international conventions, and indigenous practices, the study demonstrates how the fusion of judicial activism and traditional ecological wisdom provides a trans-formative paradigm for advancing Eco-constitutionalism and climate justice in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Eco-constitutionalism, Climate Justice, Green Rights, Judicial Trends, Indigenous Knowledge, Environmental Jurisprudence

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has been marked by unprecedented ecological degradation, including biodiversity loss, deforestation, desertification, rising sea levels, and erratic climate patterns. These environmental disruptions pose existential threats not only to ecosystems but also to human survival, compelling states, scholars, and civil society to question the limitations of traditional anthropocentric models of law and governance. Against this backdrop, the constitutionalism of environmental rights has gained significant prominence in both scholarly debate and judicial practice. Elevating environmental protection to the level of constitutional law signals a recognition that safeguarding nature is not merely a matter of policy but a fundamental value essential to the survival and dignity of present and future generations.

Eco-constitutionalism, as a principle, demands the integration of ecological concerns into the very framework of constitutional governance, placing them on par with established guarantees of liberty, equality, and justice. Unlike statutory protections, which are vulnerable to political shifts, constitutional provisions confer permanence, legitimacy, and enforceability. Some states, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, have gone further by adopting eccentric frameworks that grant rights directly to nature, thereby recognizing ecosystems as legal subjects. In other jurisdictions, including India, Pakistan, and Colombia, constitutional courts have interpreted environmental rights as an extension of fundamental rights, particularly the right to life, health, and dignity. Together, these developments reflect a global judicial trend towards expanding constitutional protections to address ecological concerns.

Simultaneously, the discourse of climate justice has grown in influence, emphasizing that the burdens of climate change fall disproportionately on vulnerable communities – particularly the poor, indigenous groups, and populations in the Global South. Climate justice re-frames environmental governance beyond technical or scientific debates, focusing instead on fairness, equity, and human rights. Courts have increasingly invoked doctrines such as inter generational equity, the public trust principle, and sustainable development to ensure that constitutional rights are interpreted in ways that respond to the moral and ethical imperatives of climate change.

Equally significant is the recognition of indigenous knowledge systems, which embody centuries of sustainable ecological practices. Indigenous worldviews often perceive rivers, forests, and land not as commodities but as sacred entities forming part of a larger, interdependent web of life. Such perspectives resonate strongly with the values of Eco-constitutionalism. Landmark developments, such as the recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person in New Zealand, rooted in Maori cosmology, and

Ecuador's constitutional incorporation of Pachamama (Mother Earth), illustrate how indigenous traditions can reshape modern constitutionalism.

1.2 OBJECTIVE

This study pursues two core objectives:

- To evaluate the judicial recognition of green rights in both global and Indian contexts, analyzing landmark cases and constitutional provisions that have elevated environmental concerns to the status of fundamental rights.
- To examine how indigenous knowledge systems complement constitutional frameworks in advancing climate justice, with particular attention to the interplay between modern legal doctrines and traditional ecological wisdom.

Through these objectives, the paper argues that Eco-constitutionalism, when enriched by indigenous epistemological, offers a trans-formative paradigm for addressing climate change and fostering environmental justice in the twenty-first century

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Eco-Constitutionalism

Eco-constitutionalism has evolved as a distinct strand of environmental jurisprudence, emphasizing the integration of ecological values into constitutional texts, doctrines, and judicial interpretation. Kotzé (2016) conceptualizes it as a legal paradigm that embeds environmental protection within constitutional frameworks, thereby ensuring greater permanence and enforce-ability than ordinary legislation. Unlike statutory provisions, which remain susceptible to political shifts, constitutional recognition of environmental rights provides an enduring safeguard for ecological concerns.

Several states have explicitly incorporated environmental rights – and, in some instances, the rights of nature – into their constitutions. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution introduced the principle of Buen Vivir (good living) and granted rights to Pachamama (Mother Earth), while Bolivia adopted the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010). These constitutional innovations mark a significant departure from anthropocentric models, advancing an concentric order that acknowledges the intrinsic value of ecosystems.

In India, Eco-constitutionalism has largely developed through judicial activism rather than constitutional text. Beginning with *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (1986), the Supreme Court read the right to a clean and healthy environment into Article 21 (Right to Life), thereby expanding the scope of fundamental rights jurisprudence. This interpretive approach illustrates how courts have acted as guardians of eco-constitutional values, bridging legislative gaps and elevating environmental protection to a constitutional mandate.

