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ARTICLE

In Search of Eco-Democracy: Education for Mutually Beneficial Flourishing

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Abstract
This paper begins with crises; environmental, social and democratic. And then it posits that in the midst of these crises there might be an opportunity. One that involves not so much "saving" democracy and sustaining current ways of life but shifting attentions towards potentially creating (re-creating) something different. Something we are calling eco-democracy. There have long been voices, calling for a more environmentally thoughtful form of democracy. After tracing a short discussion of this history including some of the critiques we turn to an exploration of eco-democracy in environmental education. Our argument is that some forms of environmental education are already thinking in more eco-democratic ways without necessarily naming the project as such. In order to do this, we focus on five 'seedlings' of eco-democracy that already exist in environmental education. These seedlings allow us to do two things. First, draw connections to Wild Pedagogies and second draw out four key considerations for environmental educators if they are interested in having more eco-democratic practices: voice, consent, self-determination and kindness. The paper ends with a short speculative exploration of what might happen pedagogically if environmental education were to assume an eco-democratic orientation through honouring voice, consent, self-determination, and kindness.

Keywords: Consent; eco-democracy; environmental Education; self-determination; voice; Wild pedagogies

Introduction

At every turn in today's world of constant news there is a sense of calamity, crisis, and confusion. A sense of precariousness involved in so many things that have, at least for some, been happily taken for granted. Natural disasters sweep through, water is becoming a "threatened commodity," and human injustices and inequities are named and considered in ways they have never been (Kolbert, 2022; Orr, 2023; Orr, 2024). There is little doubt that today's ecological and social crises are alarming challenges, and that education is an important, even necessary partner (Jickling et al, 2018; Martusewicz et al, 2020; Orr, 1992), particularly if the goal is eco-social-cultural change (Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023) towards mutually beneficial flourishing (Blenkinsop & Morse, 2017). And, in conjunction with all this there appears to be a growing threat to the form, function, and the very idea of democracy. Whether it be inequities corrupting the ideas of liberty and freedom (Blühdorn, 2011, 2022; Blühdorn & Deflorian 2021) — be they individual, cultural or communal — or strong-men leaders undermining the ideas of voice, participation, and rights altogether, it is clear that we are immersed in challenging times. Yet, work has already begun counteracting these worrisome trends as communities, including the more-than-human world,

come together to re-imagine and even re-creating the kind of world we all want to be a part of and the kinds of humans we want to be. Maybe, in the midst of these crises there is an opportunity. A chance to shift attentions towards potentially creating something different. Something more suited to responding to the crises of injustice, both social and ecological. Something that goes beyond "saving" democracy and "sustaining" current ways of life. Something better able to improve the lives-lived for many, including the more-than-humans who have been decimated by the capital driven, neo-liberal, deeply intolerant, alienated, and lonely form of existence that currently exists. Something we, for the sake of this paper, are calling eco-democracy.

For the last 40 years, there have been moments where voices have come together, calling for a more just, equitable and environmentally thoughtful form of democracy and we are going to start this paper with a very quick tracing of that discussion. We will follow that with an even shorter discussion related to the potential critiques of eco-democratic efflorescences and an exploration of eco-democracy in environmental education. For our purposes, the latter discussion will focus not just on the explicit conversations, of which there are few, but on the implicit ones. While there are plenty of political, practical, philosophical, theoretical, and empirical initiatives trying to solve these problems and touching the fundamental eco-democratic question of "how to live well together" (Gough, 2024; Peters, 2017). Including, as well, examples in fields such as post-humanist research (Malone et al., 2020) and eco-justice (Martusewicz et al., 2020). There are fewer explicit explorations in environmental education research regarding eco-democracy itself or the role of ecological beings as participants therein. And yet, there are examples of environmental education pushing against mainstream undemocratic educational assumptions (Blenkinsop & Kutcha, 2024). Our goal then is to closely examine several of these eco-democratic "seedlings" that are growing in the soils of environmental education and perhaps give them a little more space and light. Finally, our method takes a speculative turn (Brown, 2017) to focus on four thematic considerations for an eco-democratic environmental education — voice, consent, self-determination and kindness — that we draw from our analysis. We connect them to Wild Pedagogies and end with a turn to practice wherein we explore what might happen pedagogically if environmental education were to take up an eco-democratic positioning.

