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# Turning to History to Understand the Relationship between Parisians and Their River

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**Abstract**
For centuries, the Seine's relationship with Paris has evolved alongside Parisians' changing expectations – for the river as a source of supplies, as a space for leisure and as a force to be kept in check. Meeting the new challenges of the twenty-first century will require the development of more integrated river management, including an overall plan and better coordination between the various institutions responsible for the river and its functions. Promoting the river's heritage could be one way to enhance its public image and help to shape its future in ways that reflect the diversity of visions and uses it sustains.

KEYWORDS

Seine River
river-system
geohistory
environmental trajectory
heritage

WATER ICONS



**Policy Recommendations**

- Promote historical studies to have a better understanding of the various uses and decisions that have led to the Seine of today and help build the Seine of tomorrow.
- Promote activities in relation with human well-being, such as the restoration of swimming in the Seine,because it is a good catalyst for best practices and helps to accelerate environmental restoration operations.
- Establish forums for discussion and decision-making shared by all the stakeholders who are currently responsible for the future of the Seine.

< Fig. 1 A barge on the Seine River in Paris (Source: Laurence Lestel, 2025).

## Introduction

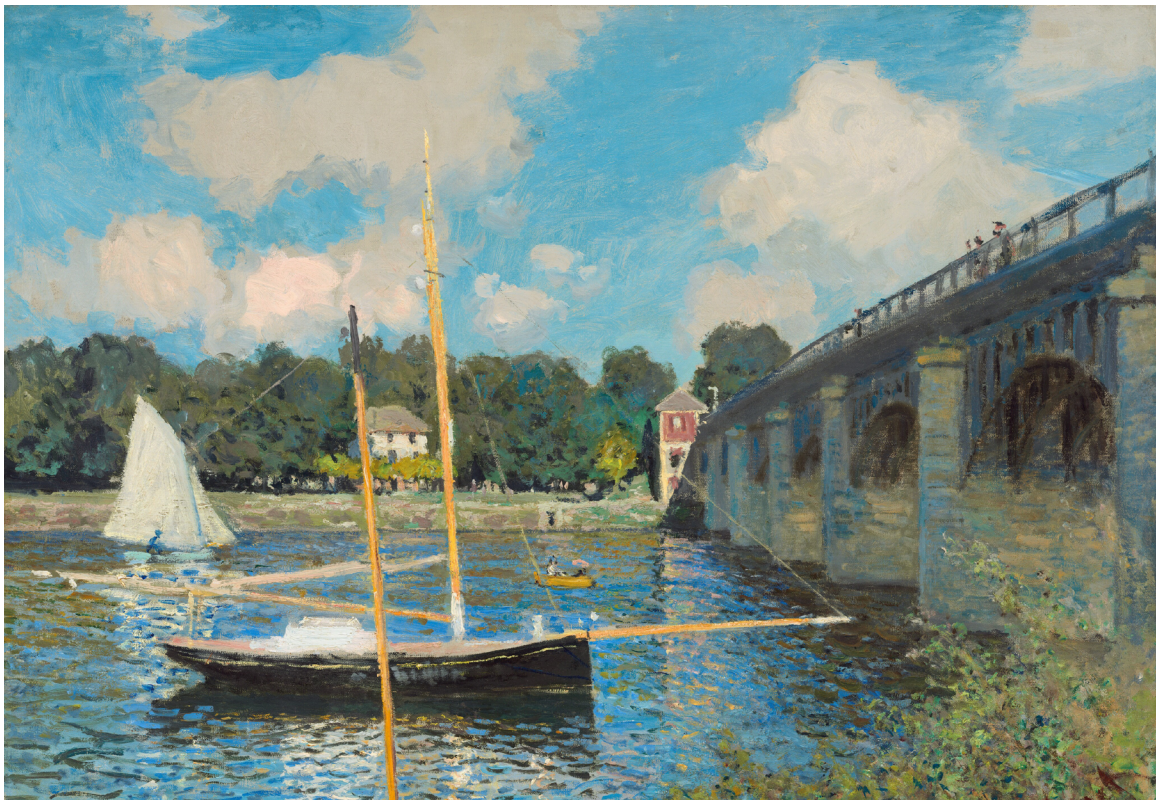
The Seine is a medium-sized river, 607 km in length, with an additional 170 km in its estuarial section. At the center of its watershed lies Paris and its metropolitan area, which today is home to 7 million of the 18 million inhabitants of the basin as a whole. Geography and history tell a similar story: Both present a river inseparable from its capital. This article explores four aspects of that relationship – navigation, which transformed the river in the nineteenth century to ensure a better supply for Paris; the contrasting perceptions of the Seine held by painters and the municipal authorities at the end of the nineteenth century; the control of the river's flow following the 100-year flood of 1910; and finally the reappropriation of the Seine for recreational use in the twenty-first century.