2.2 Climate Justice

The discourse of climate justice expands upon Eco-constitutionalism by foregrounding fairness, equity, and human rights in responding to climate change. Schlosberg (2012) identifies three dimensions of climate justice: **distributive justice**, which addresses the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits; re-cognitional **justice**, which highlights the vulnerabilities and voices of marginalized communities; and **procedural justice**, which demands inclusive participation in environmental decision-making processes. These principles emphasize that environmental governance must go beyond scientific and technical considerations to account for social and ethical dimensions.

Judicial bodies worldwide have increasingly embraced these principles. In *Oposa v. Factoran* (1993), the Supreme Court of the Philippines recognized the doctrine of inter generational equity, granting children legal standing to represent future generations. Similarly, the Supreme Court of Colombia (2018) declared the Amazon rainforest a rights-bearing subject to safeguard ecological integrity for posterity. In Pakistan, the Lahore High Court in *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan* (2015) compelled the government to enforce climate policy as a constitutional obligation. These decisions illustrate the growing trend of courts radicalizing climate justice by extending the ambit of fundamental rights to encompass environmental protection.

In India, climate justice has also shaped constitutional adjudication. Through the application of doctrines such as the **public trust principle** (*M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath*, 1997) and **sustainable development** (*Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, 1996), courts have recognized the state's responsibility to balance economic growth with ecological preservation. These rulings align India with

global trends of judicial activism in addressing climate-related inequalities, underscoring that climate justice is as much a constitutional concern as it is an environmental one.

2.3 Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Indigenous knowledge systems have long been recognized as vital for sustaining ecological balance and biodiversity. Gadgil, Berkes, and Folke (1993) demonstrate how indigenous communities conserve ecosystems through community-based management, oral traditions, and spiritual practices that embed conservation within cultural identity. Shiva (2005) further argues that such epistemology challenge exploitative development paradigms by prioritizing sustainability, reciprocity, and respect for natural systems.

A central characteristic of indigenous traditions is their perception of nature as a living entity rather than a resource for exploitation. This worldview manifests in diverse practices across regions. In India, sacred groves are preserved as abodes of deities or ancestral spirits, functioning as biodiversity hotspots protected by cultural taboos. In the Andean region, the cosmology of Pachamama (Mother Earth) inspired Ecuador's 2008 Constitution to enshrine the rights of nature, thereby embedding indigenous philosophy within constitutional law. Similarly, Maori traditions in New Zealand informed the recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person in 2017, a landmark moment in global environmental jurisprudence. These developments illustrate how indigenous epistemology can influence formal legal frameworks, bridging the gap between customary cultural practices and constitutional mandates. They provide alternative models of sustainability that complement judicial and legislative initiatives, offering ethical depth and practical strategies for ecological governance in the face of climate change.

2.4 Integrated Perspectives

The reviewed scholarship indicates that Eco-constitutionalism, climate justice, and indigenous knowledge systems are not isolated strands of thought but interrelated frameworks that collectively enrich environmental jurisprudence. Eco-constitutionalism provides the **structural foundation** by embedding ecological concerns into constitutional texts and judicial doctrines. Climate justice introduces **equity-oriented principles**, emphasizing fairness across generations and communities most vulnerable to climate change. Indigenous knowledge systems contribute **culturally embedded models of stewardship**, rooted in reciprocity, spirituality, and sustainability.

Taken together, these perspectives create a holistic paradigm for advancing green rights. Judicial innovations ensure enforceability, climate justice infuses normative legitimacy, and indigenous traditions ground environmental governance in lived cultural practices. Their intersection offers a transformative framework for addressing ecological degradation and climate change, blending constitutional authority with community resilience.

2.5 Research Gap

Together, these perspectives advance a holistic paradigm for green rights, where judicial innovation ensures enforceability, climate justice supplies normative legitimacy, and indigenous epistemology ground environmental governance in cultural practices. However, despite this convergence, a **critical research gap** persists. Much of the existing scholarship has examined these strands in isolation – focusing either on constitutional case law, climate justice frameworks, or indigenous traditions – without fully integrating them into a unified analytical framework. Moreover, comparative studies across jurisdictions remain limited, particularly in relation to how indigenous epistemological can systematically inform constitutional jurisprudence.

