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Department of Political Science

## MARIPOLDATA Reading Group

### Ethics and the BBNJ agreement

**23.09.2020**

**Guest Speaker: Dr. Carl Safina**, author of “Launching a Sea Ethic” with various publications on the relationship between humans and nature. He is an ecologist and founder of the Safina Center in New York City.

#### **Context:**

Currently, the UN is negotiating a new legally binding agreement for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. These negotiations therefore seek to regulate “global commons”.

- To what extent do policy-makers have an ethical responsibility when governing the global commons?
- And what are different kinds of ethical responsibilities that we can identify?

The two readings on ethics and the environment can be connected to the ongoing negotiations at the UN to conserve and sustainably use marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Discussion includes ethics and the ocean and how this might be relevant for policy makers.

**Readings for this session:** Global environmental commons and the need for ethics (Boda, 2003) and “Launching a Sea Ethic” (Safina, 2003)

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**Ina Tessnow- von Wysocki, September 2020**

## 1. Global environmental Commons and the need for ethics

### Reading 1. Global environmental Commons and the need for ethics (Boda, 2003)

#### Overview:

In 2003, Zsolt Boda wrote on “Global environmental commons and the need for ethics”. Global commons are areas and resources that cannot be owned by one state or person alone, but that are globally shared and used amongst all. Global commons are characterized by non-rivalry in consumption meaning that the good is collectively consumed and non-excludability, that no one can be excluded from the consumption of the good. Examples of this would be the atmosphere, space, and the ocean.

The author criticises the **focus on economic gains in environmental issues**, such as climate change and biodiversity loss: The inherent critique that he poses is that economic gains from emission trading schemes or the creation of property rights and possible markets for genetic resources are the incentives for environmental protection. Nature conservation is linked to economic and business development and global environmental commons are sought to be managed through market logic. He mentions the benefits that developing countries gain through contracts with developed countries that can develop pharmaceutical products from biodiversity found in developing countries’ territories, encouraged by the Convention of Biological Diversity. He does not argue against benefit sharing and indeed argues that benefit sharing is an inherent part, that developing countries, and local peoples need to gain rewards from the use of such resources. However, he criticises that economic incentives are currently the only incentives for the protection of biodiversity.

In the second part of the article, the author mentions different concepts of scholars in the 1970s, including the **Common Heritage of Mankind** (addressing international equity issues), **Limits of Growth** (addressing ecological limits), and **Ecodevelopment** (addressing local needs). These debates were then followed and overturned by the introduction of “**Sustainable Development**”, the notion to connect economic and business interests with ecological ones. The author further argues that environmental treaties have been shaped by so called “market environmentalism”.

The third section of the article then goes into the **economic concept of commons**, arguing that existing literature has focuses on solving global commons problems through either 1) an effective central authority to secure the common good; 2) market forces, 3) privatisation of the good. The author adds that ethical coordination would be an alternative but has been largely neglected by economic thinking.

In the last part, the author lays out the **need for ethics in global governance**. He argues that while greening of the market and market mechanisms in international environmental measures can be helpful, they only play a subordinated role. The danger is that only goods with market value will be protected – and with the motivation of continuous profits. He takes the ecological point of view that the market will not be able to

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provide sufficient incentives to protect global commons. He argues that privatising nature is limited by ecological and ethical considerations and therefore “the concept of common good carries an essential ethical content”.

He refers to:

1. **Considerations of a more equitable international order and international justice** (Common Heritage Principle): arguing that international institutions need to be designed for the “greatest benefit of the least advantaged countries, or at least to a greater benefit of the least advantaged countries than of the developed countries” (See: Justice as Fairness concept, p.222).
2. **Consideration of future generations**

### **Suggestions to manage the global commons:**

- Introduce new forms of political authority (e.g. World Environmental Organisation)
- Give local communities and civil society a role in managing and governing global commons
- Establish property rights regimes with considerations: whose property? What kind of property?
- Considering the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities; promote small-scale property systems and common property regimes

So overall, the author argues against a narrow economic focus for managing global environmental commons and provokes thoughts on ethical content of global environmental governance by referring to considering the rights of indigenous and local communities, as well as civil society to have a say in how to manage these areas and resources for current and future generations.

