

Robert Macfarlane – Open Society Ideas Podcast

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Darius Cuplinskas: Hello. Welcome to the Open Society Ideas Podcast, a project of the Ideas Workshop at the Open Society Foundations. I'm Darius Cuplinskas.

Today I'm speaking to Robert Macfarlane about his book *Is a River Alive?* Robert Macfarlane is a British nature writer, the author of more than 10 previous books, including *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Old Ways*, and *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*.

Robert, welcome to the podcast.

Robert Macfarlane: Hi Darius.

Darius Cuplinskas: I'd like to begin with an autobiographical question. Your very first book published in 2003 was *Mountains of the Mind*. You wrote that in your twenties, and it was the first of many books about humanity's relationship to the natural world. What events in your own life sparked this interest of yours?

Robert Macfarlane: I grew up as a climber. That's probably the clearest answer. My heart is still made of mountains and, I think it always will be the—what did Ruskin call them?—the beginning and the end of all natural scenery. And I think at some level they are still to me.

They're shaped by rivers and shaped by ice. They live in ancient conversations with other forces as we know. But I grew up in the Midlands, actually in Nottingham. My father was a doctor. My mom was a hospital secretary. We would travel every year to the mountains, and I learned to be competent and confident in high country from a fairly young age.

And then I became a rock climber, I suppose, and then a mountaineer. Never a very good one, but a very avid one. And I climbed in, have climbed in the Himalayas, in Greenland, in the Rockies and all over the Alps and the highlands of Scotland. So, I think repeated encounter with a very elemental, sometimes

hazardous, excitingly indifferent, in the old sense that world dove deep. It's bone deep.

Darius Cuplinskas: In the introduction to the new book, you mentioned something called Shifting Baseline Syndrome. It's a kind of dry sounding technical term that I think names a phenomenon that haunts the book and perhaps haunts our world.

Could you tell us a little bit more about that I idea?

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah, I can. I'm almost tempted to write a book about it called *Shift* at the moment. It's just such fascinating and powerful idea. So, Shifting Baseline Syndrome actually has a watery origin. It was first coined by a fishery scientist, and it describes in effect the creeping normalization of damage or loss.

To take the fisheries example, the researcher was studying perceptions of catch size, normal catch size in the Gulf of Mexico. He started to compare photographs of generations of fishermen coming back, holding up fish that were typical, good-sized fish that they'd caught. And he noticed that there was a progressive diminishment in the physical size of the fish, but no corresponding diminishment in the perception of that as a good catch, as a normal catch. And so he realized this decrease had in effect become invisible because we rapidly normalize a situation as the baseline. So, that is, the baseline shifts, but we don't recognize the shift that's happened.

So, the other example that I give in the book that's often given is the so-called splatter test which is where I remember from my childhood journeys with my parents to the mountains that the windscreens of our cars after long drives would be splattered with invertebrate strikes effectively. Now it's pretty rare, I think, to see a splat on a screen, and that's partly to do with the aerodynamics of windscreens, changing designs of cars, et cetera, et cetera.

It's also to do with the great thinning of invertebrate life that is underway. But if you didn't know the big splat, you wouldn't realize that the little splat is a diminishment. So it's so powerful and it operates, Shifting Baseline Syndrome operates, in so many areas of our life, I think, but I'm particularly interested in the ecological damage version of that, but it doesn't have to be to the worse. We can have a Shifting Baseline Syndrome, which it measures and recognizes or doesn't recognize increase abundance, betterment. And I call that Lifting Baseline Syndrome.

Darius Cuplinskas: So the book we're discussing today, *Is a River Alive?*, is made up of three different stories about places shaped by rivers. Let's start with the first one, the Los Cedros Cloud Forest in Ecuador. Can you tell us a little bit of the backstory? What led you to that particular place?

