

Love Our Ouse presents

RIVER PEOPLE TOUR

A series of community events travelling from source to sea for everyone to **celebrate, learn and act** for the River Ouse

Report on Community Mapping of the Ouse October 2023 - May 2024

Summary



"A river is more than an amenity, it is a treasure." - Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes

Community mapping is a participatory process by which ordinary people can express their local knowledge, understanding, beliefs, hopes, fears and views about a place. As part of the River People Tour, a series of community mapping activities took place in four communities along the length of the River Ouse. These activities helped community members to gain greater awareness about what they collectively most value about their

river, their relationship to it and how they would like everyone to care for it. This helped to create a renewed culture of community care for the river which can be harnessed to create increased demand and action for the protection and regeneration of the River Ouse catchment. This was born out by the communities who took part expressing their almost unanimous support for a Charter of Rights to protect the Ouse.

Along the way, the mapping process also revealed what communities most valued about the Ouse: it was valued not primarily as an amenity, but as a source of physical and mental wellbeing and recreation, a common foundation of place and identity, and the predominant local source for nature connection. Notably, these features are not the main criteria currently used by stakeholders charged with managing the river. This, perhaps inevitably, led communities to express sadness, mistrust, exasperation and even tension towards these stakeholders and the current state of the river under their management: *"I love the Ouse; it's part of what makes my home feel like home... and I want my home to be better looked after"*.

Notwithstanding this frustration, the mapping process also helped people to recognise that they too have a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of the Ouse; that with rights comes responsibilities and it will only be through a collective endeavour that the river can be fully regenerated as “*a thriving giver of life to all*”. Therefore, agencies currently entrusted in the care of the Ouse seeking community greater support would profit from managing the river in a way which also reflects local priorities and engaging communities more actively and influentially in caring for it.



1. Introduction

“I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy... and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation – and we scientists don’t know how to do that.”

(Gustave Speth, Chair UN Sustainable Development Group, 2015)

Whilst acknowledging the hard work others are doing to protect and regenerate the Ouse sadly, to date, these efforts have not been enough to fully do so. Love Our Ouse (LOO) exists in large part to address this ‘cultural and spiritual transformation’ identified by Speth and create and sustain what we call ‘a culture of care’ for the river. After all, what people most love, they most look after. Through rekindling a deeper sense of cultural and emotional community connection with the river we hope to encourage community action needed to regenerate the Ouse to its full health. We at LOO have expertise in knowing how to create that community connection summed up in our refrain of ‘Celebrate, Learn, Act’.



2. What is community mapping and why did we do it?

Community mapping is an umbrella term we have used to describe a series of activities we employed during the River People Tour that enabled people to help create that culture of care. It is a participatory approach consisting of different exercises that actively engage people in issues which affect them through a process of self-expression and analysis. These activities were carried out in four locations: Barcombe, Balcombe, Lewes (twice) and Newhaven specifically for:

- **Creating a shared vision for the future of the river**, which LOO have represented in a peoples charter of rights for the Ouse
- **Shifting peoples perspectives** to be less centred on their own needs and more on what the river needs.
- **Reactivating what people value about the river**, so to deepen the nature/human connection
- **Help develop a ‘culture of care’** towards it that creates more environmentally responsible community attitudes and behaviours towards the river
- **Creating demand for the river’s regeneration**
- **Creating the bedrock of social will** required for new policies/laws/resources regarding the regeneration of the river
- **Support responsible access** to river-based services and activities.
- **Increasing trust** within and between communities and other key stakeholders (water companies, farmers, environmental organisations etc.)
- **Mobilise additional community resources** to catchment regeneration e.g. volunteers and landowners.
- **Inspiring more community-led activities** in support of the river
- **Increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of river services** and activities because they are more closely aligned to what communities value
- **Increasing a sense of community ownership and responsibility** regarding the river
- **Increase the accountability** of key river stakeholders to the communities they aim to serve.

