

If Rivers had Legal Rights, Sewage Scandals Would be Much Harder to Ignore

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World Water Day on March 22 is intended to be a celebration. Yet, for many in the UK, it brings up images of rivers and beaches contaminated with raw sewage, with 450,000 discharges recorded in England in 2024. It's become a major political scandal, and is now the subject of a bleak [Channel 4 docudrama](#).

But what if rivers themselves could take legal action against this pollution?

A growing movement of campaigners and researchers say rivers should be granted their own rights, independent of their value to humans. In this framework, rivers are not just resources to be used, but entities with the legal right to flow and to remain unpolluted. Crucially, those rights could be enforced in court by designated human guardians. Advocates of these “rights of nature” say it could give rivers a powerful new way to challenge pollution.



The problem of raw sewage dumping is directly linked to the privatisation of water companies in 1989. In theory, an independent regulator would protect rivers and the environment and ensure that monopoly companies, such as Thames Water, would not abuse their powers. But in practice, the system has struggled to prevent widespread pollution or hold companies to account – leaving rivers with no direct legal voice of their own.

The push for privatisation came alongside the relatively new idea that water should be treated as an economic good. For water companies, water is a commodity like oil or coal. They make money by charging for it, while pollution control is a cost they seek to minimise. When oversight is weak, dumping sewage in rivers becomes a cost-cutting or profit-making part of their business model.



Failings like these are why, since the beginning of the century, many people have started thinking about legal rights as an alternative to privatisation and ineffective protection.

There are valid questions about how it would work in practice. The guardian, for instance, is still a human voice but their mandate would be specifically to protect the rights of the river, including the ability to take cases to court.

This would change how sewage dumping is handled. At present, discharges are treated as a regulatory breach and are managed through permits and fines. If rivers had legal rights,

repeated pollution could instead be challenged as a violation of those rights – and of the river’s “personhood”. A rights-based framework mandates that the person (in this case, the river) must be restored to their previous position, before their rights were violated. This could mean polluters being forced to restore the river and its ecosystems to their previous state, or to pay compensation to the river itself (rather than a fine that disappears into an overall government budget).

This sounded like wishful thinking only a few years ago, but in some places it is already becoming a reality. In 2025, Lewes District Council in East

Sussex, England, backed the Rights of River Ouse Charter, which acknowledges the right of the river to exist, its right to flow and to be free from pollution – the equivalent of the right to life for human beings.

However, a single local council cannot create rights that would replicate the rights you or I might have. That would require major national legal changes. For now, the charter is a statement of intent and a guide for local policy, and the River Ouse has some way to go before its new status can be enforced.

A case from the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia shows how hard it is to enshrine such changes. After

the Loyalty Islands Province adopted a legislative amendment to recognise the rights of sharks and marine turtles, the measure was challenged and the Conseil d'Etat – France's highest court of appeal – determined that the province lacked the power to grant legal personhood to natural entities.

But in New Zealand, the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River) really does have full “legal personhood”. In 2017, national legislation – the Te Awa Tupua (Whanganui River Claims Settlement) Act – gave the river full legal rights and duties, to recognise the local Māori tribe's spiritual connection to what some describe as a living ancestor.

Back in the UK, the recognition of river rights may help avoid a repeat of the catastrophic regulatory failures that the Channel 4 docudrama illustrates. As long as rivers are treated as assets to be managed, pollution remains negotiable – and ultimately acceptable. Recognising their rights would shift the priority from managing pollution to preventing it, and would make environmental protection a legal obligation, not a policy or business choice.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)



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