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Title: Human Rights–Based Social Work and the Natural Environment : Time for New Perspectives

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Stamm, I. (2023). Human Rights–Based Social Work and the Natural Environment : Time for New Perspectives. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 8(1), 42-50.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s41134-022-00236-x>



Human Rights–Based Social Work and the Natural Environment: Time for New Perspectives

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Accepted: 7 December 2022
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Abstract

The natural environment and sustainability play an increasingly important role in social work as a discipline and profession. This is often described as the ecosocial paradigm. Even though the paradigm shares important ethical foundations with human rights–based social work, the connection between both is rarely examined in social work scholarship. This article addresses the gap by asking the following questions: How is the ecosocial paradigm linked to the human rights discourse in social work? What is the environmental dimension of human rights, and what implications does it have for social work? How can a human rights–based social work encompass the environmental dimension? In response, the article argues for the integration of new environmental perspectives into human rights–based social work. First, it shows that social work needs to refocus on collective human rights, such as the right to a healthy environment, recently recognized by the United Nations. Regarding the rights of children and youth, good examples of social work advocacy can already be found. Second, research knowledge and practice within the ecosocial paradigm are valuable resources for human rights–based social work, mainly regarding environmental justice and the principle of sustainability. Ultimately, it is only possible to strive for the realization of human rights, social change, and an inclusive and sustainable future if the natural environment is integrated as a social work concern.

Keywords Human rights · Natural environment · Ecosocial paradigm · Sustainability · Environmental justice

Introduction

During the past decades, social work has grown globally into a human rights profession. Today, human rights are highlighted as one of the main principles of the profession in the Global Definition of Social Work and in many national codes of ethics across the globe; they are an important part of social work education, and they are incorporated into various forms of social work practice (Androff, 2016; Healy, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2016). Human rights in general are a powerful legal, political, and moral global consensus (Woods, 2016a: 334). They can serve social workers as a tool to promote empowerment and to fight against oppression with their clients (Reichert, 2003). In some cases, social workers also participate in concrete human rights advocacy

work in the United Nations (UN) and other human rights organizations (Prasad, 2018).

Less powerful but nevertheless on the rise is another paradigm in social work, connected to the natural environment, the climate crisis, and sustainable development: the ecosocial paradigm (Krings et al., 2018; Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Stamm, 2021a). This paradigm seeks to widen the scope of the profession from a focus on individual humans' well-being to a holistic view of the well-being of the whole planet and all its species. It highlights the centrality of relationships beyond the human to social work, and it is often connected to a critical view of the growth-oriented economic system (Dominelli, 2012; Ife, 2016). The rising importance of the paradigm is documented at the level of international social work: today, international documents such as the Global Definition of Social Work and its commentary notes, as well as the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, mention important elements of the paradigm, such as environmental justice and environmental sustainability (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] et al., 2012; International Federation

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of Social Workers [IFSW] & IASSW 2014). Research interest in ecosocial work has grown rapidly during the past two decades (Krings et al., 2018), and its impact on developments in education and practice has increased accordingly (Boetto et al., 2020; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Matthies et al., 2020).

Both paradigms have clearly influenced ethical discussions and international strategy documents in the social work profession. However, in theoretical and conceptual social work scholarship, questions regarding the direct links and interplay between these approaches are rarely raised. Proponents of the ecosocial paradigm perhaps regard human rights in Western societies as potentially in conflict with the rights of animals or nature (Gray & Coates, 2012); human rights-oriented scholars perhaps consider that environmental problems are outside the remit of social work discussions (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018).

This article attempts to address this gap. It discusses the environmental dimension of human rights as well as the connection between human rights-based social work and the ecosocial paradigm. The article presents a conceptual analysis based on current social work literature and the interdisciplinary human rights discourse. The main questions are as follows: How is the ecosocial paradigm linked to the human rights discourse in social work? What is the environmental dimension of human rights, and what implications does it have for social work? How can a human rights-based social work encompass the environmental dimension? The article is structured around these three questions. The next section presents the key elements of ecosocial work and its missing link to human rights-based social work scholarship. The “Human Rights and the Natural Environment” section reflects on the environmental dimension of human rights, mainly focusing on philosophical and legal aspects. The “Human Rights-Based Social Work and the Environment” section discusses the consequences for human rights-based social work, and includes suggestions for tentative steps toward the integration of environmental concerns into social work.