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah, I can. I will just add that actually there are four places as it were because the thread that joins and runs and flows, I should say, through the book, is the little chalk spring that rises near my house. I live in Cambridge on 99 million year old chalk and chalk rivers, chalk streams are incredibly globally rare. There's about 200 to 300 of them in the world. About 85% of those are in England. I'm lucky to live near one. They're also desperately fragile because population pressure abstraction loads. They have a unique ecology. I sometimes describe them as our cloud forests, our great barrier reefs. They are miraculous, but they're also taken for granted. So, that little spring, which is in effect on life support, flows through the book.

So four river systems, four continents. Mine, Europe, if I can claim Britain for Europe, which I always wish to do. And then starting then with South America and Ecuador. I was drawn here because I suppose the deep answer is that in 2008, Ecuador reimaged its constitution following the election of Rafael Correa in 2007.

And as part of that remarkable act of moral imagination they redrafted the constitution and into the heart of it inserted four articles, recognizing the Rights of Nature, article 71 to 74. And they made the state the guarantor of those rights and the rights for nature included the right to flourish, to maintain natural cycles, to be respected, fascinatingly, and to be free from damage or harm.

Any citizen, according to those articles, can bring a suit in the Ecuadorian legal system on behalf of nature. a remarkable document, very revolutionary, very radical in terms of the blueprint of a nation state's governance, however, those articles didn't really do much for about a decade. They were sort of symbolic, inspiring, but symbolic.

Then a cloud forest called Los Cedros in the northwest of Ecuador on the Pacific side of the Andes became threatened by gold and copper mining concessions that were granted in 2017. And in order to attempt to protect that forest from what would've been eliminatory level, extinction level mining activity, a case was brought within the Ecuadorian court system seeking a judgment that would rule that mining would violate the rights of the forest and the rivers. A remarkable idea to those of us who live within jurisdictions in which the rights of natural entities is an implausible notion. And that case

escalated up the court system. And then in late 2021, this extraordinary landmark judgment was handed down from the constitutional court.

It ruled indeed that the proposed mining activity would violate the rights of the rivers and the forests in Los Cedros, and it compelled the mining company's formidable institutions, an Ecuadorian state mining company, an army and a speculative Canadian mining company, Cornerstone, to leave the forest. And they did so within 10 days.

Darius Cuplinskas: Then you met some of the people who were behind that case. you tell us how that happened?

Robert Macfarlane: I traveled there with César Rodríguez-Garavito, one of the founding members of the MOTH collective and a human rights and natural rights activist. He calls himself a field lawyer, amazing man, Colombian. Giuliana Furci, Che, a Chilean-Italian-British mycologist, extraordinary scientist and a person. And we were engaged in part in trying to make second collections of two new species of fungi in the Cloud Forest. The identification of which, ratification of which, would enhance the conventional environmental protections of the forest.

I also went with Cosmo Sheldrake, a field recordist, and a multi-instrumentalist who has this extraordinary set of ears, as it were. I was very fortunate to be there with Agustín Grijalva Jiménez and Ramiro Avila Santamaría, who were two of the three judges who ruled on the Los Cedros case. They, and this is really important, had not met the forest in person. They had not been able to travel to Los Cedros during the judgment because it was COVID times. It's about a six, seven hour journey to the forest from Quito. So I was there when they met the forest that they had helped to save from destruction.

Every step we took in that forest felt like one foot fell in the real and the other in the counterfactual, the counterfactual being the one in which the forest was destroyed. It was a very, powerful time.

Darius Cuplinskas: And this is an ongoing story that you published earlier this month. We're recording this in August, 2025. A couple of weeks ago, you published an opinion piece in the New York Times with César. Can you tell us where things stand right now?

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah, it's very precarious, I'm sorry to say. So Daniel Noboa, the young populist president, came to power in Ecuador on combating crime, a militant crime ticket, and however, a month ago, late July at the time of

speaking, he unveiled a series of quote unquote reforms, which are really assaults on the Constitution and the integrity of the constitutional court among them.

He's taking aim at indigenous rights and the rights of nature. He's seeking to enable an extractivist economic program, and he is undoing 20 to 25 years of work by what is undoubtedly the most pioneering nation state in terms of 21st century imaginings of the human relationship with nature and how we legislate and regulate that.

