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CONVERSATIONS WITH MOTHER NATURE

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A podcast by the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature
Transcription - Episode 10: Roots of Change:
The Birth of UK's Rights of Nature Network
(ESPAÑOL ABAJO)

Lucy (Presenter): Hello friends and welcome to the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature's podcast, Conversations with Mother Nature. My name is Lucy Gavaghan and for this episode, I made a journey from Scotland, where I live, to London to meet Paul Powlesland by the River Roding in London. Paul lives beside the river and extended an invitation to meet him there and record this conversation in person. As you listen, you will also hear the sounds of the wind in the rushes and the trees and the noise of the water in the river flowing. We hope you feel as though you were right there with us.

Paul is a barrister at Garden Court Chamber, a founding member of Lawyers for Nature, and at the core of an emergent UK Rights of Nature network. Paul is a specialist in Environmental Law, Nature's rights, and the defense of activists. Famously, in 2023, he climbed a tree in Wellingborough and remained up in its branches to protest the decision of a developer to cut it down. Paul is a guardian of the River Roding and his life on its banks is an embodiment of the principles of his work, namely a deepening understanding of the interconnections between all life. I hope you enjoy our conversation.

So for all of the listeners, can you try and paint a picture of where we are right now? We're by the river, but what does that mean to you?

Paul: So we're on my mooring in Barking, which is sort of hidden at the edge of one of the largest tidal reed beds in London, tucked away as you saw when you arrived! And all around is a quite harsh human-built environment. So the a A46 North Circular is 100 meters away, one of the busiest motorways in London, the town center of Barking, one of the busiest Townsends in London is 10 minutes walk away and there's a massive housing estate a few meters away from the other side of the river, there's railways and pylons and rubbish and rats! And yet in the midst of it all is this beautiful wild hidden gem which is where I'm privileged to be able to live just on the banks of the Roding which is London's biggest river.

Lucy: You're more immersed in Nature here than anyone whose home I've seen. I was wondering how life changes for you in the summertime?

Paul: I mean it becomes a lot nicer! [Laughs]. I mean there's a lot I've learnt, I've lived on a boat for 12 years now and I've learnt to try and avoid this idea that winter is horrible we have to get through it, 'cause actually winter has its own blessings as well - there's something quite nice about closing the doors of the boat and sort of snugging yourself away like a little door mouse with your stove on, in your nest.

But summer is just incredible here, the reeds come up in sort of late April and they sometimes grow around a foot a week, just as you can see huge - I think they're around maybe 3 to 4 meters high at their highest and just form a wall of green. So actually you can see now in the winter when you look over there, you can see all the buildings of the city and it feels quite even though you're in Nature, it feels like cities encroaching on you. But here now the buildings almost entirely disappeared, all you can see is green and there's something very magic about that.

And also I've got the seating area right next to the river where I can sit on sunny days and it feels like a real privilege to be in one of the largest cities on earth, but gently ensconced in a wall of green and Nature, like a nest.

Lucy: So you say it's a privilege, how else does it make you feel living here, do you feel alone or do you feel accompanied?

Paul: I feel a bit alone human wise, I think if this was in the middle of the country I'd feel very, I would feel lonely but obviously I'm just five minutes cycle away from a station that takes me to yeah one of the biggest cities on earth so I can do whatever I want and like… so there's a kind of actual feeling of relaxation when I come back to here at night, and you know I'm on a district line and then cycling through this like very urban sometimes hostile environment, and I get to my path and they get to my gate and wander into the reeds and just can feel my body relaxing.

Lucy: And how has living here changed the way you approach your work? Or has it changed the way you approach your work?

Paul: Yeah I mean, it's quite interesting. 2017 was unintentionally a very big year for me in a way that I didn't quite realize at the time. it was, although Lawyers for Nature was founded in 2019, the things that led to it (which is particularly the Sheffield Tree campaign happened to me in 2017, we'll maybe go into more of that in detail later). But the same time 2017 is when I

moved here, and actually I moved here - I did move here to start a project to have boats more and to use that to restore the river. But I didn't realize at the time how much my work on the Roding would contribute towards my Rights of Nature work, and actually it's all been as important, sometimes more important, than the kind of lawyers for Nature - very typical Rights of Nature - campaign work, because it gives so many practical examples and illustrations of all of how Rights of Nature might work in practice.

And actually when speaking to people about Rights of Nature I often find that that's more… it cuts through almost more than the theory. People can be like oh yeah, I mean you know Ecuador has in this constitution great or you know the Maori, in New Zealand did it for the Maori people with the Whanganui River, but how can that really work here? Then you can be like well, actually here is like 15 different examples of all of the ways that a Rights of Nature approach might work in practice, and I've gone out and done that on this river, let me tell you some stories about it. And it just sort of really cuts through to people I think.

