Walking for Water: Inside a 100-Day Pilgrimage for River Rights

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What is the Voices of Water Foundation (VoW)?

The Voices of Water Foundation (VoW) is a soon to be CIO focused on river system restoration and healing through advocating for, acting on behalf of, and protecting the river's voice and rights. Following the Rights of Nature movement, we believe rivers should have a say in how they are treated, and river rights should be protected and respected. Therefore, with the river's natural and inherent rights at the core of our ethos and focus, such as the right to be free from pollution, or the right to regeneration and restoration, we are:

1. **Campaigning for a law change in the UK whereby rivers and drowned river valleys (Ria) are recognised as the 'entities**', the life forces they truly are and granted rights, following the Universal Declaration of River Rights (UDRR).

and

2. Connecting with many to **develop river guardianship projects and groups**, through combining science and policy, with art and spiritual practice.

Just as the natural world works best connected, so do we. We want our guardianship projects and practice to be where both community voice and river voice can meet, be heard and understood.

How and why did I become a River campaigner?

I have made a VoW to the river, to do whatever I can to protect and act on behalf of 'her'.

I have had a special, personal connection to river environments since I was a little girl. Then and now, the way the river flows has always inspired me, the water through, under, around and over

stone. To me, this echoes hope that there is always a way.

Fast forward to my early adolescence in 2021, nearing the end of my research master's in marine biology, sat by the river again, I asked – "*Where did it all go wrong?*" A question that sparked my now almost 5-year investigative research journey into river issues, environmentally and systemically, in the UK. This led me to delve into environmental law, which then led me to the 'words' that I believe are a root in some of the issues – **rivers being seen as 'objects' under law, instead of 'entities' with rights** that give them a say in how they are treated.

Why did I go on a 100-day pilgrimage?

From this, I founded the Voices of Water Foundation (VoW) and launched a petition – **calling the UK Government to grant Rivers and Rias Legal Personhood (legal recognition) in England**, and for a system to be created whereby **River Guardians** in many forms can come together to **act on behalf of the rights of rivers**. To share the word about the petition and this overall movement, I embarked on a **100-day, 1000+ mile pilgrimage** from Cornwall to Wales, back to and across England, ending at the mouth of the River Thames.

This was a journey for the river, I followed and met many rivers at differing points along the way – the River Camel, River Tamar, River Dart, River Exe, River Otter, River Frome, River Severn, River Neath, River Thames and many more. I posted daily updates on the **VoW Instagram**, through which I was able to grow a wonderful social media campaign and community, and I met so many wonderful, kind people on the quest, sharing their water stories of adventure and healing. From this, it became ever more apparent that journeying for River, water connection, this was also a journey of human connection.

What did I learn during the pilgrimage?

I truly believe a **huge part of reversing the disease of disconnect is about us coming together**, so many beautiful things can happen when we listen and communicate. This, I feel, can resonate and re-root beautifully in River Guardianship practice. But undoubtedly the element that shone through the brightest during my pilgrimage was the **wonder of water**, and this existence we get to live because of ‘her’. This I was reminded of daily, every morning waking up to my first thought/question being – “Do I have enough water for the day?”.

Why are River Rights important?

We truly cannot live without water. Therefore, it makes zero sense to me that river voice and right are not already a key part in river conservation practice and decision-making related to these precious environments and all connected to them.

I believe the Rights of Nature movement is imperative for the healing and regeneration of Mother Earth's vital interconnected habitats, and our relationship to and with 'her'. Based on the indigenous perspective, river rights, specifically environmental personhood, is eco-centric, whereby people – River Guardians, act on behalf of the river's voice and rights. But giving rivers a say in how they are treated and protected is not just about developing physical acts, conservation practice and projects within/of nature guardianship; **this is a paradigm shift**, **a re-awakening, a vital shift in perspective**, reminding us of how interconnected we truly are to this Earth.

I hear the word 'radical' mentioned a lot in this space, but I don't actually agree with associating river rights and guardianship with this word. Remembering that rivers, woodlands, and mountains are truly alive is not something new; it is re-awakening an ancient perspective, knowing, and understanding of the remarkable world we are all a part of. **I believe this is key to fixing the mess.**

Vision for legal Guardians and Guardian groups for Rivers?

Following a law change, **granting rivers legal personhood (recognition) will give rivers legal standing**. Lead guardian and guardian groups for protection and enforcement of the river's rights could be assigned/designated to each river. However, there is a lot to consider when developing a system for River Guardianship legal protection and practice, and it would also need to be both specific and broad enough to align with every river's collective and unique pollution issues and ecology. There are now many movements based on and leading to the formation of river guardian groups and projects in the UK, the momentum is flowing! At VoW we are trying to connect with as many as possible in the rights of nature, law, policy and conservation space and in the development of a River Guardianship, which we will be sharing a lot more about over the next year.

For now, please head over to voicesofwaterfoundation.org and sign the petition if you too believe Rivers are alive.