

# The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] Pella Thiel: You know, we are people. That's the beautiful thing. We can choose. We are creative. We are imaginative. We know how to feed ourselves. We know how to have a forestry that respects the right of the forest to still be a forest. But we don't do that because we think it's not profitable or too slow or not efficient,

[00:00:22] and that's what we have to change.

[00:00:29] Nate Hagens: Today's guest is my friend, Pella Thiel, who lives in Sweden. She previously was on this podcast on a reality round table on local food systems. Pella is a maverick ecologist, part-time farmer, full-time activist, and teacher in ecopsychology. She is also the co-founder of Swedish hubs of international networks like Swedish Transition Network and End Ecocide Sweden, as well as a knowledge expert in the United Nations Harmony and Nature Program.

[00:01:00] Today, we talk about ecocide as a global legal framework, as well as the rights of nature and other legal strategies to defend the ecosphere and the denizens therein. Please welcome Pella Thiel. Pella Thiel, god morgon.

[00:01:19] Pella Thiel: God eftermiddag, Nate Hagens.

[00:01:22] Nate Hagens: Eftermiddag for you. I have Sweden highlighted on my globe for you.

[00:01:27] Pella Thiel: Oh, thank you.

[00:01:30] Nate Hagens: So welcome back. You were on a round table with Dougald Hine, and Chris Smaje on local food systems. And I know you're the founder of Transition Town Sweden or one of the co-founders, you work in agriculture, transition, sustainability, but your main focus is on ecocide, and the rights of nature, which is why I invited you back for a deep dive on that topic.

[00:01:59] So your work is for ecocide to become an international crime. What does that mean and how did that work start for you and how did you get to this place?

[00:02:11] Pella Thiel: Yeah, well, there are many ways to tell that story, but I have a background in ecology and I did my master's thesis fieldwork in Ecuador.

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[00:02:21] And that was a childhood dream for me to go to the rainforest. And I went to a national park called Yasuni, which may well be the most biodiverse place on Earth. So while we have in Sweden, I think we have like 40 tree species. We are very species poor, even compared to, where are you?

[00:02:43] Nate Hagens: Wisconsin.

[00:02:44] Pella Thiel: Wisconsin. Yeah. I think you have some hundred tree species in the US, but in Yasuni, they have 600 tree species per hectare.

[00:02:54] Nate Hagens: So I did an Earthwatch trip to Ecuador and we trapped birds. I haven't told you this before, but Ecuador the country is about the size of Minnesota and Wisconsin combined.

[00:03:05] There's 1800 bird species there, and there's only 800 in the entire United States. United States has seven species of hummingbirds. Ecuador has 250 different hummingbird species. Unbelievable. Please continue.

[00:03:20] Pella Thiel: Orders of magnitude different. Yeah. So, I went there and I was, you know, so delighted and it's a long journey.

[00:03:29] You go with a bus and then with a car and then with a motor boat and then with a canoe. And when you get there you find these huge signs with the Shell on them and Chevron. And I was like, you know, I was so shocked. It took me years to sort of, I'm still processing that experience. And I thought, if we can't protect a place like this, then actually there is nothing that we can protect. And so I have been looking for ways to, like credible ways to shift this culture and protect what needs to be protected. And then I met with a remarkable British lawyer called Polly Higgins, and she told me about this work to make ecocide an international crime.

[00:04:22] And ecocide, the word means, so eco is oikos, it's the home, and it means killing the home. And that's what we are seeing. And I learned that one of the first people to mention the concept of ecocide was the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme, who gathered the international community for the first UN conference, the Stockholm conference, back in '72, where he spoke on ecocide.

[00:04:51] And that's over 50 years ago. And it's still not just legal, but we are continuously investing in ecocide and we cannot continue with that. So the work we

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are doing with an international network is to have ecocide acknowledged as a fifth crime against peace at the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

[00:05:18] So there are currently four crimes there and those are the gravest crimes, the crimes that are so bad that the whole international community has to care when they are committed. So even if you have all the power in a country, you can't do anything to your population. And, it took, I mean, this discussion sort of got, started after the Second World War, when the world woke up to an industrial killing of people and, you know, we had to agree to do something.

[00:05:55] And that's where genocide and crimes against humanity were started to become codified, and then they became codified in the Rome Statute, which is the document behind the International Criminal Court. And the International Criminal Court was inaugurated in 2002.

[00:06:16] Nate Hagens: What are the four crimes?

[00:06:18] Pella Thiel: It's genocide, which is then the parallel is ecocide that we're talking about, and then crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression was added a bit later.

[00:06:32] Nate Hagens: And when you go about your work and you go to a meeting in some city and discuss ecocide, is that word becoming known?

[00:06:43] Like how many people have even heard that word? I mean, are you often asked to define it?

[00:06:49] Pella Thiel: I mean, in English it's sort of self explanatory, I think, isn't it? If you hear it, do you get what it is?

[00:06:58] Nate Hagens: Yeah, exactly, it feels bad, it's quite a strong, emotive word, but I think, also, it seems like out there, like, oh, there's ecocide happening over there.

[00:07:12] It's like not in my backyard. We don't have ecocide here, but it's over there. Yeah. I care about that. But it is both planetary with the biosphere and it is also in micro local regions like Ecuador, for example.

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[00:07:27] Pella Thiel: So in Swedish it's a bit more complicated because it's not self explanatory.

[00:07:33] So yeah, I have to define it, but it's like, it's sort of a, as you say, it's a big word and it's sort of a deterrent because it sounds bad. And that's kind of, it works in our favor because it's, you pause, I don't think you forget it when you've heard it, but it's also something that people maybe don't like to think about so much.

[00:07:55] Nate Hagens: How do you say it in Swedish?

[00:07:58] Pella Thiel: Ekocid. So when we talk about it, we talk about it as mass damage and destruction of nature.