Lucy: So obviously living here, you'll have learnt more and more about the river itself. Is there anything that you have realized that you don't know that you want to know about the river, about the ecosystem here and the way the non human species interact, any mysteries or puzzles that have come to you?

Paul: I mean, a huge amount [laughs]. I feel like the first couple of years I knew absolutely nothing basically, which is quite interesting as well, I'm not you know, trained as an ecologist, all of my knowledge is self taught. In the last few years I feel like I've grown to know it probably better than most other people, including ecologically trained people who are supposed to be looking after it from that environment agency, just purely because the more time you spend in Nature, the more time you have to get to know it and draw patterns and draw together different parts of it.

I think a big change for me actually was last year, I did a walk along the river from the source to the sea and mapped everything (on open source Google Map which to anyone is available to look at). And I basically took a photo and geographically pinned and then described across 12 sets of data pretty much everything I could see. So every set of trees, every single outfall, every bridge, every river, bit of river condition, everywhere the bank was hard, everywhere there's rubbish and basic species, pretty much everything which is quite a labor of love.

It took me like three weeks in the end to do, over various days. What it did do was it was like a kind of self taught crash course in ecology in the river, because if you just look at enough different examples of the river in different conditions, you can soon start to understand what causes that. And actually the connection between certain practices towards the river and the

condition was way more direct than I ever thought it could be. I thought, you know it would start off as a pristine, perfect stream and then actually went further and further downstream it would just gradually get worse and worse, but actually it was far more direct than that.

On the first night that I camped alongside the river, it was in a Woodland and the river was so beautiful. It was a tiny little babbling brook, clear water, meanders, gravel in an ancient Woodland - it was perfect. And then literally on the next day, I started walking and 100 meters away, the water was no longer clear, full of algae, was basically like an overgrown ditch. And it's basically where the river had been straightened and then plowed right up to the banks and all of the chemicals and pesticides and fertilizer gone in it. And that is literally 100 meters away.

So I was like oh, wait a second hmm, if you allow the river to have Woodland surrounding it to trap and purify the water and gradually release it, and you know allow it to meander and don't pour chemicals into it and agriculture practices, you get a good result and if you do this you get a bad result. Yeah and that was like over and over and over again, just by looking at the river, just by looking at it and actually describing it.

Lucy: So discover it, instead of just being told.

Paul: Yeah! That actually was quite interesting, the mapping exercise was quite important. I had walked the river two years before from source to sea just looking at it, and I learnt some stuff actually being forced to describe it - makes you actually really look at it and describe what you're seeing, and makes you go deeper. And there was this, there was a nice story; on the middle section of the river it had quite a lot of abuse from agriculture, and then just south of a town called abridge I got to the section and I was looking at it being like this is how, I just felt I knew, just knew in my heart, this is how the river should look.

The river was in a good condition, so this is how it should be. And I literally wrote up a thing saying like, this is an example to all the landowners in the middle section of how the river should be. You know like there were beautiful meanders and channels through reeds, the water was clear and you wanna swim and you could, you know you felt this was in good condition.

And then a couple of months later, I was at something called the Roding into Species Council organized by Moral Imaginations, where we all pretended to be beings in the Roding and discussed the condition of the river. And I met a guy there (also called Paul), who I found out was a river engineer on the Roding in the late 70s, 80s, and he worked on the middle river and I said ah, you know what, this is like section of the river there that just looked really great and he was like oh my God we basically did an experimental new way of river management on that section of river, that at the time was incredibly controversial. But before then they would always

just like dredge and straighten the river to allow water to flow as fast as possible. But for that section they basically left the channel natural and instead built flood banks set back to allow it to flood over the sides.

So what was fascinating was that something that happened before I was born, resonated through time, such that I (as a complete amateur) could look at it 3, 4 decades later and know that that is how the river should have been treated.

Lucy: Tapping into an instinctive understanding, and then putting words to it afterwards I think it's always, it's the way of learning that lasts so much longer than any other.

Paul: And to me it shows that we need you know, the state agencies that charge you looking after rivers need to get out of their office and just be on the river, like walk it, see it, feel it and I guarantee that will lead to I mean - imagine if the EA or people that did the exercise that I did just walk the river and map it all and we're then tasked with taking the worst bit to the river and improving them. I think that would be better than the current top down, office based approach.

Lucy: Something I keep talking to people about is, there's been an over emphasis on taking these issues seriously and an under emphasis on taking them personally and that gap has caused more harm and more disconnection than I think we yet understand. And it's not that difficult to fix, it is the nice thing and an exercise like your own just walking a river and mapping it which is such an interesting idea, I've never heard someone describe it in quite that way, could be a way to bridge that.

