Tales from the River
An Anthology of River Literature

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TALES FROM THE RIVER

AN ANTHOLOGY OF RIVER LITERATURE

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—Wendell Berry, The Unforeseen Wilderness, 1991

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We splurged on the raft. While the picture on the box clearly showed two young kids paddling a placid lake, it also boasted a “motor-mount fitting” for an engine. It was comforting to know that this raft at least pretended to be built for rougher stuff.

My paddle-buddy, Cuong, paused in front of a cheaper one. “Are you sure this one won’t do?” he asked. It had one air compartment and looked even more like a toy. “It’s only $32.”

We should have known then that we were in trouble. Neither of us knows much about paddling a river. We are friends through rock climbing. Cuong is a photographer and graphic designer, I’m an English professor, and we became friends through outdoor adventure—climbing in Central Park, surfing in Brooklyn, and mountain biking in Queens.

It’s a ridiculous idea. We plan to paddle the entire twenty-four miles of the Bronx River, top to bottom,
in two days. It’s so ridiculous that there is no evidence of anyone even talking about doing it, let alone attempting it. Only the last eight miles of the Bronx River are officially paddleable (with a permit we do not have), and there are no campgrounds anywhere along the river. In fact, I’m not sure if any part of this trip is legal.

What we do know is that it’s generally a bad idea to take a blowup raft down a shallow river. Coming from downtown Manhattan, though, we couldn’t figure out how to get a canoe through the subway turnstiles.

“Let’s get the raft with three air compartments,” I said. “Just to be safe.” Plus, at $44 it also came with a patch kit, paddles, and a pump.

“Okay,” Cuong laughed, “I guess we don’t want to end up swimming down the Bronx River.”

We picked up a $21 camouflage tarp tent as well and a couple of days later we threw on our packs, took the subway to a commuter train and headed north to paddle New York City’s last remaining fresh water river.

To call the Bronx River “fresh” is a bit misleading. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it became a natural sewer for industrial waste. Factories, processing plants, and scrapyards lined the south, while up north, in the affluent suburbs, the Bronx was treated more as sewer than stream. In fact, until a lawsuit in 2007, the wealthy dumped their raw sewage into the river any time it rained hard. When you add in the
runoff that happens when you cover marsh and stream with asphalt, you understand why the NYC Parks website says that they “commonly refer to sewersheds rather than watersheds in the Bronx.”

I’ve talked my friend into this paddle in part because I’m interested in this bit of my city and its history, but also because we’re always looking for a new adventure in this concrete life. New York City isn’t exactly known for its outdoor activities, but there’s a solid tradition of people pushing at those boundaries. Whether it’s kite surfers fighting to open beaches to kites, rock climbers fighting off liability concerns in public parks, or volunteers offering free kayaking on the Hudson, there is a growing outdoors industry in New York. And while much of it is economically driven, some of it is also rooted in social justice—the belief that access to green spaces should not be limited to the wealthy. It’s a push toward green that brings both the National Parks Service’s initiative to open overnight campsites in Brooklyn and Staten Island—at the fairly high price of $30 per night, and also the Bronx River Alliance to push for a connected and free Greenway trail through the poorest areas of the city. For outdoorspeople who’ve found themselves in the city, it’s an interesting phenomenon to explore. So when we saw a sudden window of warmer weather, we decided to give it a shot.

The train drops us thirteen miles north of the city in the suburban town of Valhalla, where the Bronx River
is a babbling brook among manicured parkland. It is late March, at the tail end of a rough winter, so the snow is still a few inches thick. It’s an idyllic setting, with large homes on rolling hills, and the trails are sun-drenched and empty. We walk down tree-lined paths in old sneakers, pushing through the crusty snow, looking for deep water.

After a couple of miles, Cuong, who goes by Koon because kids in Michigan couldn’t pronounce his Vietnamese name, is getting antsy. “This looks good enough,” he says.

There are sticks and rocks popping up all along the shallow river. I hesitate, but finally agree. We pump up the raft on one of the snow-covered banks and step back.

