

Practising More-than-Human Diplomacy: The Embassy of the North Sea

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Abstract: In this article, we explore what is at stake when nature is recognised and engaged with as a diplomatic subject, drawing on the Embassy of the North Sea as our case study. We argue that such initiatives enact a slow, self-reflexive mode of diplomacy that challenges the anthropocentric and state-centric boundaries of traditional diplomatic practice. At the same time, we show how this approach reveals enduring tensions around representation, authority, and ecological legitimacy, as actors navigate between transformative aspirations and the constraints of existing political structures. We develop a conceptual framework for operationalising what we call the ‘*diplomatisation of nature*’, identifying key dilemmas around institutional integration, recognition, and legitimacy. By combining conceptual innovation with abductively grounded empirical analysis, we contribute to debates on legitimacy, agency, and power in more-than-human diplomacies, while offering a conceptual toolbox for assessing and enabling such diplomatic engagements in practice.

Keywords: interspecies diplomacy; human-animal relations; estrangement; reconciliation ecology; rights of nature; embassy

Introduction

Can we ever diplomatically engage with nature, and if so, what could this more-than-human diplomacy look like? In this article, we explore this possibility and employ the theoretical construct of *estrangement* to assess emerging, unconventional configurations of more-than-human diplomacies. We situate our analysis within contemporary debates in critical diplomatic theory¹, particularly those advocating for an ecological diplomacy that departs from anthropocentric, state-centric, and logocentric paradigms.² As in the Special Issue introduction, we build on earlier work by Der Derian on diplomacy as the ‘mediation of estrangement’ but operating within

¹ See McConnell, F., T. Moreau, and J. Dittmer. “Mimicking State Diplomacy: The Legitimizing Strategies of Unofficial Diplomacies.” *Geoforum* 43 (2012), 804–814; Constantinou, C. M., and S. Opondo. “On Biodiplomacy: Negotiating Life and Plural Modes of Existence.” *Journal of International Political Theory* 17 (3) (2021), 316–336; Stewart, W., and J. Dittmer. “More-than-Human Space Diplomacy: Assembling Internationalism in Orbit.” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 18 (2–3) (2023), 219–252.

² See, Morizot, B. *Wild Diplomacy: Cohabiting with Wolves on a New Ontological Map*, trans. A. Brown (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2022); Fougner, T. “Animals and Diplomacy: On the Prospect for Interspecies Diplomacy.” *International Relations* 37 (3) (2023), 449–474; Constantinou, C. M., and E. Christodoulou. “On Making Peace with Nature: Visions and Challenges Towards an Ecological Diplomacy.” *Review of International Studies* 50 (3) (2024), 579–599.

a non-anthropocentric framework, we view estrangement not as a static condition marking the separation between distinct entities (human/nature), but as a dynamic and reflexive process through which relational boundaries are produced, contested, and potentially transformed.³ A 'double estrangement', in this sense, facilitates both the recognition of difference from others and the *reconfiguration* of the 'stranger within' oneself mediated through encounters with otherness.⁴ This perspective shifts the focus from estrangement as an encounter between distinct actors with fixed identities, to estrangement as an ongoing co-constitution of entities and relations. In the critical spirit of this SI, this shift allows us to explore how the estranging process both constrains and enables the development of new diplomatic imaginaries, actors, and practices when engaging with the more-than-human world.

To this end, we conceptualise what it means for nature to have an ontological status as diplomatic interlocutor through a process we call the 'diplomatising of nature cycle'. Recognising that this is neither easy nor straightforward, we nevertheless posit that Diplomatic Studies (DS) can no longer ignore the existing practices and future potential of more-than-human diplomacies regardless of how 'strange' or 'radical' they seem and of how daunting this task may be. Although over the past decade, there has been progress in putting other-than-human diplomacy into the DS agenda, notably by Leira and Neumann's work on 'beastly diplomacy' and by Fougner's work on interspecies diplomacy, the field remains at an embryonic stage, particularly in terms of moving from theory to *practice*.⁵ Moreover, both studies focus solely on animals/species rather than nature/biotic collectives more broadly. Given that the primary rationale for engaging with animals and diplomacy is 'that animals have consciousness and are sentient'⁶, engaging diplomatically with entities like trees and rivers becomes even more challenging given that scientists do not (yet) have clear markers for the existence of either of these capacities.⁷

More recent work problematises existing claims of reconciliation ecology for their anthropocentric and logocentric approach and calls for new paradigms of 'peacebuilding with nature'.⁸ Building on this approach, our paper attempts to move a step further from theory to practice, heeding calls from scholars for further explorations of how this diplomatic possibility 'can be translated into reality'.⁹ Although we do not claim to resolve the complex and controversial issue of how nature can or should be represented in political or diplomatic forums, our purpose is twofold. First, we attempt

³ Der Derian, J. *On Diplomacy: A Genealogy of Western Estrangement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

⁴ Constantinou, C. M. "On Homo-Diplomacy." *Space and Culture* 9 (4) (2006), 351–364

⁵ Leira, H., and I. B. Neumann. "The Beast and the Sovereign: Toward a Posthuman Understanding of International Politics." *Review of International Studies* 42 (1) (2016), 1–24; Fougner, T. "Animals and Diplomacy: On the Prospect for Interspecies Diplomacy." *International Relations* 37 (3) (2023), 449–474.

⁶ Fougner, 'Animals', 468.

⁷ One notable difference between these two works is that whereas the former 'prefers not to go the full post-anthropocentric route' and dismisses the idea of communicating with them because 'even if a lion could speak, we would hardly know what it said' (p.358; p.338), the latter explicitly calls for an engagement with animals as diplomatic actors in their own right.

⁸ Constantinou & Christodoulou, 'Making Peace'.

⁹ Fougner, 'Animals', 468.

to develop an agile conceptual framework for such a diplomatic possibility to materialise i.e. we gauge what this diplomatisation could look like in practice in the near future and attempt an operationalisation of reconciliation ecology through the 'diplomatisation of Nature' cycle (DoN cycle). This conceptual framework is useful as a toolbox for mapping and assessing the various ways such diplomacy can be operationalised as well as for capturing the challenges faced by organisations that attempt to engage in diplomatic practices on behalf of more-than-human entities. Second, we provide an empirical analysis of an organisation, created specifically for this type of diplomatic engagement. To achieve this, we adopted an abductive approach, iteratively moving between theoretical concepts and empirical insights from the case study to refine the DoN cycle.

