

Declaration of the Rights of the Venice Lagoon

The Venice Lagoon is a unique ecosystem co-created by nature and humans. We acknowledge the intrinsic value of the Lagoon’s natural and sociocultural entanglements. We advocate for the formal recognition of its distinct character and global significance through the following rights.

Grounded in the emerging paradigm of the rights of nature, building on international precedents, and consistent with evolving environmental governance frameworks, this initiative seeks to advance an integrated model that combines ecological resilience and sociocultural emancipation with eco-democratic participation.

1. The Venice Lagoon as a Legal Subject with Rights

Contemporary environmental challenges demand a shift from anthropocentric governance models based on an outdated nature-culture dualism, and towards rights-based frameworks that value the agency and reciprocal relationships of entangled ecosystems. The Venice Lagoon, both a highly biodiverse landscape and a distinctive cultural landmark, exemplifies the need for new protection schemes that reflect the interdependence of and co-benefits between human and non-human flourishing. We highlight the place’s intrinsic hybridity, its constant change and evolution, and its fragile artificial balance; all of which are at risk today. Our proposal to establish the Rights of the Venice Lagoon draws on the global implementation of the rights of nature.

2. The Rights of Nature as a Conceptual Foundation

The rights of nature are a global movement that promotes the recognition of natural entities – including mountains, rivers, forests, and wetlands – as legal entities with enforceable rights. By moving beyond the instrumentalization of nature towards a governance model championing equal co-existence, it institutionalizes the intrinsic values of a more-than-human world, that is, a world that sees humans as only one part of a bigger, relational network of beings. With more than 600 initiatives in 56 countries across the world, the rights of nature represent a rapid (r)evolution that transforms anthropocentric environmental law into ecocentric ecological law.

3. The Multiple Meanings of the Venice Lagoon

Ecological Exceptionalism
Ecologically, the Venice Lagoon is a highly biodiverse, enclosed saltwater bay in the Northeast of the Italian peninsula. Connected to the Alps through its tributaries and the Adriatic Sea through its inlets, it formed at the end of the last Ice Age and has witnessed constant change ever since. Originally a confluence delta, its current form was engineered through historic interventions in the water flows of the Brenta, Bacchiglione, Piave, and Sile Rivers as well as the more recent MOSE system, a set of mobile gates intended to manage water levels. The result of this process is a unique habitat that hosts human and non-human inhabitants. Nevertheless, significant ecosystemic pressure persists. Ideally, the principle to be applied in any engineering intervention on the lagoon is that of “scomenzera” – from the Venetian word for “begin”, used by the Republic of Venice – according to which the construction of any infrastructure should be carried out slowly,

designing reversible and adaptable interventions based on the dynamic, ecosystemic reaction of the lagoon itself.

Sociocultural Complexity
Socioculturally, the Venice Lagoon is home to an intricate network of political, economic, artistic, and spiritual traditions, each inseparably related to the natural components of the place. Several human settlements are distributed on the shorelines as well as across an archipelago that accounts for around 8% of the area. Its identity has constantly evolved since the first people arrived in prehistoric times. UNESCO recognizes Venice and its lagoon as ‘an archaeological site which still breathes life’. Precisely due to its global appeal, the Lagoon is facing severe crises: challenges include population decline, economic overdependence on tourism and congestion problems due to traffic, privatization and gentrification of public space, insufficient urban and nature conservation funding, and expanding mainland urbanization and industrialisation.

Legal Leverage
Legally, the Venice Lagoon is subject to a set of protection schemes ranging from global to local levels. The area has been a UNESCO Cultural Heritage Site since 1987. A part of the Lagoon, Averte Valley, is recognized as a ‘wetland of international importance’ under the Ramsar Convention, others as ‘Sites of Community Importance and Special Protection Areas’ within Natura 2000. There are multiple additional laws at national, regional, and metropolitan levels, as well as coordination tools including the PALAV (Plan for the Lagoon and Venetian Area); The Venice Lagoon Authority, which consolidates various responsibilities; and the Wetland Contract proposes a governance model involving various stakeholders in the Northern part of the Lagoon. These examples reflect a fragmentation of space and authority. Overlapping mandates, regulatory inefficiencies, and under-resourced governance structures have hindered more systemic protection schemes.

4. The Rights of the Venice Lagoon

Informed and inspired by similar precedents such as the recognition of the Rights of the Mar Menor (Spain, 2022), we advocate for a rights-based governance structure that reflects the Lagoon’s unique hybrid identity shaped by ecological, sociocultural, legal, and other considerations. In the words of Italo Calvino, we want to recognize a place that consists ‘of relationships between the measures of its space and the events of its past’.

As part of an ongoing participatory process among those who, individually or as a group, want to protect the Rights of the Venice Lagoon, we propose the following rights to guide future governance:

1. Right to be Recognized and Represented as a Legal Person before the Law
Reflecting, complementing, and supporting shifts in environmental governance frameworks

2. Right to Ecological and Sociocultural Integrity
Respecting the Lagoon’s natural and sociocultural components as interdependent and inseparable; to protect its unique and changing amphibious identity by allowing adequate response times to any intervention and recognizing its interconnectedness with neighboring and communicating ecosystems

3. Right to Co-Exist, Co-Evolve, and Co-Create
Recognizing the Lagoon as a dynamic system where natural and sociocultural processes influence each other, with specific emphasis on its historical trajectories, present experiences, and future interests

4. Right to Diversity of Cohabitation
Sustaining biodiversity and a wide range of livelihoods and living realities through inclusive governance and planning practices

5. Right to Flow and Maintenance of Healthy Water Cycles
Safeguarding water quality and quantity of existing aquatic, terrestrial, and hybrid structures

6. Right to an Ecologically and Socially Just and Sustainable Economy
Incentivizing a financial system that serves the principles set out in this declaration, against resource-depleting growth and other extractive economic models

7. Right to Participatory Co-Governance
Securing the eco-democratic consideration of both natural and sociocultural interests; to ensure structural attention, dedicated representation, and protection from marginalization within dominant societal, economic, and political frameworks

8. Right to Adaptation, Restoration, Reparation, and Repair
Committing to a just and sustainable ecological and infrastructural regeneration; to acknowledge the lagoon as a living and resilient place whose human transformations must respect the ecosystem’s capacity to adapt

5. Representing and Speaking for the Lagoon
The Venice Lagoon will have a dynamic representation for the purposes of its protection. Its composition reflects the need for local commitment, expert input and independent oversight. The model, inspired by the Mar Menor (Spain, 2022), also proposes specific representations for particular issues and contingencies, so as to support and reflect the dynamic existence of the lagoon and respond appropriately to the specific problems faced.

6. Bringing Rights to Life: Implementation Pathways
Anchored in both ecological necessity and sociocultural responsibility, these rights offer a comprehensive approach to safeguarding one of the world’s most iconic and vulnerable environments. This governance model will need to be accompanied by a set of appropriate institutional reforms and the involvement of local associations.

Rights, understood as a relationship that aims to protect a non-human ecosystem within a human legal system, create duties for the communities that inhabit and govern the lagoon. The rights of nature introduce a novel perspective that does not set humans and ecosystems in opposition but instead reaffirms their inherent coexistence.