# Rivers in peril: the global battle to restore and recognise their rights



A comprehensive examination of the current state of rivers worldwide reveals a complex and concerning picture of environmental degradation and evolving understanding of natural rights. Rivers, once revered and central to human civilisation, now face unprecedented challenges, including pollution, damming, and over-extraction, compounded by regulatory shortcomings and a diminished cultural connection.

The southern reaches of England provide vivid examples of river pollution, illustrated by observations near Windsor on the upper Thames, where swans bear brown tidemarks from passing through sewage-contaminated waters. Signs displayed by water companies carry warnings such as "avoid contact with the water" and advise washing hands after incidental exposure, indicating that certain freshwaters are becoming not only undrinkable but also unsafe for swimming or touching. This decline in water quality signals a significant environmental and public health issue.

Underlying this crisis is a shift in perception and policy. Modern society tends to regard rivers primarily as resources or economic assets rather than living entities deserving protection. This instrumentalisation has seen water rights and rivers themselves embedded within financial markets, with water futures being traded akin to commodities such as oil. Economic interests often override environmental stewardship, with regulation frequently unenforced or underfunded.

Globally, the impact of human activity on river systems is monumental. For instance, the Yangtze River in China, affected by the Three Gorges Dam, is so heavily regulated that changes in its water volume have measurably altered the Earth's rotation. In Canada, the Athabasca River suffers from contamination due to extensive oil extraction practices. Europe has over one million barriers fragmenting its waterways, leaving very few rivers free-flowing.

The article also highlights the cultural detachment from rivers encapsulated in language. In English, natural features are often referred to impersonally, reducing them to objects or "brute matter," rather than living entities. This reflects and perhaps perpetuates a worldview that disconnects human society from natural systems.

In contrast, movements around the world are challenging this perspective by advocating for recognising rivers as living entities with legal rights. Starting with the 2017 Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act in New Zealand, the Whanganui River was declared "an indivisible and living whole" and granted legal personhood—a landmark recognition that the river has rights and can represent itself in court. Gerrard Albert, lead negotiator for the Whanganui iwi, emphasised this perspective by stating, "We want … to begin with the view that [the river] is a living being, and then consider its future from that central belief."

Similar legal recognitions have since emerged worldwide. In Ecuador, a constitutional protection recognising the rights of nature led to a court ruling in 2021 that saved the Los Cedros cloud forest and its rivers from mining threats. In Quebec, Canada's first river rights were declared for the Mutehekau Shipu River in a campaign opposing a hydroelectric dam. In India, efforts in Chennai seek to revive severely endangered waterways that oscillate between near dryness and destructive floods, with community leaders promoting "just water culture."

In the United Kingdom, movements are gaining traction. Lewes district council in East Sussex has recently agreed to support a charter of rights for the River Ouse, and campaigns advocating for river rights are emerging for other rivers such as the Clyde, Don, Derwent, and Rye. Activism ranges from large-scale marches—like one in London with 15,000 participants protesting for clean water—to local community projects restoring riparian habitats and creating living memory maps of river catchments. Notable figures, such as Feargal Sharkey, publicly criticise governmental neglect, while lawyers like Paul Powlesland mobilise guardianships for rivers, asserting that these waterways are sacred beings deserving legal protection.

Ecological restoration efforts also demonstrate the resilience of rivers. A landmark event occurred on 2 October 2024, with the removal of the Iron Gate dam on the Klamath River, which flows from Oregon into California. This was the largest dam removal project in US history and followed two decades of activism, largely led by the Klamath Tribe. Shortly after the dam's removal, scientists recorded the first upstream migration of a Chinook salmon past the previous dam site in over a century. Salmon return is crucial ecologically; their spawning supports diverse freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems by transporting marine nutrients inland, thereby nourishing forests and associated life forms.

Urban initiatives such as "daylighting"—the restoration and exposure of buried rivers—exemplify innovative approaches to reconnecting cities with their watercourses. In London, over 20 such rivers lie hidden underground, including the Fleet and the Moselle. Other cities globally, such as Seoul with its Cheonggyecheon Stream, have transformed formerly obscured rivers into vibrant public spaces, leading to benefits like reduced urban temperatures and improved air quality. In Sheffield, the recent reopening of a concealed section of the River Sheaf was widely celebrated as an act of ecological and cultural renewal.

The rights of rivers movement forms part of a broader philosophical and legal re-examination of natural entities as living beings rather than mere objects. This philosophical stance resonates with ancient narratives such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, where the destruction of the Cedar Forest—home to the forest's spirit—illustrates early recognition of ecological consequences tied to human actions.

The Guardian’s report illustrates an evolving global dialogue encompassing legal, ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions concerning rivers. It showcases the tension between entrenched exploitative practices and emerging efforts to acknowledge and restore the vitality and rights of rivers across the world. International examples from Ecuador, India, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States provide diverse models of river advocacy and restoration. In the UK, growing activism and legal initiatives reflect increasing societal concern about river health and future sustainability. The recent ecological success following the Iron Gate dam removal signifies the potential for river ecosystems to recover when given opportunity and protection.

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

## Bibliography

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2. <https://earth.org/2023-marked-by-exceptionally-dry-rivers-and-largest-glacial-melting-rates-in-decades-wmo-says/> - This URL corroborates the impact of climate change on river systems by discussing record-low river water levels and massive glacier melting in 2023.
3. <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/152754/water-pollution-in-the-world> - This URL discusses global water pollution and access to clean water, supporting the article's focus on environmental degradation and human reliance on polluted water sources.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/30/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being> - This URL provides evidence of the legal recognition of rivers as living entities, specifically the Whanganui River in New Zealand, which was granted legal personhood.
5. <https://globalvoices.org/2021/01/11/ecuadors-first-court-ruling-to-recognize-the-rights-of-nature/> - This URL highlights the legal protection of nature in Ecuador, where constitutional provisions have led to court rulings safeguarding specific ecosystems, supporting the broader movement of recognizing river rights.
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7. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/apr/26/is-this-river-alive-robert-macfarlane-on-the-lives-deaths-and-rights-of-our-rivers> - Please view link - unable to able to access data