Empirically, we focus on the Embassy of the North Sea, a Netherlands-based grassroots initiative established in 2018, which employs a phased methodology—listening, speaking, and negotiating—with the North Sea. Our analysis draws on oral and written correspondence with founding members of the organisation, systematic examination of the Embassy's website and its featured diplomatic practices, and close reading of their primary publications, including *The Voice of the North Sea* (2020) and *Exercises in Watery Politics* (2023). We identify the representational techniques employed by the embassy and evaluate the extent to which they incorporate the different conceptual elements of the DoN cycle.

Based on the premise that none of these creative and novel forms of ecological diplomacy are - or can ever be - a panacea, we advance three main arguments. First, we contend that the Embassy of the North Sea enacts a mode of diplomacy that challenges the *ontological boundaries* of conventional diplomatic practice (going beyond states and beyond humans). Second, we argue that this mode of engagement reveals constitutive tensions between representation and operational authority in speaking on behalf of non-human entities. Initiatives that attempt to operationalise the diplomatisation of nature inevitably operate within a *hybrid* space which entails constant navigation and negotiation between traditional and more radical elements of politics and diplomacy. They must constantly navigate a hybrid terrain: balancing critique of traditional structures with the need to operate within them to exert influence. Thirdly, and related to the above is the issue of *ecological legitimacy*, legal, political and social¹⁰: the ability to be recognised - not just recognising nature but recognising certain groups of humans as legitimate diplomatic interlocutors of nature - and gain legitimacy is of particular significance if these initiatives are to exert meaningful influence. Our study shows that one limitation of these initiatives is that they do not hold recognised political authority and this emerges as one of the core difficulties of diplomatising nature vis-a-vis global environmental governance: initiatives risk being absorbed into symbolism, tokenism, or even spectacle, if not accompanied by institutional pathways for change.

¹⁰ See Bernstein, S. "Legitimacy in Global Environmental Governance." *Journal of International Law and International Relations* (1–2) (2005), 139–166.

Ultimately, these diplomatic spaces become sites of contestation of legitimacy in manifold ways. Legitimacy is used in this paper not just in terms of who has the right to speak on behalf of nature/biotic collectives. Even if there is an institutional mechanism with recognised interlocutors, what type of authority lends it/them support and what is ultimately their specific function?.¹¹ How will these processes be conducted? How will decisions be taken and how will we know if these are sufficient or beneficial for more-than-human collectives? Ecological legitimacy entails a rethinking of the natural world not merely as an object of management but as an entity whose interests merit representation and care. Just as traditional principles of global political legitimacy define when a political authority may impose rules and policies and assign costs for noncompliance, so too can ecological legitimacy determine under what conditions biotic collectives are recognized as a stakeholder, influencing the legal and policy decisions that affect ecosystems. In other words, it establishes the criteria under which human intervention - particularly within the framework of Earth jurisprudence - is considered legitimate, and provides a basis for holding humans accountable, including the recognition of harm and the pursuit of reparative or restorative justice for nature.

By foregrounding these dynamics, dilemmas and tensions, our study contributes to broader debates about the recognition and transformation of agency in ecological diplomacies. We begin by examining contemporary calls for multispecies representation in diplomacy, before turning to theoretical debates around estrangement as a condition that enables recognition and relational reconfiguration between human and non-human actors. We then present the one-plus-five stages of the DoN cycle before we apply it to the case study of the Embassy of the North Sea.

The Diplomatization of Nature: Revisiting Estrangement

The recognition of nature as an active agent does not represent a radical departure from human practice; such cosmologies have long characterized most of humanity's relationship with the non-human world. As anthropologist Philippe Descola has shown, the Western naturalist ontology that sharply separates nature from culture represents a historical anomaly rather than a universal human condition. Indigenous and non-Western societies have consistently operated within diplomatic frameworks that recognize the agency and personhood of rivers, forests, animals, and more-than-human beings.¹²

The Embassy of the North Sea, therefore, needs to be situated within a wider genealogy of efforts to bring nature into diplomatic practice. Recent precedents include the Cochabamba Declaration (2010), which called for a Universal Declaration of the Rights of Nature, as well as national legal initiatives in Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2010) that granted constitutional and statutory personhood to ecosystems. Similar

¹¹ See Erman, E. "A Function-Sensitive Approach to the Political Legitimacy of Global Governance." *British Journal of Political Science* 50 (3) (2020), 1001–1024.

¹² Descola, P. *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

developments include New Zealand's recognition of the Whanganui River as a legal person (2017) and Spain's granting of legal personality to the Mar Menor lagoon (2022). These initiatives link to broader Rights of Nature debates, animal rights discourses, and emerging work on planetary diplomacy, all of which seek to reimagine relations between humans and more-than-human actors.

The early conservationists pioneered a science-based protection of nature at an ambitious international scale and acted as trustees and, if only metaphorically in the beginning, as *Nature's Diplomats*. As explained by De Bont, who coined the term 'like diplomats, they assumed a mandate to talk on behalf of a particular entity', although 'unlike for professional diplomats, this entity was not primarily the nation-state but rather global nature, an entity lacking representatives up till then'. In this regard, these early advocates of the conservation movement adopted 'the demeanor and habitus of professional diplomats', through their participation in international conferences, committees and engagements with official state diplomats and other stakeholders, whilst performing an assumed mandate that reflected and legitimated their activity.¹³ However, in the 21st century, non-anthropocentric, materialist and relational approaches have advocated for new typologies of diplomacy: 'animal', 'wild', 'interspecies' or 'more-than-human' ones.¹⁴ These new typologies diplomatize nature in quite different ontological terms than previous attempts. Specifically, they recognize nature as a legitimate subject, not merely as an object of scientific or diplomatic interest.