The Ecosocial Paradigm and Human Rights

The ecosocial paradigm or approach is a framework for thinking about and practicing social work from the premise that humans are part of nature, and that the natural environment plays a key role for all human beings and their well-being (Stamm et al., 2023). Within the paradigm, the term “ecosocial work” is often used to describe the interconnections between social and ecological concerns in social work. According to Rambaree et al., (2019: 205), “ecosocial work [...] approaches the analysis of social problems, issues, and concerns with an ecosocial paradigm or lens, rather than

an anthropocentric lens” (see also Matthies & Närhi 2017; Peeters, 2012). Ecosocial work calls for the sustainable use of natural resources and the holistic consideration of the well-being of all species, and it generally puts the environmental crisis and its main causes at the center of attention. The environmental crisis, particularly the climate crisis, is not only deepening the social and environmental problems of already marginalized and vulnerable groups but also creating new challenges for many individuals, groups, peoples, and species now and in the future (Mapp & Gatenio Gabel, 2019). The ecosocial paradigm overlaps with or in some cases includes other approaches, such as environmental, ecological, and green social work (Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013; McKinnon & Alston 2016). Furthermore, it shares common ground with critical and structural approaches to social work. All of these approaches take up critical stances regarding the narrow, individualistic understanding of the traditional person-in-environment model in social work, and they include critiques of the current neoliberal, growth-oriented economic model, which has led to the overexploitation of natural resources and the destruction of community-based forms of social and solidarity economy. Moreover, all of them identify a political mandate for social work, focusing on the structural foundations of current social and environmental crises (for an overview, see Närhi & Matthies, 2016).

The ecosocial paradigm consists of several essential elements or principles, such as environmental justice, climate justice, and environmental sustainability. Environmental justice is about the “fair distribution of environmental burdens and amenities (*distributive justice*), the use of inclusive processes to achieve such outcomes (*procedural justice*), and the creation of places where marginalized groups, including residents of color and immigrants, feel welcome and safe” (Krings & Copic, 2020: 2; see also Schlosberg, 2007). In the US context, the principle is closely connected to the Black Civil Rights Movement, and it is therefore based on principles such as equal rights, antiracism, and antidiscrimination (Bullard, 1996), but it has been expanded to other marginalized groups as well. Although it is less widely known outside of the US, attempts to use and further develop the concept of environmental justice have also been made in countries such as Germany (Ituen & Hey, 2021). Closely connected to this is the concept of climate justice, which emphasizes that the burdens of the climate crisis are very unequally distributed within nation-states (between population groups) and between states across the globe. It calls for more justice regarding these burdens, and for more solidarity regarding climate change mitigation strategies and their social impact on certain groups (Liedholz, 2020).

Another key principle for ecosocial work is environmental or ecological sustainability (Stamm, 2021b; Dylan, 2013; Schmitz et al., 2012). Sustainability in general can be considered a principle of justice, namely intergenerational

or intertemporal justice, and it calls for different modes of production and consumption. In social work, scholars have declared sustainability a central goal of social change that social work is obligated to promote (Peeters, 2016). The principle of environmental sustainability was a priority area for the first decade of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, which can be considered a global strategy paper for social work. The Global Agenda started as a joint endeavor by the IFSW, the IASSW, and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) in the early 2000s; it has been extended into the 2020s with new themes, which for example structure World Social Work Days. During its first decade, environmental sustainability was brought together with community and social development. In the third report of the Global Agenda on environmental sustainability, the principle was mostly connected to social problems that affect social work practice (IASSW et al., 2018). It raised awareness among social work scholars, educators, and practitioners regarding the ecosocial paradigm across the globe.