Our boat is too small. While the box said “two-person,” apparently they didn’t mean two grown men with camping gear. They might not have even meant two adults at all. After trying a few options, we realize that the only way to fit is if we lay our packs lengthwise and straddle our bags.

Our weight dips us deep into shallow water. It’s slow going, and we’re constantly using flimsy oars to dislodge the boat from gravel bars to get into deeper channels. We’re in one of these fast-moving channels when Koon lets out a yelp. There’s a sharp stick barely below the surface pointing directly at us.

It’s too late. There’s a loud tear followed by air bubbles burping. We jump knee-deep into the frigid water and drag our limp boat to the side.
There’s a four-inch gash through the outside bladder and our patch kit is useless. We’re only a few miles in and we’ve popped one of the three air bladders that keep our boat afloat.

“I think we were a little overanxious to get in,” I say.

Koon gives me a look that lets me know I’ve stated the obvious.

We decide to walk a bit further downriver to deeper waters, and head through trees and along train tracks until we reach White Plains, a shopping center town among the wealthy suburbs. We launch again, paddling under bridges and between buildings while people smile at us from above. The sun washes snow from the parking lots, funneling water into the river through plastic drainage. The brook is finally becoming a river.

“I’ve never been so excited to see street runoff before,” I say.

As we head under a highway it’s my turn to gasp.

Just under the bridge, hiding in the shadows, is the top of a sunken refrigerator—its jagged edge a few inches below the surface. We jam our paddles to turn the boat but it’s too late. There is another horrible tear followed by the gurgle of escaping air.

We’ve lost two of our three bladders in the first several miles.

Without an outside bladder we’re almost round, and now without a bottom bladder we dip low. While the water is deeper, every time we paddle now we spin sideways. We must look like a teacup ride in an amusement park—spinning back and forth, zigzagging
downriver. And we’re taking on water. The refrigerator punctured our boat all the way through so there are little pinhole tears that slowly seep water into our hull.

Koon, who has worked as a rock-climbing guide and is a gear-fiend at heart, is far more prepared than I. He has waterproof pants and a cover for his bag, while I’m in jeans that have swelled to six times their original weight. My bag is soaked and I’m pretty sure my sleeping bag is too. It is going to be a cold night.

We pass into Scarsdale where the riverbanks are lined with glistening McMansions and Tudor-styled cottages that each look like they could fit a family of forty. The river winds along private yards and town parks, past the picturesque brick and stone village. Any hint of trash that had begun to appear in the more urbanized White Plains is gone now, picked up by a vigilant town-funded parks crew. Scarsdale is one of the wealthiest towns in America, named the number one “Top Earners Town” by *Money Magazine*, and, along with Mount Vernon, White Plains, and Greenburgh, had to be sued to stop dumping raw sewage into this river. But the Bronx River also seems like a centerpiece here—a soothing vein of natural beauty—and we weave through the suburbs like we’re on some sort of quaint amusement park ride. Lululemon walkers pass by without a glance.

I’ve been to Scarsdale before, to their public high school. It’s an amazing place, complete with a college-level library, performing arts department, and tennis courts. I remember it as a stark contrast to my work at the time as a consultant for New York City schools. Both
were “public,” but the poorer city publics struggled to recruit teachers, pay for classroom books, or offer any arts at all. Many couldn’t even offer basic health classes. They simply didn’t have the space to let students run free. It felt tragic, to see this disparity under the same term, “public,” and only a dozen miles away.

As we head south, toward the city, the trees begin to disappear. The buildings grow denser. City lights turn on and roads replace trees along the riverbanks. The change feels swift, in part because we’re losing sun and getting nervous.

“We need to figure out where to sleep,” Koon says. We consider a small island in the middle of the river, or a crowded cemetery, but we finally settle on an embankment under an outskirt downtown. There is a small floodplain of trees below a condo complex. A hundred feet uphill there is a bodega and a fast food joint, but the embankment shields us from view. A tree-lined highway buffers the other side. We drag the boat out and pull our soaking wet bodies onto shore. We are exhausted, and I just want to get dry, warm, and pass out.

