

Spotlight

Rights for River Ouse



The River Ouse in Lewes on 25 September 2024. Credit: Orla Dwyer, Carbon Brief.

This week, Carbon Brief visits a river that could be the first in the UK to gain its own rights.

The River Ouse runs for 35 miles across east and west Sussex in England, winding through the town of Lewes and meeting the English Channel at Newhaven.

Since [last year](#), the Ouse has been at the heart of community discussions in Lewes on what it means to give a river a voice – similar to a [person](#) – amid a growing global movement to grant legal rights to nature.

Lewes district council approved a [motion](#) on River Ouse rights in February 2023, agreeing to develop and consider a river rights charter in two years.

Ahead of the district council cabinet considering this charter next February, Carbon Brief visited the town to hear about the steps towards the Ouse gaining legal rights.

‘Eco-centric view’

[Matthew Bird](#), a Lewes Green town councillor (pictured right) who put forward the 2023 motion, told Carbon Brief that the charter will be comparable to the [universal declaration on river rights](#) used in other parts of the world:

“It [will contain] things like the right to flow, the right to be free from pollution, the right to native biodiversity, the right to have a voice...The key thing for us is that it’s seeing things from an eco-centric point of view as much as you’re able to.”

The Ouse, as with many rivers, faces threats from climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss and invasive species such as [Himalayan balsam](#) – a fast-spreading plant with explosive seed pods.



Bird, who is also the director of the [Love Our Ouse](#) campaign, said that those involved in the motion aspired for a more holistic approach to tackling these issues. He told Carbon Brief:

“We’re just so focused on [sewage](#) [in the Ouse] that all those other really challenging issues were sort of drowned out. It felt like river rights, rights of nature could almost be a framework for looking at that.”

One focus of the movement is to grant the river the “right to restoration”.

Restoring and protecting rivers has [proven](#) to be an effective adaptation measure against increasing flood risk. Lewes was badly flooded in 2000 after the Ouse [burst its banks](#) following heavy rainfall. Hundreds of people were [evacuated](#).

Rights for rivers

Local campaigns are ongoing in other parts of the UK to give rights to rivers such as the [Cam](#), [Don](#) and [Medway](#).

Further afield, a city in Brazil “[legally recognised its waves as living beings](#)” earlier this month. Ecuador was the [first country](#) in the world to include nature rights in its constitution in 2008.

[Emma Montlake](#), the director of casework at the Environmental Law Foundation, who is also involved with Love Our Ouse, said that the charter, if approved, “will be a declaration by the local authority that they accept that the river has these rights”. She told Carbon Brief:

“The charter will also introduce a governance structure that can represent the river. Whether that’s an inter-species council or a citizens’ assembly.”

It will take longer to give legal rights to the river, however, “because there’s no national legislation to pin this on” in the UK, she added:

“It’s about giving nature a voice that it doesn’t currently have. We have lots of legislation, we have protections for habitats and species, we have different regulations for permitting, for pollution. But...our laws are not adequate to protect nature.”