These new typologies envision entities/species/biotic communities 'within' nature as significant others and worthy interlocutors, i.e. worthy to be 'listened to' and 'understood' in their own terms. They view vast entities like the North Sea as biotic collectives, defined as ever-evolving communities 'of living organisms that interact with each other – cooperatively, antagonistically, or symbiotically – in a particular geographic zone'.¹⁵ This underscores the major challenge that this new frontier in diplomacy faces when engaging the complexity of nature; that is, the challenge of not only representing and speaking for 'entities' but ultimately also representing and speaking for 'relations' that ought to be protected, enhanced or revised in different geopolitical contexts.¹⁶ It follows from the important work of Stengers and Latour acknowledging the diversity and alternative worlds created through the human-nature encounter, entangled worlds and relationships that need to be constantly and laboriously engaged with and mediated before one begins to negotiate the terms of coexistence between and across species.¹⁷ The diplomatization of nature bears, in

¹³ De Bont, R. *Nature's Diplomats: Science, Animals, and the Making of Modern Diplomacy* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021) 5-6.

¹⁴ See e.g. Cornago, N. *Plural Diplomacies: Normative Predicaments and Functional Imperatives* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Dittmer, J. "Theorizing a More-than-Human Diplomacy: Assembling the British Foreign Office, 1839–1874." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 11 (1) (2016), 78–104; Morizot, *Wild Diplomacy*; Fougner, 'Animals'; Constantinou & Christodoulou, 'Making Peace'.

¹⁵ Constantinou and Christodoulou, 'Making Peace', 295

¹⁶ Morizot, *Wild Diplomacy*.

¹⁷ Stengers, I. *Cosmopolitics II* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2011); Latour, B. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

this respect, less affinity with global environmental governance and more with enhancing modalities of being and coexistence.

Key to implementing a deeper and holistic diplomatization of nature is a reappreciation of how estrangement functions. Estrangement helps us to reconceptualize the problematic of human-nonhuman relations and is not an attempt to impose a prescriptive mode of analysis. The introduction to this SI provides an extensive exposition of the need to reengage estrangement in order to open up further the field of diplomacy, which we endorse. Indeed, the systematization of ‘the mediation of estrangement’ in different historical periods has been linked to alternative formations of diplomatic practice that followed on religious, social, civilizational and national divides¹⁸. From the advent of critical diplomatic studies, however, there has been a confluence of ‘alienation’ and ‘estrangement’, where the terms have been used interchangeably. This has led to focusing more on the repressive, oppressive and overall negative aspects of othering, often associated with the former vis-a-vis the reflexive otherness and self-discovery often associated with the latter. In the process, what has been often missed is that ‘the strange’ serves as a condition for the recognition of distinct entities as separate from others. But also, as a form of reflexive, *internal recognition of estrangement or auto-otherness (αυτοαλλοίωσης, ξένωσης)*, ‘the stranger within’, which has been linked to the freedom and ability to revisit the self, to imagine and institute it otherwise, and thus as a precondition for the pursuit of autonomy.¹⁹

Nature can serve as *strange and other*, but also as an all-encompassing *self*. The human alienation from nature is founded upon the onto-theological inheritance of western modernity and the long history of the nature/culture distinction. By contrast, the appreciation of human life as inseparable from nature follows the animist non-western epistemologies and their pluriversal understanding of nature, e.g. as Pachamama and as human-animal continuum. The diplomatization of nature in the holistic form discussed above concerns itself *both* with: (a) the ‘separate entities’, the forms of life that face specific existential threats and whose conditions of living are recognized as worthy of enhancement, and (b) the ‘relational ontologies’, the interdependencies and techniques of coexistence that are necessary for conviviality to occur and which, notably, revise and transform individual entities in the process.²⁰ From this perspective, estrangement should be reconceptualized not as a fixed condition or a traditional binary exercise (self/other, human/nonhuman²¹) but as an effect of diplomacy’s persistent and diachronic reconfiguration of relations. The diplomatization of nature becomes *less about understanding and managing divides between estranged entities and more about mapping and navigating networks of actors and their relational interdependencies* which constantly shift and are

¹⁸ See Introduction to SI and Der Derian 1987

¹⁹ Castoriadis, C. *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

²⁰ Constantinou and Opondo 2021, ‘On biodiplomacy’.

²¹ This biological interconnectedness is supported by research showing that humans are composed of and dependent upon other life forms that have become integrated through evolutionary transitions. See Maynard S. J. and E. Szathmáry “The Major Evolutionary Transitions.” *Nature* 374, no. 6519 (1995): 227-232.

reprocessed. Thus, constantly shifting from unfamiliar to less familiar to intimate otherness, from smaller and distinct to larger and interconnected selves, and vice versa.

To that extent, we suggest that anyone claiming to engage in interspecies or more-than-human diplomacy enters a cycle of diplomatization that needs to be adequately understood by the participants. We conceive this DoN cycle to operationalize in one-plus-five stages. In practice, participants enter the cycle – fully or partly to different degrees – depending on (a) the diplomatic mechanisms and methods that they use and (b) the commitment that they display to the different stages of the cycle.

Before outlining the DoN cycle, it is important to recognize that the model inevitably begins from human initiative and risks reinforcing anthropocentric presuppositions; our aim is therefore not to deny this limitation but to foreground it, and to consider how practices of mediating estrangement might work to mitigate this imbalance, for example through distributed agency, humility, and reflexive readjustments (e.g. stage 5). We view this cycle as a heuristic tool—imperfect but necessary—that starts from where we are, builds on the positives of anthropocentric diplomatic culture while aspiring to go beyond it, and serves as a first step toward a conversation that has so far been largely absent.

The DoN cycle is important because it can serve as a *proto-guide* for more-than-human diplomatic practice - establishing a shared sequence/structure for recognising, engaging with, and negotiating with and for non-human entities. Historically, in traditional diplomacy, the emergence of protocol (and other diplomatic ceremonial) was critical: evolving from repeated, often informal encounters into codified international norms that shaped expectations and procedures.²² They facilitated coexistence, and ensured respect, legitimacy and some form of predictability. Similarly, this cycle (although not a protocol as such) can serve as a conceptual framework for emerging forms of more-than-human diplomacies - a toolbox for analysing the various ways such diplomacy can be operationalised as well as for identifying the challenges faced by organisations that practice it.

