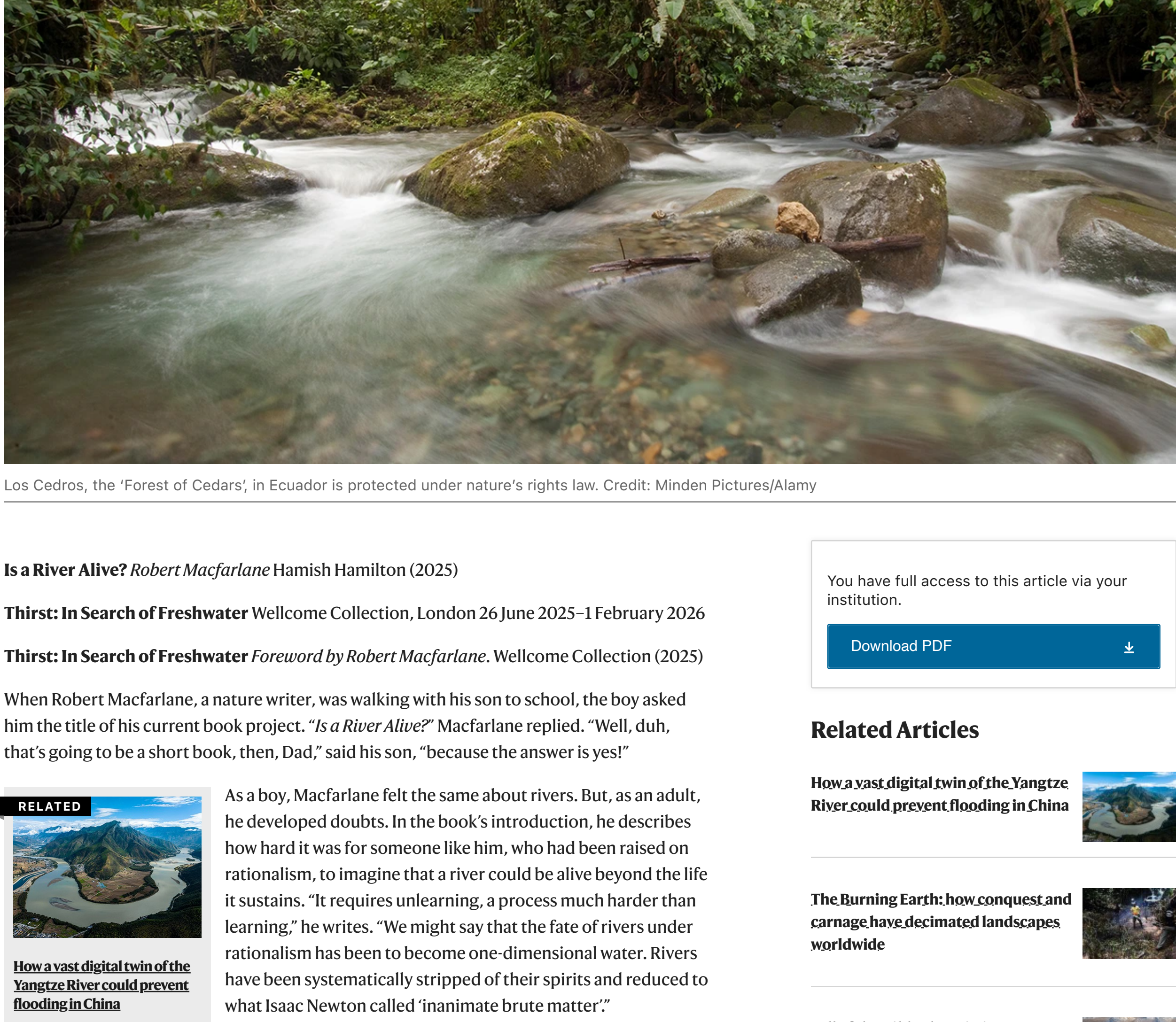


Should we treat rivers as living things?

Rivers are born, evolve and die, and can bring life – and death. We might respect them more if we saw them as animated by spirits of their own.