[00:08:07] Nate Hagens: So there's lots of, not that I'm an expert in this, but there's lots of international laws and treaties dealing with the environment already. Like how is this different and how would it be effective?

[00:08:17] What are your hopes?

[00:08:19] Pella Thiel: Yeah. So, that's a good point because we have actually I think it's around 2000 different treaties and conventions just on the international legal arena, so not to mention all the domestic law, on the environment. The thing with those is that they're obviously not working and that's because they are soft law.

[00:08:44] So they are not enforceable because states are sovereign. So as you know, more than anyone, since 1972, the global economy has really expanded a lot and really become global and transnational. But we don't have corresponding legal frameworks. We don't have corresponding legal governance to protect the ecosystems.

[00:09:09] And that's why, I mean, it's more or less a cowboy economy when it comes to the relationship between the ecosystems where we get our resources.

[00:09:20] Nate Hagens: The Superorganism is running wild without a leash or a muzzle.

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[00:09:25] Pella Thiel: Yes, exactly. So what's different with the ecocide law is that it's criminal law. So there is a clear accountability. And criminal law is targeting individuals. So the Rome Statute is concerned with individuals. Who has the most responsibility for the decisions taken that may risk being ecocide? And I, when I think about this, it's like, it's really powerful because, in two ways. One is that it shifts the risk landscape where those decisions are taken.

[00:10:09] So I picture like a room with a board of a large, transnational company, and they may have been working on this potentially very profitable, but also potentially very destructive project for years. And then there starts to be an international discussion of ecocide becoming a criminal activity.

[00:10:33] And then suddenly, because you may be the, let's pretend that you are the CEO of that company, and your daughter is now sitting in front of the city hall every Friday, saying that, you know, you are wrecking my future. And if you let this proceed, I will not talk to you again. And then you can tell that to your board and they say, well, you know, we don't care about you and your relationship with your daughter.

[00:11:01] We don't care about the global environment. That's not our thing. We have to protect our shareholder value. That's what we do. That's our responsibility. But if you can say that I respect, I mean, I know that we have our shareholders to think about, but actually now ecocide might soon be an international crime.

[00:11:24] And that means that I could go to jail. I could be put to accountability in The Hague, and so could you, who are the chairman of the board. And I don't think anyone is interested in that, certainly not our shareholders.

[00:11:39] Nate Hagens: I have a ton of questions. I mean, you and I are friends and I know you're working on this, but we talk about transition, and sheep, and podcasts, and our mutual friends and things like that.

[00:11:49] We really haven't had a deep dive on this topic. So here comes a flurry of questions. Let's stick with Chevron and Shell and Exxon for the moment. There are the "crimes" or the ecological damages to a native jungle ecosystem in Ecuador. And then there's also the emissions from hydrocarbons that are going into the biosphere and the ocean, but only around 10%

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[00:12:21] of those emissions are from the fossil fuel companies themselves. The other 85 to 90 percent are by us. Those who take planes and cars and everything else. So, isn't part of the ecocide fault the consumers, the citizens who are using the end product? Can this all be directed to the chairman or CEO of a company that is just following out the cultural laid out rules and structures that existed from the past?

[00:12:57] Pella Thiel: Ecocide law obviously is about changing those rules and structures. And I think that we have been, we have wasted decades by focusing on the end product of fossil fuel extraction emissions, which is sort of the wrong end to start with. That's where it's already becoming waste. And we know if we are continuing to dig up hydrocarbons,

[00:13:23] and if we are continuing to explore new ways of digging up hydrocarbons, those will turn into emissions. So in a way, I think like ecocide law is targeting this problem from a systemic viewpoint saying that we have to start where this is, where this problem is emanating from. And there is also the case that, yeah, sure, we are all culpable because we are all using this stuff, but we don't have the same responsibility, we don't have the same power to influence those decisions, and there is a whole ecosystem

[00:14:05] of things that has to happen before you open a new coal mine, for example, or before you go exploring for new oil in the Barents Sea or something. You have to have insurance to do that. You have to have funding to do that. And, if you ask a bank, for example, how come that you are still using my pension funds to dig for fossil fuels? Which we all know is putting all our collective future in danger.

[00:14:35] And they will just say, well, it's profitable and it's not illegal. But when this starts to possibly become illegal, then you'll just shift the whole system in a more healthy direction.

[00:14:53] Nate Hagens: So the thinking is instead of waiting for education and a change in consciousness and a change in values which would lead to a change in policies and prices, you start at the root and try to make planet damaging behaviors

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[00:15:10] illegal, which then, indirectly, would put pressure on changing incentives, prices, and behaviors from the top down. So it's kind of a, you're starting at the other end of the equation slash problem.

[00:15:26] Pella Thiel: Yeah, that was my other point. So for me, it's powerful in two dimensions. One is that it directly influences decisions.

[00:15:35] But the other thing, the other powerful dimension of why I work with this at all, is that it does change values and norms and behaviors. So it's really, you know, a systemic act. It's probably, you know, it's probably more powerful to have a new law saying that, yeah, sure, we used to destroy nature to get what we call "development," but that was before. Now we know better. Now it's this thing is illegal. And there is a powerful...I hear that you have a lot of questions, but I just want to have this really powerful comparison, which is that in Sweden, up to when my parents were young, it was legal to beat up your kids, and most kids actually got beaten by grown ups.

[00:16:30] And then, I think it's like 90 percent actually, and then that was made illegal in the 70s, and that totally shifted what you saw as the right thing to do when raising a child. And now it's less than 10 percent that gets beaten. So law is a very powerful tool in shifting how we view the world.

[00:16:53] Nate Hagens: Applying that anecdote to natural systems. One could argue that we've been "beating up our children" for a very long time in nature. So where do you draw the line on mini ecological infractions versus major ones? Because if you make any type of... If you make a wide boundary ecocide a law, the entire economy would ground to a halt and we wouldn't do anything and then humans would... society would collapse and we would take down the rest of nature, laws be damned.