The one-plus-five stages of the DoN cycle are:

0. Pre-Diplomatic or Proto-Diplomatic. Shifting perspective from Nature as Object to Nature as Subject. In effect, it entails a conscious recognition that nature is not a passive resource or backdrop for human activity, but that it is active and agential, voice-bearing, and co-producer not only of physical reality but also of the social reality within which all earthlings live and operate.

1. Mapping/Identifying Significant Others – Recognizing entanglements between humans and nonhumans, in places where nature and politics are coproduced.

²² Sowerby, T. A. "Early Modern Diplomatic History." *History Compass* 14, (9) (2016): 441–56

Specifically, looking at places where nonhuman beings with needs and interests shape and are shaped by human lives. This extends not only to individual beings but to ecosystems and biotic communities that ought to be spatially mapped but also understood in terms of the power relations they produce, be it in sites of contestation or wherever nature influences politics. This recognizes the existence of a plurality of autonomous yet entangled entities that need to be *horizontally engaged* on an equitable footing rather than merely being governed. Being Significant Others renders them crucial interlocutors and worthy of diplomatic attention, time and consideration.

2. Listening/Understanding Significant Others – Recognizing the distinct presence of Nature presents a challenge for human comprehension but also for ethical engagement with nature. It suspends human mastery and demands attention without domination and listening across difference. It entails learning to decode nature's 'strange' languages and seeking to understand nonhuman subjects in their own terms, i.e. listening to oceans, elephants, whales etc. and decoding language and behaviour. The methodology may or may not include the use of technology and AI, but it is – ideally - an embodied form of relationality; it should represent an act of emancipation rather than anthropocentric instrumentalization and manipulation. Decoding the languages of nature can, of course, end up not being diplomatic but only a purely scientific endeavour in the name of technological and scientific progress. This stage is conducted to better understand nature's needs and interests, the output of which will inform the later stages of diplomacy.

3. Accrediting Representatives – Recognizing certain entities or institutions as legitimate voices or advocates acting on behalf of nonhuman significant others in specific legal and diplomatic settings. It includes humans but also goes beyond the human monopoly on agency, i.e. beyond guardianship models and environmental ombudspersons. The transparency of the process and the ethical responsibilities involved are, of course, paramount. Equally critical is the question of how biotic collectives are recognised and represented without silencing alternative voices and positions. There should also be recognition of irresolvable value conflicts and of how attempts to mediate them raise anew the issue of incomplete representation and the need to remain open to new representatives where necessary to address existential concerns. These concerns are intimately tied to the broader issue of legitimacy - namely, who is authorised to speak on behalf of more-than-human entities, and under what conditions such forms of representation can be considered just, accountable, and inclusive.

4. Negotiating Terms of Coexistence – Moving beyond domination and exploitation to modes of mutual adaptation and fostering deeper relationships across species. For example, finding ways of sharing space, accepting tension, mediating competing needs and interests, and enhancing interdependencies. This negotiation process also entails defining boundaries of where and how humans intervene, e.g. by attending to invasive species, boundaries that also allow landscapes to self-organize through

rewilding and passive restoration. In addition, mediating competing needs through human-wildlife corridors that allow ecologies to persist, optimally and pragmatically, even if imperfectly.

5. Monitoring and Readjusting the Terms of Coexistence – Diplomacy is an ongoing and adaptive process and coexistence requires continuous ethical and ecological attentiveness. It requires observation and tracking of interactions, how ecosystems are responding, whether species are thriving or declining, and how far vulnerability or resilience increase. In this respect, interspecies relationships can be evaluated and reconfigured, adapting conservation strategies, revising boundaries and modifying access rules. All in all, critical evaluation and responsive adaptation can lead to ethical, reciprocal and resilient forms of coexistence. Again, the issue which emerges is how best to interpret the responses of nature.²³



Figure 1: Stages of the 'diplomatisation of nature' cycle

²³ Although we have identified these different stages, it is important not to see them as mutually exclusive which is also why we have depicted them as part of an ongoing dynamic cycle. For example, we believe that the act of listening in order to understand nature's needs in Stage 2, is not a static process but is and should be an ongoing one that can be readjusted as part of Stage 5 and so on.

Evidence from the Embassy of the North Sea

Origins and Mission of the Embassy of the North Sea

The Embassy of the North Sea (ENS) was founded in 2018 with the fundamental belief that the North Sea possesses self-ownership and should be recognized as an autonomous entity with its own rights and agency. This initiative is linked (but not entirely in agreement) with the broader Rights of Nature movement, which advocates for ecosystems and natural entities to be legally acknowledged as subjects with rights rather than objects of human governance and exploitation. The Embassy challenges traditional anthropocentric perspectives by promoting a more reciprocal and inclusive approach to marine ecosystems. Instead of viewing the North Sea purely as a resource, it seeks to establish it as a diplomatic actor with its own voice and agency in environmental decision-making processes. Its vision is to: 'emancipate the North Sea in all its diversity as a fully-fledged political player, via collectives of humans and non-humans'.²⁴

At the core of the Embassy's work are three primary objectives/methods which it has chronologically separated into three distinct phases running up to 2030 – described as 'Route 2030': Phase 1 (2018-2022); Phase 2 (2023-2026) and Phase 3 (2027-30).²⁵ First, it focuses on *listening* to the sea through interdisciplinary methods that combine scientific research, artistic interventions, and legal advocacy to interpret its presence and understand its ecological needs. They argue that they listen to the sea in order to effectively represent it and they do so with their 'eyes, ears and nose, with science, with [their] imagination and with [their] inherent sense of empathy'.²⁶

Second, the Embassy seeks to use the findings of phase one - which have enabled the North Sea to be 'seen, heard, felt, smelled and tasted in a new form of political activism' - in order to *speak* on its behalf i.e. to act as a representative for the North Sea in cultural, legal, and political spaces.²⁷ The aim of this phase is to give a voice to the North Sea, so that its interests are adequately represented in diplomatic spaces and processes.