However, the importance of human rights, whether conceptually or in application to practice, is generally neglected within the ecosocial paradigm. One example is green social work, one of the most cited concepts within the paradigm. Dominelli (2012: 196) has identified the role of green social work “in eradicating poverty while caring for and protecting the environment within a framework of social and environmental justice, human rights, active citizenship and a critique of neoliberal capitalist modes of production, distribution and consumption.” In a more recent conceptualization, she states that green social workers should highlight “human rights violations that go hand-in-glove within degraded environments” (Dominelli, 2018: 11). However, she offers no closer examination at a conceptual level of what these violations are or how they are linked to degraded environments. Apart from a reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Dominelli, 2013), she makes no detailed connections to the UN’s human rights system, or to the environmental dimension of human rights in general. Another example is Boetto’s (2017) transformative eco-social model. This often-cited concept challenges the modernist roots of social work and calls for an ecologically centered approach that (among other things) adopts a holistic worldview and fosters global citizenship (Boetto, 2017: 50). Based on her model, Boetto demands a fundamental transformation of social work regarding the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking), and methodological (doing) dimensions of social work practice. Lobbying for human rights is just one minor issue on Boetto’s list of social action strategies to facilitate economic and political change (Boetto, 2017: 62). Further thoughts regarding how human rights might guide social workers’ ethical considerations, or how knowledge

about human rights might support environmental concerns, are not included.

On the other hand, social work scholarship on human rights does not usually include references to the ecosocial paradigm or its basic elements. The link between human rights and the natural environment in general was established with reference to collective human rights during the 1990s. However, during the last 20 years, very few authors have brought human rights, sustainability, and environmental justice together or discussed their joint importance for social work (for an early example, see Hawkins, 2010). Ife was one of the first to highlight the importance of collective human rights, first and foremost the right to a healthy environment. He discussed collective human rights in the context of social work ethics (Ife, 2012: 178). In more recent publications, Ife calls on the social work profession to turn to an ecocentric worldview and embrace a relational approach that includes nonhuman beings (Ife, 2016, 2018). He argues we must abandon the view that human beings are superior and exceptional; instead, we must emphasize humans’ interconnections with the natural world (Ife, 2016: 7). This means that social work must expand its scope of responsibility and gain new competencies regarding the needs and rights of animals, plants, and ecosystems, according to Ife (2018). Although many social work scholars might agree in light of the climate crisis and biodiversity loss, Ife’s theory omits important questions, such as how to balance different needs, and how strong human rights might be within an ecocentric worldview. Moreover, Ife does not touch on the discussion of ecosocial work at all. The two global discourses—human rights on one side, and the ecosocial paradigm in social work on the other—remain disconnected.

Human Rights and the Natural Environment

This section focuses on human rights and the natural environment within the UN. For a long time in the context of international law, the pillars of human rights protection and environmental protection were mostly separate (Boyle, 2020; Trent & Schnurr, 2018). The human rights system was an essential part of the formation of the UN, manifested in the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The idea that concern for the environment should be part of the UN’s mission developed much later. The first UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm in 1972 (Postiglione, 2010). However, at that time, there was no strong connection to the human rights system, or indeed to concrete human rights treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (adopted in 1966). Only since the 1990s has the right to a healthy environment been discussed within different UN bodies. This right is commonly understood as

part of collective human rights, which are also known as “group rights” or “solidarity rights” (Riedel, 2004). Shortly after the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1994, a document named Draft principles on human rights and the environment was discussed within the UN Human Rights Commission (now the Human Rights Council). Yet, at that time, the majority of UN member states did not support the adoption of the draft (Kämpf, 2012; Tester, 2013), and the human right to a healthy environment remained soft law: it was not enshrined in any official UN document or treaty, but human rights experts derived it from other groups of rights or rights holders.

Scholars in international law and the philosophy of law have identified five ways to derive the right to a healthy environment: from (1) civil and political rights; (2) economic, social, and cultural rights; (3) regional human rights treaties; (4) minority rights; and (5) procedural rights (Lohmann, 2012; Nickel & Viola, 2003; Peters, 2008). To give an example of the first of these five ways, the fundamental right to life is enshrined in Article 6 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and this can be connected to a healthy environment. It is self-evident that environmental degradation can threaten the human right to life. The second of the five ways relates to economic and social human rights, such as the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, enshrined in Articles 11 and 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (and in other human rights treaties). Again, the fulfillment of these rights clearly depends on a healthy environment. Some scholars further emphasize the importance of social and economic rights regarding the consequences of climate change (Boyle, 2020). The third way to derive the right to a healthy environment is to refer to regional or supranational human rights treaties. Here, the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights is a crucial document. Within the African human rights system, there are also documented cases regarding the right to a healthy environment, which is enshrined in the charter. The fourth way to derive the right to a healthy environment is from minority rights. The main reference point here is the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This declaration recognizes Indigenous peoples’ rights to land and environmental resources. For Woods (2016a: 338), this is proof that “the human rights paradigm is capable of recognizing and legally protecting a relationship between the human and the non-human that is very different from the Western tradition of dominance and mastery.” The fifth and last way to derive the right to a healthy environment is to refer to procedural rights. These are often important for activists and nongovernmental organizations. They include the right to freedom of speech, the right to organize, and the right to protest, enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other

