Watery Encounters – Sound Walk Transcript (English)

Echo 1:
Greeting the River
Location: viewpoint above the botanic gardens: Arco do Traição

Hello. You are most welcome to this sound walk about and along the Rio Mondego. We are going to discover this river together and explore our relationships with rivers more generally.

You will be guided on your journey by my voice and each stop on the walk is marked in the map on Echoes, so you can always check that map if you get lost.

Some sonic flows will also keep running down the hill and by and through the water of the Mondego, helping you to flow to the next stop on the route.

Please take care as you move along the route of the walk. There is step free access throughout, but some paths are steep. Also be careful when crossing roads and be aware of other pedestrians and cyclists.

If you haven't already, enter the gate to the botanical garden and stand at the curved white railing overlooking the garden and river beyond.

The Mondego is the longest river that exists entirely in Portugal. It rises in the mountains of the Serra D'Estrela, runs through the beiras and Coimbra, then out into a wide fertile floodplain before entering the sea at Figueira da Foz.

The Mondego flows more than 227 kilometres through schist, granite, quarzite, sandstone and limestone (see Cunha, Santos and Ramos 2020)

Here, we see the river from above

Deborah Cheetham (2022), an Indigenous singer and composer from Australia, talks about how she encounters a body of water as a visitor.
This process comes with duties and responsibilities, she says - duties of care
She advises us to speak their name or names gently and with respect
Maybe you can introduce yourself to the river below now and speak their name if you like.
If you know them already, maybe you can greet them again in a different way.
Take a moment to do this in whatever way you wish.

Look down across the botanical garden and to the river now to see how far you can trace their path upstream and beyond the bridge
To the right their passageway is hidden by trees - how they move through and out of the city

Close your eyes for a moment and try to hold the Mondego in your mind – the totality of the river from source to mouth

Imagine that passageway, from the tiny 'Mondeguinho' who emerges in the mountains, through rocky ravines and wide valleys, through fast flowing sections and slow lazy, lake-like moments where the flow of the water is stilled by dams

How the water of this river meets the sea, flowing out with abundance, with joy to become something other

While your eyes are closed, picture another river. One you know well, one you remember
Allow the two to shift in and out of focus in your mind – the present river below and one that you feel in your memory
Now allow them to flow together - join the movement and shape of this river with the one you remember
If you like, you can trace these movements with your hands

Open your eyes now – we are going to move on in our journey down to the River Mondego

Turn left
Follow the path down through the botanical gardens, which curves down to your right

Turn right again and then left, so you are heading down the steep cobbled hill below the gate which should be on your left

At the 'estufa fria' take a right to walk with the bamboo on your right and then another sharp right to head down the curved path into the bamboo forest. Stop when you reach the Capela de São Bento

References

Cheetham, D. (2022). *Podcast: The Rivers Sing, with Deborah Cheetham and Daniel Browning.* [Podcast]. Available at: https://2022.rising.melbourne/wormhole/podcast-the-rivers-sing-with-deborah-cheetham-and-daniel-browning

Cunha, L, Santos, J and Ramos, A. (2020). The Mondego and its Valley. In Vieira, G, Zêzere, JL and Mora, C. (eds.) *Landscapes and Landforms of Portugal*. Springer.

Echo 2
What is a river?
Location: Capelo de São Bento, Botanic Gardens

Find somewhere to be comfortable for a couple of moments while we deepen our thinking about rivers. There are steps and a stone bench next to the chapel if you'd like to sit

The River Mondego is hidden to us here, but try to maintain a sense of their presence, their continuous flow below us

What is a river?
Rivers form landscapes
Rivers shape places
A river is a boundary
A river is a pathway
A river is resource

How else might we think of what a river is?
As a companion?
As a lifeforce?
As a threat?
As an opening?
As a living connection?

