

Opinion

At last, England's dying rivers are an election issue - and the danger isn't just sewage

Friday 5 May 2023, by [MONBIOT George](#) (Date first published: 3 May 2023).

Voters are finally furious about water pollution, but tackling it means unpicking a complex web of assaults from source to sea

I can't help feeling a small surge of gratitude every time an environmental issue breaks the surface. That the state of England's rivers seems at last to have [become an election issue](#) feels slightly miraculous, after so many years in which campaigners have swum against the political flow.

In wards across the country, people who are furious about the pollution of their rivers and coasts seem prepared to vote accordingly in Thursday's local elections. The Labour party has at last smelled blood in the water. Keir Starmer has promised "[real action on this scandal](#)", but the action doesn't yet extend even to renationalising the water companies, though this policy would be [overwhelmingly popular](#).

While I'm glad to see this flood of public concern, there is a danger here: of reducing the issue to sewage pollution. This problem, in turn, is reduced to the malfeasance of the water companies. Sewage pollution is a massive and disgusting cause of riverside in the UK. But if it were eliminated entirely our rivers would still be dying.

The assaults extend from source to sea. They start with the extreme mismanagement of our uplands. As they are burned, drained and overgrazed, their [capacity for retaining water](#) is reduced. Instead of acting as giant sponges that gradually release the water they contain, the degradation of the uplands ensures that water levels fluctuate violently: one day a river might be in flood, soon afterwards its flow might be dangerously low.

As rivers descend from the hills, they come under further assault. Last month, a farmer called John Price was [jailed for a year](#) and told to pay more than £1.2m in court and restoration costs for his massive vandalism of the River Lugg in Herefordshire. He had sent an [18-tonne earthmover](#) into the river to dig out gravel, uproot trees and reprofile the banks, destroying the spawning beds of fish, trashing a 1.5km stretch of the river and polluting a further 7km. As the [judge remarked](#): "He has turned a traditional, tree lined, meandering river, full of wildlife, into a canal void of most life."

He continued in the face of repeated warnings to desist and chased an official in his car for 12 miles, then hemmed him in, blocking the carriageway. Price claimed he was controlling flooding, but as the judge pointed out, his "actions have made matters worse. The channel is deeper, wider and straighter, which increases flow rate and volume as it approaches the road bridge which still provides a choke point for the water." The praise Price had received from some local people "arises out of a total ignorance of the true impact of his actions".

Damage to the River Lugg shown in a photo issued by Herefordshire Wildlife Trust, December 2020.
Photograph: Herefordshire Wildlife Trust/PA

But total ignorance rules. On the Farming Forum, a popular chat site, opinion is overwhelmingly [in Price's favour](#). He is portrayed as a salt-of-the-earth type just trying to make a living, though the court documents reveal that he has assets worth [between £21m and £25m](#).

A farmer called Olly Harrison, with a substantial following on social media and YouTube, [made a video](#) supporting Price, in which he compared rivers to blocked toilets that needed "cleaning out". He demanded that our rivers be "manicured", using a photo of a razor-straight channel in the Netherlands to show what he wanted: "the water gets to the sea as fast as possible". Speeding up rivers increases the flood risk: to reduce flood peaks, you need to [slow the flow](#). He claimed that "nature has recovered" on the Lugg, as a sprinkling of grass has returned to the devastated banks. A petition on [change.org](#) insisting that Price "did the most amazing job clearing the banks and dredging the bottom of the River Lugg" has so far gathered more than 13,000 signatures.

It's bad enough that the extreme concentration of landholding in the UK means an extreme concentration of daily decision-making. It's even worse when some landowners seem performatively ignorant of the most basic facts of ecology and hydrology. It's worse still when they insist on being treated as the "guardians of the countryside".

A healthy river is one that can [meander and braid](#); is connected to wetlands throughout its course, into which it can safely flood; and whose changing topography – pools, rapids, riffle runs, islands, backwaters – creates an endless variety of habitats, each of which supports a different assemblage of life. The featureless drains with which some farmers and England's Internal Drainage Boards (rotten boroughs in [urgent need of reform](#)) would replace them are inimical to most of the life they should support.

Farming is the [top cause](#) of river pollution in the UK, a greater threat even than [sewage pollution](#). As far as we know, there have been only two regional surveys by the Environment Agency, one in north Devon and one in east Devon. It found that in north Devon, [almost 90% of farms](#) (mostly dairy) were not complying with the rules on storing and spreading slurry, while two-thirds were polluting rivers on the day the inspectors visited; in east Devon the figures, respectively, were [95% and 49%](#).

In Wales and the English borders, [chicken farming](#) is pushing rivers towards total ecological collapse. The first hopeful sign I've seen is a warning by the National Farmers Union that this disgusting industry [could be about to fold](#). Yet Powys county council, ignoring both ecological and economic failure, has continued to [grant planning permission](#) for new chicken factories in the catchment of the River Wye.

Though the [farming rules for water](#) have been in force since 2018, Price's case was the first prosecution under them. Blatant lawbreaking is either [ignored by the authorities](#) or farmers are [given "guidance"](#), which they merrily ignore.

Building sites are another regulatory black hole. They are the source of many of the [PFAS](#) and other persistent organic chemicals entering the water system. Yet there is almost no monitoring or enforcement: everything goes down the drain. Our open sewer of a government has done as little as possible to [hold polluters to account](#) or [clean up our rivers](#).

As for sewage pollution, yes, there is an urgent need to take the water companies back into public ownership. Their split incentives – profits v public service – are [lethal to our rivers](#). But even if Labour grew a spine and did so, we would still need a massive programme of new works. The

underinvestment goes back decades, beginning long before the disaster of privatisation.

This government may have calculated that fish and otters and kingfishers don't vote. Now we have a chance to vote on their behalf. Don't let it float by.

George Monbiot

P.S.

- The Guardian. Wed 3 May 2023 06.00 BST:
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