And I'll just give one example of his reforms, which is that he has abolished the Ministry of Environment, Water and Ecological Transition, and he has placed all its powers under the Ministry of Mining and Energy. So, you can see what's been done there. So, the living world now really has no meaningful institution within the state to defend its interests.

And I mean that in the broadest sense, those people, as well as those more than human lives who flourish in what have been protected areas. It's bad, it's really bad, and it's unfolding even as we speak. But there is tremendous and impressive civil resistance including brave, really brave and courageous resistance from the constitutional court.

Noboa has marched, personally led a march on the court. The faces, photographs, and names of constitutional court justices are hung on huge banners in the streets labeled as enemies of the people, traitors to peace. I mean, really ugly, brutal stuff. So the courage of those judges is immense. And it's happening in the, what we might call the rain shadow of Trump.

The American administration is not gonna criticize what's happening in Ecuador because it's happening in America.

Darius Cuplinskas: You mentioned indigenous rights, and in the book you also talk about the Kawsak Sacha movement which involves the Sarayaku indigenous people in Ecuador, but others as well in the Amazonia region. Can you say a little bit about that?

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah. Gladly. It's a remarkable thing. It's in Spanish translated typically as Selva Viviente: the living forest. So this is a declaration that the Sarayaku people devised as it were imagined as a community over several years. And it came from their recognition that the powers with whom they were having to interact over whether or not in effect world ending extractive activities would be permitted within their territory, simply could not

comprehend the notion that is self-evident to the Sarayaku that the forest and the river and the people and the life in the forest comprise a singularity, a web work of relations that are kind of continuous. That being is not specific to the individual human, let's say, rather being, is always in process and lived relationally with Forest River.

So the central premise of the Selva Viviente movement is that the forest itself is a conscious, living being, and humans are part of that consciousness of that life. So is the water. So are the creatures, and that's why it makes no sense to an oil company executive, let's say, it makes no sense to a nation state minister in a conventional liberal democracy because it's untranslatable into the idioms of those discourses. And the impressive thing is how absolute the Sarayaku people have been about maintaining the integrity of that central ontological claim: the forest is a living and a conscious being. They refuse its translation into standard conservation idiom. Oh, we should preserve the forest and not allow drilling there because we want to keep species abundance and species diversity at high levels.

No, they're like, no, it is because it is living entity in a complex and emergent form.

Darius Cuplinskis: One of the sub-themes of the book is how that perspective is in fact very widespread, especially among people who still have some kind of contact ways of living that are more ancient live with in the modern world.

In the second section of the book, you travel to India to the city of Chennai, and you have an encounter with the three rivers that flow into Chennai. As in Ecuador, there are these remarkable humans who are living with these rivers and defending them. So again, what was the backstory? How did you travel to Chennai? How did you meet that remarkable young man?

Robert Macfarlane: Well, again, the combination of profound threat and radical imagination. So the threat there in a way is already realized so that the Los Cedros rivers were saved from annihilation and they still run clear watered for now. But the rivers in Chennai, in a way, the damage has already happened.

So this is a case of almost resurrection from death that's being attempted in Chennai, and the death there, just to give it a conventional, biological name is -- so there are stretches of those rivers that have 0% dissolved oxygen. That's the free floating stuff, not the O that's bound into H₂O.

And that's really the, you have to have oxygenated water to have life within, the water mostly. And they have zero species count, like zero species counts. I laugh at the awfulness of it. And this is a function of extreme chemical and fecal pollution of staggering volumes and failed regulation, failed infrastructure.

A lot of which dates back actually to the British occupation. And Chennai was then known as Madras. And you can really track forwards a lot of the long-term zoning activities and infrastructural failures to the British regime. So I was drawn there really if you're writing a book about living rivers, you have to see dying rivers.

