



Engaging with Water and Rivers from a Multispecies Justice Perspective

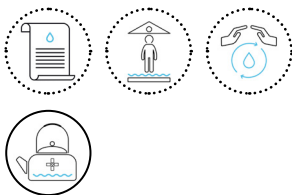
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Rivers are ecosystems indispensable for the survival of both humans and non-human species. Yet humans often disregard their importance and modify the existing socio-natural equilibrium of rivers in the pursuit of economic and political agendas. With a focus on new water justice movements, this article advocates a perspective that recognizes rivers as hydrosocial territories, actively and continuously co-created, co-inhabited, and transformed by a multiplicity of human and other-than-human beings. Such a perspective opens a path to a multispecies justice framework that involves rethinking the relations between human and non-human beings in the worlds we share as a medium for creating more socio-ecologically just and biodiverse water worlds.



KEY THEMES



Rivers carry freshwater, an essential substance for life on Earth, across vast distances and diverse landscapes, but many rivers are currently endangered due to human activities and infrastructure, including dams and mega-dams, pollution, diversion and depletion. These threats originate from a dominant, technocratic and anthropocentric paradigm that defines water management and governance according to specific human worldviews and economic and political agendas. In response, new water justice movements (NWJMs) have been arising that strive to defend and re-enliven riverine hydrosocial territories (Boelens et al. 2022). As described by Boelens and colleagues, hydrosocial territories are “the contested imaginary and socio-environmental materialization of a spatially bound multi-scalar network in which humans, water flows, ecological relations, hydraulic infrastructure, financial means, legal-administrative arrangements and cultural institutions and practices are interactively defined, aligned and mobilized through epistemological belief systems, political hierarchies and naturalizing discourses” (Boelens et al. 2016, 2).

NWJMs include Rights of Rivers campaigns, which have been spreading around the globe for the last decade and a half (O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones 2018; Kauffman and Martin 2018). Key cases include the Vilcabamba in Ecuador (Berros 2017), the Atrato in Colombia (Macpherson, Ospina and Ventura, 2020), the Whanganui in Aotearoa New Zealand (Rodgers 2017), the Ganges and Yamuna in India (Kinkaid 2019), and the Magpie or Muteshekau-shipu in Canada (Page and Pelizzon 2022). A network of international organizations has since drafted a Universal Declaration of Rights of Rivers acknowledging these bodies of water as living entities with inherent fundamental rights such as the right to flow, the right to perform essential functions within their ecosystems, the right to

be free from pollution, and the right to regeneration and restoration.

Although pervaded by challenges that include contestation, internal power dynamics and processes of subjectification, these NWJMs have the potential to help restructure nature-society relations in watery worlds. Namely, they reflect an attempt to bring modern, Western legal systems into dialogue with other cultural modes of relationship with water (Laborde and Jackson 2022) and with different ontological understandings of rivers (Götz and Middleton 2020). Indeed, the construction of water as a natural substance abstracted from social, cultural, and religious contexts that is prevalent in mainstream water resources management is coming under increasing scrutiny (Anderson et al. 2019). In civil society, socio-environmental movements, and branches of academia, there has been a growing interest in understanding how water is also historical, cultural, and political (Anderson et al. 2019). The same happens with rivers, who are differently recognized as living beings, as ancestral kin and as multispecies communities. For Australian Aboriginal peoples and for the Maori tribes of Aotearoa New Zealand, for instance, rivers such as the Murrumbidgee or the Whanganui are understood (and have been engaged with historically) as sacred ancestors (RiverOfLife et al. 2020; Magallanes 2020).

These alternative modes of relationship encourage the acknowledgment of rivers as hydrosocial territories, actively and continuously co-created, co-inhabited and transformed by a multiplicity of humans and other-than-human beings, such as animals and plants. This awareness leads people to consider issues of water justice beyond the predominant human-centric perspective. Through a particular political ecology lens, water justice aims to challenge



^ Fig. 2 River trout (Source: Hunter Brumels via Unsplash).

power structures as they are manifested in and through water and to shed light on the “multiple layers of water injustices, ranging from the brutal, visible practices of water grabbing and pollution to the subtle powers and politics of misrecognition and exclusion” (Boelens, Perreault and Vos 2018, 2–3). These practices, powers and politics affect not only human communities but also many other beings who live in, with and around rivers. Exclusion and misrecognition may lead into canalizing, damming, and polluting rivers while disregarding the fact that rivers are the habitat of many different species whose lives entirely depend upon the socio-ecological integrity of their territory. Thus, impacting the river will ultimately impact all the species in the area. Exclusion and misrecognition may also involve overlooking the agency of

beings who co-create these riverine territories, such as beavers, who are ecosystem engineers and whose dam-building activities can have significant impact on river biodiversity (Orazi et al. 2022). Further, both animal and plant species should be recognized for their role in river territories. Rivers can thus be understood as “territories-in-territory” (Hoogesteger et al. 2016), bringing together many different species, lifeways, knowledges and forms of agency. Therefore, analyzing river systems (and water worlds in general) through a multispecies justice perspective becomes fundamental.