2. **What we did** *“I don’t think you can love a town in the same way you love a river; it’s a different kind of love” – Arundhati Roy*

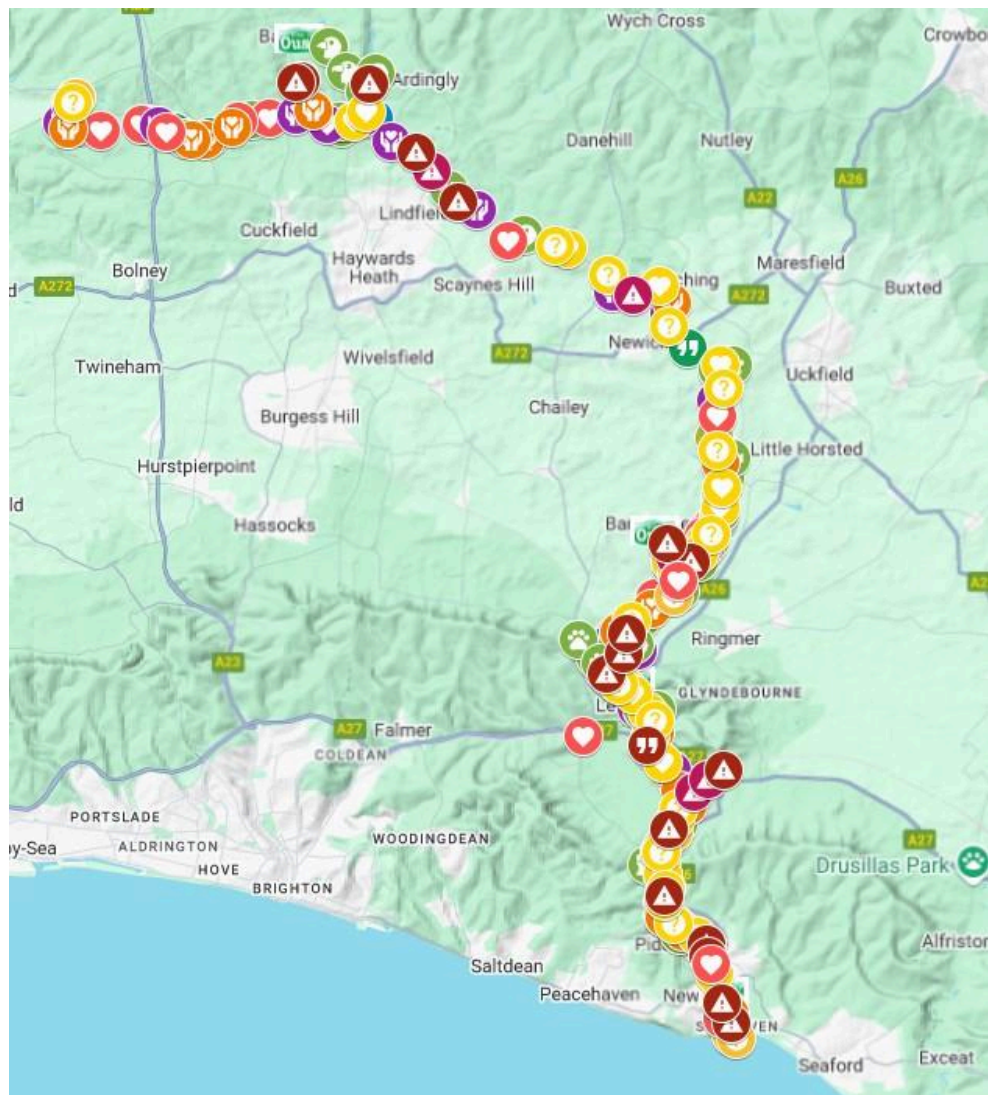
Broad mapping: On a giant satellite map of the whole Ouse catchment, twenty feet in length, people were invited to write down:

- *The places or heritage sites they most love*

- *Special places spots they would like to see protected*
- *Activities they enjoy along the Ouse*
- *Specific memories*
- *Where they have noticed pollution, flooding or environmental degradation*
- *Wildlife species they have spotted along the Ouse*

Focussed mapping: these were large scale Ordnance Survey maps used to help people identify and verify a very specific spot not easily visible on the satellite map e.g. a particular bend in a path.

[Explore our Google Map](#) – We had over four hundred responses and you can explore our interactive map by clicking on it.



Engaging people's compassionate values

In order to mobilise a 'culture of care' for the Ouse, we drew upon the latest science done by the [Common Cause Foundation](#) regarding how to engage peoples compassionate [values](#) in order for them to act in more environmentally sensitive ways. A more comprehensive explanation of the importance of values and how they shape human behaviour can be found [here](#).