I came to understand that. The amazing thing, the surprise there, I suppose, was how much life did still flourish around them and was enabled by them, and was drawn to them and more than human, even among these absolute desperate circumstances. And I traveled there with this young activist, a naturalist, best field naturalist across all the kingdoms that I've ever walked with anywhere.

Such an eye, such knowledge, and a deep metaphysician as well. And he has lived a hard life, brought up in a context of extreme domestic violence. Ran away from home at 16. Effectively self-educated himself. Lost his younger sister suddenly to an illness when she was 16 and somehow crystallized, metamorphized himself into this ecologist whose dream is to imagine and realize a better future for rivers, people and more than human life in and around Chennai. He's tough. Like he fights hard legal fights, hard ecological fights. He's working in communities. He's under threat from state actors often.

It's absolutely astonishing. And he and I had known each other for five years or so. I don't mention it in the book, but when he was recovering, in effect from his abusive childhood at hands of a stepfather, he ran away to this school called Pathshala, and there he found one of my books, *The Old Ways*, it turned out, and he read that. One of the books that was with him in that time of metamorphosis. So he reached out to me eight years ago now. We've fallen into a friendship, and then I traveled with him and wrote about him, and he amazes me.

Darius Cuplinskis: What's the status of the resurrection of those dead rivers?

Robert Macfarlane: Yuvan is always very insistent with me and rightly so that I don't call them dead. Perhaps deadened or mortified or temporarily wounded. Because it's monsoon region, the rivers do get flushed once a year and the monsoons kind of come through, bring oxygenation, bring fresh water to bring species back, And the whole region, which, and this, I suppose is really

important and it goes back to this idea of kind of ancient forms of knowing and water literacy. We know that human-adjacent beings have been living in that area for a million and a half years. We know this from good archeological evidence by the rivers. Their life there enabled by the water.

And there is landscape evidence of an extreme water literacy in a region that is at once water abundant during the monsoon and predominantly then water scarce during the summer. So it lives in this doubleness, you know, there's too much water and then there's too little, and people learn to manage that using system of tanks, which are dug on down slopes and sort of hold water that the monsoon brings and then makes that available.

So this literacy is then sort of very rapidly collapsed and left the city in this stricken state. So even while he's still working away, I spoke to him just a couple of days ago and he, told me about a wonderful small victory that he'd achieved in terms of moving a very large number of farmers off pesticides and onto organic methods of pest control. And when I was with him, I don't write about this in the book, but he won an incredible court case in two days.

There was a road widening project gonna go straight through saltwater lagoon south of Chennai. We went to the lagoon together, we gathered bird data, we filmed, we verified the presence of eelgrass. We showed where the highway could go. We met a lawyer. We filed all this stuff. That's in one day. That was the Tuesday. On the Thursday, I got a message from Yuvan saying the birds have moved the bench.

The judges ruled that the road will go somewhere else and I was like, this is extraordinary. He is like a mongoose, like he's darting, nipping at power, beating things that shouldn't be beatable. It's really inspiring.

Darius Cuplinskas: And the seacoast of Chennai is also an important ecosystem. You have beautiful passages about the turtles who come to nest on the shore and the humans who protect them as well.

Robert Macfarlane: Well, Yuvan has written a glorious book called *Intertidal*. I've long been fascinated by that ecotone where salt meets fresh, where land meets water. And he knows it very well, and as ever he uses it to think metaphysically as well as ecologically as it were. So he's scattered the ashes of his sister, his uncle, his father, his stepfather, in that sea. And so it's become a place where life and death are actively commingling, let's say, for Yuvan. I saw that in very fleshly terms when we spent the night patrolling for sea turtles, mother sea turtles who come ashore to lay their eggs at that time of year,

January, February. Very moving. These mothers, these ancient mothers, following this ancient instinct to come to this beach, haul themselves out of the darkness, the dark water at night, dig their nests, nest holes in the sand, and then lay typically around a hundred eggs, little ping pong balls, and then fill the nest in, turn around, and dive off back into mystery.