This study seeks to address this gap by evaluating the **judicial recognition of green rights** alongside the **integration of indigenous knowledge systems** within constitutional frameworks. In doing so, it aims to demonstrate that Eco-constitutionalism, when enriched by indigenous wisdom and climate justice principles, can serve as a transformative paradigm for achieving sustainable environmental governance in the twenty-first century.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Judicial Trends in Green Rights

Courts across jurisdictions have transformed environmental protection into an enforceable constitutional mandate. Through doctrines such as inter generational **equity**, **sustainable development**, and the **public trust principle**, judges have expanded the scope of human rights to include ecological rights.

Table 1: Landmark Judicial Decisions on Green Rights

Country	Case Name	Judicial Contribution	Year
India	M.C. Mehta v. Union of India	Right to environment read into Article 21 (Right to Life)	1986
Colombia	Future Generations v. Ministry of Environment	Amazon rainforest recognized as a legal entity	2018
Pakistan	Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan	Enforcement of climate policy mandated under Constitution	2015
Ecuador	Rights of Nature Case	Constitutional rights of ecosystems upheld	2008
Philippines	Oposa v. Factoran	Inter-generational equity principle recognized	1993

These cases highlight the shift from anthropocentric to eccentric jurisprudence. While Latin American courts have granted direct rights to nature, South Asian courts have innovated by interpreting constitutional guarantees dynamically. Together, they illustrate the judiciary's growing role in embedding ecological concerns within constitutional law.

The judiciary has played a transformative role in elevating environmental concerns to the level of constitutional rights. Across jurisdictions, courts have consistently bridged the gap between legislative inertia and the urgency of ecological crises, expanding constitutional jurisprudence to include environmental protection as an essential dimension of justice. This development underscores the judiciary's capacity not only to interpret the law but also to **redefine the very boundaries of rights discourse**.

A. Expansion of Fundamental Rights

One of the most significant contributions of judicial activism has been the expansion of fundamental rights to encompass environmental concerns. In India, the Supreme Court has consistently interpreted Article 21 (Right to Life) to include the right to a clean and healthy environment. Beginning with *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (1986), the Court established a jurisprudence foundation that linked ecological well-being to human dignity and survival. Subsequent cases such as *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India* (1996) reinforced this trajectory by embedding the principle of sustainable development into constitutional reasoning. Similarly, in Pakistan, the *Leghari v. Federation of Pakistan* (2015) decision emphasized that environmental protection is a constitutional obligation, compelling the state to enforce its climate policy.

B. Emergence of Eccentric Jurisprudence

Beyond anthropocentric reasoning, several jurisdictions have pioneered eccentric approaches by recognizing nature as a rights-bearing subject. Ecuador's 2008 Constitution granted constitutional rights to Pachamama (Mother Earth), while the Constitutional Court of Colombia in *Future Generations v. Ministry of Environment* (2018) declared the Amazon rainforest a legal entity. These rulings represent a radical shift, acknowledging ecosystems as subjects of rights independent of human use. Such recognition marks a departure from traditional property-based frameworks and affirms that the survival of nature itself is of constitutional significance.

C. Intergenerational Equity and Climate Justice

Courts have also advanced doctrines of intergenerational equity, ensuring that environmental protection extends to future generations. The Philippine Supreme Court's decision in *Oposa v. Factoran* (1993) was groundbreaking in granting children standing to sue on behalf of future generations, thus embedding inter generational justice into constitutional adjudication. Similar principles were echoed by the Colombian judiciary in its recognition of the Amazon rain-forest's rights, explicitly linking environmental protection to the rights of unborn generations. These cases highlight how judicial reasoning has evolved to transcend immediate claims, emphasizing long-term ecological continuity.

D. Comparative Judicial Patterns

A comparative perspective reveals different pathways to eco-constitutionalism. Latin American jurisdictions, such as Ecuador and Colombia, have pursued **textual constitutional reforms** that explicitly enshrine environmental rights and rights of nature. In contrast, South Asian courts – particularly in India and Pakistan – have relied on **judicial interpretation** of existing fundamental rights to incorporate ecological concerns. Both approaches demonstrate the adaptability of constitutional law in responding to climate challenges, with Latin America favoring explicit constitutional design and South Asia showcasing the power of interpretive innovation.