## **2. “Launching a Sea Ethic” and Discussion**

### **Text 2: Launching a Sea Ethic (Safina)**

Dr. Carl Safina goes a step further and argues for a different kind of ethical responsibility - the ethical responsibility toward nature itself. With his work “launching a sea ethic”, he calls the importance of environmental ethics into mind that go beyond the “land” and extends to the “oceans”.

### **Short-term vs. long-term goals**

Dr. Carl Safina emphasises that unfortunately in our societies today focus is on “short-term gains” rather than on “justice and community building and intergenerational benefits”. With a general shift in perspective in this regard, the global community could undertake a long-term strategy to achieve a more ethical way forward.

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## **Ethical responsibility- for whom/what?**

There are different forms of ethical responsibility that humans feel and live, including the ethical responsibility towards other humans in their group- which could be their family, their neighbourhood, their community, their city, their country, or even the whole international community. Then, there is also the ethical responsibility towards humans that are worse off than oneself in a sense of justice, as well as the ethical responsibility towards nature itself for its own right. What our ethical responsibility towards others and the environment “ought to be” is on a wide spectrum of different opinions. Dr. Safina describes his encounter with tuna and the fascinating nature of these creatures as individuals. Upon the question within the group on his stance on tuna farms, he underlines that this in his view is not sustainable.

## **Rights of Nature**

In capitalist structures, oftentimes humans ask for the “benefit from nature”- What is the purpose for us? But rather than valuing certain species and ecosystems on economic or other value directly serving humans, he emphasises the fact that this should not be the motivation to care, but that nature has rights on its own.

## **“We protect what we love”**

Humans are drawn to beauty in its various forms, including physical and emotional beauty. Dr. Carl Safina refers to how values shape the way we think, treat and protect and that values drive our sense for ethics. How can values change to meet the universal benefits that we want to see? “We teach values”, Dr. Safina emphasises the importance of education in this regard. He also underlines that if people felt connected to the oceans - through e.g. spending time with marine species, in the marine environment- they would be more willing to protect these places and species.

## **Competition vs. cooperation**

The discussions also evolved around the concepts of competition versus cooperation, or harmony. Dr. Carl Safina likes to think back to his young age, when he always preferred to play an instrument in a band- and in this way was able to create something with others, instead of against others. He criticizes competition-driven societies, where individuals try to outplay one another, get their own benefit, rather than building something together. He draws the line to international negotiations in the way that states on an individual basis often seek to look for their own benefit before the collective benefit. With different institutions coming in with their own values and a lack of common interest, he sees that something needs to change. In international negotiations for the global commons “there needs to be a change of the attitude” of “trying to bring the biggest fish home”. A change in this regard could also largely enrich negotiations where global commons are at stake.

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### 3. Book Suggestions

Lastly, some book recommendations by Carl Safina and reading group members to dive into the topics a bit further...

#### **Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants** **by Robin Wall Kimmerer**

Content:

As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Kimmerer brings these lenses of knowledge together to show that the awakening of a wider ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world. For only when we can hear the languages of other beings are we capable of understanding the generosity of the earth, and learning to give our own gifts in return.

#### **Becoming Wild: How Animal Cultures Raise Families, Create Beauty, and Achieve Peace** **by Carl Safina**

Content:

Some people insist that culture is strictly a human accomplishment. What are those people afraid of? This book looks into three cultures of other-than-human beings in some of Earth's remaining wild places. It shows how if you're a sperm whale, a scarlet macaw, or a chimpanzee, you too experience your life with the understanding that you are an individual within a particular community. You too are not who you are by genes alone; your culture is a second form of inheritance, received from thousands of individuals as pools of knowledge passing through generations like an eternal torch. You too may raise young, know beauty, or struggle to negotiate a peace. And your culture, too, changes and evolves. As situations shift, so does your community's capacity for learning, especially social learning, which allows behaviors to adjust much faster than genes alone could adapt.

*Becoming Wild* brings readers close to the lives of non-human animals to show how other creatures teach and learn. With reporting from deep in nature, alongside portraits of various animals in their free-living communities, Safina offers a fresh understanding of what is constantly going on beyond humanity. Readers are taken behind the curtain of life on Earth and asked to reckon with the most urgent of questions: Who are we here with?

We are looking forward to the upcoming Reading Group Session and discussions!

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