

# Policy Brief: Recognising the Rights of Nature in the UK



## Summary

Rights of Nature (RoN) is an innovative approach to environmental protection and policymaking, with over 50 countries now protecting nature by granting it legal rights. Now RoN has arrived in the UK, with local charters and council motions declaring river rights. This brief outlines the problems faced by UK rivers, and the unique opportunity presented by RoN approaches.

## The Problem

Due to over-abstraction, pollution, and biodiversity loss, none of the UK's rivers are ecologically healthy. Citizens are increasingly frustrated by approaches to river management which exclude local communities and fail rivers. Existing legal protections are fragmented, difficult to interpret, and rarely enforced. Overall, rivers are understood as a resource to be owned and exploited, without any independent moral or legal importance.

## River Rights

River rights approaches solve these problems by:

1. Placing **river health** and rivers' non-instrumental **value** at the heart of decision-making,
2. **Empowering** local communities to speak for the interests of their rivers
3. Providing a clear **interpretative framework** for interpreting laws and policy.

The health and empowerment of the local community, and the health of the local river, are inextricably linked.

## Key Barriers to Recognition

The absence of Rights of Nature in UK law is underpinned by several systemic barriers:

- Legal traditions rooted in property law, and anthropocentrism
- Lack of political will and limited understanding among policymakers
- Fragmented institutional mandates and regulatory constraints
- Dominant economic paradigms that prioritize exploitation over stewardship
- Lack of precedent and enabling mechanisms in UK courts

## Recommendations

To advance Rights of Nature in the UK, the following actions are recommended:

1. Introduce local Rights of Nature declarations and community charters
2. Launch parliamentary discussions or inquiries into RoN legislation
3. Integrate RoN concepts into planning, environmental and land reform policy
4. Build legal literacy and test RoN arguments in UK courts
5. Support cultural and educational initiatives that reframe nature as a rights-holder

**Conclusion** Recognising the Rights of Nature in UK law is not only a legal innovation – it is a moral and ecological necessity. It offers a transformative pathway toward restoring balance between human and non-human life, ensuring future generations inherit a living, thriving planet

Further information [www.riverrights.org](http://www.riverrights.org)

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