So that was the life as it were, and it was thrilling. We would then dig out the nests in order to take the eggs and rebury them in a hatchery which was safe from dogs and tractors and other forms of harm. But the death, with the carcasses of this, of the mother sea turtles who never made it, killed by trawler strike, typically, you know, every a hundred yards. We would find these huge shells dead. Eyeless, the eyes picked out by ghost crabs present, and you could see where the prop or the bow had struck the shell and split it. So it became a very powerful space that shoreline.

Darius Cuplinskas: The third place you write about is in Northeastern Canada and Quebec in Nitassinan. Can you tell us about the river that you met there?

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah, I will just on the place names, listeners might be interested. So Nitassinan is a word from the Innu language, Innu-aiman. And it means homeland, and that for the Innu as for me, that is unceded territory.

The kind of state settler designation is Quebec, that's the province. So if you were thinking on a map, you'd kind of drive northeast from Montreal for about 600 miles along the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence which comes in at that immense water body, but I call it Nitassinan through the book. So there's a river there, there are so many rivers there. I call it a delusion of infinite resource, which I don't have in this country, in England, because we have so little left. But in Canada it must be hard sometimes to think you could ever run outta river or ever run outta forest, but you can of course.

Many of the rivers in that region, huge wild rivers, have been converted as part of, as it were, the electrification of Quebec. So Quebec is one of the biggest hydro power electric generating machines in the world. It exports a lot of its centers of need to the northern US and in Canada.

And it's done so by damming. So the Romaine River is a multi dam project of one of the biggest wild rivers, and that's reduced it to a chain series of reservoirs. The river is drowned. You would think you can't drown a river, but you can, you just need a big enough dam.

This river, the river I traveled down over 10, 11 days. It has one small dam on it, but Hydro Quebec has its eye on the river for a multi dam project that would in effect flood, back flood, the lower 60 kilometers or so of the river.

The reason I was drawn there is because in early 2021, the same year as the Constitutional court ruling came down in Ecuador, a declaration was recognized, which made the Muteshekau-shipu the first Canadian River to have its rights declared and recognized. And that was part of an anti-damming campaign that was jointly led by the Innu community near the mouth of the river and by the municipal council, as it were, white council of Minganie in the same area. So it was a real alliance of resistance, and it's a beautiful document, short, beautiful document in the Innu version that just recognizes the river as a living and spiritual entity whose life is continuous with that of the Innu people across four to 8,000 years and recognizes its right to go undammed among other things.

Darius Cuplinskis: Part of the story there is you have an ongoing conversation with one of your fellow travelers, Wayne Chambliss, about what does a river want, who can speak on behalf of the river? What kind of intentionality does the river possess? I think it gets us to the deepest underlying question of the book, the title: *Is A River Alive?* But the implied question is "what is life?" Right? And I can share, I think we both know Melanie Challenger who's writing a book right now about this question of what is life? And her argument is that biological life is something extremely rare in the universe and very particular. It has boundaries. It reproduces. It has intentionality, and I think she's inclined to argue against the inflation of, or the metaphorical use of biological life for other forms. I've been thinking about that as I was reading your book. I think perhaps a distinction can be drawn between biological life on the one hand and other forms of animacy.

You kind of dance around that question and probably rightfully so because anyone who thinks they know the answer is probably deluded. I would love to hear a little bit more, some of your reflections on that question.

Robert Macfarlane: Yeah, that's really carefully and interestingly put, and yeah, I have great regard for Melanie Challenger's work and really interested to read it. And I suppose the first thing to say is the title of this book is a question. It's not a statement, it's not a conclusion. The book itself is an exploration, and it doesn't, it doesn't come to hard answers. I think many of the answers, it seems to arrive at only open up new questions. And I think, for me, the importance here is the, is as it were, the provocation that life as it is understood within a technocracy, for want of a better word, has come to be an ultra restricted

category. And that that has perhaps this is where we expand life out to something like a animacy or the power to animate. The mortifying project of extractive capitalism, the benefits of which people like you and me and everyone listening reap, it has been founded upon the restriction of an account, of where life resides, where it is valued.