Is a river a single entity?
Are they only the water running through a channel?
Are they also the rocks and pebbles and silt on the riverbed?
What about the banks, and vegetation on those banks? The trees and plants who grow beside and benefit from the river's flow?
And the fish and freshwater creatures and insects and birds and mammals who make their home there. Are they also the river?
What about when the river floods, as the Mondego often has, and the surrounding area becomes the river?
Perhaps it is best to consider a river as a living system that is always moving, but always changing, in its size and energy and scope – they are always multiple

Throughout history, humans have venerated water sources - springs, streams and rivers were sacred to us. Only recently has that changed. Only in the last hundred years or so have rivers for some of us become flattened into resources and services rather than living beings with whom we share a landscape.

Move now closer to the small chapel and look through the gate
Maybe you can't see it, but there is water in here. The chapel is built around a 'fonte', or spring, that existed here and around which the Benedictine monks, whose order owned this land, would pray.

What forces and spirits and energies exist in the deep wells of the earth?
All that water beneath us, held in rocks or aquifers, that emerges through springs, that is scooped up from wells and forced to the surface by pumps

Some of that water, deep down in the rocks, has existed there for millennia

Can you feel it beneath you? Place your hands on the earth if you wish to get a little closer to the dark, watery places of the deep.

Time for us to move now down the hill towards our friend, the Mondego river.

With the chapel behind you, walk forwards and then turn left to follow the path down the hill, with the bamboo on your left and the apple trees on your right.

At the fork in the path, take the right hand route and walk down this lower path until you reach the fonte dos tres bicos on your left. We'll stop there for a couple of minutes.

Echo 3
Control and Flow
Location: Fonte dos três bicos, Botanic Garden

Stop here to examine the fonte dos três bicos, which is the building on your left.

Taken over by natural growth, the structure recedes into the woodland, but you can still see the markings on the building, perhaps where the water source would have emerged – something that looks like a flower, something that might be the rays of the sun

And then all that snaking growth, gently pulling apart the stones and mortar; the solidity of the building melting into green.

Across history, some humans have consistently tried to control and manage and harness the energy and movement and flow of water - rivers in particular.

The Mondego often flooded downstream from Coimbra before the dams upstream of here were built. They had a torrential winter flow of more than 4000 times that in the summer, so dams were constructed to prevent this and to create hydro-electric energy (Cunha, Santos and Ramos 2020, p.175)

But what are the consequences of changing the flow of the water in this way? Of imposing our will upon the river?

The Mondego River upstream where I live is slow, sluggish and lake-like

My friend tells me that the people in her village of Ázere, near Tábua on the Mondego, were famous for apple growing. After it was dammed, the mist from the river made conditions too damp – the apples would rot and they couldn't grow them there any more

What does it mean to do change the course of a body of water?
What does it mean to subdue their flow and alter their passage and put them to work?

Robert Macfarlane (2026) says that 'Europe has the most obstructed river system of any continent, with more than a million barriers fragmenting river-flow, and only a handful of free-running waterways remaining' (p.20).

Deborah Cheetham (2022) reminds us that in many ancestral and Indigenous cultures, rivers are sacred

Changing their flow, extracting from them, treating them as a resource, rather than a living entity with whom we share a landscape often has consequences for human and other than human life. Migratory species can no longer swim upriver to spawn, river sedimentation is increased, as are methane emissions and water loss through evaporation (see Pearce 2006). Those downstream live with the threat of the dam failing, as the Aguieira dam on the Mondego nearly did, in February this year.

Do the benefits of the dam outweigh these effects?

This land was once owned by Benedictine monks before it was a botanical garden. Before that through the times when the university was built and back to when the Romans established Coimbra as a city, we can imagine that water flowed here from the ground rock to the surface of the land, and people would mark and venerate and give thanks for that sacred flow.

Before we move down to the river Mondego, take just a couple of moments in this place and reflect on all the rivers whose flow is managed and controlled and extracted from across this continent – the free flow of water subdued.

Deborah Cheetham (2022) insists though that rivers continue to sing, with longing, resilience and rising.

It's time now to go hear the song of the Mondego, as we go to meet them in person.

Keep walking down the cobbled path. Follow it round to the right and then left, exiting the botanical garden through the portão da alegria.

Walk straight ahead and cross the three lanes of the main road at the crossing on the left. Please be careful here!

