# Robert Macfarlane warns of UK rivers’ dire pollution crisis amid call for renewed stewardship



As a child, Robert Macfarlane would spend long hours floating in the River Avon, situated on the edge of his grandparents’ field in Scotland. The crystal-clear water and the sight of salmon darting beneath the surface left an indelible mark on him. Today, Macfarlane, who has penned twelve books about the natural world and received accolades including the Wainwright Prize for nature writing, explores the relationship between humanity and rivers in his new book, *Is A River Alive?* Piloting through a conversation in Cambridge, he pairs nostalgia with a stark reality: numerous rivers in the UK have become increasingly polluted.

Macfarlane's journey into writing about rivers began in earnest in 2020, ignited by a burgeoning cultural awareness of the state of British waterways. His research, which took him kayaking in Canada and observing India's polluted ponds, unveiled unsettling truths about the fragile ecosystems that were once thriving. In the UK, however, the numbers paint a bleak picture: the Environment Agency reports that none of England and Wales's rivers are in "good chemical health." Macfarlane recounts a particularly jarring moment: coming across a Southern Water sign warning against contact with the water, ironically juxtaposed with their slogan—"Water for life."

The role of sewage discharge in this environmental crisis is alarming. Macfarlane identifies it as “the mega-villain of river death,” illustrating a system that continues to rely on outdated Victorian infrastructure. During heavy rainfall, combined systems, which carry both rainwater and sewage, overflow, resulting in untreated effluents entering rivers. This practice, combined with illegal sewage discharges in dry weather, resulted in a record-breaking 3.62 million hours of untreated sewage being released into British waters in 2024. Such statistics fuel frustration not only among environmental advocates but also the general populace. Campaigns have emerged urging for accountability and reform, culminating in events such as the "March for Clean Water" in London, which saw thousands demanding action.

The financial aspect behind this neglect is equally concerning. Between 1991 and 2023, the privatised water companies in England disbursed over £78 billion in dividends, even as they accumulated substantial debts. This prioritisation of shareholder returns over necessary infrastructure upgrades has elicited outrage. As Macfarlane succinctly puts it, the water companies have “sweated the assets they were handed.” Critics, including Environment Secretary Steve Reed, have labelled the situation as disgraceful, highlighting the inadequacy of regulatory frameworks such as Ofwat, which has failed to impose substantial penalties to deter repeat offenders.

Agricultural practices, notably the management of slurry, present another significant threat to river health. Excess animal waste, if not properly managed, can wash into local waterways, exacerbating pollution levels. While recent efforts to financially incentivise better practices among farmers aim to address this issue, transformation will require sustained commitment from all sectors.

Despite these grim challenges, there remains a glimmer of hope. Macfarlane points to the responsiveness of nature itself, suggesting that rivers can heal remarkably fast when given the opportunity. Examples such as the Klamath River in Oregon, which saw salmon returning within weeks of a dam removal, demonstrate the possibilities for revival. Moreover, regions in Scotland, particularly the Highlands, continue to maintain excellent water quality, providing a stark contrast to the situation in England. The River Nar in Norfolk, for instance, highlights the effectiveness that regenerative land management can have in preserving clean water.

A burgeoning grassroots movement is also emerging, driven by passionate citizens, including swimmers, kayakers, and activist groups. Collaborations like the River Rescue Kit from River Action offer practical solutions such as testing water quality and reducing sewage discharges. Such efforts signal that, while the challenges are daunting, there exists a collective will to instigate change.

Ultimately, the core thesis of Macfarlane's work is profound. Rivers, he argues, are not merely ecosystems; they are vibrant, living entities that reflect the health and spirit of their surroundings. This notion becomes tangible when observing revitalised waterways, unearthing the potential for ecological renewal. Macfarlane's recent swim in the Highland rivers serves as testament to the revitalising power of clean water. "In a river, you feel life flowing into you. It feels like enlivenment," he shares, emphasising the essential relationship that humans can forge with these water bodies—if only they are given the chance to thrive once more.

As he articulates both the complexities and the beauty of rivers, Macfarlane also underscores an urgent need for systemic change. *Is A River Alive?* serves not just as an exploration of the natural world but as a clarion call for action—a recognition that the health of our rivers is intricately linked to the health of our communities and ecosystems alike.