By [Andrew Robinson](#)



Los Cedros, the 'Forest of Cedars', in Ecuador is protected under nature's rights law. Credit: Minden Pictures/Alamy

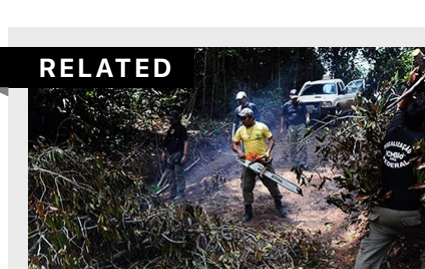
Is a River Alive? Robert Macfarlane Hamish Hamilton (2025)

Thirst: In Search of Freshwater Wellcome Collection, London 26 June 2025–1 February 2026

Thirst: In Search of Freshwater Foreword by Robert Macfarlane, Wellcome Collection (2025)

When Robert Macfarlane, a nature writer, was walking with his son to school, the boy asked him the title of his current book project. “*Is a River Alive?*” Macfarlane replied. “Well, duh, that’s going to be a short book, then, Dad,” said his son, “because the answer is yes!”

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As a boy, Macfarlane felt the same about rivers. But, as an adult, he developed doubts. In the book’s introduction, he describes how hard it was for someone like him, who had been raised on rationalism, to imagine that a river could be alive beyond the life it sustains. “It requires unlearning, a process much harder than learning,” he writes. “We might say that the fate of rivers under rationalism has been to become one-dimensional water. Rivers have been systematically stripped of their spirits and reduced to what Isaac Newton called ‘inanimate brute matter.’”

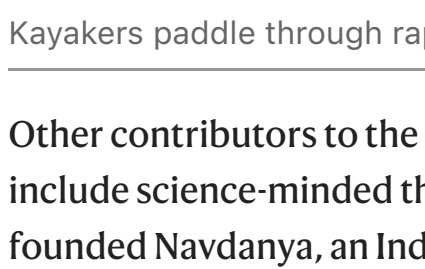
His childhood belief returned while he was researching the book. In it, he refers to rivers “who” flow, rather than rivers “that” flow. Macfarlane’s view seems akin to that of the political scientist and anthropologist James Scott: his last book, *In Praise of Floods*, published in February after his death in his eighties, argues controversially that crucial rivers, such as the Colorado River in the western United States and the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar, [should not be damned by being dammed](#).

In Scott’s words: “Rivers, on a long view, are alive. They are born; they change; they shift their channels; they forge new routes to the sea; they move both gradually and violently; they teen (usually) with life; they may die a quasi-natural death; they are frequently maimed and even murdered. Each river, though subject to the same hydraulic laws, has its own unique personality and history.”

Rivers under threat

Macfarlane ranges, compellingly, further afield than Scott’s relatively academic study – not only geographically, but also intellectually and emotionally. Driven by his concern over human damage to rivers in England, where he lives, he journeys at length alongside and along other rivers, in the company of scientists, environmental activists and diverse adventurers. Sometimes paddling by kayak, even dangerously over rapids, he experiences three, very different, threatened riverine landscapes – in Ecuador, India and Canada.

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The first is a cloud forest in the Andes Mountains: Los Cedros, the ‘Forest of Cedars’, which forms the headwaters of the Rio Los Cedros, which eventually reach the ocean through another river. Los Cedros is threatened by companies eager to pursue copper and gold mining.

The second includes the rivers, creeks, lagoons and estuaries of the city of Chennai on the coast of the Bay of Bengal. They are deeply polluted by toxic industrial products and exposed to a brutal cycle of droughts and floods caused by monsoons and cyclones.

The third is Nitassinan, homeland of the Innu people. It is a wild interior through which flows Mutehkaup Shipu, the Magpie River, which reaches the sea at the Gulf of St Lawrence, some 1,000 kilometres northeast of Montreal. It is constantly at risk from dam-building.

Rivers in time

As a spin-off from his newly released book, Macfarlane also provides a foreword to a diverse collection of short writings about water. *Thirst* was commissioned by the Wellcome Collection in London, to accompany its exhibition of the same title.

The exhibition is divided into sections: Aridity, Rain, Glaciers, Surface Water and Groundwater. Surprisingly, rivers are not given their own space. But they flow through the exhibition, which begins with a Babylonian clay tablet from around 1900–1600 bc, on which the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is inscribed in cuneiform. It describes the first war waged over water in ancient Mesopotamia, the ‘land between rivers’ – the Tigris and Euphrates. Later comes a section on the Iraqi Marshes, including filmed interviews with their inhabitants. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the swamps were drained to about 10% of their original size by the regime of dictator Saddam Hussein, to evict the people living there – but have since been partially rejuvenated.

Videos feature people across the globe wading speechlessly through their houses after flooding, exploring [human experiences of the phenomenon](#). A satirical cartoon from 1828, entitled ‘Monster Soup commonly called Thames Water’, shows a horrified woman peering through her microscope, studying numerous creatures swimming about in a drop of drinking water from London’s River Thames. Another drawing, made in 1931, shows a cross-section of an artesian tube well drilled beneath the Wellcome Collection building into one of London’s many underground rivers.