Eco-democracy: emergence and challenges

Ideas of a more environmentally thoughtful form of democracy started as a more cautious critique of liberal democracy and its institutions. More recently, the label ecological democracy has tended to be understood as built on a more radical form of critique that also questions and re-examines liberal democratic institutions (Eckersley, 2020). The first and older form with its roots in green politics and sustainable development, tends to focus on tinkering with the democratic system as it currently exists while increasing the knowledge and awareness of the human membership such that they become more thoughtful and active "eco-citizens." The main focus relating to how environmental ideals, sustainability, and the framework of democracy can be reconciled to respond to the ecological crises without undermining democracy itself (Lundmark, 1998; Pickering et al, 2020; Schlosberg et al, 2019). The assumption of this form of eco-democracy is that these eco-literate humans will democratically advocate for, and at the same time change their behaviours in, ways that support and sustain the natural world, while living an ecologically aware modern lifestyle. Here, Goodin's (1992) quadrium on how to guarantee that democratic procedures will advocate a substantive ecological outcome is important. As it advocates for a way to make citizens more socially aware without manipulating them to a particular end. The hope is that citizens as they become "educated" will do the "right thing" as determined, presumably, by enlightened educators and some form of invisible set of axiological truths. Intriguingly, Lundmark (1998) suggests that as citizens become more ecologically aware there is a blurring of the assumed

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sharp divide between societal ideals and democratic decision-making which potentially leaves space for more expansive change going forward.

As the reader can tell, to preserve democratic integrity these first eco-democratic conversations leaned in the direction of a deliberative form of democracy where the membership, still just some humans at this point, is listening carefully to each other and thoughtfully reaching shared decisions that allow as many humans as possible to live well (Lepori, 2019). The idea underneath this being that once the membership had the information about the environmental challenges they would, as a majority, come to ecologically "good" decisions. Yet, as environmental educators might recognise, this did not happen and, at this point, the "educate up and all deliberate" model may be too slow to respond well anyway. In fact, as we now know, it can be easily hijacked and slowed to a snail's (though we wonder if snails would be better advocates for change at this point) pace by special interest groups with deep pockets. Later, the focus of this deliberative, tinker with, democracy strand expanded as it sought to include different interpretations and changing forms of meaning-making, normative reflections, and engagement with larger questions of culture itself (Hammond, 2019). This move also then expanded the discussion to include the importance of everyday life, ordinary people, and undoing a narrow understanding that environmental democracy was about buying more sustainable products or voting in favour of a more embodied ecological citizenship. However, some still find this form underwhelming in terms of its ability to effectuate change and respond to the ecological and social problematics of democracy itself (Gough, 2012; Stevenson, 2007).

As such, a different slightly more recent form of eco-democracy has been growing in parallel. This form sees the above challenges and responds first by rooting itself in more critical discussions and then by being willing to seek a more radical, substantive change in democracy itself (Eckersley, 2020). This democracy would seek to undo the ecological injustice of modernity's anthropocentrism while at the same time actively responding to the social injustices that are baked into the current version. Given its roots in eco-feminism, earth democracy, and deep ecology it is unsurprising that this form sees itself as being eco-centric with citizenship being expanded beyond humans. Which in turn advocates that all beings of the more-than-human are seen as having intrinsic value, moral consideration, and, in its more radical forms, the rights of citizenship (Kopnina, 2012; Kopnina et al., 2021). As Peters (2017) suggests, this form of ecological democracy is more expansively participatory and education contributes to the transformation of civil society not just by offering facts and information but by facilitating, even advocating for, the locally based coming together of these eco-citizens (Hammond, 2019).

