

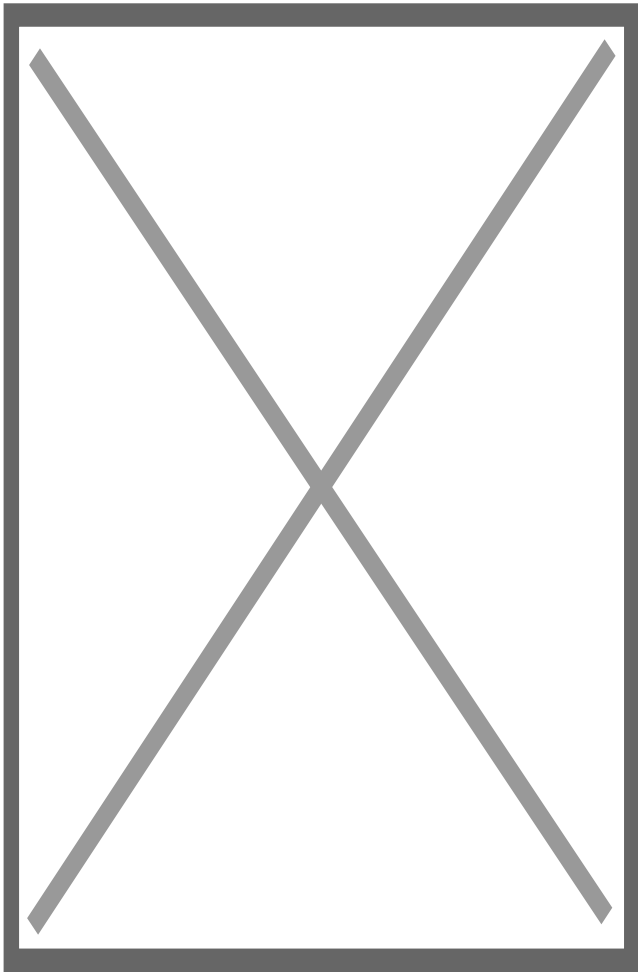
A river runs through us

Robert Macfarlane helps us appreciate that life is not a possession. It is a process we participate in.

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue

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In Review



Is a River Alive?

By Robert Macfarlane

Penguin Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

A river flows at scripture's beginning. With its source in paradise, this river flows out of Eden before branching into the four rivers that water the then known world. Along with the misty springs that bubble up from the

garden's ground, the freshly created world speaks a fundamental truth: no water, no life.

Another river flows at scripture's end. Placed in the new heaven and new earth, this river flows straight from the throne of God and down the main street of holy Jerusalem. Filled with the water of life, clear as crystal, this river nourishes the tree of life which grows fresh fruit for food and medicinal leaves for the healing of all the nations.

Rivers witness to the presence and provision of God as the one who creates, nurtures, and delights in life's flourishing. Water isn't simply a liquid. It is a sacred power that refreshes, quickens, cleanses, and restores life. We should not, therefore, be surprised that Jesus speaks of God's life-sustaining Spirit as "living water" that flows from his heart (John 7:37–39).

What, then, are we to make of the Christians throughout history who severely punished and killed Indigenous peoples who thought their rivers were alive? Or consented to the poisoning, damming (damning), privatization, and commodification of water?

In his magnificent new book, *Is a River Alive?*, Robert Macfarlane shows how, when it comes to rivers, our purportedly rational minds have become impounded, even stagnant. Like a river trapped behind a dam, the meaning of water itself lies trapped, signifying a dead, utilitarian unit, a mere service provider for industry and commerce. As a result, people have become "waterproofed: conceptually sealed against subtle and various relations with rivers, even as they continue to irrigate our bodies, thoughts, songs and stories. Rivers run through people as surely as they run through places."

Macfarlane plunges readers into the sacred significance of water by taking us on journeys into the heart of three great rivers: the Río Los Cedros in Ecuador, the Adyar in India, and the Mutehekau Shipu in the Canadian province of Quebec. To travel with Macfarlane is to undergo something like a baptismal experience: immersed within each river's awe-inducing power and vitality, and having submitted oneself to its flow, one emerges newly awakened to fresh ways of perceiving, feeling, understanding, and engaging life.

To say that a river is alive is not to personify a river, even if the category of personhood can sometimes help us enter into reciprocal relationships with our landscapes. Often, we assume that we already know what a river is and what it wants, so that our speaking for rivers becomes ventriloquizing.

The more necessary and much harder task is to reimagine what we believe "life" is. As Macfarlane travels these rivers, he helps us appreciate that life is not a *possession* or a *property* contained within things. It is, instead, a *process* that we participate in. To attend to a river is to enter the presence of a bewildering profusion of creatures enlivened by and immersed in its diverse, dynamic flows. This is why the death of a river amounts to what anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose calls a "double death": It isn't just the death of a single creature but the erasure and foreclosure of life's creative possibilities.

As Macfarlane travels with river keepers and protectors like Giuliana Furci, Yuvan Aves, and Rita Mestokosho, he finds himself challenged to open and extend himself "into a vast community of others." Every creature is kin. We need microbial, plant, animal, and aquatic others to flourish because they flow through us, just as we flow through them. That's an inescapable fact. Macfarlane also revisits the idea that a river holds rights—a right to flow unimpeded and unpolluted, for instance. He admits that the framework of a legal right may not be entirely adequate if our aim is to appreciate what a river is, but what this legal mechanism can do, and what we most immediately need it to do, is to stall the relentless assault on rivers.

A baptismal experience presupposes repentance, what we might describe as a rejection of ways of being that degrade and destroy life. But it also entails one's daily commitment to live in ways that affirm, nurture, and heal life. *Is a River Alive?* shows us that the transformation we need is conceptual, linguistic, experiential, affective,

and spiritual. It is also economic and political. To recognize that we are ourselves bodies of water constantly receiving, circulating, and passing on water—"participants in the hydrosphere," perpetually hosted by and playing host to streams that are without end—can be exhilarating. But it can also be terrifying, because rivers can kill us if we don't learn to respect their ways.

To make ourselves companions of rivers is to realize, eventually, that they cannot be comprehended. Hence the need for apophatic speaking. "The alien will not be articulated," Macfarlane says. "Alive, yes, but not in any way we might speak it." Might this chastening realization be the inspiration we need to implement new economies, liturgies, institutions, laws, educational curricula, and political frameworks that will honor life's unfathomable gifts?

Macfarlane asks if we can learn "to know, love and live on this Earth in ways that will help us do it justice and abide with it." In prose that shimmers with insights that move us at the core, *Is a River Alive?* is an exquisite elucidation of this question. Throughout its pages, Macfarlane introduces us to the work of river defenders who cannot help but inspire us. Together, they show us that the journey, though regularly punctuated with hardship, grief, and despair, is finally animated by love. If a hopeful life depends on the activation of love, Macfarlane also helps us understand that "hope is the thing with rivers."