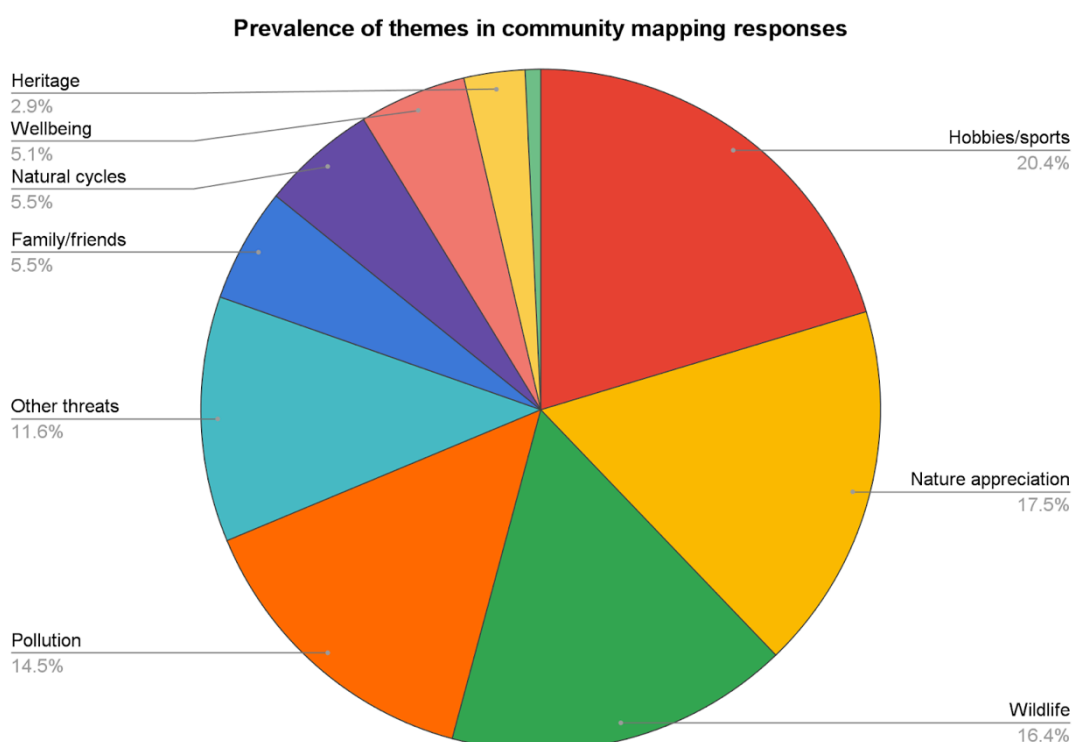
Training: These are quite complex ideas and prior to the River People Tour, we trained six volunteers in the principles and practice of values and norms and how to facilitate the community mapping methodology described.

Engaging values: The way we did this was a series of question cards specifically designed to engage peoples compassionate values about the river and help them reconnect to it by placing themselves in the rivers soggy shoes. People were invited to fill them out and either place them onto the map or peg them up in a gallery. Questions included:

- *What are your favourite memories about the Ouse?*
- *What are the Ouse's favourite memories about you?*
- *What are your hopes for the Ouse?*
- *What do you think the Ouse dreams about?*
- *How do you look after the Ouse?*
- *How does the Ouse look after you?*
- *What do you love most about the Ouse?*
- *What does the Ouse most love about you?*
- *What are your fears for the Ouse?*
- *What do you think are the Ouse's fears?*
- *What do you gain from the Ouse?*
- *What do you give to the Ouse?*



4. Identifying common themes in responses



You can explore all of the community responses on [our interactive map](#). Whilst inputting them into the map, we identified common themes (see below). These themes often overlap and usually consist of a specific place, how they interact and an emotional response. Often it includes wildlife references too. Specific experiences and connections with place/nature that are most significant to people. Themes that emerged included:

Pollution - referring to unclean conditions, litter, types of pollution etc. E.g. *"She dreams of a day when she can flow free from pollution and be a clean home for the other living beings"*. This was a major concern of the community – not just for the rivers health and the wildlife on it, but for humans too who regard the river pollution as a threat to a primary local source of their own physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Other threats - developments and overdevelopment, invasive species and access issues. E.g. *"Humans may push the natural system too far"*, *"The breaking down of the riverbank at Barcombe Mills, through overuse of this area by hundreds of people with boats, paddle boards etc"*

Mental wellbeing - mentions of the river in regards to mental health benefits and emotional wellbeing E.g. *"It gives me meditative resilience"*.

Family/friends/community - mentions of family and friends and sense of community E.g. *"Being able to introduce my grandchildren to the natural world"*, *"A thriving river that inspires and connects the community"*.

