

Confluence of the Waterbodies

Robert Macfarlane

University of Cambridge, UK

Greetings to you all on this special afternoon, at this confluence of waterbodies. I bring warm wishes from my own river; the beautiful, stricken River Cam, a river who – and I choose to say ‘who’, not which or that – rises as a series of clear-watered springs in a little wood called Nine Wells Wood, around a mile from my home. I bring those greetings from my river, and in turn I greet representatives of the Venice Lagoon; the Waddenzee; the Oslo Fjord (running through a city, Os-lo, whose name I have this week learned means ‘the light place where the river meets the sea’); the fast-vanishing Snæfellsjökull glacier of Iceland; Berlin’s Spree River; Ecuador’s polluted, beloved Machángara River (whom I have met, who flows through Quito, and who was recognised on 5 July 2025 as a constitutional entity); the beautiful, blue-watered, braided Tagliamento River (who I am also lucky enough to have met, and who is perhaps the last morphologically intact river of the Alps); the River Don of Sheffield; the Dogger Bank; the Mar Menor (who as we know has become the first waterbody to have its rights and legal personhood recognised in European legislation); the Baltic Sea (the youngest sea on the planet!); the Sussex Ouse; the Rhone; the Rhine; the Odra; the Mediterranean – and many other waterbodies besides.

What a coming together – a confluence – this is. “The places where water comes together. | with other water”, wrote the American poet Raymond Carver, very late in his life, when, knowing he was dying, he had moved to be close to the clear-watered rivers of the Pacific Northwest: “The places where water comes together with other water | Those places stand out | in my mind like holy places” (Carver 1985, 12). I agree. We know this to be ecologically true too; the ecotones where river meets sea, or lake births river, are always rich, diverse, generative sites of mingling and co-making. And we know it to be culturally true, too, as is the case at this confluence of ours, here, today.

So it gives me great pleasure to be opening this third edition today, after Venice and Menor, here in a space – De Balie – where, historically, land management policy has been debated, here near a coast where European rivers meet the sea, and here in a landscape which has been created, conjured into being, by the intensive, even heroic management of water.

Indeed there is a close connection between my home landscape of the Fens, in southern England, and this one. For the Fens were transformed into habitable land by the expertise of Dutch water engineers, who came – known as the Adventurers – to the Fens in the seventeenth century, bringing their knowledge of dykes, pumps and windmills, and drained the Fens, creating, as here, an ultra-managed water-world in which I now live, where water operates within a fully privatised national water system that has delivered, in the 36 years it has been in operation, a rivers crisis which has not been seen in England since the mid-1800s.

We might say that my country, England, represents the global apex of privatisation of water, and that the Netherlands represents the global apex of water's instrumentalization. Here, an ultra-conservative perspective on water largely holds sway: a combination of expert management plus fear, with a technocracy that largely renders water politics as inaccessible for citizens, because it is held to be the domain of experts.

It may appear that this makes the Netherlands the worst place to gather in which to imagine water otherwise, as we are trying to do. But – quite the opposite, I think; it is exactly the right place to gather, and to try to carry out what is sometimes called 'pre-figurative politics': that is, the building of the new in the shell of the old. Ultra-conservative contexts have often birthed radical new approaches, and as we know, Amsterdam has a long history of being open to dissenters, non-conformists and apostates! When *Is a River Alive?* (2025) was published in the UK, I found myself described in *The Guardian* as a 'heretic'. It was a very proud moment. We need all the heretics we can get right now in respect of the living world, it seems to me, and I sense that here in this room I find myself among heretical friends! Long live the River-lution!

Ours is a confluence of disciplines and practices as well as waters. We are artists, lawyers, poets, designers, teachers, performers, activists, campaigners, counter-mappers all. We share a recognition that current laws and policies have failed to stop the collapse of watery ecosystems, because they are largely grounded in the fiction of nature-as-resource, as stuff, as "brute inanimate matter", to use

Isaac Newton's phrase.¹ We share a belief that the voices of water, or the more-than-human world more broadly, are rarely heard in political decision-making, but need to be. We wish to challenge the foundations of 'Westphalian' state sovereignty and we share a wish to advance water diplomacy and water democracy beyond human-centred rights, moving forwards into a precarious future where rivers and seas – like the sentient ocean in Stanislaw Lem's great SF novel *Solaris* (1987) – are encountered as fellow subjects. We believe in the urgency and possibility of a radical shift in perspective, whereby 'waters are no longer viewed as human assets, but as living entities that belong to themselves and have the right to better representation, protection, and restoration'.

We know our views are in the minority, but as Ursula Le Guin famously put it:

We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art, and very often in our art, the art of words.²

Le Guin, in fact, shortly before her death, also turned to the very matters that we are here to consider.

One way to stop seeing trees, or river, or hills, only as 'natural resources', is to class them as fellow beings – as kinfolk. I guess I'm trying to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us. To subjectify is not necessarily to co-opt, colonize, exploit. Rather it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination. (Le Guin 2016, 2)

'A great reach outward of the mind and imagination'. That is what we are here to attempt, and like all great reaches, it will need to be both effortful and audacious.

But – and – change is coming. There is, around the world, a rising from the river, from the water's surface, from the seabed upwards. A "global tapestry of alternatives",³ to use Ashish Kothari's phrase, is being woven. We have seen the Goldman Prize recently awarded to Teresa Vicente and Mari Muriñari in Peru for their work on the

1 These words come from sir Isaac Newton's third letter to Richard Bentley. The full text is accessible through the Newton Project portal at <https://www.newtonproject.ox.ac.uk/view/texts/diplomatic/THEM00258>.

2 These words were part of Le Guin's speech in acceptance of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 2014. The full text is accessible at <https://www.ursulakleuin.com/nbf-medal>.

3 To explore more on the GTA, see <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/>.

rights of waterbodies. To speak only of my own country, we have this year alone seen the cross-party recognition of the rights of the River Ouse by Lewes Council, and then subsequent councils recognising or determining to recognise the rights of the Rivers Loddon, Itchen, Test and Medway.

Many challenges, remain, of course, and some of these are of immense philosophical and practical complexity. What does it mean to give voice to or speak for rivers? What does water want? Is a river or sea 'really' alive? How are we not just human actors, jockeying for position in a pseudo-ventriloquism? How do we avoid a cos-play animism? Where does a river or sea begin or end as a rights-bearing entity or legal person? Why speak of rights for rivers where the rights of human groups are being obliterated in the Middle East, Sudan and Ukraine? And how to help Indigenous or other forms of customary law pluralise and irrigate Eurocentric legal structures, without corrupting or co-opting them? None of these is easy, but we must grapple with them all, and more. It has been the work of many hands to bring us to this brink; it will be the work of many to bring us back from it, and create a just and habitable Earth, in which we move ahead with waterbodies recognised as fellow subjects and partners in a shared future.

Bibliography

- Carver, R. (1985). *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water*. New York: Random House.
- Le Guin, U.K. (2016). *Late in the Day: Poems 2010-2014*. Oakland (CA): PM Press.
- Lem, S. (1987). *Solaris*. San Diego (CA): Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Macfarlane, R. (2025). *Is a River Alive?* London: Hamish Hamilton.