At this point, it is likely easier to think of eco-democracy as operating on a continuum. At one end, with its sustainable development roots, eco-democracy maintains the *status quo* — anthropocentrism, enlightened capitalism, lightly deliberative liberal democracy — while adding awareness of, and thoughtfulness towards, the environment. This form of deliberative eco-democracy has long influenced environmental education both theoretically and practically (Lawrence & Knapp,1997; Östman, 2010; Houser, 2009; Öhman and Louise, 2021) and has deep connections to Dewey´s ideas of democracy and education (Dewey, 1997; Englund, 2016; Samuelsson, 2018). At this end of the continuum, humans are the only citizens of, participants in these deliberations but it is hoped that through a better understanding of the science and a growing relationship with the natural world — both facilitated by environmental education — they will act, and vote, in more eco-lightened ways. This could include seeking to limit the rapaciousness of the destruction of the natural world and actively encouraging the well-being of future generations of humans. Critiques of this end of the continuum are quite varied and often substantive. At the operational level, there is concern about the speed at which this kind of democracy can operate (Lundmark, 1998; Pickering et al., 2020) particularly if the discussion is dominated by those who have vested interests in not changing the way things currently exist. Underneath this there is a concern that to advocate for the environment in such a way that it becomes a central platform for democratic change might be undermining the very fabric of

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democracy itself. For how does a particular platform gain this kind of priority without silencing voices that exist within the sought-for inclusive plurality?

Beyond these operational critiques are some of a more fundamental nature. What masquerades as democracy right now does not actually involve all human voices with myriad groups (i.e. women, BIPOC,[1] LGBTQIA2S+,[2] children, the elderly) and particular communities being left unheard and that beyond this the whole practice is deeply anthropocentric and human-elitist. In response to some of these challenges Kopnina and Cherniak (2016) wonder why it should it be any harder to include more-than-humans as citizens, both theoretically and normatively, than following similar tracks that have been laid down in overcoming historical gender gaps for example? Historically, as the reader might note there have been changes in who counts as "citizen" and included in the *demos* so might this extension not be able to include the more-than-human. As such, Kopnina et al (2021) are moving down the continuum, away from the anthropocentric end, when they suggest that both pragmatically and ethically more-than-human needs must exceed their utilitarian value and that that involves changing the anthropocentric paradigm.

Somewhere in the middle of the continuum the priorities shift as the above critiques are taken seriously and the focus moves from just humans to all beings — ecocentrism —, from particular voices in deliberation to all voices in active participation — plurality and multicentrism — and from living sustainably together to mutually beneficial flourishing (Kimmerer, 2013; Blenkinsop, et al., 2019). And though there seems to be a consensus in this half of the continuum about acknowledging ecocentric/multicentric values it is quite unclear as to how they should be enacted. As such the ecocentric/multicentric half of the continuum captures and changes some of the challenges in the debate. Critiques of democratic processes being too slow to handle the significant crises are quieted a bit as the idea of democracy itself is undone and debated with a view to creating a framework that includes the more-than-human from the get-go rather than seeking to add them as "persons" in a human generated framework. And yet, at the same time, there is still debate about the dangers of a more seemingly imposed, authoritarian, and potentially prescriptive environmentally friendly direction that could be ruining any form of democracy at all. For Pickering et al. (2020), this is the nexus between environmental democracy and eco-democracy, and it points directly at the more abstract pluralism and normativity of the anthropocentric side of the continuum and the more grounded (Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014, 2017), local, and inclusive (Kopnina, 2012) forms that ecocentric commitments require. This part of the continuum also raises challenges between the rights and powers of the local vs the global, who counts as a citizen and what their civic, social, or political rights might be. Such discussions also involve and embrace how agency and action competence plays out, what consent is and how it can be offered, how these diverse voices are heard, what restrictions are made when the agency of one member/species impedes another's, and how all these eco-democratic rights and responsibilities are understood, learned, highlighted and monitored.

At the ecocentric/multicentric end of the continuum there is a desire to radically rethink and transform democracy. This would include overcoming boundaries between ecology and democracy. For many, at this end of the continuum, the focus shifts to commons-based everyday life. This would also include re-examining materialist assumptions about the natural world, normative reflections about the human/more-than-human relationship, epistemological givens concerning meaning, and the culture out of which these ideas and education itself arises (Hammond, 2019). This is a form of democracy that removes the focus on *demos* (people) and replaces it with *ousia* (beings) as those active members, citizens, involved in *cracy* (governing). This move then has implications for how this *ousiacracy* plays out. Or, for those who worry about these Greek etymologies perhaps this would become a form of democracy that rests in kinship and understands each member as having a *ki*-ness (Kimmerer, 2013). With 'ki' used for each

[1]Black, Indigenous, People of Colour.

[2]Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersexual, asexual, two spirit, and additional identities and allies.