Other contributors to the exhibition book, some of whom also feature in the exhibition, include science-minded thinkers – such as environmental activist Vandana Shiva, who founded Navdanya, an Indian non-governmental organization that promotes biodiversity conservation; Native American Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist at the State University of New York College in Syracuse; and Anthony Acciavatti, a scholar at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, who works at the intersection of landscape and the history of science and technology. Writers and artists, including British-Turkish novelist Elif Shafak, Vietnamese-American poet Ocean Vuong and the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective, provide vivid snapshots of freshwater and its behaviour. But, oddly, the book contains no photographs or maps of rivers, as crucially displayed in Macfarlane’s book.

Only 3% of Earth’s water is fresh, so humans have always had to search for freshwater to alleviate thirst – a word which derives, in both English and Sanskrit, from the Proto-Indo-European root ‘ters, meaning ‘dry’. Early civilizations were motivated by their thirst for water to designate territorial boundaries and devise ways to secure supplies.

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But thirst was also, and still is, “associated with greed”, as the exhibition’s opening panel notes. [Today’s water crisis](#) is more than an environmental issue. It reflects “exploitative practices like over-extraction, and other causes such as conflict”. The hope is that the “regenerative power of water” will inspire us to “learn from its cyclical, healing nature, as well as from communities, past and present, who create abundance out of scarcity” – such as those encountered by Macfarlane.

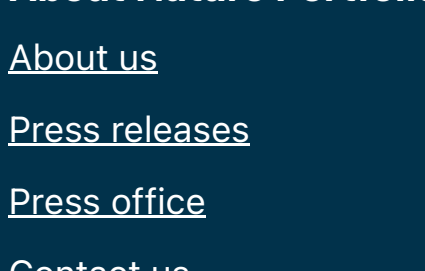
Colonial empires and commercial businesses, not to mention many scientists, have denied that rivers are in any sense alive: the investment bank Goldman Sachs refers to water as “the new oil”. They have generally treated flowing waters as dead: wholly inanimate. For example, after the Spanish Conquest of the Andean-Amazonian region half a millennium ago, a New World branch of the Inquisition was established, notes Macfarlane. This sentenced any locals who worshipped a river or stream to a hundred lashes.

“The Spanish literally flogged animism out of their newly colonized subjects, and persecuted towards extinction the recognition of the forests and rivers as both central to life and themselves alive.” Somehow, though, through five centuries of oppression, such Indigenous communities held onto their “vital ideas of the entangled lives of rivers, forests, mountains and people”.

River rights

Over the past couple of decades, such thinking has led to a global ‘Rights of Nature’ movement to grant nature legal personhood, which Macfarlane discusses at length. More than 500 nature’s rights laws have been passed by local and national governments in about 40 countries, including the United States and Canada.

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One key development was the Te Awa Tupua Act, passed in New Zealand in 2017, which protects the North Island’s Whanganui River, known to Māoris as *Te Awa Tupua* (‘supernatural river’). This arises as meltwater on the snowy slopes of three volcanoes, from which it flows for about 290 kilometres through steep rainforest, deep gorges and bush country to reach the town of Whanganui on the Tasman Sea between New Zealand and Australia. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the river was weakened by human-made destruction, such as mining and re-routing.

The act radically claims the Whanganui River is alive, and an ancestor of the Whanganui tribe. It describes the river as an “indivisible and living whole”: a “spiritual and physical entity” with a “lifeforce”, by using the Māori word *mouri*, or ‘the essential quality and vitality of a being or entity’. The closest English equivalent is ‘anima’, explains Macfarlane, “which means ‘a current of breath or wind, the vital principle, life, soul’, and which gives us ‘animal’, ‘animate’, ‘animism’ and ‘animus’ in the sense of ‘mind’”.

So, are rivers now considered alive? The Wellcome exhibition and its book do not answer this question directly, even in Macfarlane’s foreword, but their humanistic tone seems to imply that the answer is yes. As for Macfarlane’s book, at the end he returns to an English place he has frequently described between his travels in Ecuador, India and Canada: nine springs that bubble up in a small wood near his home – a source of the River Cam that flows through Cambridge. He imagines, in the future, his three grown-up children being reminded of their deceased father while visiting these wells, which he cherished and shared with them when they were kids. “Death and love and life, all mingled in the flow,” he concludes.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests.

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