## The Major and Irreversible Transformation of the River for Navigation

To facilitate the transport of supplies to Paris, major development works were undertaken along the Seine beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The construction of a series of locks and weirs transformed the river into a succession of reaches extending over 400 km. The navigable Seine is managed by Voies Navigables de France (VNF) and the ports along the Seine by HAROPA (Le HAvre, ROuen, PAris). These transformations are irreversible (Lestel et al. 2023). The riverbed was dredged to increase navigable depth, and the width of the minor bed was reduced. Approximately 100 islands have been leveled or attached to the banks to remove secondary branches and improve water circulation in the main branch (Lescure et al. 2011). In Paris, the revival of swimming in the Seine has recently led to calls for a rethinking of how the river space is shared, since it is currently dominated by barges and *bateaux-mouches* (fig. 1).

## The Impressionist Painters: The Illusion of a Clean Seine

The 1870s were productive years for the Impressionists, who painted a magnificent Seine, magnified by their brushes, with a few sailboats gliding along in a light breeze and groups sitting on the grass enjoying picnics (fig. 2). These idyllic images of the Seine downstream from Paris did not reflect a reality that was well known to the municipal authorities, who were concerned at the time with the negative visual and olfactory impacts of Parisian sewage, which, according to the plan devised by Haussmann and his engineer Belgrand, was collected and then discharged into the Seine downstream from Paris, at Clichy and Asnières. This situation led Auguste Gérardin, an inspector of industrial establishments in the Seine department, to measure the level of dissolved oxygen – that is, oxygen consumed by the organic matter discharged into the river by the city. The river's anoxia (particularly in summer), measured since 1874, lasted for more than 100 years prior to the funding of wastewater treatment plants with sufficient capacity and treatment methods to address it (Meybeck et al. 2018). Other measures, such as the installation of rainwater collectors beginning in the 1990s, have restored the Seine – in terms of this particular parameter – to good quality in summer, and they have brought back fish that had almost completely disappeared from the Seine in the 1960s. The practice of swimming in the Seine, promoted by the Paris City Council, has highlighted this aspect of water quality, which has required extensive work, at a cost of €1.4 billion, mainly to restore the fecal bacteria parameter.



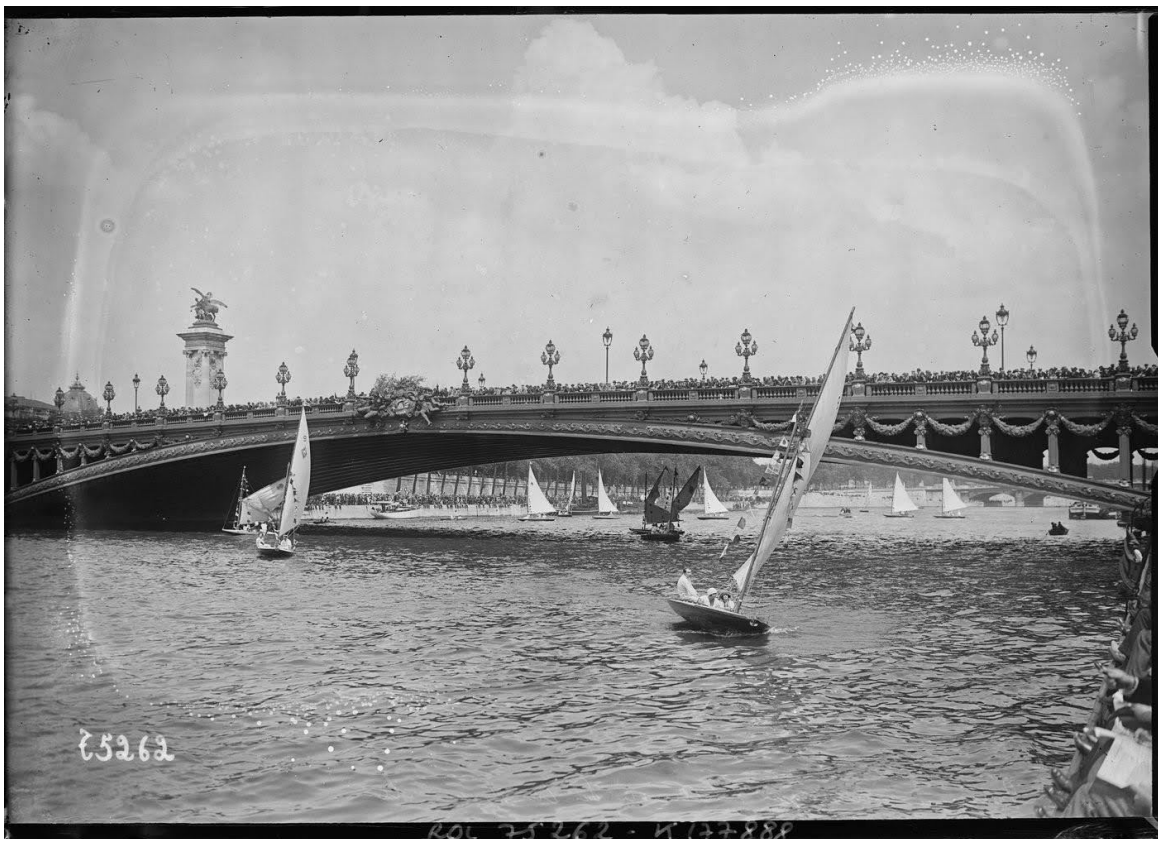
^ Fig. 2 Claude Monet, The Bridge at Argenteuil (Source: Claude Monet, 1874. Public domain, National Gallery of Art, Washington).