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individual earth-being (Kimmerer, 2013) and with its plural from "kin" the result becomes kincracy for an eco-democracy considering not only everyday-life-democracy but also its more expansive political and practical governance angles. For if all beings have intrinsic value, agency, their own becomings (self-realisation), and are worthy of moral consideration then questions of voice (having one and being heard), consent (the right to consultation, engagement, and the room, possibility, and space to say no), self-determination (self-becoming/realisation and active participating both as individuals and as/in groups and communities), and kindness (the support of the membership to not be unduly restricted in an everyday-life-democracy) are clearly challenging.

For many theorists this has tended to suggest an "inclusive pluralism" (Kopnina & Cherniak, 2016) which educationally makes itself manifest in examples drawn from Indigenous traditions, from bioregionalist work such as the Council for all Beings (Seed et al, 2007), and in the arguments of earth democracy, deep ecology, and eco-feminism. As the reader can discern the critiques of this end of the continuum are myriad and varied as well with the imaginative limits of human modernity being primary amongst them. What does hearing Mouse's voice sound like? How does Cedar give consent? How does any being know how Wolf self-determines?[3] And, how does Human limit their freedoms and exercise their responsibilities as good eco-citizens in light of the frame of kin, kindness, towards the mutual flourishing of all? Philosophically there are significant critiques as well but for the purposes of this paper we are going to suggest that in fact these are the kinds of questions that an imaginatively engaged environmental education can perhaps begin to respond to, or even position themselves within. Questions that concern themselves with a re-imagining and re-wilding of education and democracy. But first, we should turn our attention to eco-democracy and its presence in environmental education.

The soils of environmental education: tiny seedlings for an eco-democracy

At first glance it might appear that democracy and eco-democracy are somewhat peripheral to environmental education in both research and practice but as we dug into the ideas undergirding the more eco-centric end of the eco-democracy continuum and the critiques of democracy as enacted in environmental education (Hart & White, 2024; Hart, 2024) it became apparent that there have long been eco-democratic seedlings growing in the soil of environmental education. Eco-democratic themes of kinship, voice, de-centred learning (particularly a decentring of the human teacher), agency of the more-than-human, local-to-global action, active participation, questioning of current power relations exist and have long existed, in the theories and practices of environmental education (Gough, 2024). They have also long been part of the assumptive fabric of many practitioners whether named explicitly or not. These themes are in fact quite common though not often gathered together under the frame of eco-democracy. Below, we will examine five of the more apparent and significant themes — change, uncertainty, voice and consent, participation and self-determination, and intrinsic value/rights/agency of the beings of the more-than-human world. These themes will be examined in both eco-democratic and environmental educational contexts. To do the latter, we will extend the discussion by using the touchstones of wild pedagogies to both support the argument and to grow the conversation. The goal then from all this work is to offer out five 'seedlings' of eco-democracy whilst giving them light and some room to grow.

The first important eco-democratic seedling in environmental education, revolves around the concept of change. In democratic processes, the idea of leaving space for change and always being able to adapt to new problem situations is central (Petersson, 1999). As Martusewicz et al. (2020) describe, the world is always changing, differences are prerequisites for life, and humans are

[3]There is a growing body of Indigenous research and literature that might assist the reader to begin to think, act, into some responses to these questions. See Simpson, 2014; Kimmerer, 2013; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006 referenced below for example.

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fallible. Here we notice a pushback against the modernist sense of both control and stability which has long been an important critique by those interested in eco-democracy and wild pedagogies as it seeks an openness to a diversity of narratives, embraces the unknown and the uncertain, pushes against easy assumptions of progress, and understands the present as always unfinished. Peters and González-Gaudiano (2008) take a very similar position suggesting that in environmental education

> a great variety of viewpoints were taken into account and elements incorporated not only from the widest variety of theoretical approaches and philosophical currents but also from very different schools of thought and action, which established important articulations with complex social movements such as feminism, multiculturalism, peace, democracy, health, consumerism and human rights to mention but a few (Peters, 2017, 944).

In action, this suggests a recognition of the importance of supporting and engaging with difference and leaving space, as wild pedagogies suggests, for the unexpected and spontaneous while also recognising that it is unlikely to ever have absolute answers regarding how to live well together. Here environmental educators can hear deep resonances to practices of community building — community as diverse, fluid, contextual, and ever-changing — and to an understanding that learning involves making mistakes, taking risks, and developing the skills of problem-solving.