**Reference Map**

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 4-6
2. Paragraphs 3, 4
3. Paragraphs 5, 6
4. Paragraph 7
5. Paragraphs 8, 9
6. Paragraphs 10, 11
7. Paragraph 12

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-14687379/britain-river-problem-nature-expert.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/uk-water-companies-released-sewage-36-mln-hours-2024-2025-03-27/> - In 2024, English water companies discharged untreated sewage into waterways for over 3.6 million hours, marking a slight increase from the previous year and setting a new record. This issue has sparked significant controversy in Britain, with accusations that privatized companies prioritize dividends over necessary investments, releasing sewage when infrastructure is inadequate. The Labour government has initiated a sector review, and the regulator Ofwat announced that customer bills will rise by an average of 36% over the next five years. However, the sector warns that improvements will take time. The Environment Agency reported a 0.2% increase in sewage discharges, with South West Water being the largest offender with 544,439 hours. Environment Secretary Steve Reed described the data as disgraceful, highlighting that lack of investment has led to unacceptable pollution levels. South West Water claims to see positive results after starting a 15-year investment plan.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/de8c5104-2384-4bef-8fd5-ac58545e6903> - Privatized water companies in England and Wales have failed to improve more than half of the worst sewage overflow pipes in 2024, according to data from the Environment Agency. South West Water's Salcombe Regis pipe alone discharged sewage for 8,772 hours throughout the year without any repairs to reduce spills. Overall, 54% of high-frequency storm overflow locations did not report any actions to mitigate spills. The total duration of spills reached a record 3.6 million hours, despite a slight decrease in the number of outflows compared to 2023. Anglian Water and Thames Water significantly increased their raw sewage discharges, while Dŵr Cymru and Southern Water made no efforts to improve their combined sewage overflows. The extent of pollution is uncertain due to reliance on self-reported data from electronic monitors. The industry aims to invest £10 billion by 2030 to reduce spills, funded by the largest annual increase in consumer charges since water utilities were privatised. Environmental advocates argue that proper enforcement of regulations could have prevented the current extent of sewage pollution.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/df8b99a240fce5f6d8ca121733df5d19> - Thousands of protesters, estimated at 15,000 people, marched in London on Sunday demanding a cleanup of Britain's sewage-tainted waterways. The "March for Clean Water," organized by groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, saw participants form a "human river" along the River Thames to Parliament. The issue highlights the legacy of privatization and outdated Victorian infrastructure, with water companies discharging raw sewage into rivers during heavy rainfall—resulting in a record 464,000 spills last year. Pollution from farm runoff and climate change exacerbates the problem. Olympian rower Imogen Grant and nature broadcaster Chris Packham emphasized urgent action is needed. The new Labour Party government has proposed stricter regulations, but demonstrators call for swifter, more comprehensive measures.
5. <https://www.sas.org.uk/water-quality/water-quality-facts-and-figures/> - The UK's waterways are in a dire state, with 75% of rivers posing a serious risk to human health. In 2023, there were 604,833 discharges of raw sewage into UK waterways, and 14% of rivers are considered to be in good ecological health, yet every single one fails to meet required chemical standards. The antiquated sewerage system cannot cope with increasing population, urbanization, and climate change. Sewage pollution leads to poor water quality, reduced biodiversity, and damages ecosystems. The Surfers Against Sewage campaign demands an end to sewage discharge into UK bathing waters and a 90% reduction in sewage discharges by 2030.
6. <https://datahq.sas.org.uk/data-investigations/2023-water-quality-deep-dive/> - In 2023, there were a total of 464,056 sewage discharges into English rivers, waterways, and seas, averaging 1,271 sewage spills per day. This amounted to a staggering 3.6 million hours (about 410 and a half years) of sewage spills into English waterways over the course of the year. When including data from Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, there were a total of 584,001 spills in 2023, a 42% increase from 411,927 sewage spills in 2020. Forecasting shows that if these trends continue, by 2035 there would be over 1 million sewage spills per year. The report highlights the need for urgent action to address the growing environmental crisis in UK rivers.
7. <https://anglingtrust.net/2024/05/20/huge-increase-in-fish-kills-linked-to-sewage-pollution/> - The Angling Trust is calling for immediate government intervention following confirmation of a huge increase in fish kills linked to sewage pollution in UK waterways. Environment Agency data from the past four years shows an alarming rise in the number of fish deaths linked to sewage pollution, with figures escalating from 26,690 in 2020-2021 to a staggering 116,135 in 2023-2024, a 176% increase on the previous year. Southern Water and Thames Water stand out as being responsible for the majority of fish kill incidents linked to sewage pollution in 2023-2024. This drastic increase highlights the growing environmental crisis in UK rivers that demands swift and decisive intervention. 2023 saw a 54% increase in the number of sewage spills – from 301,091 spills in 2022 to 464,056 in 2023.