**Nature Under Control? Controlled Flow Rates**

After the great 100-year flood of 1910, which affected the Seine valley and the Paris region, a major project known as the Chabal project, which began in the 1920s, led to the construction of reservoir lakes upstream from Paris to store water diverted from the Seine and Aube Rivers in winter and spring. That reduced flood peak levels, but it also made it possible to release the water in summer and fall, thus preventing excessively low water levels in the Seine (Barles and Guillerme 2014). Nearly 50 per cent of the water flowing through the Seine in Paris in summer comes from these reservoirs (up to 80 per cent during the particularly dry summer of 2022). Now managed by the Seine Grands Lacs institution, these structures ensure sufficient water flow to allow barges and riverboats to circulate, as well as making it possible to swim in water with a controlled flow.

**Swimming in the Seine in Paris: Catalyst for Good Practices for the Seine**

In the 1920s, recreational activities were still taking place on the Seine in Paris (fig. 3). In "Le testament de la Seine," André Guillerme (1990) emphasized that Parisians had lost their connection with their river in the 1970s, following the opening of the riverside expressways, which were effectively urban highways. The perception of the Seine changed again when




^ Fig. 3 Arrival of sailboats during the Paris Water Sports Day near Pont Alexandre III, 11 June 1922 (Source: Agence Rol, 1922. Public domain, Bibliothèque nationale de France / Gallica).

the quays of the Seine were classified by UNESCO in 1991. Then, the banks were reclaimed in several stages, with cars gradually being excluded from the banks of the Seine beginning in 2002. The reintroduction of swimming in the Seine in Paris in the summer of 2025, "after 100 years of prohibition (since 1923)," (see below) and one year after the Olympic Games, some of whose water sport events took place on the Seine in 2024, has accentuated this rapprochement between Parisians and their river. Major works, focused on reducing pollution in the Seine, have been undertaken to make it clean enough for swimming in summer, thus shifting the political discourse toward issues of water quality.

In doing so, entire chapters of the history of swimming in the Seine in Paris have been ignored. In fact, swimming in the Seine had been prohibited in Paris since at least the seventeenth century (for reasons of decency), and formally banned to make way for navigation since 1840, with the ban renewed every year until 1923, the date of the last official text concerning swimming in the Seine in the former department of the Seine. This shows that reopening the river to swimming today means not only restoring it to a sufficient quality for swimming according to contemporary quality criteria (particularly E. coli levels) but also resolving the issue of how the Seine's public space can be shared with watercraft.

## Conclusion

Taking a step back in history allows us to better understand how the uses and relationships of Parisians to their river have evolved over time, leading to irreversible changes to the river. Today, it is a river with controlled flow and quality. As new challenges emerge for the Seine (whether climate change or new societal expectations, such as access to the quays or recreational swimming), meeting these new challenges of the 21st century will require the development of more integrated river management, a comprehensive plan, and better coordination between the various institutions responsible for the river and its functions. Enhancing the river's heritage could be one of the elements that would help to give the river a more positive image and help to shape its future, taking into account the diversity of its visions and uses.

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