Is a River Alive? - A guest blog by Robert Macfarlane

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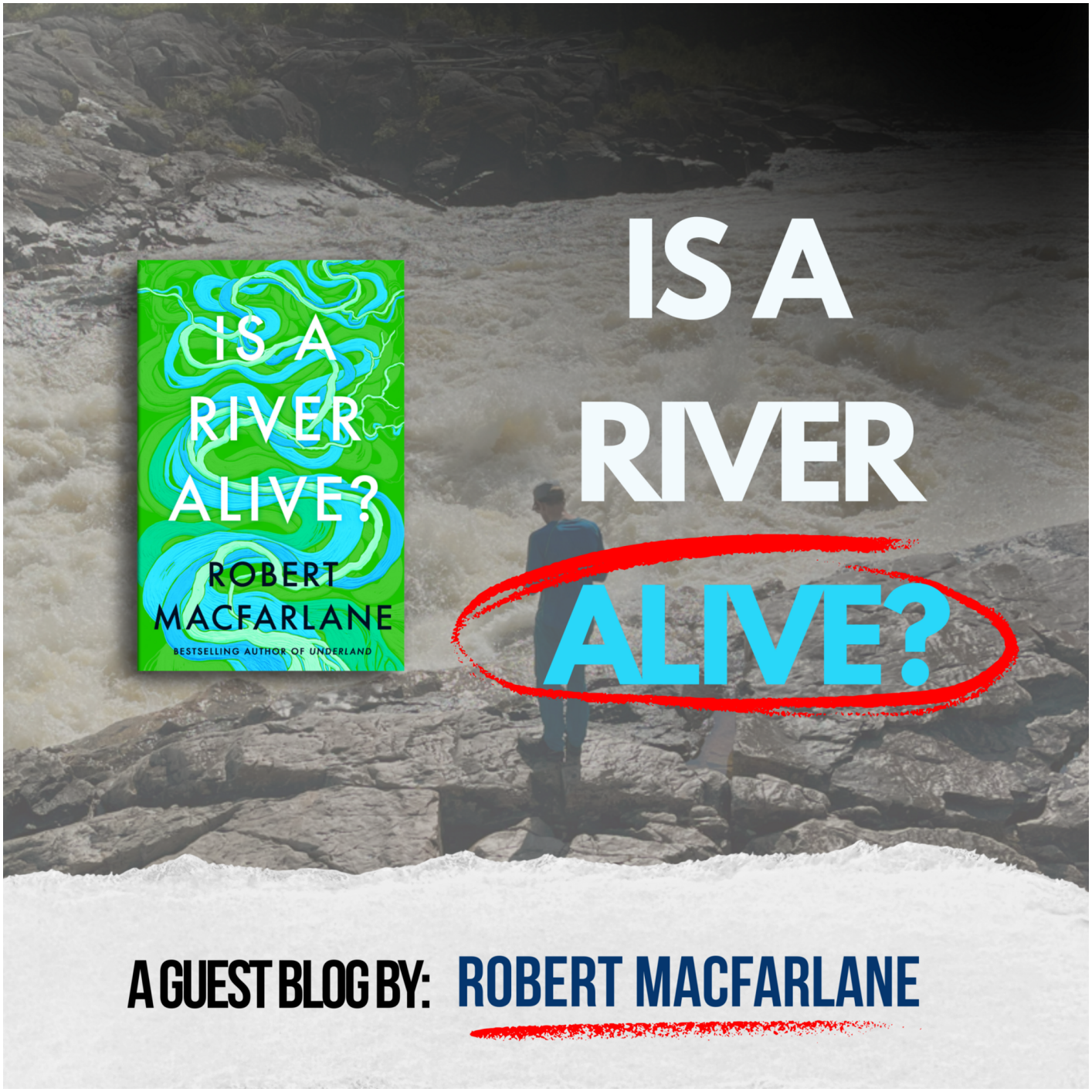
Date : 1 May, 2025



By: Robert Macfarlane, British Author and Professor of Literature and Environmental Humanities

The crisis in our rivers is a crisis of imagination as well as legislation. Too many people — especially those in power — have forgotten that our fate flows with rivers and always has. Our relationship with freshwater has become privatised and monetised, such that rivers are largely perceived as resources, not as life-forces. Our duty of care for rivers, who extend such care to us, has been abrogated. Rivers named after deities — the Dee (Deva), the Shannon (Sinnan) — now struggle under burdens of nitrates, forever-chemicals and waste. We have made ghosts of gods. In parts of this septic isle, flowing freshwater has become first undrinkable, then unswimmable, then untouchable.