“We need to be smart about this,” Koon says. “We don’t want cops waking us up at 3 a.m. with dogs and batons.” He clears a bit of brush from behind a fallen tree. “This’ll work. No one can see us from above, and hopefully cops don’t look off to the side when they’re driving by.”
We’re trespassing. I’m not sure if this is public land or private but I’m positive that we’re not allowed to be here. Trespassing is a Class B Misdemeanor in New York, which could result in up to three months in jail and $500 in fines. People are meant to sleep in apartments and houses, not along the river.

Our $21 camo tent offers the perfect cover. The greens and grays fit with the brush, and the plastic fits with the trash. Even if you notice the tarp, it might just be a bit of plastic washed ashore.

We set it up and bring our wet clothes inside to keep them from freezing. It’s supposed to be 34 degrees and my pack, sleeping bag, and clothes are all soaking wet. Koon’s are dry. I’m tired and want to be mad at him for not talking through the gear, but mostly I’m just embarrassed that I wore cotton on a rafting trip.

We rehydrate our camp food and are halfway through our meal before Koon laughs, “You realize there are a dozen restaurants within throwing distance. I’m not saying I want to be at one, but it’s sort of ridiculous.”

I remember a girlfriend of mine who hated the idea of camping. She asked, “Why would I leave my perfectly good home to sleep on the ground?” The question doomed the relationship, but she wasn’t wrong. Whether you’re hours from a warm bed or seconds from it, camping is ridiculous. It’s the intentional self-denial of modern amenities. But there is also something serene about lying close to the soil, even in a damp sleeping bag downhill from city lights. There is a
simplicity that offers perspective on need and desire. There is time to breathe.

There's something important about it being so near, too. Historian William Cronon wrote a controversial essay called “The Trouble with Wilderness” in 1995 that traced our history of preserving the “wild” inside of parks. He suggested that we've built a fantasy where we live one life, in town, while we try to preserve a separate, managed, pristine wilderness. He suggested that to do so preserves “wilderness” for the wealthy. It sets up a system where you must pay to access trees and dirt. It is why charging $30 for the privilege of bringing your child to sleep on the ground under the stars is problematic. Thirty dollars for me might not be much, but for a family living on minimum wage it quickly becomes “something rich people do,” and that seems wrong. Equally bad, Cronon said, the separation of nature and civilization encourages us to destroy those areas not “preserved.” Cities become purely utilitarian—nothing but concrete, trash, and people.

The sun wakes us up as birds chirp. This little oasis of water and trees has wildlife on it and we’ve become part of their morning routine. We heat water for coffee, pack our camo tent, and get moving.

Through much of the northern Bronx, the river cuts back and forth under the Bronx River Parkway, the Metro-North commuter train, business centers, public housing blocks, and apartment complexes. It runs with
high walls on either side, hiding the water from city streets filled with more fast food chains, tire shops, and carpet salesmen than you could ever want in a lifetime. The river feels more as if it’s in the way in these areas—something that requires bridges and winding roads, and it is filled with trash. What is most striking, in fact, is not the random appliances or tires, but the plastic shopping bags. They are scattered through the river like lost leaves caught on branches and rocks.

Near 211th Street, we reach the Bronx Park. This is the start of the Bronx River Blueway, the final eight miles of the river. Organizations like Bronx River Alliance and Rocking the Boat bring canoe groups down this final stretch, including local students who explore the river as a classroom. They organize cleanup and restoration projects, pulling hundreds of junked cars and thousands of tires from the river, and they put on community events like the Amazing Bronx River Flotilla Race. While tax dollars up north can go to parks, down here public money is more scarce, and slated for other things, so community groups and nonprofits have moved in to fill the void. It’s all part of an environmental and educational revitalization of the South Bronx that tries to reconnect the river to the people who live alongside it. It is one of many recent and welcomed initiatives for a part of the city that has gone long-neglected. And as powerful as these projects are, they can only do so much. The last census report showed that this is the poorest Congressional district in
the country. More than forty-nine percent of children live below the poverty line. In New York City.

