

Charter Rights of the River Wye

What is a river charter?

A river charter is a way of defining and expressing the intrinsic and inalienable rights of a river. Aligned with existing regulations and laws, it offers an alternative to the customary human-centric (anthropocentric) lens through which decisions regarding Nature are often made and considers that Nature itself is worthy of rights.

It's accepted that lifeless entities such as companies have rights - the Rights of Nature movement simply asks: why not recognise the same for a living and vital ecosystem?

This movement is global and growing; from Ecuador's recognition of the rights of Nature in its constitution in 2008, to the recognition of Colombia's Atrato River as a legal entity in 2016¹, and the legal personhood given to Whanganui River (Te Awa Tupua) and Mount Taranaki (Taranaki Maunga) in New Zealand in 2017 and 2025²³.

In the UK, the Rights of the River Ouse Charter was supported by Lewes District Council in February 2025⁴. Later in the same year Basingstoke and Deane district council passed a motion to develop a charter for their local chalk stream rivers.

Other local authorities are either investigating or producing charters for their rivers, and a private members bill is going before the House of Lords. It is an idea whose time has come.

Local Background

In February 2023 Herefordshire Council debated a notice of motion calling on the executive to explore the possibility of a byelaw to enshrine the rights of the River Wye and, in addition, wrote to the then secretary of state, Dr Therese Coffey, with a suggestion for a Commissioner for Nature.

The legal advice at that time was that the existing mechanisms of byelaws were not suitable for this proposal, and a Commissioner for Nature never materialised. Although the executive had acquitted the specific question, the spirit of the motion, and of subsequent motions brought before full council, remained.

The adopted council plan states that the council will do 'everything that it can' to improve the health of Herefordshire's rivers, including the Wye. That the river should be given full consideration in matters that could impact on its condition remained a hanging thread.

¹ [Judgment T-622](#)

² [Te Awa Tupua \(Whanganui River Claims Settlement\) Act 2017 No 7 \(as at 27 August 2025\), Public Act – New Zealand Legislation](#)

³ [Te Ture Whakatupua mō Te Kāhui Tupua 2025/Taranaki Maunga Collective Redress Act 2025 No 1, Public Act Contents – New Zealand Legislation](#)

⁴ [Council champions 'pioneering' Rights of River Charter to protect 'landmark waterway' - Lewes and Eastbourne Councils](#)

In 2024 the Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board took a critical step in addressing that shortfall and allocated a space on the board for someone to act as an advocate for the river, and to vote on its behalf in Board decisions. After much effort and a rigorous recruitment process, Dr Lousie Bodnar became the first person to take the mantle of Voice of the River Wye, with full voting rights on the Nutrient Management Board.

Since 2023 the current Cabinet Member Environment has investigated and interrogated the concept of rights of Nature. She has met with Paul Powlesland (Lawyers for Nature), Monica Feria-Tinta (Barrister), Tom Johnston (River Guardian of the Usk) and attended a number of webinars regarding the ways in which local authorities can support the idea of a charter.

Working in collaboration with members of the Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board and the River Wye Catchment Partnership, the Charter for the Rights of the River Wye has been developed. Using the Charter for the Rights of the River Ouse as a reference point, with the aim of producing a high-level document able to garner broad support, the group agreed the Charter as it now stands. This Charter offers an incredible opportunity to local authorities in the Wye catchment to unify under a shared purpose – an action which would be of national significance and a step forward in the recognition of the rights of the nation's vital natural systems.

What will it mean in practice?

A charter typically recognises the inalienable rights of natural entities – that their existence, functions, cycles, and ability to regenerate, should be respected and protected.

In the UK, the production of a charter offers a framework through which natural systems can be recognised, represented, and considered in the decision-making processes that have the capacity to affect their function.

Facing the scale of biodiversity loss and population decline the UK has witnessed in the last few decades (19% of species experiencing decline, with 1 in 6 at risk of extinction) and increasing threats from the climate emergency exacerbating risks to Nature⁵, raising the profile of essential ecosystems is critical to their continued existence.

As an innovative area of law making it is not yet clear how this Charter will apply. It is something that is evolving and, if nothing else, it sets down an intention. The rights that are expressed in this Charter are reflected in current legislation and regulation. In that sense, the protections should already be in place, supported by the rights in this Charter. Appendix 1 details local, national and international regulations, policies and treaties that are relevant to this Charter.

