

# Data & Facts - Legal Campaigns Go Upstream

Communities, angry with the poor legal protections of rivers are being inspired by campaigns by indigenous leaders around the world who campaign to have legal rights assigned to aspects of nature, such as rivers.

This page looks at some of the cases being brought, success stories and ongoing investigations into the state of our precious waters.

## Law Shakers: Citizens Turning the Legal Tide

The tide of abuse of power may be turning. More communities are tackling our current corrupt systems of water management. Dirty Water Campaign will be steadily adding important cases that empower communities to fight back here as time goes on. Please share any you become aware of with us on our Telegram Chat.

- 17/2/2025: Lewes and Eastbourne Council decision to support the principles within the Rights of Rivers Charter presented by [Love Our Ouse and allies](#)
- 15/5/2025: [Hampshire rivers granted legal \(personhood\) rights](#). Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council's landmark decision, on Thursday 15 May 2025, granted 'personhood' rights to local rivers, including the Loddon. This marks another positive step in granting legal rights that strengthen protection of Hampshire's globally rare chalk streams. A major victory for nature and an example to follow. Further information here: [Hampshire Chalk Stream legal rights- Metro News](#)
- [Exmouth legal case against South West Water](#) for damage to businesses. Leigh Day supported Joe Bateman and the community, including sports groups and swimmers. This has followed the Supreme Court Decision referred to elsewhere here. Implications for all of UK of the outcome to this case.
- The [Gbangbola family's fight for justice](#) for a public enquiry regarding the **preventable death of their little boy**. 8 year old Zane was the UK's first climate crisis victim. Numerous councils have now passed a motion to back the proposed 'Zane's Law'; more are coming onboard as the months pass, through dedicated campaigning of the family and their supporters. There are wider issues at play here, notably pressing for a 'Zane's Law' to increase accountability and transparency of public bodies. Many councils and some unions are signed up to this. When Keir Starmer was DPP he was also in support. Steve Reed in Support since Parliamentary Summit held in 2025. Dirty Water

made a submission to this hearing.

- Leigh Day [class action in Wales](#) against agricultural and water industries due to pollution of the iconic AONB, the River Wye catchment area. The Wye crosses the English Welsh border and flows to the Severn. Polluter companies include: Cargill PLC, Avara Foods Limited (often referred to as 'Avara Cargill', to recognise the interconnected parent and UK brand links) and Freemans of Newent.
- More here about [the River Wye](#) catchment class action and the [involvement of River Action](#).
- Read about the [Supreme Court decision](#) that **private citizens have the right to sue for nuisance or trespass** caused by sewage pollution. This is not precluded by the Water Industries Act of 1991. This legal recourse has been strengthened by the **Manchester Ship Canal Company Ltd v United Utilities Water Ltd** (No 2) case.
- [River Action](#) took government departments on with the support of The Good Law Project.
- [2025's Legal and Statutory Outlook](#) The **Pickering Fishery Association** have won a Appeal Court judgement against the Government. The group of Anglers said Government river clean up plans were too weak to be workable. Despite the Government appealing against their case, this is another victory for people and planet at the [Upper Costa Beck, N. Yorkshire](#). This strengthens citizens wanting to use the EU Water Framework Directive to reverse pollution of local rivers, lakes, coastal waters and streams. Is it time to resurrect the Public Trust Doctrine, which could be used to underpin the right of protection of commons? There are records of it being invoked in the thirteenth century and has been lost, but never negated fully, in the mists of time.
- [Julianna the Washerwoman](#) versus the Mayor of Winchester could bring us back to basics, post Brexit.

## Ongoing Investigations into the Water Industry and Regulators

- The environmental regulator, the Environment Agency (for England), and the UK water industry regulator, Ofwat, are investigating the Water and Sewerage Companies in relation to pricing.
- The UK **House of Lords** has also been investigating Ofwat via the **Industry and Regulators Committee** inquiry into the work of the Water Services Regulation Authority. The Committee will consider Ofwat's performance against its statutory objectives and whether it has the powers and resources needed to meet those objectives. The Committee will also consider the regulator's relationship with the Government and other regulators.
- House of Lords precis [2023 report on the Water Industry](#)
- The **Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)**, (formed only in 2021), is investigating the performance of the EA, Ofwat and DEFRA.

# Useful Resources

- Global map of ecological jurisprudence to check [legal cases on environmental issues by area](#) | [www.ecojurisprudence.org](http://www.ecojurisprudence.org)
  - 'Does a River Have Legal Rights?' [Article on legal rights for Rivers](#) | New York Times
  - [Nature Lawyers Up](#) article | New York Times
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