Head now towards the avenue of plane trees ahead. Walk down the avenue, with the park on your right and the white tables and chairs on your left until you reach the river

References

Cheetham, D. (2022). *Podcast: The Rivers Sing, with Deborah Cheetham and Daniel Browning.* [Podcast]. Available at: https://2022.rising.melbourne/wormhole/podcast-the-rivers-sing-with-deborah-cheetham-and-daniel-browning

Cunha, L, Santos, J and Ramos, A. (2020). The Mondego and its Valley. In Vieira, G, Zêzere, JL and Mora, C. (eds.) *Landscapes and Landforms of Portugal*. Springer.

Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Pearce, F. (2006). *When the Rivers Run Dry: What happens when our water runs out?* Eden Project Books.

Echo 4
Who is a river?
Location: Rio Mondego, Parque da Cidade Manuel Braga

Finally, we have arrived at the river themselves

Stand at the railing and look out over the Mondego and then down
Feel how the air is a little cooler on your skin next to the water
Examine the plants growing below on the banks – when I am here in the summer, there are reeds and sugar cane, grasses and wild fennel

Look carefully at the Mondego's waters – what flow can you see? What movement? Can you see any birds on the river or above? What is the scent of the air here? Can you spot any fish in the shallows?

Does the river look happy and healthy?

What traits does the river have here, as they pass through the city? What is their personality?
What relations can you see between humans and the river, between the city and the waterway?

Across the world, rivers have been a focus for movements promoting the rights of nature.

In Ecuador, indigenous groups have led the way to a constitution that upholds the rights of Pachamama or Mother Earth (Strang 2024, p.1679)

In New Zealand, personhood and thus legal rights have been conferred upon the Te Uruwera Forest, the Whanganui River and Taraniki Maunga (Mount Taranaki) (Strang 2024, p.1679)

Robert Macfarlane (2026) says that 'At the Act's heart is a radical claim: that the Whanganui River is alive, and an ancestor to the Whanganui *iwi* (tribe)' (p.27)

Would you grant this river personhood?
Are they alive?

Macfarlane (2026) goes on to say that 'everywhere I travelled, I asked people the same question: what is the river saying?' (p.15). 'We live in a polyphonic world', he says, 'but also one in which the majority of Earth's inhabitants – human and other-than-human – are denied voice. To be silenced is not the same as to be speechless. No landscape speaks with a single tongue' (p.16)

Veronica Strang (2024) also asks what it means to listen to a river and then respond to their needs
She asks, 'How do we know when a river is flourishing and thriving?'

What is this river saying to you now? Spend some time listening, perhaps not just with your ears, but with all your senses to feel how the Mondego speaks and what they might be saying about their existence here with us, about their passageway through this city, about their relationship with human kin. Open your body to the flow of this watery entity, this fluid being, this multiple, polyvocal lifeforce.

When you are ready, turn left and move along the river.

You can walk down the steps and past the docas bars or head to your left to take the step free route behind the bars.

We are heading for the ‘ursinho’, or little bear, who lives just past the docas bars and restaurants, and beyond the children’s play area.

References

Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Strang, V. (2024). Listening to the river: Representing non-human needs and interests in debates about water governance and management, *River Research and Applications*, 40(9), 1698–1709. https://doi.org/10.1002/rra.4137

Echo 5:
The river remembers
Location: Rio Mondego, Parque Verde (Ursinho)

Just in front of the ursinho is an area beneath the trees where you can approach the river and examine the water a little more closely.

Carefully approach the river's edge and take a look at the water, the rocks beneath, the fish and underwater plants. When I am here, there are ducks resting in the water and on the bank of the river

Does a river remember? Do they hold the happenings and movements and livings in their passageway in their flow?
Does this river remember their form before they were dammed, where they used to flow?
Do they remember the fires that swept past them near where I live in the summer of 2024? Searing down the river corridor?
When the storms came here in February 2026, the Mondego flowed over their banks, pushing at the dams and threatening communities downstream
3000 people near to Coimbra were evacuated due to the threat of flooding.