In its third phase, the Embassy aims to be *negotiating* on behalf of the North Sea with the aim of fostering coexistence between human activities and marine life and advocating for new governance frameworks that respect both human and ecological interests. By 2030, the Embassy envisions achieving formal recognition of the North Sea as a political entity, potentially securing legal personhood - an ambition that aligns with global precedents such as the recognition of the Whanganui River in New Zealand

²⁴ The ENS grew out of the 'Parliament of Things', a 2015 Dutch initiative inspired by Bruno Latour that laid the conceptual groundwork for including nonhuman entities in political decision-making. Embassy of the North Sea (ENS): 'Mission Statement'. Available at: <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/over/#undefined>

²⁵ ENS, 'Route 2030'. Available at: <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/route-2030/>

²⁶ ENS, 'Research'. Past version of website accessed using Wayback Machine: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210624022559/https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/projecten/>

²⁷ ENS, 'Route 2030'.

in 2017 or the pioneering case of the Vilcabamba River in Ecuador in 2011. Given the complexity and ambitious nature of the task, it may not be surprising that the Embassy does not provide specific methodologies in place for how exactly it will negotiate and achieve impact, although it does have several experimental projects some of which already touch on this third phase.

Before delving into further analysis and assessment of the practices of the ENS, it is important to note that the organisation itself is now officially within phase two of their 2030 path. Therefore, any assessment of the extent to which the ENS follows the DoN cycle (particularly stages 4 and 5 on negotiation and monitoring) needs to take into account the fact that the negotiation stage will formally begin in 2027. On the one hand, this may be seen not only as a deliberate but also a right choice given their philosophical underpinnings emerging from our analysis of their work: of taking things slow, of not being sucked up into the fast-paced and overhyped world of AI, of being humble and nature-centric, of taking the time to perform (and reflect on) difficult and innovative tasks such as embodied bottom-up mediation rather than impose anthropocentric ideas from above.

On the other hand, this slower and gradual approach also has its downsides. Given the urgency of the environmental degradation as well as the fact that we live in a fast-paced world where speed and efficiency is valorised, the fact that the crucial stage of negotiation and implementation is left to start almost a decade after the commencement of the project can be seen as a weakness. This slow pace is something intentional which they have received criticism for as they admit:

‘People often say to us, ‘Don’t you have a sense of urgency?’ And I always say, no, that’s not possible. You can’t rush this. It’s unfortunate that it’s now five minutes to midnight, and we had hoped it wouldn’t be that way, but that’s the situation. If we don’t take the time, we can’t do our work. A paradigm shift is needed, a different way of thinking and listening.’²⁸

This arguably reflects a broader theme in ecological and speculative diplomacy: that open-endedness and unpredictability are part of the process, and what matters is creating the conditions for something new and meaningful to emerge.

Diplomatic Practices and Mediations of Estrangement by the ENS

From our analysis, it becomes evident that the Embassy of the North Sea (ENS) aligns closely with several stages of the DoN cycle, while also revealing the tensions, dilemmas and difficulties inherent in the process. At the **proto-diplomatic stage (0)**, the Embassy explicitly challenges the framing of nature as a passive object, advancing a relational ontology that treats the North Sea and its inhabitants as agentive, voice-bearing participants. This philosophical positioning underpins its efforts to map and

²⁸ ENS. *Exercises in Watery Politics* (Amsterdam: Embassy of the North Sea, 2023).

identify significant others - from sea trout and mussels to underwater currents and soundscapes - focusing attention on the interdependencies as well as power asymmetries between humans and marine ecosystems. They acknowledge that these actors - referred to also as 'natural participants'- must be engaged with respectfully and equitably 'as subjects with their own lives, interests and stories', rather than simply managed or governed:

*'From the goodness of our hearts, we can wish porpoise, eel, yellow booger, seaweed, beach grass, seahorse, algae or plankton well. However, in our current political and legal system, we are unable to properly represent their interests. We lack images, words, laws and practices for an 'ecological politics': a society in which the North Sea with all its inhabitants is a fullfledged political player.'*²⁹

By treating these more-than-human entities as significant others, the Embassy positions them as *deserving* of diplomatic attention and meaningful involvement in shaping the terms of coexistence (**Stage 1**). Moreover, both from their self-descriptions but also from the ways in which they conduct their projects, it also becomes clear that the ENS clearly follows a *non-state-centric* perspective focusing on the lack of accountability for the harmful acts performed upon nature and presenting it as a democratic deficit to be remedied:

*'Today's most pressing ecological issues **transcend** borders and species, yet we mostly approach them from the nation-state perspective. For example, the largest mass extinction has been going on for 65 million years, but **which country feels responsible for it?** Countries are only accountable to one another, and their politicians only accountable to their electors, rather than to all life under threat. The Embassy of the North Sea highlights this **crisis in our democracies**.'*³⁰

Our analysis also revealed that the ENS is closely aligned with **Stage 2** of the DoN cycle which involves listening to and understanding significant others with close attention and without intentional or unintentional domination, regardless of how 'strange' their languages may seem. In their publication (2018–2023) for the first phase, of 'Listening', the organisation documents its 'endeavors and explorations' (note the reflexive, flexible nature of the wording) diverse methods of listening to the sea, combining artistic, scientific, and legal approaches to explore human–sea relationships. The Embassy innovated various forms of embodied and sensory engagement with a clear commitment to understanding without dominating or imposing. Key methods of their listening case-studies include embodied fieldwork in coastal and underwater environments, hydrophones, speculative design, sound-based research into underwater noise pollution, multispecies studies such as the long-term focus on eels and marine ecosystems in the Dutch delta, interviews and

²⁹ ENS, Exercises, 2

³⁰ ENS, 'About'. Available at: <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/over/> , emphasis added.

publications. The Audement³¹ project, for example, creates physical and acoustic spaces for multispecies listening, while contributions from artists, legal scholars and designers explore listening as a political and ethical act.

The ENS, then clearly adopts bottom-up and decolonial methods to listen to nature. Although they are not against technology and they do use it e.g. in underwater recordings, they warn of the dangers of a naive technological optimism and expressed to us their intense scepticism regarding initiatives which claim to be using AI to “give” nature a voice.³² Importantly, they acknowledge that listening to nature may require a different kind of listening than the one we are accustomed to and that we should not impose our own way of listening. This includes

*‘listening to things that you cannot hear physiologically or that your ears are not focused on. If we assert that we should be accountable to a non-human political actor, then that means **listening to it in its own seaworthy way**. It is not like us; we are not a vast body of saltwater’.*³³

Overall, for the ENS, listening was not just practiced in a myriad of ways, but their commitment to it is undeniably very strong despite the challenges. Listening, they claim, is extremely valuable as a way of building embodied knowledge, forming arguments, and connecting with a range of stakeholders.