[00:17:33] Pella Thiel: Yeah, exactly. That's a very good point. And,so ecocide, I mean, obviously international law is only dealing with the big things, the big stuff. And that's also where you have to begin, I think. But so, I should also just say that when I started this work, that's about 10 or 12 years ago, and I spoke to my friends, I wasn't very involved in the environmental movement, and I spoke to my friends, like the environmental lawyers, and I said, have you heard about this thing, ecocide, it seems very promising, very exciting work? And everyone was like, yeah, well, that sounds good, but you know, it's totally utopian. It will never happen.And that has

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changed completely. And one thing that made it change is that Stop Ecocide International, which is our international movement, they put together this independent expert panel defining a crime of ecocide. So this is a proposed definition of the crime. Let me read it to you.

[00:18:38] It's fairly short. "For the purpose of this statute," so the Rome Statute, "ecocide means 'unlawful or wanton acts committed with the knowledge that there is a substantial likelihood of severe, and either widespread or long term damage to the environment being caused by those acts.'" So it has to be severe and either widespread or long term.

[00:19:04] And those are terms that are recognized previously within international law.

[00:19:11] Nate Hagens: Could you give an example of something that would clearly qualify?

[00:19:16] Pella Thiel: I mean, to me, I live in an island in the Baltic Sea, and to me, the industrial fishing of the Baltic Sea is ecocide.

[00:19:26] Nate Hagens: I didn't think there were any fish left in the Baltic Sea when I was there.

[00:19:31] There are some, right?

[00:19:32] Pella Thiel: There are some, yes, but they are actually, you know, they are collapsing one, one by one, the fish stocks. So it's really bad. But that's one. And you could argue like some mining activities are really damaging, some forestry activities. But the thing is that

[00:19:53] this will be up to the court to define and they will be informed by experts. So this is a growing legal practice that we'll have to develop.

[00:20:04] Nate Hagens: And if you are successful, what is kind of the best case or a positive outcome say in the next decade? What could you foresee happening and what impact would it have?

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[00:20:17] Pella Thiel: I actually think that it has an impact already. I mean, let me just say that it's amazing to speak today because the last two weeks has been phenomenal. Two weeks ago, or something, Belgium became the first European state to legislate nationally for ecocide as a national crime and as an international crime, even though it's not recognized yet on the international level.

[00:20:43] Last week, the European Union, they adopted their new environmental crime directive where they have ecocide level crimes in it. And I have been gathering the faith communities internationally for faith for ecocide law. And last week also at the yearly summit in the United Nations environmental program, the Muslim world, they released a new report called Al-Mizan, means balance, A Covenant for the Earth, where they also say that ecocide should be a crime on par with genocide.

[00:21:26] And another thing actually in Sweden here, we have been working to get, business behind this initiative, because we think that, you know, business people, they also care about nature, but as long as it's legal for someone to destroy ecosystems that will mean that to have a conscious and a careful and respectful business will be more difficult.

[00:21:54] So we had six CEOs in an article telling the Swedish government that please get behind this initiative and please other corporations also support ecocide as a crime. So it's moving very fast. And you gave me a 10 year time frame. And so it could be actually that at the assembly of the state parties of the ICC, they gather every year in December, it could be that it becomes formally put on the table this year.

[00:22:26] I think it would be good if it was, you know, some time before that happened, but it will probably happen within five years. And this discussion is already changing, you know, the discussion internationally. So, I definitely hope within 10 years that it's becoming a recognized international law and that there is also, you know, supporting bodies and institutions to really get it implemented.

[00:22:55] Nate Hagens: So before I had four questions, now I have seven. So, let me start with a comment. You were at my presentation at Norrsken, and I did point out that humans wear different hats. And we wear our... we want to be good stewards of the Earth hat, we want to have a good life and a family and a community, and also we need to make incomes for our jobs.

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[00:23:21] And so you point out that even these CEOs care about the environment and the Earth. They do. However, they are the most constrained because of what you said earlier, their shareholders. The superorganism is such that if one CEO, if he or she does the right thing for nature, the corporate structure will just kick them out of the organism and replace it with someone else. So, so let me ask you this, human rights were, and a lot of environmental laws, were adopted and taken seriously just in the last century or so that correlates with this huge energy abundance. My friend Wes Jackson has a quote, "leisure is a great enabler of virtue."

[00:24:10] So do you think the idea of ecocide and the resulting laws that would ensue can only come about during a period of energy and economic abundance, or will something like A Great Simplification shake the foundation of these international laws past the point where they can be effective?

[00:24:30] Or how do you marry those two trajectories?

[00:24:34] Pella Thiel: There are two ways to answer that question. I think that many cultures, I mean, most human cultures have had laws that protect the living systems that they are part of because we recognize that it's so important. So for example, if you fish in a river, there will be rules to protect the fish in the river.

[00:24:55] And that's what we have lost in our culture. But having the type of international institutions that the International Criminal Court is, I think, I mean, those are probably, they will go very early in The Great Simplification. But for me, the work I do is about, you know, trying to prepare us all and our worldviews to what you call a post tragic

[00:25:27] position. And a lot of the, you know, "we have to protect nature" stuff, that discussion can't be had. Like if, when you were at Norrsken, talking at Norrsken, if you would, talk about protecting nature is one thing, but talk about ecocide becoming an international crime, that sort of is more on that level of understanding.

[00:25:51] So you can, kind of a Trojan horse for another way of relating to the world, I think. Even if the International Criminal Court may not be the institution that enforces it in the long term.

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[00:26:08] Nate Hagens: Who would enforce it?

[00:26:10] Pella Thiel: You and I.

[00:26:12] Nate Hagens: You and I would enforce ecocide law?

[00:26:14] Pella Thiel: People will have to be the stewards. People will have to be the guardians of their landscapes, as they have always been.

