

Our rivers need help

Robert MacNaughton

In 2010 Robert moved to Calne in North Wiltshire, where he started picking up litter in the streets, and demanded his local Council do more. This led to him becoming an elected Councillor, and eventually Mayor. This platform has helped him promote the river work which he feels so strongly about. For twelve years he was a member of a Druid Grove based in North Oxfordshire.

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It all started way back in the summer of 2019 when I noticed an article that said nearly all the rivers in England are in bad health.¹ I thought we must do something about it and with friends here in Calne in North Wiltshire, we formed a local river group called the Friends of the Marden Valley (<http://www.friendsofthemardenvalley.co.uk/>).

After Covid in November 2022 we held our first River Festival where we declared the Rights of the River Marden. I am a local Town Councillor, so was able to ask our Town Crier to declare the Rights from the four directions – a tribute to the many years I had spent in a Druid Grove in North Oxfordshire.

I had seen a photo of the Bishop of London blessing the River Thames, and decided that that is what we were going to do next. I contacted our local Bishop, Andrew of Ramsbury, and I suggested he come for a walk with me, and others, to the real Source of Life – the Source of our local River, the Marden. He agreed.



Photo 1. Our River Marden in the middle of May.

Like many others, I know rivers to be living beings, that they have sentience, and that they need our support in dealing with the poisons and sewage that our selfish corporations are pouring into them, aided and abetted by our inept government. The general election won't change anything with respect to the abuse of our rivers, in our opinion.

At our first River Blessing in March 2023, I introduced Kate, our shamanic practitioner from Stroud, to Bishop Andrew, gave them a pair of waders each, and asked them to create a Blessing together. They only had half an hour to work it out but everything went well. They are both musicians, and love singing. Kate has had shamanic training in South America, and she created a *despacho*, a wreath of flowers made by the children who came to the Blessing, and Kate herself.² Once the *despacho* had been made, Kate and the Bishop got in the river and sang to each other from their different traditions, before releasing the wreath. Around 80 people came from the town to watch.



Photo 2. Kate, Bishop Andrew and the *despacho* in the River March 23.

I was elected Mayor in May 2023, and announced our group would be holding River Blessings through the South West of England for my mayoral year. Being the 'Druid Mayor' helped attract attention and interest.



Photo 3. Tara, our River Maiden, preparing our offering at the winter Solstice Blessing in Bath.

Each participant in the Blessings is asked to bring a flower and water from their local area. The waters are mixed into one jug, the flowers are woven into a *despacho*, and each person steps forward in the circle we make, to talk about the water they have brought, and share any anecdote they feel is important.



Photo 4. The waters being poured into the River Frome, at a Blessing we did in Stroud at Imbolc this year. Kate released the *despacho* as Tara poured the mixed waters from the bridge above.

At the spring Equinox this year we were back in Calne. I had invited the other local Mayors to join us to illustrate that these Blessings are not just for ageing hippies like myself. People from more orthodox backgrounds and more conservative career paths also feel the same need to support and help our rivers.



Photo 5. After the Blessing in March 2024. A lot of people were giving, and receiving hugs.

The Blessings bring people into a larger group with a coherent purpose. Our strength is working together, sharing our love and our indignation at the callous neglect and abuse of the natural world. We need a complete change in our collective consciousness to learn to love our Earth, instead of destroying and poisoning her.

Over the summer of 2024 we are holding three more River Blessings in the South West. Everybody is welcome. We can turn the tide of sewage being poured into our rivers, but, unfortunately, it will take time.

Will you help to share your love with the rivers of our planet?

Notes

- 1 According to the *State of Our Rivers 2024 Report*, the UK's rivers “are in a desperate state of affairs”, with 85 per cent of river stretches falling below good ecological standards. Every single river in England is contaminated with chemicals and toxic agricultural run-off, and there are frequent spills of untreated human sewage (<https://theriverstrust.org/rivers-report-2024>).
- 2 A *despacho* (‘dispatch’) is a ritual offering used by the Quechua and Aymara peoples of the Andes to communicate with the nature deities (to bring rain, to request abundant crops, to cure disease, etc.). For a detailed and accessible discussion, see Armstrong (1990: ch. 1).

Reference

Armstrong G (1990) *Symbolic Arrangement and Communication in the Despacho*. Doctoral thesis (University of St Andrews, UK). Available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10023/1993> (accessed June 2024).