However, the picture becomes more blurred when it comes to Stages 3-5 of the DoN cycle. For example, for **Stage 3** one can infer that the members of the Embassy have recognised and self-appointed themselves as credible representatives of the North Sea. This is not done uncritically or without reluctance, however, it seems that this is the only solution that they see at the current moment and that they feel it is their responsibility as humans to try to remedy the injustice. Citing Eva Meijer, one of the members of the ENS explains their position (and motivation):

*‘If you don’t listen, you don’t have things on your radar, and that also suggests culpability...Refusing to listen is negligence or a deliberate act and is therefore political...We believe that you have a responsibility to seek out the voices that are subjected to injustice and may not be able to speak clearly’.*³⁴

³¹ The Audement was initiated to create a new kind of political space—one designed not for debate among humans, but for attentive listening to nonhuman voices such as water, sand, fish, and birds. The term “Audement” is a play on “parliament,” emphasizing auditory engagement over speech and is part of the ENS’s broader mission to include nonhuman entities in democratic processes. It was developed in collaboration with scenographers, anthropologists, lawyers, and sound artists.

³² See here <https://demo.emissaryofgaia.com/>

³³ ENS, Exercises, 3, emphasis added.

³⁴ ENS, Exercises, 3.

It is here that they seem to agree with the rights of nature movement. Despite their critique of it (that it is rooted in capitalist and imperialist Western legal frameworks of property, limiting truly transformative ecological politics) they do see it as having a practical value for more effective environmental protection, particularly emphasising the benefit of lawsuits which can allow nature to recover. Nevertheless, the issue of legitimacy, and of who decides who is credible as a representative, let alone the process of accreditation that involves acceptance by other stakeholders in terms of having legitimate authority to represent the North Sea, remains something not adequately discussed. It seems the ENS finds the question itself problematic to begin with and as one rooted in Western understandings of epistemology.

In terms of Stages 4 and 5, again these represent a more complex picture. ‘Negotiating Terms of Coexistence’ - **Stage 4** - is clearly present in terms of their commitment, but in terms of the mechanisms used and the impact they have, it is questionable. Negotiation remains at an embryonic stage and once more aligned with performative acts (not surprising, given the difficulty of the task at hand). They see theatre as politics and politics as overtly theatrical and ‘performance’ is an important part of their toolbox as well as a word they use often. The Embassy has nevertheless experimented with projects such as the Audement (a word play on the word parliament) or the Moot Court (discussed below in more detail). The Moot Court was used as a performative and pedagogical tool to raise awareness about the legal and ethical challenges of representing more-than-human entities like the North Sea. So in terms of Stage 4, it is safe to say that participation in the cycle remains at a symbolic, though not tokenistic, level.

Stage 5 - monitoring and readjustment - is also not institutionalized, particularly as the project is still only in its middle phase but arguably also because this reflection is a philosophical underpinning that cuts across every project of the ENS. The Embassy’s iterative, reflective process and ongoing projects suggest a commitment to adaptive learning and long-term ecological attentiveness, even as it grapples with how best to interpret the sea’s responses.

As mentioned above, there are several representational techniques employed by the Embassy, which include experimental legal argumentation regarding the rights of nature, artistic and sensory methodologies, research, political activism and the construction of speculative institutional forms. The rest of the section presents three of its initiatives, showing the diversity of diplomatisation of nature and activities of estrangement.

a. The Diplomatic Suitcase

The Diplomatic Suitcase is a mobile exhibition developed by the Embassy of the North Sea in partnership with TBA21–Academy. It is designed as both a symbolic and physical representation of transnational water diplomacy. The initiative emerged in 2023 as part of the Confluence of European Water Bodies project. The exhibition

seeks to deepen public and institutional understanding of the rights of nature and how bodies of water can be politically represented in Europe. By traveling across different locations, the Diplomatic Suitcase provides a platform to amplify the voices of water bodies, highlight the environmental threats they face, and encourage cross-border dialogue on water governance.

The exhibition brings together scientific research, artistic expression, and legal advocacy, illustrating the pressures these ecosystems face, such as pollution from agriculture and infrastructural developments like dams. The suitcase itself unfolds into an immersive display featuring text panels, photographs, sound recordings, and a 13-minute film documenting the 2023 Confluence of European Water Bodies. It also contains symbolic artifacts collected during environmental ceremonies, including a seahorse bone from the Mar Menor and a ceramic otolith from the North Sea each representing ecological struggles linked to different aquatic environments.

At each location it visits, the Diplomatic Suitcase is accompanied by public programmes and workshops designed to trigger discussion about local water bodies and their roles in governance. The project's scope is thus not limited to the North Sea or to local contexts, but intentionally mobile and transboundary. These activities invite the public, policymakers, and environmental advocates to reconsider how water is represented in legal and political frameworks.

The Diplomatic Suitcase project reflects the early stages of the diplomatisation cycle, beginning at the pre-diplomatic stage (0) through its symbolic recognition of nature as a political actor. The use of a suitcase -a classic symbol of state diplomacy-filled with materials, stories, and objects representing non-human entities, marks a discursive and aesthetic shift from nature as object to *subject*. In terms of Stage 1, the suitcase implicitly maps 'significant others' through curated representations of marine life, human-made artifacts, and natural materials, signalling a recognition of their diplomatic relevance and relational agency. It also reaches Stage 2 as it at least tries to understand the needs and interests of the North Sea. However, the project stops short of the rest of the stages. While it evokes questions of representation (Stage 3) and proposes symbolic stand-ins for non-human voices, it does not fully move toward negotiating coexistence (Stage 4) or systematically integrating feedback and readjustment (Stage 5). As a result, the Diplomatic Suitcase functions more as a performative and provocative gesture rather than a mechanism for sustained more-than-human diplomacies. It is best seen as a conceptual and symbolic entry point that enriches public understanding without offering procedural or institutional follow-through.

b. A Voice for the Eel

A Voice for the Eel is arguably a more advanced initiative in terms of engaging the DoN cycle. It begins with Stage 0, explicitly treating the eel as a mysterious and

autonomous entity. Through the identification of the eel as a subject of concern (Stage 1) and an array of methods - embodied installations, ethnographic portraits, sound recordings and public exhibitions - it pursues deep, multisensory listening and understanding. The interactive obstacle course created by artists Sheng-Wen Lo and Yi-Fei Cheng invites participants to empathise across species boundaries by navigating an environment intentionally not designed for human bodies or sensibilities. It challenges anthropocentric assumptions and prompts the question: what might it feel like to inhabit the world as an eel, with its own struggles, disorientations, and migrations? The research question posed by the project: 'but what is it like to be an eel?' clearly fits within Stage 2 of the DoN cycle.

