



The Seed

Newsletter

The Western
Environment
Centre
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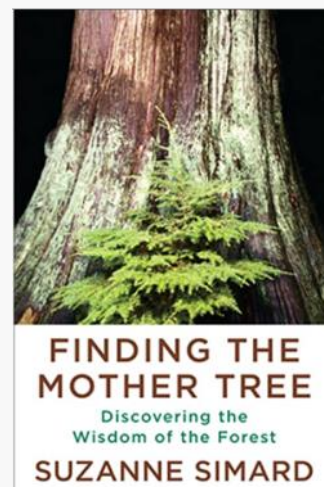
Spring/Summer 2022

Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries Book Recommendations *(continued)*

Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest, by Suzanne Simard (Allen Lane, 2021)

“From the world’s leading forest ecologist who forever changed how people view trees and their connections to one another and other living things in the forest -- a moving, inspiring journey of discovery.” Horizon Library Catalogue (hip.nlpl.ca).

Alexander Taylor, Regional Librarian, Newfoundland and Labrador Public Libraries



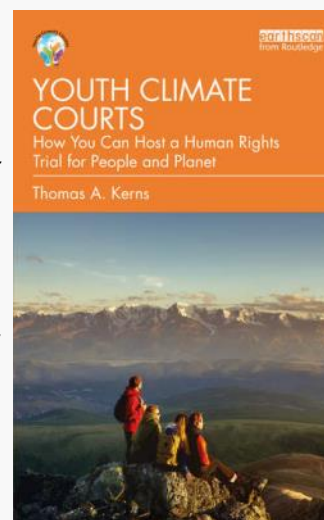
Book Review: Kerns, Thomas A. *Youth Climate Courts: How You Can Host a Human Rights Trial for People and Planet*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 124p. \$21.56 (paperback).

This is a marvellously clear and helpful book for anyone in their teens or early twenties wishing to become involved in fighting climate change. One of the best means for doing so are the Youth Climate Courts, an increasingly popular and effective method being pursued to encourage governments to act. This book is a concise introduction to such Courts, and Tom Kerns brings to the subject a wealth of experience and knowledge; he is currently the Director of Environment and Human Rights Advisory and Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at North Seattle College, USA. He also has been involved in drafting international declarations of human rights as they pertain to climate change and has written extensively on the topic.

The book’s first chapter describes how a Youth Climate Court works and how youth activists can start one, ideally at the local level. With much preparation and some help from adult mentors and guides, youths take on particular roles in a public courtroom setting, either as judge, prosecuting attorney, or a member of the jury, calling upon representatives from their local government to stand before the Court and explain what the government has done (or not done) to facilitate meaningful action and legislation on climate change.

While the Court’s sentence is not legally binding, the Court can make suggestions to its local government and develop a follow-up, science-based action plan. The intent is not so much to humiliate members of government as to work with them to implement meaningful change; and, because a democratically elected local government is beholden to its public, the Court most likely will receive a receptive ear from those in positions of authority.

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Book Review: Kerns, Thomas A. *Youth Climate Courts: How You Can Host a Human Rights Trial for People and Planet* (continued from the previous page)

Particularly praiseworthy in this book are the many reasons given that explain why a Youth Climate Court can be effective. Kern cites reports that show that youth are and will continue to be more adversely affected by climate change and they will be around longer to deal with the consequences. As such, youth can speak with a great deal of moral authority and weight in their communities. Far from being pointless mock theater, a Youth Climate Court can raise public awareness in a community about local environmental challenges and how the government at hand could engage more purposefully in the struggle against climate change at the local level. Furthermore, as Kern notes, “[T]he deep moral urgency of direct appeals from young people can actually make it easier for governments to undertake the kind of major policy initiatives that they know will be necessary” (p. 36). The actions of Youth Climate Courts could even muster support and awareness of larger, formal court cases being undertaken at upper levels of government.

Moreover, the book bases the operating principles of Youth Climate Courts on human rights, as opposed to statutory law. Such an approach is more appropriate for Youth Climate Courts, because human rights are universally applicable to all people and the language of human rights is more accessible than that of statutory laws, which are often specific to time and place and written more for legal specialists. Many of the courses that I teach deal with the history of human rights (the liberty of conscience and the freedom of religion; political and civil rights during the American and French Revolutions; the abolition of Atlantic slavery, and so on). Movements for human rights succeeded or at least made significant progress because of popular participation. Popular participation creates momentum and critical mass, and this is all the more potent given that governments must base their legitimacy on the extent to which they uphold and protect human rights.

Today, ideas of human rights as enshrined in international declarations and covenants have expanded beyond political and civil rights to include the right to life, the right to health, the right to water and sanitation, the right to a healthy environment, the rights of the child, and the rights of Indigenous peoples. Kern’s book devotes two chapters to discussing these critical links between environmental justice, human rights, and fighting climate change. The chapters are filled with human rights citations, references, and arguments to use in a trial. Also useful in the book are the appendices on the Declaration on Human Rights and Climate Change, the burgeoning legal notions of the rights of nature, and possible avenues that a local government could incorporate into its Climate Action Plan. There is a wealth of material available for a Youth Climate Court to build a case!

Maybe one day our understanding of rights will expand further to include more fully the rights of nature and non-human beings; that development could extend a government’s obligation to protect habitat from the ill effects of climate change. For now, however, there is still much that can be done and Kern’s book provides young environmental activists with a clear roadmap to guide the way.

Edwin Bezzina