This brings us to the second seedling, uncertainty and the active presence of the more-than-human world and its myriad denizens. Politically, seeking to be more inclusive, and just in that inclusion, of the more-than-human world has led theorists to point in the direction of a more radical, grassroots, pluralism which has also appeared, theoretically and practically, in environmental education (Rudsberg & Öhman, 2010). Pedagogically, this move towards active inclusion and pluralism has appeared in Wild Pedagogies, for example, in the touchstones nature as co-teacher and the building of human alliances (Jickling et al. 2018), in questions around eco-social-cultural change (Fettes & Blenkinsop, 2023), and in the active listening to, acknowledging and seeking to understand all voices. Here again we hear reverberations of an overlap as both ecocentric eco-democracy and environmental education, back to the days of Orr's "all education is environmental" (Orr, 1994. p 12), see all acts, pedagogical and practical, as being inexorably political and value-laden. As such, environmental education is never free from politics and power relations which specifically is acknowledged concerning pluralism and reflexivity as possibilities (Wals, 2010) but also underlining democratisation at all levels (Huckle, 2014). This in turn suggests that accepting an ecocentric/multicentric worldview that includes recognising more-than-human beings as citizens will entail an important shift, disruption even, in power, control, and the *status quo* (Jickling & Blenkinsop, 2020). Here uncertainty becomes pivotal as it is helpful as a starting position when one seeks to rethink, reimagine, how normativity might be understood and enacted, the implications arising when the intrinsic rights of more-than-humans are acknowledged, and the prioritising of values in an eco-democracy. And, in parallel to environmental education, a sense that learning and community creating is never complete. As such, uncertainty challenges us to understand eco-democracy as a living, unfinished, project. And, that we must find ways to be comfortable with that.

A third seedling involves an ethical commitment to process and a clear desire to not lose the threads of democracy in moves that might be overly manipulative and indoctrinating (e.g. Van Poeck et al, 2016; Van Peck and Östman, 2018; Jickling, 1994). We can also hear quiet threads of response to the voices critiquing pluralistic approaches for being too slow for the urgency of crisis (Tryggvason et al, 2023). Part of the overlap between environmental education and eco-democracy involves commitments to "do the work" which will, as Wild Pedagogies suggests, take time and practice (Jickling et al., 2018). These practices involve staunch support of the process and include commitments to diverse participation, being heard, and making active space such that consent can be freely offered or withheld, without repercussions, by all members involved. Here

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there is a sense that forcing members to become more environmentally aware and eco-politically active is to undermine the very nature of the imagined community in spite of the dire realities. Laessoe (2010) argues for a historical and sociocultural approach to participation in order to best handle work with dilemmas, dissensus and deliberative communication. And although environmental education rarely names imagined futures as being 'eco-democratic' it is hard not to see how that might in fact be what many are pointing towards. In this seedling there is also a sense of the importance of developing the abilities of the members in as many as aspects of being human, citizens, members of the more-than-human as possible. Both allowing the individual to expand their particular ranges of being but also because of an understanding that as situations change, roles and competencies may change as well and that flourishing communities have expansive resiliences and the diversest possible range of competencies. Where this might be described in the environmental education literature are in advocacy of action competence (Morgensen & Schnack, 2010) for environmental educators it is often just good skill building in, across, and for community (Van Poeck & Vandenabeele, 2012). This also takes us to the next seedling.

A fourth seedling growing in the overlap between environmental education and eco-democracy is a vision of participation and self-determination. Here Peters (2017) argues that ecological democracy builds on principles such as freedom to participate in "local society" and a growing awareness of humans' embeddedness with more-than-humans. Lotz-Sisitska (2008) points towards the connections between the local and global in environmental education such that not only are individuals learning how to, and leaning into, self-determination but they are also actively engaging in local groups that are doing the same. Also, Payne (2010) mentions tensions between global abstract politics and individual moral behaviour. In fact, what we get is a layering of self-determination such that individuals, groups, and communities are able to exercise this (think, for example a transgender individual advocating for LGBTQ2S+ rights while also having their unique voice heard and understood within the community itself). Wild pedagogies names this in the touchstones building human alliances and socio-cultural change (Jickling et al., 2018). Intriguingly, what begins to happen in this layering process is a dissolving of the assumed ontology of self towards a more relational way of being. Alongside this is a sense that as individuals and groups develop their voices and the skills of organising, building alliances, and living together they are better able to affect change at the larger national and global scales and thereby pushing back on the institutionalised and eco-socially problematic structures that currently exist. In wild pedagogies we find the conversation about wildness and self-willed (Jickling et al., 2018)) helpful as educators trying to enliven this seedling.