[00:26:25] Nate Hagens: So is your hope that there will be a macro and a micro versions of ecocide, like in the island, in the archipelago where you live to have a version of ecocide law that applies to the rivers and the Baltic sea and the forest? I mean, there already are those where I live. It's called the DNR, the Department of Natural Resources, and there are guidelines on hunting and fishing and, forest lands and things like that.

[00:26:56] You just started talking about something stronger?

[00:27:00] Pella Thiel: So, I mean, that's really revealing what you said, the Department of Natural Resources. Yeah. So that brings us to the sort of deeper level. Ecocide law is a very specific legal invention in a very specific institution. But the work that I like most is the deeper work, which is that we think about in our culture, we think about nature as object, as resource, as property.

[00:27:37] And that's a very crazy way of relating to the living world, that we have to change that. I mean, it's so silly. It's like we have based our whole culture, because this is a foundation. It's not just anything. It's a foundational piece of the Western civilization, from the old Greeks to the Christian faith, viewing

[00:28:07] humans as the crown of the creation, created in the image of God and as the only one with a soul. I mean, this is just one way of interpreting Christianity, but it's actually the dominant way. And then along comes the enlightenment saying that, yeah, well, God is good, but you know, we are also humans and we can try to understand the world in our own capacity.

[00:28:33] And we do that because we are the ones who can think. We are the rational ones and thereby we see the world as being made for us, being made as

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property, as resources, giving us ecosystem services. And, I think, you know, I suspect that there's only one culture in humanity that sees the world in that way.

[00:28:56] Nate Hagens: So, given that, your hope is that ecocide international law is a stake in the ground that then pulls our value system forward with international laws and structures and treaties and cooperation and all the legal hoopla, but generally, it moves us away from Department of Natural Resource type of thinking to Department of the rules for protecting the sacred type of thinking.

[00:29:32] Pella Thiel: I mean, so ecocide law is interesting because it's so... because we need global rules at this stage that says first do no harm. Like we are in this predicament, we don't know really where to move now, but we can all agree on first do no harm and protect, like, whatever we care about, whether it's climate change or equality or human rights or biodiversity or peace, we know that we need healthy living systems.

[00:30:03] Nate Hagens: This is where I really bog down, because my heart and my spirit is completely aligned with what you're saying, but to do no harm, like we need to stop and reduce emissions now to do no harm. There is zero chance of that happening. Not 1%, 0% chance. Because our entire lives are built on carbon right now.

[00:30:32] So I think doing less harm is the goal. And doing no harm in the distant future based on some new cultural ethic that makes it through the bottlenecks of the 21st century is a good goal, but I think doing no harm from the perspective of ecocide is, you know, an Overton window expansion sort of idea, but I don't know how practical that would be.

[00:30:55] What are your thoughts?

[00:30:56] Pella Thiel: I just want to tell you two things. One is that actually the ICC, the International Criminal Court, they are making now a policy paper on how to deal with environmental crime within the existing framework. And they have specifically asked Stop Ecocide International to come in with a commentary, which will obviously be that existing framework is not enough, we need a new crime.

[00:31:23] So, from the ICC, I mean, the message we get is that this isn't a case of if, it's about when and how. That's one thing. I also wanted to say another thing

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that happened, I think, in November in Panama. So Panama, they just got rights of nature into national legislation in just, I think, two years ago, 2022.

[00:31:54] And they've had a Canadian mine operating in this Mesoamerican rainforest belt covering Latin America. And it's obviously very destructive, a copper mine. And there has been thousands of people protesting on the streets last fall because they got a renewed permit. And then what happened was that the Supreme Court of Panama, they took up the case and they specifically said that since this project is violating the rights of nature we cannot extend this permit.

[00:32:35] You have to close the mine. And this is not any mine. It stands for 1 percent of the global copper exploitation. 5 percent of the Panamanian GDP. It's not a small thing. It's not a small decision. So I think it's actually showing its teeth. If we view humans as separate from the living systems and we see what's happening in the world now, how destructive we collectively are, then we tend to think that what we can do is to do less harm and to say that we are maybe, you know, innately bad.

[00:33:28] We become a bit misanthropic. And I love people, and I think that people are a part of a living whole. So it's not so much about, you know, like fulfilling human needs. That's not innately harmful, because we are part of something. But if you start having the discussion that maybe not just doing less harm, but actually see, okay, how can we as being part of this living whole also make it more healthy, more beautiful?

[00:34:04] How can we do good instead? Because I think as soon as you start, you know, saying that, oh, well, we need to, we are... It looks like we are very harmful. We should do less harm. We should shrink our footprints. We should really do very little. And that's not engaging. You don't bring people with you from that point of view.

[00:34:25] So instead, start to think like, how can we act to make the ecosystems that we inhabit become more flourishing because we are there? Like, what would, how would we fulfill human needs by making the living world a more beautiful place? Which is more complex, but not impossible at all.

[00:34:49] Nate Hagens: And how would we do that?

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[00:34:51] Pella Thiel: I mean, I know that you have had guests, amazing guests on regenerative agriculture, and that's how I see that as key. Like, all kinds of regenerative practices. I brought this picture that I love. This is the Donella Meadows leverage points. I think you recognize them. The iceberg where you have... If you want to have leverage to transform systems you have to work down here in the deep water of mental models, assumptions, and worldviews.

[00:35:30] And that's what ecocide law and rights of nature is doing. It's also working with the design of the system, the rules, what we think is right and wrong and what's prohibited or not, which is also powerful leverage. And this is about the governance part. So here's the worldview, here's the governance, and here is the practice, and we have to shift all of this.