The 718-acre Bronx Park is at the heart of the Bronx. Soon after the park was opened in 1884, the city allocated 250 acres to the New York Botanical Society and another 250 acres to the New York Zoological Society. That means that 500 of the 718 acres, then, are pay-to-play parks. In the poorest of districts, there is a massive park that only the wealthy can enter.

The trash slowly dwindles as we get closer to the Botanical Garden boundary. The river becomes greener and less covered in plastic bags. We paddle around a corner and see a small furry animal digging into a garbage bag on a branch over the river. “Is that a beaver?” I ask. His nose is down so I can’t quite make him out. “—or a rat?”

He pulls his head up and looks directly at us.

“That’s a beaver,” Koon says, jumping up from his pack with such excitement that I worry we’ll tip.

In 1997 the first beaver in more than 200 years was spotted on this river. During the time of the Mohegans, when this river was called the Aquehungh, or “River of High Bluffs,” locals relied on small game like beaver and fish for food. When the Swedes and Dutch arrived in the early seventeenth century, they lived as trappers until they hunted the land bare. They built mills and factories next, as the industrial era took hold, and the fish were polluted out of the river.

It was a big deal when the first beaver came back, so they named him Jose after a South Bronx Congressman
who helped find funding for river restoration. A second beaver recently joined Jose, and from the pictures I’ve seen, this looks like that second, nameless one. It’s a good sign for a once-dead river.

As we get deeper into the park, we reach a low bridge with a security camera pointed at the water. There are so many railings and wires that I back-paddle for a moment.

“You think it’s alarmed?” Koon asks. “We don’t exactly have the right permits.”

“It looks more like a booby trap.”

“I guess there’s only one way to find out,” Koon laughs.

We paddle through without alarm and soon see people walking along the wooded paths, snapping pictures of trees and birds and us. They smile and wave and as we get closer a young couple stops with their boy.

“Where are you guys going?” the mother asks.

“To the East River,” I say.

“Really? They’re paddling all the way down to Manhattan,” she tells her son. “How far is that?”

“Seven more miles.”

“Good luck!” the boy yells.

There are three portages through this park—dammed parts of the river where we’ll have to walk the boat around on private parkland. We reach the first and carry the boat down a thin road, past a small dam where the water cascades across a rough patch of ledges and mini-waterfalls, and then past an old Dutch stone mill.
A golf cart with two maintenance guys comes over the hill toward us.

“Is this going to be a problem?” Koon asks me.

I have no idea so I offer them the friendliest wave I can.

“Nice day to be out here,” one of the guys says, unfazed.

“They don’t seem to care,” Koon laughs.

We head down a dirt path just as a police cart comes over the hill.

“Hurry up,” Koon says, and we dip out of sight.

Past the first dam, the water opens up to a horizon filled with herons and egrets. There isn’t a single road or building in sight. It is serene and we might as well be a hundred miles away. Or four hundred years ago. We chase a flock of ducks downriver until the Fordham Road overpass, the roadway that separates the Botanical Garden from the Bronx Zoo.

On our first portage inside the Bronx Zoo we have to cross a pair of tall waterfalls among deep woods. The path around the falls is short, and we’re only on parkland for a moment. We begin to paddle away when we see two security guards on the other bank of the river pointing at us. One walks toward us, but he is on a ridge twenty feet above.

I yell a hello over the raging waterfalls.

“How’d you guys get around those waterfalls?”

“There’s a path,” Koon says. “We just carried the boat around.”

The guard smiles and watches us paddle past.
The river is widest through the Zoo and the long horizons let us realize how slowly and erratically we’re paddling, shimmying down this broad river with each paddle turning our teacup boat sideways. We paddle under the Wild Asia Monorail, which carries passengers through Mongolian Horses, Asian Elephants, Red Pandas, and Bengal Tigers. Just past, a tiny head pops out of the water. It’s another beaver, twice as big as the first. This, I want to assume, is Jose.

“I can’t believe there are beaver here,” Koon says.

