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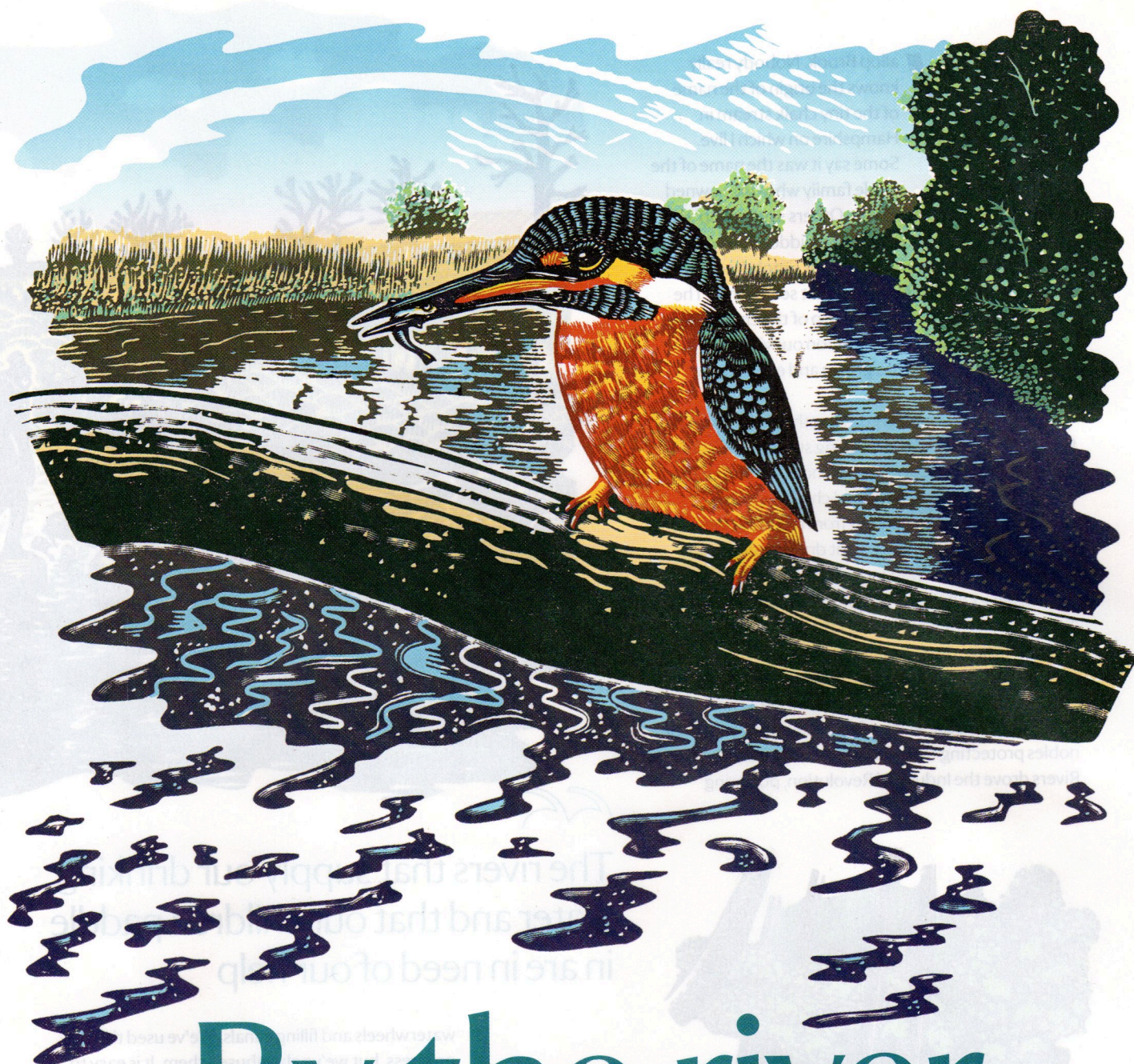
# Woodlands

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# By the river

A year after the Trust launched Riverlands, a project to restore some of our most precious rivers and their catchments, author and chalk stream conservationist **Simon Cooper** reflects on their significance and why we should all care what their future holds

Illustrations by Robin Mackenzie



**W**allop Brook. Nobody really knows the origin of the name of the tiny chalk stream in Hampshire on which I live. Some say it was the name of the noble family who once owned the lands around these parts. Others say 'wallop' is a lost Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'hidden valley'. I err towards the latter explanation, not simply because it feels more romantic, but because it seems true. The unwary traveller will reach the top of the chalk down above us and suddenly come upon our village of Nether Wallop, which has grown and evolved over two millennia.