And I think the distinction is a useful one where animacy exists and functions. The second thing I would say is that it is possible to recognize the rights of rivers without deeming them to be alive. Corporations, nobody would claim a corporation is alive and yet within European and US Legal Convention, a corporation has rights, a whole suite of rights, partly guaranteed under the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to privacy, the right to a fair trial. So it is possible to have the river rights conversation without making a claim about the river itself as a alive.

And the third thing I would say is that rationalism is a cognitive regime. It is an empire of knowing, and there are ways of being and seeing and knowing in the world that lie out with the cognitive empire of rationalism, and some of those ways of being and seeing operate in my country in England.

And it took me in a way, going around the world to realize that a lot of what I was finding elsewhere was happening on my doorstep as well. And for those ways of being and seeing in the world, life is something that is lived in relation. We return here to the Selva Viviente. We return to the Kawsak Sacha that life is not restricted to the biological unit.

It is always lived in relation and the biological unit is merely a concentration and expression of that life but would not exist were it not for the relations with notionally inanimate presence, that life unit exists around. So I am very drawn to those though I also recognize that within the world of, shall we say, an ontological philosophy or process ontology, it's easy to assert relation but hard to know what to do with relation once you've asserted it, what is meant by that word or that term.

I do believe that we have tended to imagine life as, in a Newtonian way, as a series of billiard balls that click and clack off one another. And I, I suppose if the river helped me think about anything, it was to move away from substance and towards process and a recognition of that we are all always already in the flow, in process, even when we think we're standing dry footed on the bank.

Darius Cuplinskas: Indeed. You don't mention Iain McGilchrist's work in the book, but I would direct listeners to his, especially his last big book, explores exactly that question in great depth.

Robert Macfarlane: Absolutely, yes, interesting to me how often I'm asked about Iain's work.

I can't quite work out why Iain and I have not yet crossed paths, but maybe I'll go knock on his door in Skye one day. But yeah, a formidable thinker and I'm often asked in conversation about McGilchrist work.

Although, so that readers know, *The Matter with Things* is what, 1,100?

Darius Cuplinskas: I think it's 1,573 pages long, but that includes 200 pages of bibliography. And you don't have to read the whole thing. It's like a library. But definitely reading the first few hundred pages is immensely rewarding.

Back to just finish with your book, I should say your book is gorgeously written. Much of it reads like poetry. So I hope this conversation will encourage listeners to pick it up and read it for themselves.

The last quick question would be what are you working on next?

Robert Macfarlane: Just about the poetry as it were, it did become clear to me that part of the project of reanimating, animating the idea of river, the being of river, was going to require the remarkable animating force of language which can make us fall in love with people we've never met, grieve for people who've never existed, so it could surely shake some of its readers out of a set of rationalist, instrumentalist recognitions of water or river, as stuff, as good as chattel. I really, I think it's the most sort of linguistically experimental and risk taking of the big books I've written.

And I really relish that challenge of allowing language to try and utter water while also recognizing that water was always shifting in its own forms and that language would always fail. I'm much more interested in how language fails than some dream of correspondence that will always be delusional.

Towards the end of the book, in particular, as my editor put it, the full stop leaves the building. We get into the flow, but, at the moment I'm finishing a re-imagining of the field guide form called, a huge book, called *The Book of Birds* that I've been working on for about seven years with the artist Jackie Morris.

And that comes out next year. And I'm also about halfway through a huge graphic novel retelling of the Epic of Gilgamesh, which is a text that has come to utterly obsess me over the past seven years. And the only tattoo I have and probably will ever have sits over my veins on the inside of my right wrist, and it's the two cuneiform symbols for "River" from the Epic of Gilgamesh. That keeps me honest.

Darius Cuplinskas: Well, we'll look forward to seeing those books come out soon. Thank you so much, Robert, for the conversation.

Robert Macfarlane: Thanks, Darius. I really enjoyed it.