We’re in the center of Bronx but it’s the very picture of sublime, as if we’ve invaded a Hudson Valley School painting. Waterfowl fly above and there are nothing but trees on either side. We’re alone here. The river in front of us seems to end at the horizon as if we could be paddling in silence for miles more to come.

We turn a corner and the serenity ends as quickly as it began. There’s a dam followed by 180th Street and rows of tenements. The dam is our third portage in the park and it’s under construction. There’s a tiny park on the other end that is getting a facelift, but the main purpose of the construction is a new fish ladder—a set of water-filled steps that allow fish to make it over the dam. The Park’s Service has begun reintroducing Alewife and Blueback Herring to the river, starting with the heartiest of species.

With the fences across the river and park, our portage includes climbing a spiked fence and walking across 180th Street. We pass our gear and boat over a piece at a
time, careful to keep from impaling our fragile boat—or ourselves—on the long metal spikes.

Across the street, the riverbanks are made of a hundred yards of car tires, stacked eight feet high and holding back the land that carries the weight of a dozen tenements that seem like they’re falling apart in peeling paint and water-damaged walls. While the trash had slowly accumulated from the suburbs to the city in direct relation to the wealth of the area, here it is abrupt. Striking.

A woman is sitting in a garbage-strewn yard nearby. The building behind her looks condemned, crumbling into the river, but there is laundry hanging from a string outside the windows. She smiles at us, “That looks like fun. Can I come?”

“I wish,” Koon laughs. “Look at how small this boat is.”

The river is contained as far as we can see, funneled by tire walls, then rocks and cement. It is city drainage, and we’re to be flushed out for these last few miles. We paddle past a submerged engine block, plastic bags, discarded clothing, and tires piled as plentiful as rocks. A swelled sock catches onto my paddle.

The buildings here are often boarded or dilapidated. Under each of the next two overpasses there are homeless encampments. We startle one man who is trying to go to the bathroom in peace.

The South Bronx wasn’t always as poverty-stricken. Until the 1950s and ‘60s it was filled with middle class neighborhoods and factory jobs. Over the course of a
few years, city planner Robert Moses cut up the Bronx with highways, using eminent domain to displace hundreds of thousands of people, cutting the population of the South Bronx by more than half in less than a decade. Moses wanted to make Manhattan more car-friendly so that certain people could live in the northern suburbs and drive to work downtown. He was at the forefront of a global urban initiative to partition each urban area into separated sections of work, home, industry, and poverty. Industry would be in one area, poverty in another, white collar work in another, and the upper- and upper-middle class would live on the outskirts of it all, in the suburban counties to the north and east. His mission was a devastating one for this area in particular. He gave many of those displaced families thirty days’ notice to leave their homes before they would be bulldozed for highways, and he drained the city’s public transportation funds to pay for it. As Moses famously said of his work here, he “took a meat axe to the Bronx.” And while our understanding of city planning has shifted since then, the damage done has been written across this landscape.

We paddle south through Starlight Park—a recently renovated set of athletic fields. The river is straight and contained and we pass a half-dead tree that hangs over the river. There is a rope swing dangling from it and the grayness of it all feels like a horror movie.
“There was a kid who drowned in a swimming hole near here,” I say to Koon. “I wonder if this is it.”

“Oh God, I hope not.”

But it must be. There are trash bags and tires and broken glass but this is the only place we’ve seen that resembles a swimming hole.

I remember my own swimming holes, visiting family in Kentucky, where I’d flinch when my feet hit sticks on the soupy clay bottom. I wonder what kids’ threshold for flinching must be here. At the same time, I also know that if I’d grown up here I would be the first to jump in. A swim is a swim is a swim, after all, and we all get used to our own normal.

We paddle past pockets of park that stand out like wildflowers breaking through a sidewalk crack. These parks have been popping up over the past few decades as community groups pressure city, state, and federal governments to increase park access to the area, asking why all of the parks are in wealthy areas, and wondering openly about the effects of Moses’ meat axe. “Economic degradation begets environmental degradation, which begets social degradation,” offered Majora Carter, the founder of Sustainable South Bronx, in a TED talk.

