



Gower Street- our story so far on bringing nature's voice into our governance

My name is Tessa Durham, I am Co-Director of [Gower Street](#), a UK based family foundation. This article shares with you our path to bring the voice and rights of nature into our decision making and governance. To be clear, we are not experts, nor are we at the end of our journey. We have committed to learning by doing and sharing as we go, as we know many others are considering a similar path or are curious. This is our story so far . . .

Our journey into Rights of Nature:

Gower Street is a small foundation, working in a relationship-based model, centred on trust and open communication. Our funding supports a socially and environmentally just and rapid energy transition, and we work primarily in the UK and Ghana. We typically work with small organisations, or individuals in the early stages of their organisation's life cycle. Gower Street started out as an education funder in 2007. In 2018, founders Sophie and Nick Marple pivoted the focus of the foundation to the climate crisis and decided to deploy all of the resources and close the Foundation by 2030. This decision was made recognising the importance of this decade to meet the goals of the Paris Climate agreement.

Through our climate work, we have supported many nature-focused programmes over the years as we know that nature-based solutions are vital in the fight to stabilise our climate. Many of the Gower Street team live in the UK, which is one of the most nature-depleted countries in Europe and this is a source of shame and disappointment for us all.

The definition for the Rights of Nature we are using is:

Rather than treating Nature as property under the law, Rights of Nature acknowledges that Nature in all its life forms has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles¹.

We see Rights of Nature work as multi-faceted: it's about changing laws and culture; both must be synchronised for any real change to be sustained.

We became aware of the Rights of Nature movement through our membership of the [Environmental Funders Network](#) and we made our first grants in 2023. Since then, we have funded more work in this space, often with a geographic or landscape (i.e River or mountain) focus, and our interest has built from there. In 2024 we became the fiscal host for a small amount of pooled funding focused on Rights of Nature work from UK foundations and we are still active members of that group. We have sought out learning opportunities on the subject and last year convened a meeting for all of our partners (in the UK and Ghana) to share the concept of rights of nature with them. At that meeting, an expert panel of speakers talked through what Rights of Nature are and how they can be realised at a local level and or through local legal structures. One of our grantee partners who attended the meeting is an academic in Ghana, Dr. Dickson Adom. The work resonated so strongly with his interests and expertise in Indigenous knowledge and education systems that he rapidly upskilled and set up the [Rights of Nature Movement in Ghana](#) – a wonderful outcome from our point of view. We reflected that it was starting to feel like the

¹ [What are the Rights of Nature? - Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature](#)



concept of Rights of Nature was joining a lot of dots for us and our partners; we were seeing and feeling energy and passion come through this work.

In 2024 we started to actively consider how we could embody a Rights of Nature governance structure within Gower Street. We spent time speaking with experts and learning from those who had already embarked on this journey (such as [Faith in Nature](#), who were the first corporate to put Nature on their board) and in October 2024 we invited [Lawyers for Nature](#) to join a Gower Street trustee meeting and talk through the options for bringing the voice of nature into our Governance structures. They challenged us to think deeply about why we wanted to do this and how we were going to ensure we were giving nature a genuine seat at the table and to think broadly about where we need nature's voice to be heard. The trustees committed to continuing to learn and explore this work further, taking an active learning approach.

In January 2025, Brontie Ansell (Founder and Managing Director, Lawyers for Nature) joined our Board meeting to represent nature. This provided trustees with the opportunity to experience what it is like to have nature represented in our meetings and to hear how nature interjected, questioned and challenged the discourse. From that point, trustees committed to taking it in turns to represent nature in our meetings as part of our 'learn and do' approach to this work.

To help us capture nature's voice throughout the organisation and across the strands of our work, we appointed Dr. Adom to our [Advisory Board](#); created a theory of change for Gower Street's work in this area; and added a nature lens to all of our documentation and processes, both internal and external. We added nature to our trustee board on our [website](#) and started to talk publicly about the role nature was playing in Gower Street.

Since embarking on this work we have been committed to sharing our insights and experiences of bringing nature into our Governance to promote the concept and invite others to consider this within their own organisations. As part of our wider strategy of spending out, we are committed to sharing our learning and provoking conversations on progressive ideas within philanthropy.

Impacts we have seen so far:

At key moments of reflection on our strategy and the impact of the work we have funded, we have often noted that the nature-based work was often the most joyful aspect of our work.

A key personal reflection is that once you embark on this work, it impacts your thinking in every aspect of your life. Once you understand that nature is integral to life and needs a voice at the table, you naturally start to manifest that in all that you do. For me, I have brought nature onto my school governing board – this is pretty unorthodox in the education system but makes perfect sense. The role has already brought new opportunities, perspectives and vibrancy to our school community.

My co-director at Gower Street, Sally Vivyan, is currently writing a book and has used nature as the analogy to weave her book chapters together – for those who have proofread the book (it is due to be published later this year), this is the aspect they enjoyed the most.



We often reflect that nature has brought joy to our work as it has encouraged us to be wilder and less boundaried in how we structure and run our meetings and how we make funding decisions. It has provoked us to question our systems and processes and challenged the status quo within our organisation.

Nature encouraged us to consider our own death (as we are spending out the funds and closing in 2028) and to manifest how we want the ending to happen – these insights and challenges have stayed with us and encouraged us to be bold, more open to risk and getting comfortable with not knowing what the outcomes of our work will be. It is from those provocations that we decided to ring-fence the final portion of our funding to ‘Seeding things for the future’, recognising that we have limited resources to have meaningful impact within this current political moment, but we can seed things now that will flourish once we are no longer here and we are comfortable with that idea. We know there is a risk that not all of the things we support now will flourish. For those that do, we won’t be around to capture that learning and record the impact – but Gower Street doesn’t need that now. We are moving into an eldership role in philanthropy and are working hard to bring others on the journey to ensure continuity of support to our partners and also potential funding to follow in the paths we are forging.

What’s next on this journey for Gower Street:

As part of our ‘Seeding things for the future’ fund, we have identified Rights of Nature as a key issue area. We are now exploring how we can most effectively fund into this space within the timeframes we have left and what our legacy could be. We would love other funders to join us on this journey.

We are committed to raising awareness of Rights of Nature and are considering how to build it into our capacity-building offer for our partners in the UK and Ghana – in particular those who are in climate-focused work.

We are open to legally formalising having nature on the board of Gower Street should that be a helpful step for the sector. For our own purposes it is not necessary as we are already operating with nature on our board.

We are committed to sharing our ongoing learning in this work, in the hope that this may inspire others to consider how nature could be represented within their organisations. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss further.

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