[00:35:53] But if we start with down here, with the worldview and with the rules, we will have a lot of leverage then to change the practice. Because I think, you know, we are people, that's the beautiful thing. We can choose. We are creative. We are imaginative. We know how to feed ourselves. We know how to have a forestry that respects the right of the forest to still be a forest, but we don't do that because we think it's not profitable or too slow or not efficient, and that's what we have to change. Like the case of industrial fishing in the Baltic, you know. That fish is, I think it's basically like 25 fishing vessels taking the fish, feeding it to minks, these little, yeah, the little martens that you make fur of, yeah, and salmon, that you will then feed to people.

[00:36:56] Instead of having living fisheries, like outside of here, you don't have, like, the last fisherman is now 83 and he's retiring. The last. So we don't feed ourselves from this fish because there are 25 boats feeding mink. That's crazy.

[00:37:16] Nate Hagens: Feed mink so that the mink grow up to be harvested to make clothing?

[00:37:22] Pella Thiel: Yeah, call it clothing, it's fur for, excuse me, but rich Russians.

[00:37:29] Nate Hagens: Yeah, I didn't know that. So, as you and I spoke to each other on WhatsApp, earlier in the week, this could be a four hour conversation. So let's treat this as a part one because I have a lot of questions. So, tell me a little bit about the Baltic Sea, because you and your colleague Jonas, I believe, are working also on trying to get The Baltic Sea as an entity on some corporate boards so that

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decisions are made with that as a potential stakeholder. Did I say that correctly? Could you tell that story briefly?

[00:38:07] Pella Thiel: Yeah, I think the story is bigger than that, but let us begin with the embassy of the Baltic Sea. So, what we want to do is to--

[00:38:21] Nate Hagens: What's the story with the Baltic Sea firstly?

[00:38:24] Pella Thiel: Yeah, the Baltic Sea is a brackish sea. So it was... It's been developing since the last ice age, being salty and then sweet, and now it's kind of brackish. It's the largest body of brackish water in the world. It's also possibly the most polluted sea in the world. And I think that's a shame. And it's due to chemical pollution and runoff from agriculture and overfishing.

[00:38:54] And yeah, it's just, it's a dying sea. And there used to be, you know, my grandfather, he used to go fishing every week. And now I haven't seen a cod since I was a kid. And we have been fishing herring. And I shouldn't feed my kids fish because it's so poisonous. And now, I mean, if someone had told me, like, just five years ago that the herring, which is, you know, a small fish, very abundant, but that it's now going the same way as the cod population crashing.

[00:39:35] I wouldn't have believed that because it's so crazy. And this is what's now happening. Even the herring population is now crashing. So, yeah.

[00:39:45] Nate Hagens: Is it more from overfishing or more from the industrial pollutants or a cocktail of a bunch of things?

[00:39:50] Pella Thiel: It's a cocktail. It's very difficult to say. It's complex, yeah. So what we are working from here is sort of the wider legal framework from ecocide, which is saying that nature has the right to exist. So nature, like humans have rights, nature, other living beings, they can also have rights, and those rights can be acknowledged in law. And actually, it's the same like with ecocide law.

[00:40:29] I've been working with this for a bit more than a decade, and in the beginning it was seen, I mean, I also thought that, you know, I can work with this my whole life, I will never see any difference because it's so far removed from the general conversation in sustainability thinking. But it's exploding.

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[00:40:50] So there are now more than 30 countries having legal provisions acknowledging the rights of nature. The first one actually being Ecuador, which is still the only one having rights of nature in their constitution. But, Sweden

[00:41:12] is a country with very old institutions. And it feels like, I mean, yes, we are seen as a forerunner in sustainability, that picture is now eroding, sadly. And it feels very, you know, even I think that it will take a long time to get rights of nature acknowledged. So we are sort of skipping that step and saying that if nature would have a voice in human society it needs representation.

[00:41:46] We can't bring the Baltic Sea into a court or into rooms where decisions are made. So it needs someone to represent it. The herring needs someone to speak for it. And if you have a transnational setting, a regional setting. Then how do you do that? Well, you have embassies. So we want to create an embassy for the Baltic.

[00:42:10] Nate Hagens: You know, even though you and I and a lot of people listening to this podcast hear the voices of the oceans and the seas and the forests and the dolphins and the other creatures, they are silent in the courtrooms. So who specifically would represent the Baltic Sea? Lawyers, or citizen activists, or how will their voices be heard in a courtroom?

[00:42:40] Pella Thiel: In this case, there is no legal provisions. And as I said, I think there will probably be a decade or more before that exists. I don't know. I don't want to be weak in faith, but to be realistic. So this is like, maybe it's just a game. Like, maybe we take it seriously that as human beings, we always live according to narratives.

[00:43:08] Like, one narrative is money, for example. I give you a piece of paper and we all agree that this piece of paper will buy you a meal, for example.

[00:43:20] Nate Hagens: Yeah, I mean, building on that, what if it's just a story or a narrative that changes people's consciousness? That we have an ocean or a forest or a giraffe or an elephant on a corporate board,

[00:43:35] and obviously that can't physically happen because they don't speak English or any human language and we don't know what they're saying, but we know that if they could speak they would not be happy about their habitat disappearing if they were aware of it. But if we had some human voices that would

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state this is what this ecosystem, this body of water, this forest, this species would say, and of course it would be toothless in the face of the profit-maximizing structure of these entities, but over time it would maybe change the awareness of decisions being made by the people. What are your thoughts on that?

[00:44:20] Pella Thiel: It's already happening, Nate.

[00:44:23] This is what's happening. That's why Rights of Nature is so powerful as a framework. That's why I'm working on it. Because It really shifts the relationship between... Okay, so let me take the long story. I will get to your answer. There is this, one of the pioneers of this movement is a Catholic priest, or was, Thomas Berry.

[00:44:46] I'm sure you have his books in your bookshelf. And he said, we must say of the universe that it is a communion of sub subjects. Not the collection of objects. You've heard this. And everybody knows that. Like, we know that the trees and the elephants and the moose and the herrings, that they have interests, that they have needs.