The fifth seedling of eco-democracy already growing in the soil of environmental education has to do with respect for, and recognition of, the intrinsic agency and rights of the myriad denizens that make up the more-than-human world. For decades deep ecology has influenced environmental education in this direction and for those on the eco-centric end of the eco-democracy spectrum this question of nature's agency, including the ability to self-determine, and rights, thus having the right to be heard and to consent is one of the key considerations and a kind of border that divides the continuum in two. At the centre and the more enlightened anthropocentric end, proxy representation is celebrated, and as Lundmark (1998) argues, through science and experience humans might better understand other species and uncover what they want. However, for Naess (1986) and other deep ecologists, this is not enough. Even if humans can partly understand and feel compassion for more-than-humans without an acknowledgement of intrinsic rights it is easy for humans to still try to 'master' and manipulate nature even from this position of thoughtful 'awareness.' In the end there is a paternalism to the assumed position of caring for the more-than-human without having its voice present that is worrisome to the eco-centric and justice-oriented end of the continuum. For ultimately the assumption remains amongst certain cultural frames that humans know better what the other wants and needs than they might, whether they be Tree, Salmon, or Iguana. Ignoring, in this case, millions of years of

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quite successful eco-system functioning and flourishing — natural self-governance and self-determination in action as it were. Now, while details of the process of representation need ongoing adjustment and some hard imagining, the overall purpose of eco-democracy would be to recognise the entitlement rights of more-than-humans to exercise their forms of agency, to be heard as voices in eco-membership, and to flourish in their own ways — Bear being able to be Bear as Bear wishes. At a certain point this seedling makes clear that there is a need for some kind of governance frame. For it is unlikely, even with the best of intentions and deep commitments to change and kindness that this change to an eco-democracy will be seamlessly enacted. Therefore, we also suggest keeping in mind a democratic government perspective with help of two premises that Petersson (1999) highlights. One, the need for some form of stabilising force/s that align with the premises and aims of the eco-democracy itself but that can hold and sustain the project at the same time. It should be noted that these are unlikely to be narrowly focused on forms of instrumental control. And, two, tools that help evaluate the governance and collective processes for all. For Wild Pedagogies this connects back to seedlings related change and uncertainty, the touchstone complexity, the unknown, and spontaneity, and the shared aim of striving towards mutual beneficial flourishing.

Echoing this discussion environmental educators like Kopnina et al. (2021) have suggested that both pragmatically and ethically the more-than-human needs to exceed their utilitarian value, as defined by the modern human, and thus changes are required to the anthropocentric paradigm or, in the language of this paper, a shift is needed towards the ecocentric/multicentric end of the continuum of eco-democracy. Kopnina et al. (2021) further suggest that we look towards human examples where values have changed and new institutions have emerged that secure a wider and different range of rights and protect individuals and groups, previously marginalised, from discrimination. This reminds us that historically active engagement in the democratic process has been restricted by and to the centre often citing the margins inabilities or limitations concerning their 'abilities' to fully participate. Of course, there will be challenges as human citizens are educated to better understand more-than-human rights and how those might be compared, contrasted, and included in the larger rights discussion of an eco-democracy. Here we see environmental education playing an important role supporting the expansion and acceptance of concepts such as intrinsic value and agential rights (see: nature as co-teacher), building the relationships needed to emphasise local participation, grassroots communities — the celebration of collective self-organisation (Lepori, 2019) — and larger questions of cultural change (Hammond, 2019). And having this occur through developing the criticality to recognise and respond to human elitism, paternalism, and anthropocentrism while at the same time offering opportunities for learners to 'try on' and play with living in an eco-democracy and allowing the space for the very ideas around what it means to be human and to live in community to flex and change. We see this as both imaginative and re-imaginative work that invites, listens to, and learns together with the voices of the natural world and myriad different cultures all over the globe.