E. Implications for Global Environmental Jurisprudence

Judicial trends in green rights reflect a broader global shift in constitutional thought: from **anthropocentric models of governance**, where nature is valued only for its utility to humans, to **ecocentric frameworks**, where ecosystems are recognized as rights-bearing entities. This shift not only strengthens environmental governance domestically but also resonates with international instruments such as the Paris Agreement, the Aarhus Convention, and the United Nations' recognition of the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (2022). Courts, by embedding these principles into constitutional jurisprudence, act as critical mediators between global norms and national implementation.

3.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Climate Justice

Indigenous traditions provide **bottom-up frameworks of ecological governance** that complement judicial innovations in Eco-constitutionalism. Unlike dominant models of environmental governance, which often commodify nature as an economic resource, indigenous worldviews are grounded in reciprocity, spirituality, and interdependence. Rivers, forests, and land are understood not merely as material assets but as sacred entities with intrinsic value. This worldview challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of modern law and resonates with emerging constitutional doctrines that recognize the rights of nature.

A. Sacred Groves in India

India's sacred groves illustrate how cultural traditions can serve as powerful conservation mechanisms. These community-managed forest patches, preserved through taboos against tree felling or hunting, function as **biodiversity hotspots** and **micro-reserves** that safeguard rare species and sustain watersheds. Scholars such as Gadgil and Vartak (1976) have shown that sacred groves embody a community-based ethic of conservation long before the advent of modern environmental statutes. Their ethos parallels the **public trust doctrine** recognized by Indian courts, which frames natural resources as collective heritage to be preserved for future generations. The Forest Rights Act (2006) has further legitimized community-based conservation, aligning statutory law with these indigenous practices.

B. The Andean Concept of Pachamama

In the Andean region, indigenous cosmology envisions Pachamama (Mother Earth) as a living entity sustaining all existence. This worldview informed Ecuador's **2008 Constitution**, which explicitly enshrined the **rights of nature** (derechos de la naturaleza), marking a paradigmatic shift in legal thought. Rather than treating nature as property, the Constitution recognizes ecosystems as subjects of rights. Bolivia followed with its **Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (2010)**, institutionalizing Andean ecological philosophy into national law. These developments demonstrate how indigenous traditions can directly influence constitutional design, reshaping legal systems to embrace eccentric values.

C. The Whanganui River in New Zealand

For the Maori of New Zealand, the Whanganui River is an ancestor inseparable from community identity. After decades of advocacy, the **Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act, 2017** granted the river legal personhood. This recognition ensures that the river has enforceable rights, represented by guardians appointed from both the state and Maori communities. The case reflects a radical departure from resource-based governance, advancing a **rights-based model** of ecological protection rooted in indigenous cosmology.

D. Broader Implications

These examples underscore the trans-formative role of indigenous epistemology in shaping constitutional and judicial frameworks. They highlight three distinct contributions:

Biodiversity preservation through cultural norms (Sacred Groves).

Legal institutionalization of reciprocity and ecological respect (Pachamama).

Recognition of natural entities as legal persons (Whanganui River).

By integrating these traditions, modern eco-constitutionalism moves beyond abstract legal doctrines, embedding environmental governance in ethical, cultural, and community-based practices. In doing so, it advances climate justice not only through rights and institutions but also through lived traditions of sustainability.

These practices show how indigenous epistemology not only conserve biodiversity but also influence constitutional and judicial frameworks, bridging **customary traditions** with **formal law**.

3.3 Judicial Activism as a Catalyst for Green Rights

Judicial activism has been instrumental in filling legislative gaps and ensuring that environmental protection is elevated to the status of a constitutional right. In India, for example, the Supreme Court expanded Article 21 of the Constitution to include the right to a clean environment, establishing

precedents in cases such as *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (1986) and *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India* (1996). Similarly, the Colombian Supreme Court (2018) recognized the Amazon rainforest as a subject of rights, while the Philippine Supreme Court in *Oposa v. Factoran* (1993) gave standing to children to represent future generations. These interventions mark a decisive shift from anthropocentric frameworks to eco-centric constitutionalism.

3.4 The Contribution of Indigenous Knowledge

While judicial activism provides top-down legitimacy, indigenous knowledge offers a bottom-up approach to sustainability. Sacred groves in India, Pachamama in the Andes, and Maori traditions in New Zealand illustrate how cultural practices view the environment as a living entity with intrinsic worth. These traditions stress reciprocal relationships, where humans are custodians rather than exploiters of nature, offering models of ecological governance that precede modern statutes.