Hobbies/sports, specific mention of leisure activities (Swimming, canoeing, kayaking, fishing, rowing, paddle-boarding, walking) E.g. *"Being in Daddy's kayak"*, *"Good memories of swimming at Piddinghoe in the deep and murky Ouse as the tide turns. Excellent stuff!"*

Wildlife (responses mentioning wildlife and plants specifically or non specifically) E.g. *"The heron and the egrets and the wonderful array of wild plants"*. Over forty different species were identified from the very common 'ducks', to the rare 'osprey at Balcombe reservoir' to the lost 'I last saw otters at Barcombe in 1978' to the hoped for 'bring back beavers!'

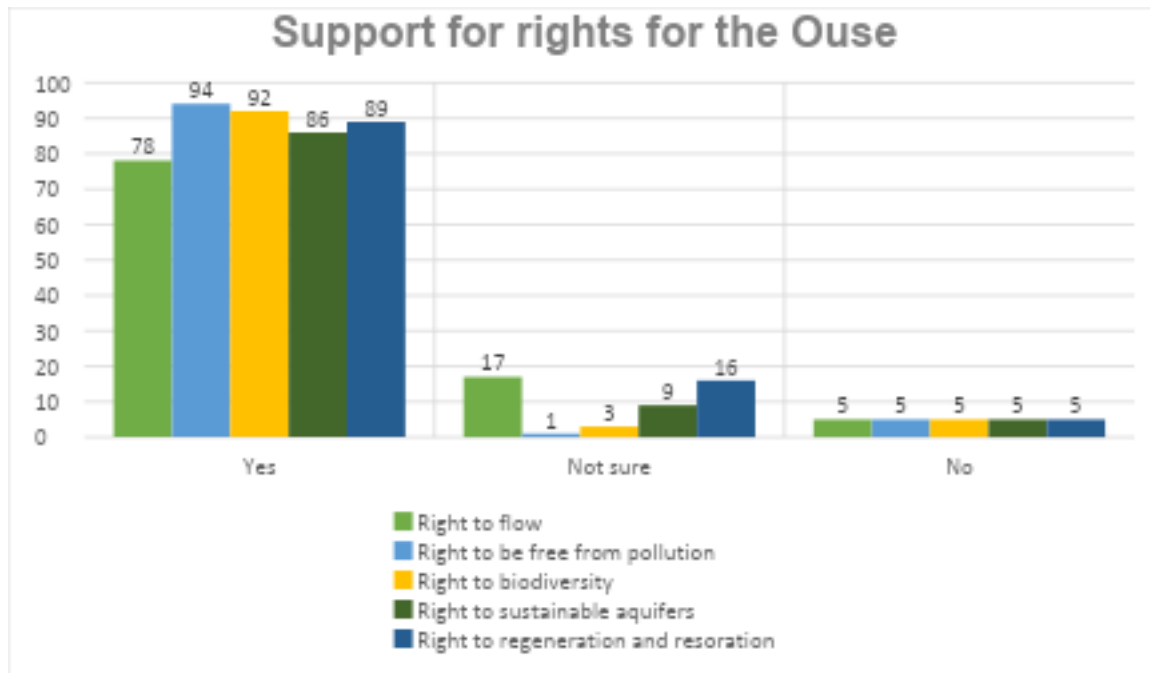
Deeper appreciation of nature, descriptions and observations E.g. *"That it shares all of itself freely with me"*

Natural cycles or Ecosystem services - mention of the water cycle, freshwater provision, changing seasons etc. E.g. *"My contribution to the cycling of water"*, *"It gives us water, it gives us life"*

Heritage (Historical sites and recurring events important to the area, mentions of past time periods) E.g. *"Millenia of flows, movement; a time where man and all living things can be"*, *"62/63 winter. Frozen river. The girls from Browns boat house would skate from home down the river to Barcombe Mills and then walk to the Railway station to catch the train to Lewes. Many lampreys could be seen at Barcombe Mills Andrews Stream."*, *"Lewes to Newhaven raft race"*

Support for Rights of Rivers

At each event we gave an introductory workshop to the growing worldwide Rights of Rivers movement. Love Our Ouse, is at the vanguard of over twenty other UK rivers currently exploring the potential of Rights for rivers and recently held a national summit on the topic. On the Peoples River Tour participants were then invited to consider each of the proposed rights for the Ouse and vote on whether they supported them or not. The proposed rights were drawn from the Universal Declaration of River Rights. People could also make comments on them and add any additional rights they thought the Ouse should have.