'In *Rivers Remember*, her book about the 2015 floods in Chennai, India, Krupa Ge describes the systematic injuring and forgetting of Chennai's rivers over centuries. 'We displaced them,' she writes 'disallowed them from entering their own turf. And then we built on top of their homes'

But Chennai's rivers, Ge continues, are beings with long memories – memories which reawaken in times of flood. 'We didn't think they'd remember, but they did' (in Macfarlane 2026, p.130-131).

Author Toni Morrison names the phenomena of water's resistance to containment when she writes about the Mississippi River flooding; she disputes the idea that the river is flooding, instead seeing it as the water returning to the land the water remembers: 'All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.' (in Bailey-Charteris 2017, p.53)

What memories are carried in the flow of rivers?
What memories do you hold of times with and by flowing water?
Pause now to remember a river you have known, perhaps the one whose waters you combined with the Mondego at the beginning of this walk.

What memories do you have of being in, with or by these waters?
Let them slide into the Mondego here, to join with these waters
As we did when we traced the shape of rivers at the beginning of the walk, let's allow watery memories to meet, eddy and flow together.

When you are ready, turn left to move toward the footbridge just along the river. We will meet again beneath the footbridge on the banks of the Mondego

References
Bailey-Charteris, B. (2017). *The hydrocene: eco-aesthetics in the age of water*, Routledge.

Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Echo 6:
Relations and Connections
Location: Under the Pedro e Inês footbridge

Under this footbridge on a sunny day, you can see the light reflected from the flow of the water on the underside of the bridge.

Humans and rivers have long, deeply connected histories
River valleys were the cradles of early civilizations in Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in Peru, Mexico, South Asia and China (see Pearce 2006)

Where rivers were, people settled, planted and built

Humans would change their behaviour seasonally in response to the variations in the water's flow. Some peoples still do, planting crops in watery places when the floods recede and then retreating when they come again. Along this river, goods were transported from the interior to the sea on flat bottomed 'barcas serranas'.

In many places though, rivers are contained, managed, straightened, put to work, extracted from, dumped into, built over, even forgotten altogether

What still ties us to rivers?
How can we feel those deep ancestral connections with the water flowing through the world?

Many Portuguese poets wrote about the beauty of the Mondego and so, it is known as the 'river of poets'. Luis de Camões described the 'sweet and clear waters of the Mondego' (see Veiga 1994), while Deborah Cheetham (2022) sings with the rivers of Australia
She says that all rivers have a voice and we can sing with them
What is the voice of this river – the Mondego? Do they call to you? Do they sing to you?

What kind of composition could you create with them now?
You could use your voice and blend it with theirs
You could find a reciprocal movement or gesture in your body
Maybe it is enough simply to breathe with them

Take this moment to compose a brief space of connection between you and the river, before we move on.

When you're ready, take the steps or step free route up onto the footbridge and head for the very middle of the bridge where the river flows beneath you

References

Cheetham, D. (2022). *Podcast: The Rivers Sing, with Deborah Cheetham and Daniel Browning.* [Podcast]. Available at: https://2022.rising.melbourne/wormhole/podcast-the-rivers-sing-with-deborah-cheetham-and-daniel-browning

Pearce, F. (2006). *When the Rivers Run Dry: What happens when our water runs out?* Eden Project Books.

Veiga, JC. (1994). *Os mais belos rios de Portugal*, Verbo.

Echo 7
Bodies of Water
Location: Pedro e Inês footbridge

Stop for a moment in the middle of the bridge and look down to the flowing water beneath you
We are all bodies of water – the river and us
As you watch the river flowing, feel also how that flow connects with you

Astrida Neimanis (2012) reminds us that we are between 60 and 90% water at any given time – we are watery beings

She tells us how all the water in the planet that ever was is still here – it has remained the same, cycling in and out of individual bodies, flowing between us

Water connects us to the planet, to its history, to our companion species, to each other

'ko au te Awa; ko te Awa ko au'
The Whanganui proverb, quoted in the Act granting personhood to the Whanganui River says: 'I am the river; the river is me' (Macfarlane 2026, p.28)

As you stand on this bridge, suspended above the flow of the Mondego, as you listen to and watch and feel that continuous movement forward, feel your part of the greater flow and cycle of water on this planet, as it moves within and through and out of you, as it nourishes and cleans your body, as it joins with the bodies of water with whom we share the earth

We flow together, we are interdependent
Repeat the phrase to yourself: 'I am the river, the river is me', 'I am the river, the river is me'.