The project also approaches Stage 3, with researchers, artists, and “eel interpreters” acting as representatives who mediate the eel’s needs and perspectives into public discourse.³⁵ The participatory and interdisciplinary setup even hints at early experimentation with coexistence frameworks (Stage 4), such as breaking down ecological barriers in urban design to support eel migration. Yet, institutional reflection and feedback mechanisms (Stage 5) are not realised. Overall, this project stands out as a model of more-than-human diplomacy in progress, integrating ecological, cultural, and justice concerns.

c. Moot Court

Another project is that of the Moot Court, which touches on all stages, albeit not always in an advanced form. In October 2022, the Embassy of the North Sea brought together the insights and materials gathered during since 2018 (listening phase) in a moot court held at the Peace Palace in The Hague, a place that hosts the International Court of Justice, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, and the Hague Academy of International Law, making it a central institution for international legal and diplomatic affairs. This performative legal exercise served as a critical intervention, using the format of a legal proceeding to argue that the Dutch state has failed to sufficiently represent the ecological interests of the North Sea. By presenting artistic, scientific, and philosophical evidence (which it gathered in its listening phase), the Embassy highlighted the representational gaps in current legal and political systems when it comes to more-than-human actors. Among the evidence presented were underwater reef recordings from *Ghost Reef* project, which bridges marine ecology and art to make visible and audible the lives of overlooked reef ecosystems, and sound material from the *Underwater Noise* case study, which exposed the harmful effects of anthropogenic sound (ships, drilling) on marine life, including disorientation and harm to species such as dolphins and polyps. These projects exemplify how artistic-scientific collaborations can render the otherwise inaccessible experiences of nonhuman entities both perceptible and politically legible. By including them in the

³⁵ See <https://www.embassyofthenorthsea.com/f-eel-the-life-of-an-eel-by-sheng-wen-lo-and-yi-fei-chen/>

Moot Court, the Embassy not only amplified the voices of silenced marine communities but also demonstrated the urgency of addressing underwater noise pollution as a pressing diplomatic and ecological concern.

The case centered on why the North Sea lacks sufficient legal representation in the Netherlands and aimed to explore how non-human entities might be represented in legal contexts. Human and non-human witnesses testified to the inadequacy of current laws in addressing the sea's interests. The Dutch state was represented by Thomas Rammelt (a lawyer), while Dr. Laura Burgers (a legal scholar) spoke on behalf of the Embassy, presenting its work as symbolic 'evidence'. Judge Isabella Brand concluded with reflections on how such claims might be addressed within existing legal frameworks. Although the session produced no binding verdict, it served as an open-ended intellectual and diplomatic exercise - arguably one of the most advanced initiatives engaging the full diplomatization cycle.

Becoming Diplomatic, Differently: Challenges and Dilemmas

The Embassy of the North Sea offers a compelling example of how ecological diplomacy can be reimagined beyond state-centric and anthropocentric frameworks. Its slow, reflective, and multisensory approach contrasts with technophile, fast-paced, and predetermined approaches that often assume rather than inquire into nature's needs. Yet, the Embassy also illustrates the inherent tensions in representing nonhuman entities - negotiating between radical critique and the strategic use of existing legal and political systems. This hybrid position brings to the fore the challenge of ecological legitimacy: not only in recognising nature as a subject, but also in establishing the credibility of those who speak on its behalf.

In terms of the issue of anthropocentrism and legitimacy, the ENS seems to be aware of the challenges involved and seeks to find creative ways to deal with these, showing how encounters with internal and external estrangement can potentially transform the self. As a founding member reflected:

*'We were afraid of becoming paternalistic and projecting too much onto the non-human entities. I often thought to myself, who am I to assume what a non-human experiences? But along the way, I realized that we are just as much a part of the world of non-humans....As a human, you are part of a circular system, and therefore, you have the right to make statements about it.'*³⁶

We therefore witness the mediation workings of double estrangement: the diplomatisation of nature is thus mirrored by a subtle *naturalisation* of the human. Engaging with more-than-human worlds often leads to a sense of estrangement from dominant forms of human society, not only nature. From this perspective, the human

³⁶ ENS, Exercises, 3, emphasis added.

diplomat reconstitutes the biotic collective s/he represents through the interpretive act and the creation of new narratives:

*'I think we are just now starting to learn what speaking will be like. A clear lesson is that listening doesn't stop, but also that listening and speaking may be more similar than we initially thought. Because we listened, the reef spoke, and because we listened, artist Marinus van Dijke spoke.'*³⁷

The passage above highlights that listening should not be a passive act but a relational process that can invite both human and nonhuman voices to emerge. By attentively engaging with the 'strange other' the listener not only makes space for others to speak, but is also transformed in the process. Listening expands the boundaries of who or what is considered a valid interlocutor and estrangement becomes a productive force that allows the self to question, reconfigure, and reimagine itself. To be sure, any attempt to capture the "voice" of the North Sea must acknowledge its anthropogenic transformation through shipping, extraction, pollution, and wind farms, all of which shape its conditions of resilience and vulnerability. The ENS displays awareness of these entanglements,³⁸ though it is unclear how this can materialise in practice.