[00:45:10] But the problem is that with the anthropocentric worldview, that our Western civilization, as I said, is built on, like it's a foundational assumption that we are making. And we are probably doing that and upholding that because then we can colonize the world, you know, because then there will be nothing stopping us.

[00:45:32] Like we have to go to Mars because there's no... We don't know how to stop ourselves. You know, the Superorganism doesn't have a brake. So, by saying that actually, well, it's not just humans who have needs and interests and thereby rights, but everyone who's alive has that. And it's not something that we grant them.

[00:45:56] It's something that's innate by their existence. So we can understand that and we can acknowledge that and we can change the rules, the laws accordingly. And laws, as I said, very powerful. And there is this, another pioneer who's still alive in the rights of nature movement, South African lawyer, Cormac Cullinan, he wrote a very influential book called Wild Law, and he says that laws are the DNA of society, so when you change the laws, you change how we collectively behave.

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[00:46:31] And this is happening. One of the most powerful and earliest decisions was by Ecuador, including rights of nature in the constitution. But there are now, I think, soon, almost 40 countries, as I said, who has this on various levels. And, I was involved in the Convention on Biodiversity.

[00:46:55] They recently rewrote their framework, their sort of action plan, like how do we work with the convention. And, we were a group of people with, among others, the Earth Law Center, U.S. organization working for rights of nature. And they actually included rights of nature, which was the first time in international policy in the Kunming Montreal framework in 2002.

[00:47:21] And so back to your question, because a lot of people will be also weak in faith. They will say, well, yeah, okay, that's nice. And I mean, maybe it's mostly just nice words on a paper. It's not like environmental destruction has stopped in Ecuador, for example, because they have it in their constitution. So, you know, that's nice, but it's not really efficient.

[00:47:49] It's not really implemented. So, last autumn, two things happened that I think is really interesting and shows the potential power of this as new collective rules for us. One is from Ecuador, where there was a referendum, actually, on oil drilling in Yasuni, a public referendum. Where 59%, so a clear majority, voted to end oil drilling in Yasuni..

[00:48:25] And I don't think that would have happened if you didn't have the, you know, the strength of something else than just being nice to nature because we need it. And obviously, Ecuador is a country with strong, Indigenous populations. So this is an idea and a movement that is inspired by and informed by and largely driven by indigenous populations.

[00:48:49] Nate Hagens: Is that a central part of the story that it has to be coupled with indigenous populations and that pulse of sacred devotion to the land is important in making these things happen or can they happen in other areas too?

[00:49:03] Pella Thiel: That's the thing, I think, that, yeah, I don't think it would have happened or it wouldn't have developed now without being informed by indigenous populations.

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[00:49:16] But the beauty with Rights of Nature is that it sort of carries that cosmivision that you will find with indigenous populations, that humans are part of a larger whole, and you have to respect that larger whole. But it's kind of, it's a bridge between that understanding and Western institutions, Western legal institutions, laws and courts, who don't have a problem at all recognizing that a lake or a river or a forest can be a legal person, as well as a corporation, which is just a fiction, can also be a legal person. So, it's like a very practical tool, in that sense.

[00:50:02] Nate Hagens: So, do you think that rights of nature, if they were truly adopted--

[00:50:09] Pella Thiel: But they are truly adopted.

[00:50:12] Nate Hagens: They are truly adopted? In Ecuador.

[00:50:16] Pella Thiel: In Ecuador and in other countries. Okay, tell your question and I will give you another example.

[00:50:23] Nate Hagens: Well, I'm just wondering if they're held to the same standards as human rights in a world where the dominant culture holds humans over the rest of the planet, as you, you explained earlier, what happens when human rights and the rights of nature come into conflict?

[00:50:39] Pella Thiel: So, Thomas Berry would say that human rights are a subset of rights of nature.

[00:50:47] And you and I know that there is no chance to uphold human rights if we don't respect the rights of nature because we are totally dependent on healthy ecosystems. So we have to respect the rights of nature as a culture in the long term. But, of course, I mean, this doesn't make anything simple. It just recognizes the complexity of being alive in a living whole. And we are, you know, as a culture we are like, we are deaf. We are autistic in relationship to the living systems that we are a part of. And then we will destroy them. And that's bad.

[00:51:43] And so, to me, this is a moment of atonement. And if you take that word, atonement, and you put in some space in it. It becomes at one ment. So maybe this

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is for us to, you know, understand that we are actually a part of something great. There's one living community on the planet.

[00:52:13] Nate Hagens: When you were on the roundtable a few months ago, I think you said something to the effect of: the land is asking us what we can do for it or something like that. To be honest, I've never listened to one of my podcasts, I only remember in real time what was said. Can you refresh my memory what you said?

[00:52:34] Because I recall it being quite beautiful.

[00:52:37] Pella Thiel: Yeah, you're amazingly present in your podcast, though. I said that landscapes, lands are calling for their people. Like, they miss us. They miss us. They need us to come back and to listen to them and to speak for them.

[00:52:58] Nate Hagens: So, I feel that resonates with me.

[00:53:02] How are you working for the rights of nature specifically in Sweden and Scandinavia with your work? I know that the Hague and this ecocide law, that's an international framework, but are you doing anything more for Scandinavia and Sweden in particular?

[00:53:17] Pella Thiel: I'm mostly writing and speaking and just, you know, trying to inspire people because I think that this is really a major shift, a paradigm shift, and people often find it very hopeful, like a direction to take in an otherwise rather hopeless space.

[00:53:37] And so the work that I'm focusing on is the embassy for the Baltic, and that's how I will work for Rights in Nature. I wrote the book also, which is sadly only in Swedish. It's called Naturlagen, very humble name, the law of nature. Nature's rights and human possibilities. And we have actually in the front pages this Buckminster Fuller quote, that "You don't have to fight the existing models, but you have to build an alternative that makes the previous one obsolete."