We can only wonder what kind of normal our society’s children are growing up in.

We head under a railroad bridge where two kids yell down at us, “You can do it!”
We’re three miles from the bottom, shimmying back and forth as quickly as the slow river will take us.

An older man with dreadlocks sits on the steps of a park, smoking. He yells a hello and we wave back. He’s in the Concrete Plant Park—a big grass field pocked with orange-painted remnants of a reclaimed factory, standing like sculptures against the elevated railroad tracks and highways. The city removed 32,000 tons of contaminated soil to make this park safe for use.

“Everyone’s been so nice,” Koon says. “We’ve never heard anything but positive things this whole way.” And it’s true.

“I wonder what would have happened if we were black or Latino or Middle Eastern?” I ask.

“We wouldn’t have made it five miles,” Koon laughs. “We probably would have been arrested before leaving Valhalla.”

The river widens through warehouses and factories while big box public housing units and apartment complexes rest silently on the horizon. Row houses and brownstones hide behind highways and elevated tracks.

This is the land that Jonas Bronck bought from the Mohegans in 1639—over 500 acres stretching from what’s now the Bronx River to the Harlem River, from 150th Street to the East River. According to the book *South Bronx Rising*, the land cost him “two guns, two kettles, two coats, two adzes, two shirts, one barrel of cider, and six bits of money.”

Bronck described his new land in a letter home,
The invisible hand of the Almighty Father, surely guided me to this beautiful country, a land covered with virgin forest and unlimited opportunities. It is a veritable paradise and needs but the industrious hand of man to make it the finest and most beautiful region in all the world.

Bronck died four years after arriving but his name stayed with the river, Bronck’s River, and the river gave its name to the borough when it joined New York City in 1898.

The river is wide here, at least a hundred yards in sections, and placid. We paddle past soot-covered factory buildings, a scrapyard, and along rusty barges. Above, there are railroad tracks and a maze of highways.

“There were seashells about a mile back, right?” I ask Koon. “After that last portage?”

He nods.

“I wonder if we’re tidal now. Taste the water. See if it’s salty.”

“I’m not tasting this water,” he laughs. “Are you crazy?”

There is an oily sheen to the black water.

“No, I don’t think I would either—”

“Ok, fine.” He dips his fingers into the river and puts some in his mouth.

I cringe.

“Hm... Salty,” he laughs, “but that could be my fingers. Plus it’s oily. And cold.”
He spits a few times but can’t get the grease off his tongue.

We paddle around the next bend and see a massive garbage boom—a big plastic arm stretched across the river to catch the garbage. It is a hundred yards of trash, end to end.

To portage, we climb a rusty fence, and then pass our gear through a rusted-out hole in a metal wall. Our hands and clothes are red as we push off again, wiggling back and forth through the oily water.

We’re probably going faster now but the long horizon makes our boat feel small and slow and we feel every wiggle. The shore is now a hundred yards away on either side when I remember that our inflatable boat is filled with holes. “If that last bladder pops, we’re done,” I laugh.

It doesn’t. We turn the corner and can see the East River ahead. I pull out my phone to call Lauren, a friend with a car who was planning to meet us at the New Fulton Fish Market. She says that the dock is closed and she can’t find a place to pick us up. There is nothing but fencing and food processing plants here, she says. I see a small gap in the fence at a wholesale grocer and I ask her to meet us there.

We paddle over. The shore is covered in seagull droppings, seashells, and barnacles, but we are no longer worried about adding holes to the boat. We drag it onshore and walk up toward a parking lot filled with tractor-trailers. While Koon pulls our gear out of the boat, I walk toward the road to wave Lauren down.
“I was just here,” she says. “The security guard kicked me out.”

We take a photo with our boat like it’s a trophy.

It is an anticlimactic end, standing in a parking lot, covered in mud and rust and an assortment of other things I’d rather not consider.

We hop in the car and Lauren rolls down the windows. She is nice enough to not mention our smell.

