

Conference opening talk WATER WALKS at Oxford, 12.11.2021

by Karl M. Wantzen, UNESCO Chair River Culture/Fleuves et Patrimoine

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International Webinar
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When Waters Speak #3
WaterWalks
Valuing Water Through Art and Science
Welcome speech

„Πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει <Pánta chorei kaì oudèn ménei>“, Heraklits word that all is on the move and nothing stays the same is the most philosophical and at the same time the simplest way to describe rivers and their permanent change. They change themselves, they change whatever they carry, but they also change ourselves, as we walk along them. For a sensitive person, it is absolutely impossible to take two identical walks along a river, and also if you take a longer walk along one river, you end up as a different person as you were before.

Humans have always lived at and along with rivers, they are the cradles of humanity. All plains on this planet have been made by water, and the river invites us to follow its borders. Rivers are elongate, that is their nature. Human territories, political and cultural ones, are compact. From this follows, that if you walk along a river, you automatically cross borders, you will get into contact with different cultures. It is inspiring to learn how other people live, how they talk, sing or how they interpret things differently that you thought they had just one meaning. River wandering is an invitation to open-mindedness, to respect others, to learn. The river gives us what we need to live and it threatens those that are greedy and want to get too close to its treasures. River Culture is for me the way of living together with the river, respecting it, carefully using it and taking care for it. Every floodplain is a creative space how to do this, and if you walk along the river, you enrich your life with these different perspectives.

I can only recommend you to read Patrick Leigh Fermors 2 volume diaries of walking along Rhine and Danube from the Hoek van Holland to Constantinople, *A Time of Gifts* and *Between the Woods and the Water*. He had hiked this track in the early 1930ies, just before the world went of fire. At each place where he remained a bit longer, he dived deeply into history and culture. The Rhine Danube axis spans open a four-dimensional space of Europe. Every corner, every stone begins to live... Just phantastic.

When you walk along a river, you should take time to sit next to it or to dive into it, to feel the river with all your senses. Let it wisper in your ear, let your body drift away with it (not too much!!), watch.., listen to the always recognizable but permanently changing pattern of its rhythms. It is like variations to a theme, like Bach's Goldberg variations. They help you forget about your surroundings, to let your spirit spring up like water, to be free of your daily worries and open for inspiration. (And it is so much cheaper than paying 90 bucks per hour for sitting on a outworn couch of your shrink who pretends to do the same! ;))



Sit, watch, and let your mind flow with the river. I think that many of the presenters today have done this or want you to do. It is remarkable and I thank Eriberto to bring together artists and scientists today to discuss jointly. We may have complementary starting points but we can meet and find common grounds. A scientist like me feels the incompleteness of its approach. Sometimes, when doing a measurement on a river, I hold on and start dreaming (my coworkers hate me when I do that!), and I am just encaptured by the beauty, by the unfathomable, unmeasurable. At the same time I feel guilty that I cannot stop the killing. Nature is fine China in our coarse hands, falling into pieces. I witness the extinction, I imagine to hear the cry of another population that is being annihilated. These Giant River Pearl Mussels were the last of their kind in Spain. 400 gram of pure mother of pearls, 80-100 years old they can travel hundreds of kilometers in the gills of a fish in their early life stages, no one has ever seen their youngsters in nature. A miracle and an enigma, and now gone. A friend of mine, Rafael Araujo, spent his life-time work

to save them, he could not. He died last week of brain cancer. Maybe the studies we did jointly can help to revive them from the very last populations in France.



I can not speak much for the artists, despite that I just accompanied two artists, a photographer and biologist (Pia Parolin, <https://www.piaparolin.com/>) and a universal artist (Basia Ireland, <https://basiairland.com/projects/index.html>) on their way to describe their feelings to the river in chapters of the River Culture Book, which will appear in early 2022. Artists can express what cannot be described in scientific formulae. We have to work together, to make nature perceivable for all, to sense nature's beauty, nature's miracles and to take loving care for it, as we would do for our own children.

Thank you all for your attention.