3.5 Bridging Judicial and Indigenous Frameworks

The intersection of judicial innovation and indigenous traditions creates a dialogical framework for Eco-constitutionalism. Courts adopt doctrines such as inter generational equity and sustainable development, which resonate with indigenous ethics of stewardship and reciprocity. However, this convergence is not without risks: when courts selectively borrow indigenous concepts, they may strip them of cultural meaning, reducing them to abstract legal instruments. A sensitive, dialogical approach is therefore essential to ensure genuine integration rather than appropriation.

3.7 The Challenge of Plural Worldviews

A further challenge lies in reconciling diverse indigenous worldviews within a single constitutional framework. Indigenous traditions are not monolithic; while some emphasize harmonious coexistence, others permit regulated resource use under ritual frameworks. Incorporating such plural perspectives requires constitutional flexibility and respect for cultural autonomy, avoiding homogenization.

3.6 Towards a Holistic Environmental Jurisprudence

Despite these challenges, the convergence of judicial activism and indigenous wisdom represents a jurisprudence shift from **anthropocentric exploitation** to Eco-centric **responsibility**. Judicial interpretations supply constitutional enforceability, while indigenous epistemology provide ethical depth and cultural legitimacy. Together, they chart the course for a holistic model of environmental governance that is both top-down and bottom-up, legal and cultural, global and local.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR ECO-CONSTITUTIONALISM

While judicial activism and indigenous wisdom have significantly advanced the recognition of green rights, the future of Eco-constitutionalism depends on bridging gaps between **constitutional law, international frameworks, and community practices**. Three key directions merit attention:

4.1. Institutionalizing Rights of Nature

Although courts have recognized rights of ecosystems in specific cases, there is a need for institutional mechanisms that ensure consistent implementation. Guardianship models, as seen in New Zealand's Whanganui River case, could be adapted across jurisdictions to provide legal voice and representation for natural entities.

4.2. Strengthening Global Climate Justice

Domestic constitutional frameworks must align with international environmental agreements, such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Embedding these commitments into national constitutions would enhance accountability and strengthen transnational environmental governance.

4.3. Community-Centered Governance

Integrating indigenous and local communities directly into environmental decision-making is essential. Rather than treating indigenous wisdom as symbolic, states should recognize communities as co-stewards of ecological resources, ensuring participatory governance that respects cultural autonomy while advancing sustainability.

By pursuing these directions, Eco-constitutionalism can move from being primarily reactive – through litigation and judicial activism – to becoming proactive, embedding sustainability into the daily operations of governance. This forward-looking approach ensures that Eco-constitutionalism is not only a response to crisis but also a blueprint for ecological resilience in the twenty-first century.

5. CONCLUSION

Eco-constitutionalism and climate justice represent not only doctrinal innovations but also an urgent jurisprudence evolution in response to the accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century. The steady degradation of ecosystems, the disproportionate burdens of climate change, and the limitations of conventional legal mechanisms have compelled states, courts, and communities to rethink the very foundations of constitutionalism. In this context, the recognition of green rights as constitutional values has emerged as both timely and indispensable.

By extending constitutional guarantees to encompass environmental protection, courts and legislatures have articulated a vision of justice that transcends anthropocentric boundaries. Judicial activism in India, Colombia, Pakistan, and the Philippines has demonstrated how constitutional interpretation can integrate ecological integrity into the domain of fundamental rights. Doctrines such as inter-generational equity, the public trust principle, and sustainable development are now firmly embedded in global constitutional imagination, re-framing environmental protection as a matter of constitutional survival rather than discretionary policy.

Equally important is the resurgence of indigenous knowledge systems as complements to Eco-constitutional frameworks. Sacred groves in India, the Andean philosophy of Pachamama, and Maori recognition of rivers as ancestors exemplify how deeply rooted cultural traditions offer community-based models of sustainability. These practices not only preserve biodiversity but also embody ethical worldviews that stress reciprocity, responsibility, and interdependence. When recognized alongside judicial developments, indigenous epistemology deepens Eco-constitutionalism by embedding ecological responsibility in cultural identity.

Ultimately, Eco-constitutionalism reflects a profound reorientation of constitutional law: from safeguarding only individual liberties to recognizing ecological survival as the very foundation of all rights. The convergence of judicial activism, international commitments, and indigenous epistemology provides a road map for sustainable constitutional democracies. If this evolution continues, Eco-constitutionalism has the potential to reshape not only national legal systems but also global governance, ensuring that constitutional democracies safeguard not just their citizens but also the ecosystems upon which all life depends.

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