[00:54:16] And I think that's really what we have to do because, yeah, you know, there is the predicament and the Great Simplification and I think, I mean, I actually played with words a bit before this conversation and so I think that the Great Simplification is also a Great Complexification.

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[00:54:44] Like, recognizing that we live in a complex world because the living world is really complex. And, then also how you work for changing society also becomes maybe another, you know, sometimes you can think that major change is more difficult than small change, and I'm not sure that's true. That's not how living systems work.

[00:55:11] Nate Hagens: So, on your bio, on your website, the very first thing that is said about you is that you are a maverick ecologist. And I'm guessing our listeners and viewers have a sense of the reality of that, but could you maybe describe why you are described that way? What does that mean to you? I

[00:55:32] Pella Thiel: I think it's a great word, maverick.

[00:55:35] We don't have it in Swedish. But someone said that ecology is the subversive science because it puts humans in the context of nature and deals with all of those relationships that the rest of our culture, our laws, for example, only deals with relationships between people and then between people and their property, while ecology deals with, you know, this whole network of relationships.

[00:56:05] But in my ecology training, the way we did that was a lot of measurements and just viewing the world as this very complicated, but still, you know, a machine that you could understand and you could measure it and you could foresee what would happen and you could then also exploit. And so maverick to me means that's a misunderstanding, too.

[00:56:32] I mean, the world isn't like that. It's much more exciting and alive. And wild.

[00:56:39] Nate Hagens: To me, maverick also implies bravery. And I think you have to have a strong calling and a strong care about the things that you're working on, but you also have to be brave because this is a David and Goliath task that you've dedicated your life to.

[00:56:58] Are you ever afraid? Because there's a lot of rights of nature, ecological activists in South America that have lost their lives because this was a threat to certain business interests, et cetera. Can you, you know, respond to that sentiment a bit?

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[00:57:15] Pella Thiel: No, I'm not afraid. And I also think because of what you're describing that when you are sort of privileged, like I am being living here on my farm and being fed by the lands here, it's sort of my responsibility to do whatever I can. And when I do that, like when I make that commitment, it's amazing what you actually can achieve, what things can shift from really trying to shift things. And, you know, I mean, most of the resistance that I meet is not even resistance. It's just cynicism and not believing that you can change.

[00:58:08] So we are sort of holding ourselves collectively in this trap of not believing that the things that need to change also can change. And, I think I found this quote by Angela Davis. I think she's an American activist and author. "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world and you have to do it all the time."

[00:58:33] Nate Hagens: I'm sure, I'm 100 percent sure, that there are viewers of the past hour that resonate deeply with what you're saying. So what advice would you give them to take a step towards acting in alignment with the things that you've been describing? Any personal practices or advice or recommendations?

[00:58:58] Pella Thiel: I think, actually just get out, spend time, even if it's like two minutes every day, get out into somewhere where Mother Nature is more visible, that you can sense her more, even if you are in a city.

[00:59:17] And just notice. Be present. Be attentive and notice what happens with you when you are in that presence and that attention. Like, that's a gift that we are giving to the world, that we attend to it, that we don't play deaf. Like, even if our society is deaf, we as individuals don't have to be deaf.

[00:59:43] And then when we do that, I think we may find that it's so healing. When we give that attention to nature, actually, we get so much back. And again, I mean, to quote an American indigenous author, Robin Wall Kimmerer, she's saying that

[01:00:07] when you don't just care for nature, but understand that nature also cares for you, that develops your care to a sacred bond. And I think we need that sacred bond to attend to those relationships as a practice, because it's also, you know, it's difficult to be present like that. It's not easy. It sounds easy when I say it, but it's not easy.

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[01:00:38] It's a practice. And, just to nurture that sense of wonder and awe.

[01:00:45] Nate Hagens: I hear you and I understand you. And I also will say that you live in a very privileged spot to elicit those feelings in yourself, because I visited you on your farm, and the little daily walk you take is one of the most stunning landscapes I've ever been on in my life.

[01:01:03] So it's no wonder you have a reverence, because you have a cathedral out your back door there in northern Sweden. What about young people that are learning about the ecocide that has slow motion happened before they were born, becoming aware of all this, and the magnitude of what we face, but they're in their late teens or mid twenties, what would you say to those young humans?

[01:01:34] Pella Thiel: I mean, it would be the same advice, actually. And adding that, like, when you do that, and I fully agree, I mean, and that's also what keeps me going is that I have the support from the landscape that where I can go and renew myself and just keep with my senses.

[01:02:00] But for young people, like when you get out and you attend to how that feels in you to be close, even if it's just to be close to a tree or to attend to a flower, notice what happens in you and understand that the wisdom of Mother Earth, she's so old. There's so much wisdom there, that's larger and greater and deeper than humans have.

[01:02:37] So to tap into that wisdom and also see what happens with... I mean, to trust the wisdom from within yourself when you are in touch with the wisdom from Mother Earth. And also to add what Angela Davis said, that actually you have to act as if it were possible, because then it becomes possible.

[01:03:02] And then you have to actually trust your own sense making and your own capacity. And I really think that, you know, young people, when they do that, they become quite powerful. Because then when you do that, you start to see the total craziness that we are living in. And then you put your faith and your hope somewhere else.

[01:03:27] Nate Hagens: So, with respect to young people, is this, awakening or this sense of the spirituality of the sacredness of nature that you were describing, is

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that something that is a personal epiphany, or is it helpful for young people to find others that feel the same, and is that something that, needs to happen in a group?

[01:03:48] What are your thoughts?

[01:03:50] Pella Thiel: Thank you for adding that. Yes, this is not something you do for yourself. I mean, maybe you can, some people certainly can, but it's much more difficult. So find the others. Absolutely. Even if you have to find them through the internet, find a group. That's supporting you.

[01:04:08] And I suppose you have a community around you where you can find others.

[01:04:15] I actually don't. You're my community and you live across an ocean. I actually don't have too many people locally that feel this way. Well, I don't know about that. Maybe there are a lot of people that feel this way, I just haven't met them. I don't find people that are acting this way locally as much.