Our homes are clustered along the Wallop Brook – few out of earshot of the burbling stream. The squat cottages are a reflection of the landscape we inhabit. The walls are made of pounded chalk, the roofs supported by willow spars cut from trees that grew in the meadows. The whole is kept dry by reed thatch harvested from the wetlands. Today our village is archetypally chocolate-box pretty, but the stream along which it huddles is under threat.

People have used rivers since the dawn of humankind. First, for simple things, such as water and irrigation, but over time humans have bent them to our will. Sections of the Magna Carta are dedicated to the nobles protecting their fishing interests from the king. Rivers drove the Industrial Revolution, powering



## The rivers that supply our drinking water and that our children paddle in are in need of our help

waterwheels and filling canals. We've used them to progress, but we've also abused them. It is easy to attribute blame, but rarely has the damage been wilful. And it is no new thing. As early as 1885, Charles Dickens despaired at the end of salmon running up the Thames and the demise of lobster fishing within the sound of Bow Bells in London's East End.

Climate change headlines focus on clean air for cities and ridding the oceans of plastic – both hugely important issues – but sometimes we need to lower our gaze, to look to the landscape that immediately surrounds us. For, like the oceans and air, the rivers that supply our drinking water, that our children paddle in, and that offer all manner of idle pleasures, are much in need of our help. That is what the Riverlands project, launched by the National Trust last year, seeks to do – bring life back to rivers and their catchments.

Why do rivers deserve our care? Do they really need it? Sadly, the answer is a resounding 'yes'. The facts are







## The wildlife that should thrive in and around rivers is as much in danger now as the otter was



stark. Only 14 per cent of England's rivers are in good health. The remainder are polluted to some degree by the triple prongs of commerce, agriculture and urbanisation. Just about every drop of water that falls from the sky is negatively impacted by human activity before it drains into our rivers. And that is very bad news for wildlife.

Otters are a good case in point. The creatures were brought to the brink of extinction over the course of three decades, between the 1950s and 1980s, as their fertility was gradually diminished due to a particular pesticide. There was little evidence of the decline – no corpses littered the river banks – but the species was gradually dying out. Thanks to campaigners who fought for years against government indifference and vested interests, eventually the chemical was banned, but it was another two decades before the otter population began to recover as the poison worked its way out of the food chain. From start to finish that is 50 years. We can't wait that long. Species such as water voles and the birds, insects, fish and other wildlife that should thrive in and around rivers are as much in danger now as the otter was.

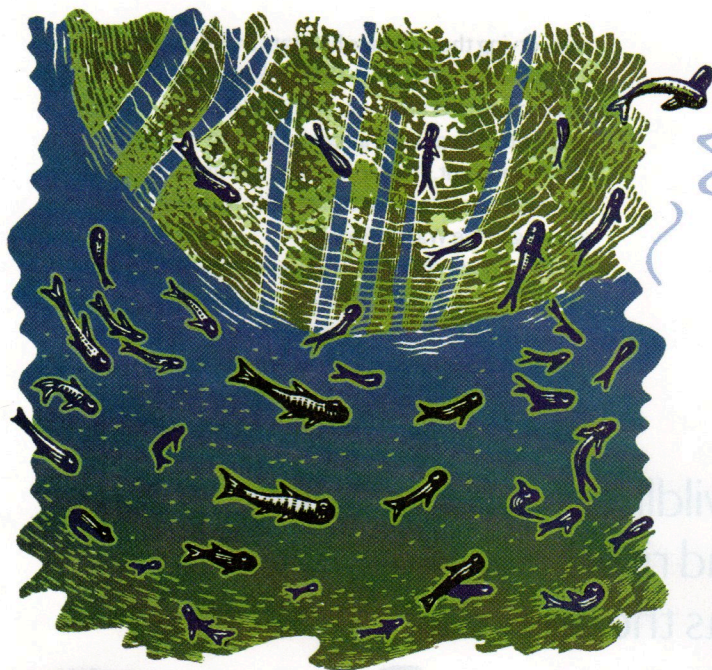
For most of my adult life I've worked on the chalk streams of southern England, initially as a professional fly-fishing guide and part-time river keeper, but latterly

conserving these unique habitats that draw their crystal-clear water from the chalk hills. The need to protect and restore rivers and the valuable work that goes into doing so is a good example of why Riverlands is so important. I've experienced this first-hand, through a problem our community had with cattle grazing in the Wallop Brook.