The question of "what it is like to be an eel" illustrates the epistemic challenge of representing non-human interests: as Nagel reminds us, another species' subjective experience is largely inaccessible.³⁹ Any attempt risks anthropomorphism and the paternalistic assumption that humans, as 'white knights' can rescue mute others. Ecocritiques of environmental colonialism and the 'white saviour complex' highlight how practices, framed as protective, often reproduce inequalities, mask domination and silence the very voices they claim to represent.⁴⁰ This operates through "whiteness" - belief systems rooted in colonial logics - which tokenizes Indigenous knowledge and reinforces the narrative that "enlightened" people must protect nature from "destructive others."⁴¹ Yet, the ENS, displays a critical acknowledgement of these risks and tries to mitigate them as much as possible, given how there are human aspects and associated paternalistic dynamics that cannot be entirely avoided when humans act as advocates or interpreters for nonhumans, not least because there are no other-than-human alternatives that we are aware of.⁴² The ENS acknowledges difference as a condition for dialogue and cultivates practices of humble advocacy that accepts their own limits while seeking to make more-than-human lives legible in collective decision-making. In this sense, ecological diplomacy is less about perfect translation than about cultivating responsibility in the face of radical alterity.

³⁷ ENS, Exercises, 4

³⁸ See for example, p.5 of ENS, Exercises.

³⁹ Nagel, T. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, (4) (1974): 435–50.

⁴⁰ Kolinjivadi, V. and G. Van Hecken. "The 'White Saviour' Deal for Nature." *Green European Journal*, 2021. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/the-white-saviour-deal-for-nature/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Embassies, for example, may not reflect the 'preferred' way of interaction of the more-than-human world and inadvertently they are the result of the historical development of human relations.

Our analysis of the ENS also revealed how more-than-human diplomacy unfolds in hybrid political spaces, oscillating between critique and engagement with traditional actors and structures. Besides the ENS being an innovative, radical endeavour in and of itself, we see them adopting rather critical perspectives such as that of critiquing the 'rights of nature' movement as not transformative enough. On the other hand, they do invite and engage with traditional politicians. They also refer to support from Dutch MPs from 5 different parties in a formal publication, signalling that it values such institutional recognition as an important part of advancing its goals. It even modified its public announcement for the Moot Court after the director of the Peace Palace advised them to avoid giving the impression that the ENS was suing the Dutch state.⁴³

This hybridity reflects not only the complexity of the task but also its paradoxes, as captured by a founding member who described the idea of the North Sea as a diplomatic subject as 'a very concrete dream and yet completely abstract' and spoke of the challenges of navigating 'two separate worlds'.⁴⁴ This tension mirrors what McConnell et al. describe as mimicking state diplomacy: a strategic use of diplomatic forms that both affirms and unsettles traditional authority.⁴⁵ The Embassy performs formal diplomatic acts while simultaneously subverting the anthropocentric norms embedded in them.

Yet, this strategic hybridity is not without its limitations. For instance, the Moot Court raises questions about legitimacy and representation on behalf of more-than-human entities. Who has the right to represent nature at court and how can we know that they do so in ways their 'clients' would find satisfactory? The ENS also offers little reflection on its website or in publications on how its projects have tangibly affected nature. Nature's response remains a missing element. Moreover, the work of the ENS, perhaps unsurprisingly, still lacks formal diplomatic recognition within legal and governance structures, reflecting the broader difficulty of representing non-human voices in systems built for human interests. Institutional, cultural, and practical challenges continue to confine the ENS to largely symbolic and performative diplomatic acts. This perhaps explains why it remains radical in ambition yet necessarily embedded within existing political frameworks. Evaluating the Embassy of the North Sea raises a core, unresolved dilemma: should it be assessed on its own terms as a deliberately unconventional, exploratory experiment in more-than-human politics, or held up to the expectations of a 'proper embassy' with all the authority, structure, and legitimacy that label implies?

Conclusion

⁴³ Ibid, 3

⁴⁴ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁵ 'McConnell et al, 'Mimicking'.

Initiatives like the ENS reveal both the promise and complexity of extending diplomatic practice beyond humans and states, while exposing tensions around representation, legitimacy, and institutional recognition. While Fougner cautions against incorporating animals into human-designed political systems – arguing that this risks reproducing domination – we take a more pragmatic stance.⁴⁶ In line with Donaldson and Kymlicka’s call for structured forms of political inclusion, we see institutional engagement as a necessary starting point for recognising nature as a legitimate diplomatic actor.⁴⁷ We acknowledge that legal and diplomatic institutions are deeply anthropocentric and power-laden, but argue that critically entering these frameworks is more productive than waiting for ideal conditions.

In this paper we developed a conceptual framework for understanding the *diplomatisation of nature*, which we applied to empirically analyse our case study, the ENS. We have made three substantial arguments to the emerging field of more-than-human diplomacies. First, we showed how the Embassy enacts a slow, bottom-up, and reflexive mode of diplomacy that challenges anthropocentric and state-centric norms. At the same time, the ENS is an example of how estrangement can also work inwardly, transforming the self, not just the other - a view that aligns with relational ontologies and posthumanist critiques of the human/nature divide. Second, we demonstrated how more-than-human diplomacy operates within hybrid political spaces, requiring constant negotiation between critique of existing systems and strategic engagement with them. Finally, we have argued that ecological legitimacy is crucial; without recognised political authority, such initiatives risk symbolic absorption rather than the substantial influence they envision.

Despite their challenging, controversial and strange aspects, it is still worthwhile to have discussions about certain ‘normative boundary conditions of legitimacy’ that more-than-human diplomacies should align with.⁴⁸ Most frameworks of global environmental governance still exclude nature as a diplomatic actor, reinforcing the need for continued critical engagement with the theoretical, conceptual, and institutional foundations of diplomacy in the Anthropocene.⁴⁹ At stake are not only ecological justice and accountability but also the criteria by which more-than-human diplomacies might be recognised, institutionalised, or dismissed as symbolic.

⁴⁶ Fougner, ‘Animals’.

⁴⁷ Donaldson, S., and W. Kymlicka. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ Erman, E., and M. Furendal. “Artificial Intelligence and the Political Legitimacy of Global Governance.” *Political Studies* 72 (2) (2024), 421–441.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Dzebo, A., and K. M. Adams. “Contesting Legitimacy in Global Environmental Governance: An Exploration of Transboundary Climate Risk Management in the Brazilian-German Coffee Supply Chain.” *Earth System Governance* 15 (2023), 100154.