Mutehekau Shipu rapids, Canada – Rob Macfarlane

How has it come to this — and where do we go from here? We all now know that there has been a massive under-investment in physical infrastructure since privatisation, as water companies have asset-stripped the country's waterways. But what we might call the 'emotional infrastructure' of rivers in this country has also been neglected for decades. We need urgently now to re-build good relations with rivers and streams: to speak of them with awe and love, to extend care and guardianship towards them, to hurt when they are hurting.

For rivers run through people as surely as they run through landscapes. They hydrate not only our bodies, but also our languages, songs, memories and stories. We are all part of the water cycle. Everyone lives in a watershed.

Rob writing the near-final words of the book, near the mouth of the Mutehekau Shipu in the far north-east of Canada – Photo by Wayne Chambliss

One of my favourite river poems is by the American poet Raymond Carver, written in the last years of his life, when he was dying of lung cancer after a lifetime of smoking. In those final, painful months, rivers sustained Carver. One of the poems he wrote about them was called ‘Where Water Comes Together With Other Water’. ‘It pleases me, loving rivers’, the poem ends. ‘Loving them all the way back to their source. / Loving everything that increases me.’ Yes! Healthy rivers ‘increase’ us. Rivers are givers: they *enliven* us.

In urban planning, ‘daylighting’ is the practice of bringing rivers back to the surface of towns and cities: unburying them from the dark tunnels in which they have been confined. Earlier this year, a long-buried section of Sheffield’s River Sheaf was disinterred in the city centre to widespread celebration: the result of a long campaign to make the river visible, restored and accessible. We must now daylight not only our buried rivers, but also buried ways of feeling about rivers.

One reason I find the work of River Action so inspiring is because it fights hard fights where they

need fighting — and because it also helps more and more people fall back in love with rivers again. Heart, as well as head, is vital to River Action's work: we know that passion is what drives action. On the immense March for Clean Water in November, the sign I saw carried more often than any other in the crowd read "Water Is Life". The Water Blessing held in Parliament Square that day mingled the water of more than a hundred rivers, seas and streams, and openly recognising water as a sacred substance. It is easy for critics and sceptics to dismiss such things as soft, even superstitious. But I see in them the foundations of our rivers' return to life.

River Action at the High Court in Cardiff this week, taking Shropshire council to court over the approval of another megafarm in the Severn Catchment

Earlier this year I found myself moved by the words of Lauren Abdel-Razek, River Action's Head of Development. 'The rivers in this land are the reason we are here', Lauren wrote, 'They are the reason people settled and made a home here thousands of years ago. Every family, home and institution has its roots in the rivers of this land. Rescuing the rivers is upholding values of gratitude, respect, justice, love and compassion. We like to think of ourselves as guardians of the rivers, but

the fact is they are our guardians.' I could not agree more. *These* are the reasons and values for which we all work as we do on behalf of rivers. As the River Action Impact Report for 2024 puts it: 'The beautiful rivers of this land give us life. They are alive themselves. And they are suffering.'

I have spent the last five years researching and writing a book called *Is A River Alive?* When I began work on it I could not have foretold how decisively rivers would move to the centre of politics in Britain; nor did I fully understand how severely wounded our rivers had become. I only knew that I wanted to seek an answer to the ancient, urgent, complex question which gives the book its title. To do so, I travelled to places around the world where rivers are being imagined radically 'otherwise': where they are understood as beings with lives, deaths and even rights — with transformative consequences.

Río Los Cedros in the Ecuadorian cloudforest, saved from destruction by a Rights of Nature ruling in 2021 – Rob Macfarlane

In Ecuador, I saw a cloud-forest river saved from total destruction by gold-mining thanks to a Constitutional Court ruling which recognised the 'right to life' of both river and forest. In Quebec, I saw the wild Magpie River defended from death by damming in a river-rights campaign pioneered

by both white and Innu communities. ‘Rivers are the veins of the territory’, said one Innu activist, ‘more than just waterways or resources, they are living beings with their own spirit and agency.’ In southern India, I travelled with indefatigable young river guardians who were trying — in desperately challenging circumstances — to resurrect rivers that were biologically dead, with zero species count and zero dissolved oxygen. And I returned again and again to the beautiful, fragile chalkstream which rises as spring-water less than a mile from my home in south Cambridge, and which flows through my years and my landscape as a time-keeper, friend and lifeline.

— *Is A River Alive?* by Robert Macfarlane is published by Penguin on 1 May. You can order a copy directly from a UK independent bookstore here, or find one of your nearest indies on this interactive river-map of indies.