Like people, cattle love a river. But their heavy weight and sharp hooves erode the banks. Our stream, that should have been five metres wide and a metre deep, had been unwittingly widened over time to become three times its original width and one third the depth – too shallow to hold any meaningful river life.

The banks were grazed of any vegetation, destroying the home of water voles and their like. The once glistening brook had become a lifeless desert. So members of our community came together, working as volunteers beneath the gaze of some disappointed cattle as we repaired the banks. We used the branches and trunks of fallen trees to create deflectors to confine and move the current, and shifted riverbed gravel to create small pools and whirling eddies. We planted rushes, sedge grasses and native plants that thrive in the damp margins of the bankside. And then we walked away. For a whole year. 🌿





## Rivers are the corridors in which so much of our wildlife will thrive given half a chance

❶ Mother Nature is an amazing thing when you give her a helping hand. One year on and our brook is transformed. It is sinuous and green. The tall growth along the banks is flecked yellow by flag irises alive with bumblebees. From somewhere among the wet margins emanates a rat-a-tat-a-tat sound as water voles chew reed stalks. In the shaded eddies shoals of tiny fish congregate, easy prey for the kingfisher that has found the perfect vantage point on a willow whip. On the half-sunk tree trunk are red-pink shards of a crayfish shell – an otter passed this way last night.

For that is the thing about rivers and their landscapes – they are more than just water and fish. They are the corridors in which so much of our wildlife will thrive given half a chance. The sight, sound and beauty of a river are an everyday reminder of our connection to nature. They might not be high on everyone's agenda, but our rivers, great and small, will always deserve our care, conservation and protection. ○

**Simon Cooper** is an author, professional fly fisher and river conservationist. His book, *The Otters' Tale*, was shortlisted for the 2017 Wainwright Prize.

**Robin Mackenzie** is an illustrator and printmaker specialising in wood engravings. He takes inspiration from the chalk stream by his mill studio in rural Dorset.



## What is Riverlands?

The Trust launched the Riverlands project in 2018, working with the Environment Agency and Natural Resources Wales to help restore some of our most precious rivers and their catchments to health.

Only 14 per cent of England's rivers are in good health. Riverlands aims to reverse this trend by slowing the flow of rivers to ease flooding, repairing river banks, helping wildlife in and alongside rivers, and tackling the rise of invasive non-native species. We'll work closely with local communities and provide opportunities to get involved in practical work, citizen science and arts projects.

'There are close links between land use and the health of rivers,' says the Trust's National Specialist for Freshwater, Catchments and Estuary Management, Stewart Clarke. 'As one of the UK's largest landowners, we are uniquely positioned to tackle many issues affecting rivers today.'

Changes are already under way. By the streams in Porlock Vale, Somerset, listen out for the distinctive 'plop' of water voles ducking for cover. Water voles became locally extinct due to human activity, but we have released 300 there since last year. 'This not only brings a much-loved animal back to its rightful home, but adds to the enjoyment of this estate for visitors,' says Conservation Manager Alex Raeder.

Meanwhile, near the River Conwy in North Wales, children have been finding out about Yr Afanc, a mythical creature whose bad mood was thought to cause flooding. Working with a local theatre company, we offered workshops to community groups and schools, exploring how to keep Yr Afanc happy. 'It has been a great metaphor for discussing flooding,' says Ranger Robert Parkinson.

An important part of the work is helping people to access our rivers. At the upper Bure, a chalk stream in Norfolk, we'll be creating 5.5 miles (9km) of new pathways so people can explore more of the area.

'Rivers don't recognise boundaries, and the success of Riverlands relies on everyone getting involved,' says Stewart. 'Together, we hope that we can leave a legacy of healthy rivers for the next generation.'

**i** These exciting changes are just the start. We need to raise £5.3m to complete the first phase of Riverlands. If you'd like to donate or find out how to get more involved, please visit [nationaltrust.org.uk/mag/riverlands](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/mag/riverlands)