

## What does a theory of change for a campaign for Rights of Nature to be recognised in the UK look like?

### Theory of Change: Rights of Rivers Campaign



**Problem Statement:** Rivers in the UK have poor ecological health, few legal protections, and local communities are disempowered.

- 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. Current UK environmental protections are based on a model that treats nature primarily as property, resource, or externality, not as a rights-bearing entity. This approach contributes to the continued degradation of ecosystems, despite regulatory mechanisms intended to prevent harm.
- Rights of Nature (RoN) is an innovative approach to protecting rivers and other natural entities by granting them legal rights. RoN is the fastest growing legal movement on the planet, with over 50 countries recognising nature's rights. RoN approaches are unique in that they recognise nature as intrinsically valuable, with moral and legal standing in its own right. RoN approaches also empower local communities to speak on behalf of and protect their river's interests.
- River rights approaches will solve the problems of UKs rivers by:
  1. Placing **river health** at the heart of all decision-making, and recognising the non-instrumental value that rivers have
  2. **Empowering** local communities to speak for the interests of their rivers, as guardians, stewards, or nature representatives.
  3. Providing a clear **interpretative framework** for interpreting existing laws and policy, and passing new legislation and policy.River Rights recognises that the health and empowerment of the local community, and the health of the local river, are inextricably linked.
- The absence of legal rights for nature perpetuates a system where ecological harm is only addressed *after* damage occurs, rather than being prevented proactively. This legal and ethical gap undermines efforts to achieve sustainable, regenerative relationships with the natural world, and weakens the ability of communities to defend local ecosystems from pollution, over-extraction, or destruction.

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### Key Barriers to Recognition

- 1. Legal Frameworks Rooted in Property Law
    - UK law currently recognises nature as property, not as a subject of rights.
    - Legal personhood or standing for non-human entities is rare and seen as incompatible with common law traditions.
    - Existing environmental law relies on regulatory permissions and thresholds, not enforceable rights for nature.
  - 2. Lack of Political Will or Awareness
    - Rights of Nature is seen as a radical or unfamiliar concept by many policymakers.
    - Few MPs or government departments have formally engaged with RoN debates.
    - Political discourse tends to prioritise economic growth and landowner interests over ecological integrity.
  - 3. Institutional Inertia and Fragmentation
    - Environmental governance in the UK is spread across multiple bodies with limited capacity or mandate to consider rights-based approaches.
    - The Environment Agency and Natural England operate within frameworks that emphasise regulation, not transformation.
    - No single institution has responsibility or incentive to push for RoN legal reform.
  - 4. Cultural Norms and Economic Paradigms
    - Dominant cultural attitudes see nature as a resource to be managed or exploited.
    - Rights of Nature challenges long-standing human-nature hierarchies and anthropocentric thinking.
    - The neoliberal economic model in the UK reinforces short-term extractive priorities over long-term ecological stewardship.
  - 5. Lack of Precedent and Legal Mechanisms
    - Unlike countries like Ecuador, the UK has no constitutional or legislative framework recognising the legal standing of ecosystems.
    - Courts are unlikely to accept novel legal arguments for nature's rights without enabling legislation or local declarations.
    - There is limited public legal education or casework exploring how RoN could be tested within UK courts.
  - 6. Lack of capacity of civil society organisations
    - The movement for rights of nature in the UK is grass-roots led by small community-based organisations which often lack the technical and financial capacity to scale-up a national movement for change.
    - Legal and academic actors are better resourced but the coordination and cooperation between these organisations and community-based organisations is currently nascent and weak.
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- Consequences of Inaction
  - Ongoing decline in biodiversity, water quality, and ecosystem resilience.
  - Communities disempowered from defending local environments.
  - Legal loopholes continue to permit harmful development or pollution.
  - The UK falls behind international leadership in environmental justice and rights-based frameworks

### Inputs (resources)

Resources and conditions required to initiate the campaign:

- Core campaign funding and organisational capacity
- Staff, volunteers, and legal/policy experts
- Support from and to environmental NGOs, communities, academics, artists, and faith groups
- Research, case studies, and educational materials on RoN
- Access to media channels and political networks

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### Activities

What the campaign will do to promote change:

- Organise public education events, art actions, and workshops
- Mobilise grassroots communities to create local river/eco charters
- Engage with local councils, MPs, and policymakers
- Launch media and storytelling campaigns (social, traditional, creative)
- Develop legal proposals or model laws for Rights of Nature
- Collaborate with schools, universities, and cultural institutions

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### Outputs

Immediate, visible results of the campaign's activities:

- Increased public awareness and support for RoN
- Media coverage in mainstream and alternative outlets
- Rights of Nature motions/declarations passed by local authorities
- Educational uptake (e.g. lesson plans, curriculum mentions)
- Public endorsements from influencers, faith leaders, or MPs
- Community charters developed and launched

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### Outcomes

Mid-term changes in attitudes, behaviours, policies, and power:

- Shifts in public narrative: Nature seen as a rights-holder, not just a resource
- Increased pressure on policymakers to act
- Legal standing of nature tested or supported in public discourse
- Strengthened, connected grassroots movement across UK regions
- Inclusion of RoN language in policy documents or legal reviews

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### Impacts

Long-term, systemic changes the campaign seeks to achieve:

- Legal rights granted to specific ecosystems (e.g., rivers, forests)
  - Embedding of RoN principles into UK environmental and planning law
  - Ecosystems protected through legally enforceable rights
  - Cultural and ethical transformation in human-nature relationships
  - Improved ecological health and resilience of landscapes
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### Assumptions

- Public and political will can shift through awareness and advocacy
  - Legal frameworks in the UK can accommodate recognition of nature's rights
  - Communities will see value in RoN as part of environmental protection
  - Successful international examples can inspire domestic policy
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### External Factors / Risks

- Changes in government or policy direction
- Legal or political resistance to novel rights frameworks
- Media misrepresentation or backlash
- Climate emergencies shifting focus away or accelerating change

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

DRAFT for Discussion