What will it mean locally?

The River Wye and tributaries have been nationally recognised for their ecological and cultural significance, with sections gaining legally protective designations including as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)⁶ thanks to the presence of indicator species, including salmon and water-crowfoot. The river is also the central feature of the Wye Valley National Landscape. However, the features that make the catchment special are in

⁵ [TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf](#)

⁶ [River Wildlife - Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty](#)

unfavourable condition due to multiple complex factors including climate change, flow, excessive nutrients, known and emerging pollutants and non-native invasive species.

As part of the integrated Catchment Based Approach adopted nationally, the Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP) exists to enable collaborative working to deliver improvements across key issues on water quality, wildlife, and sustainable land use along the length of the River Wye⁷.

Alongside this, the Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board (NMB) provides a forum for stakeholders to influence, advise and challenge those having an impact on the river⁸. Together, the WCP and the NMB represent the interests in and of the River Wye.

Representatives from both the WCP and NMB, from a variety of specialisms and backgrounds, and representing a range of authorities across the catchment, came together to produce the accompanying Charter, adapting the global movement for the recognition of Nature's rights to a UK and local context.

By positioning the River Wye as a stakeholder in planning, permitting, and other decision-making processes, governance and accountability is strengthened and collective environmental ethics reinforced. Alongside other national and international efforts, this Charter is a foundation for change, driving forward the regeneration of UK waterways, fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, and re-shaping the national approach to environmental management.

⁷ [Home - Wye Catchment Partnership](#)

⁸ [Committee details - Wye Catchment Nutrient Management Board - Herefordshire Council](#)

Rights of the River Wye

The Right to Flow and Perform Natural Functions

To maintain its natural course and seasonal rhythms without obstructions or extractions that detrimentally affect ecological function of any part of the river system.

The Right to Biodiversity

To good biological health through the existence of balanced, diverse, and viable populations of native species and habitats specific to the Wye and its tributaries.

The Right to Be Free From Pollution

To exist in a state of ecological health and not be subject to detrimental levels of known and emerging pollutants that adversely affect the life of the river.

The Right to Be Supported by a Healthy Catchment

To flow through environments which support the river as a balanced, sustainable, and resilient aquatic ecosystem.

The Right to Regenerate

To recover to full ecological function through natural processes and for this to be supported by intervention, where necessary, to halt the decline in biodiversity and abundance and to increase both over time.

The Right to Representation

To be represented and have these intrinsic rights recognised in the determination of matters that directly affect the river's health now and in the future.

Appendix 1: Key Legislative Drivers

Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000.

Environment Act 2021.

Environmental Improvement Plan 2023 (under review).

Habitats Directive 1992 - Council Directive 94/43 EEC on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora.

The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

The Reduction and Prevention of Agricultural Diffuse Pollution (England) Regulations 2018 (also known as Farming Rules for Water).

The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive England and Wales) Regulations 2017.

UN Biodiversity Conference (CoP15), Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 2022 whereby UK government committed to conserving 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030.

Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers.

Water Framework Directive 2000/60/EC.

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended).

Appendix 2: Glossary of Terms

Anthropocentric

A human-centred perspective that prioritizes human needs and interests over those of Nature.

Byelaw

A local law or regulation made by a council or authority under statutory powers.

Catchment Based Approach (CaBA)

A national framework in the UK for managing river catchments collaboratively to improve water quality and biodiversity.

Nutrient Management Board (NMB)

A governance body focused on managing nutrient levels in the River Wye catchment to protect water quality.

Rights of Nature

A legal and ethical movement recognizing ecosystems as entities with rights to exist, regenerate, and maintain their natural functions.

Special Area of Conservation (SAC)

A protected site designated under the EU Habitats Directive for its ecological importance.

Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)

A UK conservation designation for areas of particular interest due to their fauna, flora, geological or physiographical features.

Voice of the River Wye

An appointed advocate with voting rights on the Nutrient Management Board to represent the river's interests.

Wye Catchment Partnership (WCP)

A collaborative alliance bringing together organisations, agencies, community groups, landowners, and individuals with a shared interest in the River Wye catchment.