treaties, and made applicable in the context of environmental movements and civil society. These different strategies also show that the right to a healthy environment can be interpreted both as an individual right and as a collective right. There are advantages to both interpretations, and they are not mutually exclusive (see Lohmann, 2012: 442).

The first UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights and the Environment, John Knox (2018: 6), appointed by the Human Rights Council in 2012, described the interdependency between human rights and the environment, and the correlative state obligations, as follows: “States should ensure a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment in order to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, and they should respect, protect and fulfil human rights in order to ensure a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment.” In short, a healthy environment is a precondition for the realization of human rights, and only through the realization of human rights are people enabled to care for and protect the natural environment. The first part is the core element of the human right to a healthy environment. As described above, after several decades of discussions and negotiations, the right was officially recognized within the UN by the Human Rights Council in October 2021 (UN 2021), followed by the General Assembly, which adopted a similar resolution in July 2022 (UN 2022).

Both resolutions explicitly address the human right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment (UN 2021, 2022). Their preambles refer to the interdependence of this right with other human rights, such as the rights to life, health, and participation in cultural life. They further recognize that “the consequences [of environmental damage] are felt most acutely by those segments of the population that are already in vulnerable situations, including indigenous peoples, older persons, persons with disabilities, and women and girls” (UN 2021: 2). The focus on certain groups is a cross-cutting human rights principle and equally important for human rights–based social work. The rather short documents go on to encourage states to build their capacities to protect the environment; to continue to share good practice in fulfilling human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; to adopt policies for the enjoyment of the right including with respect to biodiversity and ecosystems; and to continue to take into account human rights obligations and commitments relating to the enjoyment of a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in the implementation of and follow-up to the Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2021: 3). Proponents of the resolutions hope that environmental protection will be strengthened on the national level by the use of an official human right to a healthy environment as a legal tool. On the other hand, critics question the effect of the resolutions. They claim that more than 80% of UN member states already recognize such a right in their own national legal systems

in some way, and that the rest will most likely not change their minds because of the UN resolutions. Instead, some critics advocate strengthening existing instruments, such as UN covenants, through which associated human rights can be claimed (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte [DIMR] 2021a). In practice, the impact of the resolutions remains to be seen.

Moreover, several questions regarding the right to a healthy environment remain unresolved. One issue concerns the duties related to the right. In general, within the modern human rights system as part of international law, the rights holders are individuals, and the duty bearers are governments and public institutions. Quite clearly, air and water pollution, the consequences of the climate crisis, and biodiversity loss are all border-crossing phenomena. No single government can be held responsible for causing these problems, or for solving them. States can control carbon emissions within their geographical boundaries, but the effects will be global. In particular, due to economic globalization, many emissions in countries in the global south are caused by factories that mainly produce goods for consumers in the high-income countries of the global north (as well as power plants to ensure the power supply for that production). At the same time, the negative effects of the crisis are felt first and foremost by people in world regions that are already deprived. That being the case, ultimately the problem is not so different from other human rights problems. To tackle poverty, the whole community of nation-states must cooperate and take shared responsibility. Regarding global environmental justice or climate justice, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is often used (see Peeters, 2016).

Another question is whether unborn future generations of human beings are protected by the right to a healthy environment, and whether they can be considered human rights holders in general. This question has often been discussed in philosophy, international law, and political sciences (see for example Lohmann, 2012; Shue, 2015; Woods, 2016b). As with the concept of intergenerational justice, which is inherent in the principle of sustainable development, the question here is whether we can reasonably allocate and predict the interests and needs of humans that will be born in the future. However, future persons will most likely have the same basic needs and interests as those living today, and therefore basic human rights can be allocated to them. One could state that the right to a healthy environment serves currently living human persons, future persons, and the natural environment itself. The recognition of future persons as holders of human rights can also be considered a strong ethical basis for an ecosocial paradigm in social work (Walz, 2006).

