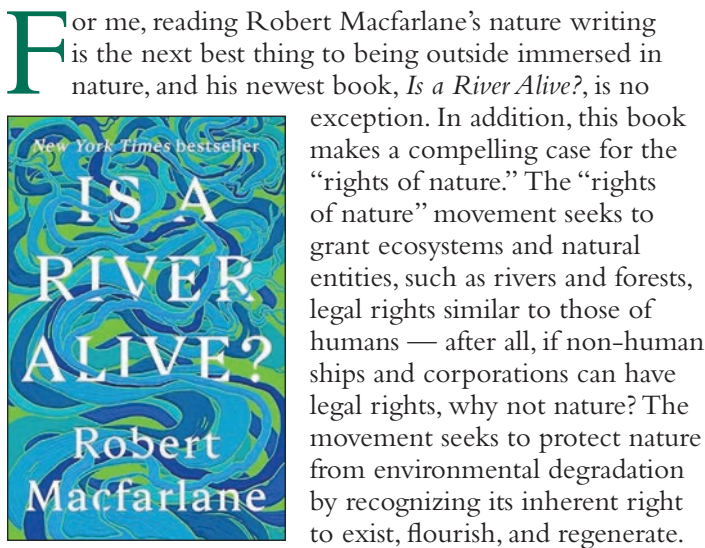


Book Review:

Is a River Alive? By Robert Macfarlane, 2025



For me, reading Robert Macfarlane's nature writing is the next best thing to being outside immersed in nature, and his newest book, *Is a River Alive?*, is no exception. In addition, this book makes a compelling case for the "rights of nature." The "rights of nature" movement seeks to grant ecosystems and natural entities, such as rivers and forests, legal rights similar to those of humans — after all, if non-human ships and corporations can have legal rights, why not nature? The movement seeks to protect nature from environmental degradation by recognizing its inherent right to exist, flourish, and regenerate.

It advocates for a shift in legal and cultural relationships with the environment, moving from one of exploitation to one of stewardship and protection based on the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature that Indigenous Peoples' worldviews recognize as the interconnectedness of all life.

Macfarlane's book, however, does not seek to convince by reason alone. It uses physical, mental, and emotional experiences to explore the idea. It is the quality of Macfarlane's prose that makes his exploration of the question of aliveness so persuasive. His ability to write in a poetic way and with great immediacy about his own and others' encounters with nature helps us break the common "nature is a machine" metaphor we hold and expand our senses and imagination. It is a compelling, exciting, and thought-provoking read.

It is also a stunningly beautiful recreation of encounters with three river systems, each leaving us with a strangely hopeful outlook:

- the Los Cedros Cloud Forest, a watershed feeding the Rio Los Cedros in Ecuador;
- three waterways in Chennai (the Adyar and Cooum Rivers and the Buckingham Canal), a "dead" river system and a sea turtle nesting beach on the east coast of India;
- the Mutehekau Shipu, a wild river also known as the Magpie River, about 600 miles northeast of Montreal, that is threatened by Hydro Quebec dams.

Part of what makes Macfarlane's prose so compelling is his use of the present tense and real dialogue to enliven his experiences and those of the various people whom



Falls on the Ellis River in NH

he encounters on his explorations. Also, his astute descriptions of the people he meets and their interactions can be funny, suspenseful, tragic, inspiring, and hopeful.

You might be forgiven for asking how a dead river system in India could possibly be a hopeful exploration. It is Macfarlane's dialogue and experiences with Yuvan Aves, a teacher, naturalist, writer, and water activist, that turn you around. He asks Yuvan what his dæmon★ is and learns Yuvan has three:

- "I would choose three, not one. First, the millipede. The millipede is a recaster of meaning and matter, you know. It turns the shit of life into something valuable; takes it in, absorbs its harm, transforms it."¹
- "Oh, my second is the mongoose! Here in Chennai, and across India's cities, the mongoose is thriving in the cracks of human life. Like your red fox, it's a space invader. It finds ways to adapt ... It's my dæmon of reimagination, you could say."²
- "Oh, my third is the banyan tree... It has to me a deep-mind-likeness, as well as a long-livedness... the far vision contains the near, and the banyan helps me to see both distances. ... I like that it exists between notions of "good" or "evil", making a nonsense of both. And I like anything that undoes binaries!"³