[01:04:32] Yeah. Yeah. I mean I, yeah. I have probably the same, but, well, but no, I have a local group actually. I do. But, I would say, you know, for people like myself and like you, I think, we are so humble, we have so small needs.

[01:04:48] We only want to not feel crazy all the time. Isn't it? So because I think, is it, how is it? Is it just me that's crazy or is it the rest of the world? It's more likely that it's just me. So that's why you have to find people who hold each other in the craziness that you then apparently share that you understand that the world is so beautiful and so sacred and it's meant to to keep that way.

[01:05:22] Nate Hagens: I totally agree. Actually, that is the first step is if you find enough other people to have you as a person feel that you're not crazy observing and thinking these things, that itself is empowering and enabling you to act in whatever way you see. I don't know if you listened to the podcast I did with Alexa Firmenish a couple months ago.

[01:05:46] Pella Thiel: I did.

[01:05:47] Nate Hagens: In that podcast, she suggested a practice that I did in India and I've started to do, although I've been sick and only been back for a few

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weeks. But, I, every day on my hike, I now stop in the same spot. It's my sit spot. And I do that for 10 minutes or so on a log in this little spot. And it's different than just taking a rest on a hike, cause now I stop at the same place every time, and I've started to know the different trees and the different species and the birds that frequent the area and the grasses, how they're changing, coming up, and I feel like it's almost like a temple that I'm coexisting with or something.

[01:06:30] And if you just stop on a hike and look around, that's different than revisiting the same place every single day.

[01:06:39] Pella Thiel: Yeah, thank you. I mean, I also lead a one year ecopsychology program and that's actually a practice that we encourage our participants to do. We call it a secret place that you find that's close to home.

[01:06:54] And for me, I'm terrible, I mean, as you said, I have a daily walk and I also have a daily practice with the animals that I care for, but I'm terrible with my sit spot practice. I should probably do it more.

[01:07:12] Nate Hagens: Pella, I know you've watched a lot of my podcasts, so you know this question is coming.

[01:07:16] If you could wave a magic wand and there was no recourse to your status or safety or anything, what is one thing you would do to change human and planetary futures?

[01:07:30] Pella Thiel: So I don't care so much about my status or safety. And even if I did, it's easy. And I've already said it. I would make ecocide an international crime.

[01:07:42] And I have to say two things. So that's one on the sort of global macro level, but I think it has to be coupled by the local micro level. And it's also easy. I would make every school to have a garden. Every school needs to have a garden, and a lot of education can happen in that garden. And none of these things, I mean, it's not even expensive, it's so possible.

[01:08:14] I don't have, I don't even need a magic wand. Well, maybe I do, but...

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[01:08:18] Nate Hagens: I wonder how many schools, what percentage of schools have a garden now? Because I like to think of schools having gardens, but maybe it's very few as a percentage of all. I don't know.

[01:08:29] Pella Thiel: I think so.

[01:08:30] Nate Hagens: Yeah.

[01:08:32] Pella Thiel: I think it's so few, and it's fewer who actually also, you know, use and develop it.

[01:08:37] Imagine what it could be, like Eden was a garden, wasn't it? Paradise. The word paradise means garden. Because that also gives us a sense of what humans can create together with the other living beings. You know, the beauty, the abundance, it's amazing.

[01:09:01] Nate Hagens: So, I don't want to put words in your mouth. we just scratched the surface here.

[01:09:06] So is there any topic that if you were to come back for a round two, that you would be willing to take a deep dive in, and you just a few moments ago mentioned that you teach a one year course on ecopsychology, I don't know much about that, to be honest.

[01:09:22] Pella Thiel: Yes, you do.

[01:09:25] Nate Hagens: I don't know much about the academic backdrop of that, but maybe I live it on my podcast. But what would you like to come back and do a deep dive on any topic that is near and dear to your passion that is relevant to The Great Simplification and what's ahead?

[01:09:42] Pella Thiel: Yeah, I would really like to explore how to think about change in living systems and the role of desire and seduction.

[01:09:57] Nate Hagens: Okay. Maybe just give us 30 seconds more on that.

[01:10:02] Pella Thiel: I think, you know, because we are in this turmoil and this huge change, and I think we are quite coarse and not so sophisticated in how we deal

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with that change, how we try to induce that change and how we've... How we perceive it to be possible or happening. And, a lot of people that I meet try to push for change. And I think that's futile. I think you have to seduce and I'm, yeah, I would like to talk about that. I think that's what Mother Earth is doing, you know, the whole rights of nature framework is about seducing people into doing things differently and encouraging each other in doing things differently.

[01:10:57] Nate Hagens: Let's do it. I just wrote a note to Leslie to invite you back for ecopsychology, desire, and seduction with Pella Thiel, round two. Thank you. Thank you so much for your time and for your work on behalf of the creatures and the beings who don't have a voice. Do you have any closing words, Pella Thiel?

[01:11:21] Pella Thiel: No, just likewise. Thank you so much. It was wonderful. And I think, you know, just this thing that we share with each other, what things are actually happening that are so powerful and hopeful is so important. And the podcast you have is such a powerful place for that to happen. So thank you so much.

[01:11:44] How do you say thanks in Swedish? Tack?

[01:11:47] Yeah, you know Swedish.

[01:11:49] Nate Hagens: Yeah, I know tack and bra and Godmorgon. That's all I know.

[01:11:54] Pella Thiel: The most important words.

[01:11:59] Nate Hagens: To be continued, my friend. Thanks for all your work.

[01:12:02] Pella Thiel: Thank you.

[01:12:05] Nate Hagens: If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform and visit [TheGreatSimplification.com](http://TheGreatSimplification.com) for more information on future releases. This show is hosted by Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and curated by Leslie Batt-Lutz and Lizzy Sirianni.