There are several arguments against using human rights to tackle the climate crisis and environmental protection in general. For example, human rights might be rejected

because they are seen to be embedded in an anthropocentric worldview that is not only human-centered but even invites humans to continue the exploitation of nature. There may be an underlying assumption that human rights include the right to exploit natural resources or pollute ecosystems. “Living beyond one’s means” (Paech, 2012: 13) and “pursu[ing] a wealthy lifestyle with high material consumption and waste” (Ife, 2012) are clearly not human rights principles, and the two should not be confused. Another argument is that instead of fixating on human rights, we are in much greater need of human obligations (Paech, 2018). From the perspective of human rights–based social work, this must be opposed. Human rights are based on human dignity; they cannot be taken away, or only granted under certain conditions. Obligations do exist, and they are important in times of environmental crisis, but the focus should not be on the individual but on the structural level of policymaking and the economy (Grunwald, 2018). Tying the fulfillment of human rights to individual obligations would clearly violate the principle that human rights are inalienable (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR] 1993). Human rights “do not represent an institutional framework for delivering the good life, let alone the green good life. Human rights are moral minimums that protect human beings’ entitlement to the necessary conditions for a life consistent with human dignity” (Woods, 2016a: 337). To work toward a life that is consistent with human dignity should be the main goal for social work in cooperation with clients at any time. The challenge human rights–based social work faces now is to add further perspectives to this central objective.

Human Rights–Based Social Work and the Environment

How can a human rights–based social work now encompass the environmental dimension? How can it be integrated? Although there is insufficient space to elaborate on concrete examples, this section offers some insights into the impact of the environmental dimension. Prasad (2018) has identified three main roles human rights can play in social work. They can (1) serve as a reference frame; (2) serve as an instrument for analysis, for example to assess the living situation of certain groups; and (3) be used as tools and methods that are connected to the human rights protection system in the UN or at supranational levels (for example, in human rights reports or strategic litigation) (Prasad, 2018; Prasad et al., 2020). These three roles often overlap. The five principles of a human rights–based social work practice (nondiscrimination, participation, human dignity, transparency, and accountability) developed by Androff (2016, 2018)

underlie the following reflections as well, although they are not explicitly addressed.

Human rights are acknowledged as a main principle in the ethical basis of social work in many countries across the globe. However, this acknowledgment often seems to be rhetorical, and concrete links to human rights treaties or conventions are often missing. As demonstrated earlier, the natural environment is fundamental to the fulfillment of many existing human rights, such as the right to life, the right to an adequate standard of living, and the right to health. Therefore, on a professional level, from a human rights perspective, social work clearly also has a responsibility regarding the environment. Apart from the right to a healthy environment, social work can already use other declarations or treaties in regional human rights systems as a reference point. If concern for the natural environment is acknowledged as part of social work ethics, and if it is tied to human rights-based social work, it might also lead to new perspectives on social work mandates. For example, the third professional mandate developed by Staub-Bernasconi (2016, 2018) would include an important additional element.

Regarding human rights as an instrument for analysis, the new UN resolutions on the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment can serve as tools. Certainly, the documents do not provide concrete guidelines on how to consider the right in real-life situations. However, as mentioned earlier, the resolutions refer to specific groups whose right to a healthy environment is most greatly endangered, and it will serve as a foundation for further legal documents. This may be helpful for assessing the living situation of certain groups. The natural environment becomes part of a human rights assessment. At the UN level, there are also other sources regarding the nexus between human rights and the environment. The UN Committee for the Rights of the Child, for example, aims to publish a General Comment in 2023 on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change. Such General Comments can be important tools for understanding the core elements of the link, states' obligations, and the most affected groups. In German policy papers, some civil society actors have already coined the term "ecological children's rights," referring to the rights of children living today as well as future generations (Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Kinder- und Jugendhilfe 2020). International and national documents such as these can serve social workers as important analytical aids. For social work, it is also crucial to recognize the human rights implications of measures against environmental damage or climate change. The right to land might be threatened by new hydropower plants or wind energy projects. Social workers might support groups at the local level in their efforts to win remuneration according to human rights standards, for example. In countries with higher average incomes, the situation of

people living in poverty might worsen due to higher energy costs and a lack of access to healthy organic food. Social workers can support affected people in their attempts to access their rights and receive compensation for further economic hardship (on the link between climate change and the right to food, see FIAN Deutschland, 2018). In times of climate crisis, social work needs to deal with both sides of the "story": the impact of environmental degradation and the climate crisis on marginalized groups, but also the impact of measures taken against environmental degradation and the effects of global warming.