Multispecies justice recasts the subject of justice beyond (only) humans and invites us to rethink relations between human and non-human beings in the worlds we share and co-create.

It is both a concept and an agenda for radical research, one which recognizes that a plurality of axes of identity (e.g., species, race, gender, class, age, ability, being) intersect and are interwoven in structures of inequality, injustice and oppression, but also, potentially of resistance and resilience (Tschakert et al. 2020). This recognition aligns with a political ecology perspective that views discussions around water (in)justices as necessarily comprising critical reflection about which and whose voices, histories, worldviews, knowledge systems, norms and practices are rendered visible or invisible (Zwarteveen and Boelens 2014).

Applying a multispecies justice framework to the defense, restoration and re-enlivening of rivers can help researchers, activists, local communities, environmental organizations and other actors to think about other relevant questions. These include: How are riverine hydrosocial territories co-constituted by a diversity of human and other-than-human beings, and consequently, how do processes of domestication, enclosure and degradation of the world's rivers (Boelens 2022) affect all these different communities? How are particular (human and non-human) subjects excluded from water governance processes? How might the recognition of other-than-human subjects and the upholding of their multiple forms of agency in the creation and preservation of these territories be a matter of multispecies justice and also be an important way to maintain or restore the socio-ecological integrity of rivers? Finally, one should be aware that enlarging the circle of subjects invited to the political decision-making table also leads to additional questions, such as: Who is doing the inviting? Who is being invited and who is not? Whose voices are we listening to and whose are we not? What tensions and potential contradictions exist between the perspectives of different subjects (e.g., a rep-

resentative of an environmental organization, a spokesperson for a riverine animal species, a representative of the state, a member of a company)? Why?

Whereas non-human beings and their modes of relationship with the environment (namely water) and with each other are traditionally portrayed as being biological or ecological matters, I would argue that they are profoundly political and cultural as well. As Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster (2016, 4) note, "Many entities, from geologic formations and rivers to glaciers, might themselves be thought to have distinct ways of life, histories, and patterns of becoming and entanglement, that is, ways of affecting and being affected." Important questions for multispecies justice would therefore also include: To what extent do water management and governance regimes acknowledge the historic relations between non-human beings that developed in (and that created) water worlds over thousands of years? To what extent does (in)tangible water heritage also implicate non-human lives, modes of knowing and of creating water worlds and modes of relating with each other? Is cultural heritage an only-human story (Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster 2016) or a more-than-human one? As Henk van Schaik and Sir Diederik Six argue in another Blue Paper, contemporary water managers do not sufficiently acknowledge the value of thousands of years' worth of experience of different people and cultures regarding water (van Schaik and Six 2021). In line with that, I would add that they also do not recognize the value of thousands of years' worth of experience, lifeways, knowledge and agency of non-human beings with water and with each other in liquid territories such as rivers. To acknowledge these – the tangible and intangible heritage of both human and other-than-human beings in relation to water – can also be a matter of multispecies justice.

Finally, it might be argued that multispecies justice already exists in daily socio-cultural practices around the world. Examples include the restoration efforts that connect Nmé (sturgeon) and Anishinaabe communities in the US (Whyte 2017), the relationship between fishing communities and the fishes of the Magdalena River, Colombia (Boelens et al. 2021); and the biodiversity conservation zone that protects more than 900 varieties of native potato in the Andean region, which was created by Quechua peoples such as the Paru Paru, Chawaytiri, Sacaca, Pampallacta, Amaru and Kuyo Grande communities (Whyte 2020). In these different geographically and culturally situated cases, local communities have been historically involved in relations of reciprocity and kinship with different beings (such as fish and potatoes) and have developed practices – such as conservation and restoration efforts – to respond to threats to their common lives and to protect and uphold the existence and lifeways of both the human and the other-than-human beings who are involved in these relations.

For example, the fisherwomen and fishermen of the Magdalena River, Colombia, engage in interspecies relations every day. They claim to hear the fish sing and to be able to predict the weather according to what animals tell them (Boelens et al. 2021). Importantly, they establish ethical guidelines for fishing that seek to respect particular aspects of the lives of the fishes with whom their own lives are so intimately entangled. This could be understood as a form of multispecies justice. In another example, the Anishinaabe are actively involved in restoring Nmé (sturgeon) populations, not only because the sturgeon has historically been an important source of food for the communities and a species indicator for monitoring the environment, but also, because the Anishinaabe are involved in a cultural and spiritual relationship with the

sturgeon that assigns them a specific responsibility to care for their fish kin (Whyte 2017). This could also be understood as a form of multispecies justice, where the well-being of one species is directly entangled with the well-being of another, and both humans and non-humans are interdependent.

These examples of hydrosociality in the Magdalena River in Colombia and in the Great Lakes region of North America show us how human and non-human systems and communities are profoundly entangled, and how the future of healthy, living rivers may be closely related to the upholding and protecting of the lives and lifeways of these diverse beings and communities. It is therefore of increasing importance to look at NWJMs around the world that are practising different, localized forms of multispecies justice, to learn from such practices and to exchange knowledge and experience in order to create more socio-ecologically just and biodiverse water worlds.

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