Another experience illustrates Macfarlane's ability to capture the senses that scientists generally don't recognize. It involves Giuliana Furci, a quadrilingual mycologist, author of two monumental field guides to Chilean fungi, and the scientific lead on his Ecuadorian cloud forest trip. Cosmo Sheldrake, the sound recorder on their expedition, recounts how she veers off the course in the dead of night to discover a new species of fungus. She could not see these fungi from the road — instead, she describes using "a fuzz in the field" that she senses to lead her directly to the new species:

"I didn't see the mushrooms, exactly,' says Giuliana when I ask her about it. 'I heard them. If you know how to listen, fungi just ... tell you where they are.' She shrugs.



Ellis River in NH

‘I’ll get this feeling that there’s a fungus around. I feel, no, I know, that there’s something — no, somebody — who wants to see me. You get a call-out from them.’”⁴

Macfarlane’s illumination of his and Cosmo’s first-hand experiences watching her “sense” new species she cannot see confirms that there are senses we don’t yet understand. Denigrating these senses because we currently lack tools to measure them and cannot construct mechanistic models of them really limits our understanding of the world in which we live.

Ecuador is the first country to enshrine the rights of nature in its constitution. Mcfarlane’s account of this event and the people involved moved me deeply. His account of kayaking the untamed Mutehekau Shipu in Canada at flood stage was suspenseful and totally mind-boggling. Both narratives explore Indigenous People’s world views and illuminate the need for our wider public to gain better access to these perspectives, which are new to the majority of our US population. The perspective of respect for species other than ourselves has always been a hallmark of Indigenous Peoples. This respect doesn’t mean you can’t eat plants or kill animals to eat them — it simply means you must use plants and animals with respect and reciprocity. We must care for them rather than exploit them.

I urge all readers who love nature and respect it to spend some time with this deeply moving book. I highly recommend listening to the audio version since Macfarlane reads it, and his voice expands the poetry of his language. However, reading a hard copy will no doubt give the same experience to others.

— Barbara Bates

I’d love to hear your reactions — you can contact me at BLBates@newtonconservators.org

*NOTE: In Jungian psychology, a daemon is an inner, guiding spirit or force that is deeply connected to one’s life purpose and creativity. In ancient Greek philosophy, it refers to a guiding spirit or lesser deity, not to be confused with a “demon” or evil spirit. ♦

References

1. *Is a River Alive?* p. 121 Kindle Edition
2. *Is a River Alive?* p. 122 Kindle Edition
3. *Is a River Alive?* pp. 123–4 Kindle Edition
4. *Is a River Alive?* p.80 Kindle Edition

Did You Miss the Webinar “Coexisting with Coyotes in Suburban Communities”?

You Can Watch it Online at Any Time.



Since September 2020, Newton Conservators has presented a free webinar series on conservation topics that are important for our community. Many of our speakers have allowed us to record their presentations, and you can watch them on our YouTube page.

In each newsletter, we plan to highlight one of these past webinar gems. This time we focus on Dr. Dave Wattles informative presentation on **“Coexisting with Coyotes in Suburban Communities”** from April of 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aweDzpfYzDE>.

Eastern coyotes are found in nearly every town and city in Massachusetts and they can thrive close to humans in a variety of habitats. Dr. Wattles presents excellent information about the behavior of coyotes, how coyotes came to be part of our neighborhoods over the decades, how they have adapted to our communities, and how to discourage them from coexisting too closely with us. What is the main takeaway—other than what beautiful creatures they are? That the best way to coexist well with coyotes is not to provide food for them, intentionally or unintentionally. And to supervise our pets.

Dave Wattles has been studying and working with large mammals in Massachusetts since 2006, when he began collaring and studying moose for his graduate work at UMass Amherst. He has 15 years of experience conducting black bear research and has been the Black Bear and Furbearer Biologist with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) since 2016.

Information about upcoming webinars can be found under the “Events” tab on Newton Conservators’ website, where you can register for them: <https://newtonconservators.org/events/>. Our webinars are free and available to all. ♦

— Beth Wilkinson and Barbara Bates