Finally, human rights can play the role of direct tools or methods for action. Using the human rights protection system directly is a form of advocacy that is also important in the context of the environmental dimension of human rights. One can find several examples of how social work might use or support such methods. Within the European human rights system, six Portuguese children have filed a court case against 33 European states at the European Court of Human Rights, accusing the states of not doing enough against the climate crisis and therefore of violating the rights of children today and in the future. Similar cases have been launched at the national level, for example in Germany and the Republic of Korea (DIMR 2021b). Several children have also filed an official complaint with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. They state that by not taking sufficient action, member states are considerably harming children both within their own territories and across borders. The children argue that this violates their rights to life, health, and cultural participation, as well as the general principle of the primacy of the best interests of the child (OHCHR 2021). Such legal and political actions might be supported or even initiated by social workers together with children and youth. Civil society human rights reports are another method of direct action. For example, the latest civil society report on the situation of children's rights in Germany addresses the impact of climate change on children's right to life (Nation Coalition Germany 2019). Social workers have been involved here, at least indirectly, through non-governmental organizations belonging to the coalition that drafted the report. By formulating and lobbying for ecological children's rights, the report addresses the environmental dimension of human rights. Thus, action against the climate crisis is part of advocacy for children's rights and therefore part of a human rights-based social work practice.

Conclusion

The ecosocial approach is an important new perspective in social work, informing social work ethics and guiding new ways of social work practice. Its basic argument is that looking at the well-being of humans in isolation,

disconnected from the natural environment, is no longer feasible. However, the link to human rights as another important principle of social work ethics and practice is still weak. To understand the link better, this paper asked about the environmental dimension of the current human rights system, focusing on the UN system. The discussion of human rights and the natural environment is still marginal within the human rights discourse in general. The right to a healthy environment has only recently been recognized at the UN level. Nevertheless, the right can be seen as an important foundation for linking human rights and the environment. Apart from that, the environmental dimension is already visible today in a whole set of human rights, groups of rights, and regional human rights treaties.

The article showed some concrete ways in which concern for the natural environment might be integrated into human rights-based social work practice. When one looks at the numerous important roles human rights can play in the social work profession, one can see the integration of the environmental dimension as a refocusing of the human rights approach, rather than as a completely new perspective. The environmental dimension of human rights has always been there, but it has not previously gained the attention of many human rights proponents, either within social work or beyond it. It is now the task of the social work profession to elucidate the importance of the natural environment, not only in its own right but also for the fulfillment of human rights. Regarding the rights of children and youth, one can already find good examples of how the dots can be connected in human rights documents and advocacy work.

The article has presented arguments why human rights-based social work needs to open up and integrate a consideration of the natural environment. These new perspectives come (1) from outside of social work and (2) from inside the profession and discipline. Both are important for understanding the link between human rights and the natural environment, and making it applicable to social work. First, the environmental dimension of human rights, the importance of collective rights, and the interdependencies between human rights and the environment must be recognized. Here, international law, philosophy of law, sustainability sciences, and environmental ethics can inform social work. Second, the human rights paradigm in social work must be linked to the ecosocial paradigm, mainly regarding environmental justice and the principle of sustainability. Here, social work knowledge itself can inform and serve human rights-based social work. Both paradigms share similar ethical foundations, and therefore each can benefit hugely from the other. They both strive for social change, for a more inclusive and sustainable future that acknowledges humans as part of nature and vice versa. Future work will have to concretize these links and discuss their implications for social work practice.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank Aila-Leena Matthies for her valuable comments on a previous draft, and Merl Storr for proofreading the text.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU).

Data Availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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