So, at this point, we want to pivot the conversation and spend some time exploring the work that might be done in environmental education, if we were to make eco-democracy a more explicit component, and goal, thereof.[4] What might environmental education look like if we take these seedlings seriously? How might environmental education best step into this work while recognising that the kinds of changes being advocated for are substantial and require pedagogical commitments that are themselves in line with eco-democratic ways? In order to do this, we want to offer a set of four eco-democratic commitments culled, thematically, both from the seedlings and historical discussions above, but also, in a nod to Kopnina et al's suggestion, from other justice-seeking conversations.[5] We also think that by gathering the above discussions into a more

[4]We do this while still questioning whether a concept such as eco-democracy is helpful in (environmental) education.

[5]Here we are pointing to work being done in feminism/eco-feminism, critical race and Indigenous theory, queer-ecology, abolitionist and speculative theorising, and more.

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concretisable group we are helping that very tricky work of translating between theory and practice. Thus, we end with proposing voice, consent, self-determination and kindness as four eco-democratic commitments for environmental education.

Eco-democratic commitments: Wilding education

In this section, we will spend a little time exploring the commitments and what education[6] might become when situated in and responsible to and for an eco-democracy. Ultimately this is about imagining an education committed to being part of the eco-social-cultural change that an eco-democracy demands. An education that sees the importance of its role at the centre of cultural change but one that is criticality reflective enough to recognise the importance of creating something not known yet. The hope is that in walking through each of the four commitments, it becomes clearer how educators might consider and work with them. But before we turn in that direction we remind the reader that in our definition of an eco-democracy, all members, human and more-than, have rights, agency, gifts to offer particularly in reference to the project of changing, understanding, and reshaping the worlds of which we are all a part. This is a view of eco-democracy that is not limited to everyday life but also acknowledges the political dimensions, both as larger theory and with regard to practicalities of governance and is aiming towards a more mutually beneficial flourishing world. By way of conclusion we now turn to the four commitments and ask the reader to consider reading each as a kind of speculative fiction, a research method that thinks towards a possible, though not yet, other than real world (Brown, 2017). What might a human educator positioned in an eco-democratic frame do? The hope is that in doing the work of imagining and potentially attempting we push things towards eco-democracy for if we change ourselves as educators then the world (e.g. our students, our communities, our assumptions) changes in response.

Voice

As with the other three discussions this one doesn't actually require the imagining of something that has never existed. There are all kinds of educational movements that have worked with the idea that it is not only humans that can communicate, that have diverse languages, and that in fact are able to speak. For the most part the trouble is really situated in the western colonial move to "make silent." Thus, the practice of an eco-democratic education will seek to both develop the skills of listening in those humans who have become unable to hear the more-than-human all around and create the pedagogical space for all those other voices to be heard. The touchstone, Nature as Co-teacher (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010, Jickling et al. 2018), is an obvious point of consideration and has in practice required educators to spend significant amounts time building relationship with the more-than-human. This includes, getting to know the beings around in their diversity, spending a lot of time outdoors, and even beginning to actively co-plan in place such that the more-than-human world is part of every step in the educational process. This also includes changing the current educational agenda that often seeks to fill every moment with important human stuff that every learner needs to know. Not only is this non-ecological, since it ignores the voices and the knowledges of the world around, but it is also, as praxis, deeply undemocratic. So, picture this, the human teacher heading outside before the programme, learning experience, or even school year starts. Settling into the pedagogical space where they have built an ongoing relationship and then beginning to co-plan with this place and its myriad denizens the outline for a full year of school. But the planning begins with humble listening,

[6]At this point, we will drop the "environmental" adjective as that only furthers an assumption that there is a form of education that is not environmental which seems to run contrary to both David Orr and the very definition of an eco-democracy.

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recognising the work already done to undo the human elitism and human teacher centredness, and opening oneself up to become part of this teaching team.