As the table above illustrates, there was overwhelming support for the Rights proposed in the draft Charter for the Ouse. These include the Ouse Rights to flow, to biodiversity, right to regeneration and restoration, to be free from pollution and the right to sustainable aquifers.

In addition, people also proposed other rights for the Ouse or edits to these rights:

- *The right to flood onto the plains*
- *The right to give peace and tranquillity to humans*
- *The right to published health checks*
- *The right to sustain life: plant, creature human*
- *The right to have its natural, healthy habitat always to be maintained*
- *The right to live in peace without light pollution or engine noise*
- *The right to connectivity: act as a corridor to other streams and for wildlife migration etc. The right to connect to other water bodies, watersheds and other hydrological processes*
- *The right of nature to take control*
- *The right to exist and live*
- *The right to fine people who pollute*
- *The right to roam*
- *The right to flow in its own direction*
- *The right to love and care*
- *The right not be poisoned*

- *The right to change and be true to its nature.*

Concerns about rights: Where people were unsure whether or not to support a right, this tended to be because they were unsure exactly what the proposed right implied e.g. the Right to sustainable aquifers (which is quite a complex concept) or the right to flow - which for some implied the right to flood in a way that maybe destructive to humans (but actually refers to a rivers need to flow in order to be healthy). There was however concern *“That it doesn't get given ‘rights’ and then gets brought into the legal and financial system in which it could (be) ripe for corporate exploitation and manipulation”*.

Where there was opposition against rights it largely came from the individuals holding very firm worldviews entirely opposed to the concept of Rights of Nature. Curiously, these worldviews came from diametrically opposed ideologies: one was faith-based and believed nature having rights similar to humans was religious heresy; and the other science based and that a river should not have rights based on the fact that it is only made up of random elements and chemicals (as opposed to humans of course, which are made up of random elements and... oops!).



5. Conclusions

To the people who live within the Ouse catchment, for them it is *“unique, irreplaceable”* and of *“inestimable value and worth”*. It is not valued simply as a public amenity for water and sanitation or economic gain (in fact, these were hardly ever mentioned). Rather it is a central, constant and familiar feature of their lives giving them a sense of place, heritage and identity *“without the Ouse, this town would never have existed”*. Rather than a flood threat, it is primarily seen as a reliable source of physical and mental wellbeing. For people who live near it, it is their main focus of nature connection (and all the benefits that arise from this).

So when the river is threatened by environmental degradation or biodiversity loss, that is viewed as a personal threat to their own wellbeing and degrading of their own sense of personal identity. So people saw extending rights to the Ouse to exist and thrive is not seen as such a leap as one might imagine. Rather it is perceived as a logical extension to protect their own rights. It also was perceived as empowering to the community: a charter of rights bestows the community with a sense of ownership and responsibility for the Ouse's welfare that doesn't currently exist. In the communities eyes, it would enable them to help ensure that the river is being regenerated and managed in a way that reflects what they most value about it and their highest hopes for it.

So, key stakeholders currently responsible for the Ouse would gain both political and practical support from the community if their own strategies and plans for the Ouse more closely aligned with these communities desires. Because the Ouse is perceived as a vital and irreplaceable part of their lives, communities don't simply wish to be 'engaged' in litter picks or as water testers, but actively and influentially included in the decisions which affect its wellbeing, and in turn, their own.

There is a vast, untapped reservoir of goodwill towards the Ouse. People of the Ouse want it to be celebrated, they want to learn more about it and they want to act in its best interests. Love Our Ouse will continue to help people to 'celebrate, learn and act' for the Ouse and work alongside other stakeholders who wish to do the same.

6. Next steps?

- A draft charter of rights for the Ouse with accompanying rationale will be submitted to Lewes Council for possible adoption. Information from this community mapping process - which will include your voices will help help draft it. Thank you!
- The mapping exercises helped locate specific possible pollution sites for our citizen scientists to assess. If you would to become a citizen scientist for the Ouse we are run regular training events (see our website for further details)
- If you didn't get a chance to attend our Peoples River Tour, we are exploring ways in which you can add your voice to the Ouse Google map – watch this space!

7. Acknowledgements

Love Our Ouse would like to thank the following for supporting the Community Mapping without whom it would not have been possible: Ouse Valley Climate Action, mapping facilitators Dora Batov, Nancy Cooley, Mark Slater and Jasmine Tribe and all those members of the public who took part who call the Ouse valley home.

8. Get in touch. For further information on how you can support the Ouse, or if you need help with community engagement on your river see <https://loveourouse.org/> or contact info@loveourouse.org