As we drive away, the security guard walks out and toward us, arms raised. I lean out the window to explain but Lauren doesn’t slow down.

“We’re leaving,” Lauren yells as we drive past.

I can only imagine what it looks like to the security guard: A woman drives in and is kicked out. Then she drives in again and when she leaves, she has two mud-covered men in her car.

The guard continues walking toward where we’d come from, toward the river. She looks at the trash bins, at the back of the loading docks, and at the rows of truck containers, but never at the river. She looks perplexed, probably wondering where these two men had come from. One of the containers? Should she call the police? Or send the surveillance footage to Homeland Security?

The river probably never crosses her mind.

She shakes her head as we head out of the lot, turn the corner, and are gone.
RIVERS ARE IMPERILLED

Rivers and wetlands are imperilled.

Indeed, freshwater species and habitats are, on average around the world, more imperilled than their terrestrial counterparts.

Healthy rivers are the lifelines of our planet. Rivers and their watersheds—and the rich variety of life they sustain—provide people with water, food, medicines, building materials, land-replenishing silts, and more. They mitigate floods and droughts, support forests, recharge groundwater supplies, sustain fisheries, and provide byways for travel. A river is much more than flowing water. Its ever-shifting bed and banks, the groundwater below, its surrounding forests, marshes and floodplain are all parts of river life. A river carries not just water, but just as importantly nutrient-rich sediments and dissolved minerals that replenish the land. The river’s estuary, where fresh water mixes with the ocean’s salt, is one of the most biologically productive parts of the river—and of the planet. Most of the world’s fish catch comes from species that depend
for at least part of their life cycle on estuarine habitat. A river’s flow is its heartbeat.

Large-scale conservation planning efforts have rarely targeted freshwater biodiversity, partly because their conservation is often assumed to be incidentally provided in terrestrial parks. There is a scientific data gap to overcome. Existing worldwide species-level data have covered only the largest river basins or select hotspots, rather than all inland waters, and where data has been collected there hasn’t been much focus on describing biogeographic patterns that might reveal we are missing important ecosystems.

Even the greatest of the world’s rivers can no longer be assured of reaching the sea unhindered. The Rio Grande/Rio Bravo River, on the border of the USA and Mexico, often fails to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Its strength sapped by dams and irrigation works diverting water to farmers’ fields and city water supplies. The Indus, Nile, Murray-Darling, and Colorado–once mighty rivers–now struggle to touch their oceans and seas. Dams and channelization destroy habitats, cut rivers off from their floodplains, and alter the natural ebb and flow on which a river’s plants and animals depend. Water is extracted at increasing rates every year. Invasive species crowd a river’s banks, driving out their native fishes, and choking their courses. Pollution fouls their waters, sometimes turning life-giving rivers into serious threats to human health. And climate change threatens to alter all the rules that rivers have lived by for thousands of years. These problems are
solvable. There is enough water in the world. Protecting rivers is a political problem.

Among the most endangered rivers in the world are the Ganges (India and Bangladesh), Rio Grande (Southwestern United States), Jordan (Jordan and Israel), Xingu (Brazil), The Danube (Central Europe), Indus (Pakistan, India and China), Potomac (Mid-Atlantic United States), Nile (Northeast Africa), Murray-Darling (Australia), and Yangtze (China) Rivers. Many thousands of lesser known, precious rivers face as many, if not greater, threats.

*Tales of the River* is inspired by the work of conservationists around the world, and has taken its cue from the fine work of The Nature Conservancy and WWF in their *Freshwater Ecoregions of the World* (FEOW) database. This collaborative project provides the first global biogeographic regionalisation of the Earth’s freshwater biodiversity. We’ve grouped the creative contributions from each author under the FEOW ecoregions to demonstrate the variety of rivers and also the river connections that exist across space.

Feel free to explore the FEOW ecoregions in greater detail—feow.org—or connect with International Rivers—internationalrivers.org—and inspire your own journey of river tales and river conservation.

Margi Prideaux and Donna Mulvenna
Wild Migration and Stormbird Press
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