Consent

This component of the eco-democratic process reaches into a discussion about citizenship and the rights thereof. At one level each eco-citizen has the right to be consulted and to express their agreement or disagreement to anything. This is the kind of pluralism that we explored above and yet, there is also an educational question with regard to what it might mean to obtain consent from all beings into whose homes and lives we are entering as education moves outwards from the alienated situation of the traditional classroom. What might it mean to engage with the Western Red Cedar tree in the school yard in a way such that all involved felt like they had been adequately consulted about the learning activities that were about to occur, that Cedar was content with the way they were being represented (known) in the learning, and were they able to say "no" to any encounter or way of knowing that was misrepresentative or simply not appropriate to the moment? This question and way of thinking about educational encounters with the more-than-human is quite a radical departure from how they are usually understood. This is to counteract mainstream extractive epistemologies that have historically trampled, literally and figuratively, the rights of all beings to be known as they would like to be known. Here the human educator might consider employing a form of the "nothing about us without us"[7] discussion in relation to the natural world. Seeking consent from the eco-community before adding disruptive human learners while in turn preparing those same learners with this sense of the importance of consent. Perhaps, this can be done through recognising that there are myriad beings who live here and we need permission to enter their homes and the humility to recognise that there are different ways of being, different cultural workings at play herein. Places to further these ideas of seeking consent, honouring what is offered, and undoing extractive epistemologies might be through ideas such as Kimmerer's (2013) honourable harvest.

Self-determination

Here we are being sneaky and drawing what appears to be two themes together and yet there is method to the madness. We are doing this to avoid the assumption that this commitment is simply pointing at a western concept of individualised freedom. Self-determination is not about each being or ki being able to do whatever whenever they want. In some ways this has always been the challenge of the American concept of freedom because it ignores the reality of how individuals are actually also deeply immersed in community and in relationship. Suggesting kincracy we are pointing towards the right to best become that which one might seek while at the same time also having the rights and responsibilities of belonging to and being an active and honoured part of community. For the eco-democratic educator who is helping to create and support this kind of learning space this will include making space for the human students to bring their questions, ideas, confusions and discoveries along with their voices, rights, and desires to this growing curriculum that is actively engaged with and responding to and with these places. As such, the classroom, learning space, itself becomes an eco-democratic space in practice, where decisions are made and the community finds ways to govern itself (Nelson & Drew, 2024). All of this bringing with it all the challenges and incompletenesses of an eco-democracy in action. This move also pushes the work into a more relational way of being in the world as each ki is always and already emmeshed in layers of community that involve ongoing explorations of and responsibilities to the give and take between and amongst what best for self, best for others, best for community and then

[7]For a little history on this slogan please see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nothing_about_us_without_us

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dealing with the situations where these might not align. In short, this is about learning how to enact kinship not just in theory but in the nitty-gritty of practice.

Kindness

In some ways this for us becomes the governing frame, the nitty-gritty tool, for the other three. Here the focus is on how community finds its way towards mutually beneficial flourishing while also actively including all members. This also pushes the view of patterns of human interconnectedness with the more-than-human a bit further by actively including these questions of political enacting and governing. We have chosen the language of kindness as a form of celebration and as a way to push towards thinking of working in and with an eco-democracy as a form of ongoing gift-giving and cooperation rather than an individualistic competition where scarcity is the driving factor. Kindness also includes the language of kin within it and perhaps thinking of world and its myriad beings as kin can be an anchor for the turn towards an eco-democracy. Here the educator is offered the beginnings of an axiological frame which encounters the epistemology of practice while allowing the learners to live into and do some experiencing and thinking around eco-democracy in action. What does it mean to engage with the other in the spirit of kindness? How is kindness made manifest in moments where two self-determinations appear to conflict? And how might kindness change practical components of education such as assessment?

At this point, we acknowledge this short journey in speculative fiction to be a tiny step towards what might actually become an eco-democracy but for us taking nature-as-co-teacher seriously and asking how voice, consent, self-determination, and kindness might play out pedagogically is fecund with possibility. Add in the more-than-human-world as a living, learning, and enacting eco-democracy and maybe the seedlings of a wilding education are given the kind of light and soil to really grow and fill in the gaps that are being torn in the current democratic canopy. Through seeking, imagining, and (re)creating this 'kincracy' it is likely that the premises and work education shift towards becoming a more active partner in eco-social-cultural change for mutually beneficial flourishing.

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Ethical standard. Nothing to note.

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