When you are ready to move on, continue over the bridge to the other side of the river. Take the steps or step free route off the bridge and head to your left, walking along the bank past the canoeing area where the river flows to meet the manmade shoreline.

Keep walking until you reach the point where the concrete edges into grass and stop there.

References
Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Neimanis, A. (2012). Hydrofeminism, or on becoming a body of water. In Gunkel, H, Nigianni, C and Söderbäck, F. (eds.) *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Echo 8:
An offering for the river
Location: Banks of the Mondego river

On our penultimate stop of this walk, we can now look back over the Mondego to where we were, to the old city of Coimbra, high on the hill.

Humans have historically revered, prayed to and with, immersed themselves ritually into and given thanks for the life-giving presence of rivers and streams.
Rivers were gods and goddesses, nymphs and deities.
They deserved respect, thanks, offerings, rituals for their abundance

In the context of the climate crisis, Robert Macfarlane (2026) says that 'Around the world, people are fumbling for forms of ceremony and language with which to express the speed and severity of loss – creating new-old rites of nature' p.101

Let's create our own ritual of thanks now for the presence of the Mondego here

What can you offer? A song, another memory, a pure thought, a passing fancy, an action or gesture of thanks, a wish for their future, a promise, a commitment, a secret?
Offer something and leave a trace - a word, a sound, a gesture - as a gift for the river

It doesn't matter what it is. It only matters that you offer it here, that together we give thanks through that offering.

When you are ready, turn left to walk back along the bank, with the river on your right

Pass under the footbridge and choose a bench to sit on next to the human made channel in front of the river.

References / Referências
Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Echo 9:
Wishes for the future of rivers
Location: Rio Mondego

Once you are settled in your chosen seat, look out through the trees and beyond to the river. The city is hidden here, but you can see the infrastructure of human lives meeting the river in other ways.
What fits well in that combination? What jars?

As this experience comes to an end, let's think with the river about our future together.
What can we co-create?

Astrida Neimanis (2012)reminds us:
'To say that my body is marshland, estuary, ecosystem, that it is riven through with tributaries of companion species, nestling in my gut, extending through my fingers, pooling at my feet, is a beautiful way to reimagine my corporeality. But once we recognize that we are not hermetically sealed in our diver's suits of human skin, what do we do with this recognition?' (p.93)

The Innu people, in defending the Muteshekau Shipu River in Quebec from damming projects, drafted a resolution.
Robert Macfarlane (2026) records the three key principles that emerged for the Innu Council:
First, that the river is a living being and relative – at once ancestor and descendant – and, as such, sacred.
Second, that each generation has a responsibility to protect the river for those who are yet to be born and those they will never meet.
Third, that a continuity exists between the human and non-human lives of the river (p.216)

In our final moments together, let's gather those sacred continuities and responsibilities and hold them together with the Mondego.
Offer a wish for this river, for your home waterway, for all the bodies of water across the earth.
Use the power of your imagination to reach towards hopefulness for our future relations.
In doing so, remember all those who work with and on behalf of living beings across the planet.
Know that we are never alone.
Believe too in the power of nature to remediate and recover.
Whisper your wish, your hope, your imagined future to the river and allow it to flow with all the other memories out into the sea

Thank you so much for spending this time with me and with our companion the Mondego

Goodbye

References
Macfarlane, R. (2026). *Is a River Alive?* Penguin Books

Neimanis, A. (2012). Hydrofeminism, or on becoming a body of water. In Gunkel, H, Nigianni, C and Söderbäck, F. (eds.) *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice.* Palgrave Macmillan.