Paul: I want to think I mean, it kind of shocks me in many ways that that isn't done. Like every river in the UK should have an open source map, pinpointing all the things on it like it was mad to me for the government didn't even know where every pipe was going into the river. Well how the hell are they supposed to stop pollution. You know where the pipes are, yeah it's basic, it's a basic starting point, isn't it you know? We want to get rid of all invasive species but we need to know where they are. Now there's a map composing every part of Japanese knotweed within the river, so we can work from the top down and eliminate it. Yeah you know it's like it seems to me obvious, but maybe it's not, because it's not being done elsewhere?

Lucy: I think it's obvious if you live in connection with Nature and it makes total sense in that circumstance. I am really curious how much this kind of embodied practice that you do integrates with your Lawyers for Nature work. And this gives us a good opportunity as well to introduce the listeners to Lawyers for Nature, if you could tell me first of all how your embody practices integrate and secondly, what is Lawyers for Nature?

Paul: I might start with the second question if that's alright. So Lawyers for Nature is a collective of lawyers, both listers and barristers, students, academics, researchers, who are committed to transforming the relationship between law, lawyers and Nature. It was founded by myself and Bronte Ansel, who's a lecturer at Essex University and initially it was founded more to give direct legal assistance to local groups who are fighting to protect Nature, which came out of my experiences in the Sheffield Tree Campaign, where the council was seeking to chop down 70 and a half thousand street trees and I helped to represent local tree campaigners who was standing under trees to protect them and felt that it was just completely bizarre to me how little support they had in the mainstream system; cause of course they couldn't pay much money for it.

So yeah, that's what the initial reason for setting up was. But over time it's very much changed because we realize that whilst we still do support local groups who are trying to protect Nature, if we did only that we would be forever firefighting and just trying to stop the worst excesses of a system that's fundamentally broken at its core. And that that was a realization you know we would help people and you'd stop a planning application because there was a procedural flaw in it and then they would, the developer would just fix that procedural flaw, come back and then do it again. Or, you know, you'd represent someone who was trying to save a tree and the council just refused to put a TPO on it cause they wanted to drop the tree down and there's no other legal recourse and they were getting injunction to move the protest and chop the tree down.

Lucy: TPO meaning?

Paul: Tree Preservation Order. It's the only form of, I forgot the international audience isn't it yeah [laughs]. So it's the the main form of Tree Protection the UK has a Tree Preservation Order but they're often quite useless and there's no… a lot of very precious and important trees in the UK have zero legal protection and even when they are protected they often don't do very much, like developers will come along chop the tree down anyway and be like oops never mind and the council will do nothing.

So, we realized that we needed to not just try and stop the worst successes of a broken system but go right to the heart of why that system acts as it does, and why it's broken in its relationship to Nature. And very quickly we discovered the growing Rights of Nature movement around the world and realized that very much fits the bill as to what we need. And so we've kind of pivoted to doing some support for local groups where especially where that struggle the local group is having helps to illustrate wider problems with the system and wider campaigning and can be used to help other groups. And also have been involved in Rights Nature campaigning and bringing nature into our legal system better.

Lucy: What was your first point of contact with the Rights of Nature movement, do you remember the first book that you read or where did it first enter your mind?

Paul: I read it yeah, I think it might have been David Boyd's book, Rights of Nature was a really good little intro. I think it's just growing awareness of it, I'm not sure there's a specific I think if you were involved in any way in trying to protect nature in the UK through the law, you kind of eventually come across it. And then there've been interesting challenges, I think we probably will speak more on how you then, how we bring the Rights of Nature movement into the UK context.

I've always been reasonably clear that I've been wanting to not just look at it in other places around the world but really bring it home to the UK, but that is a very challenging thing to do given context.

Lucy: It's remarkably challenging, I think we need localized approaches but with a very global awareness and an understanding of how the Rights of Nature as a set of principles can be adapted for different localized contacts. We can't have a blanket approach, you can't copy paste it exactly and there is a huge amount of potential in the UK. But what do you see as some of the biggest barriers?

Paul: Just on that last part I mean when I give talks I find it really useful to talk about the examples around the world where Ecuador or New Zealand or any other places that are already doing this, to show that it's possible. But then the next step is always to translate what that might look like in the UK context and potentially how we get there.

I mean in terms of barriers the key barrier is really a cultural, political one that in many ways the UK was the first, one of the first countries to separate ourselves from Nature and to regard Nature as a dead resource to be extracted for human ends and to put that principle buried deeply into all our systems. And then of course we exported that around the world in a very destructive fashion, which is thankfully being overturned in many countries, that principle of being exported.

But you know we're the belly of the beast, where it in many ways started and where that principle is so deep that many people can't comprehend that Nature is anything but a resource to be used and abused by humans.

Lucy: And it now feels radical to say that that's not the case

Paul: Yeah, completely crazy.

Lucy: It feels radical to suggest that we are part of Nature and there's been a big campaign in the UK recently that listeners might be aware of, to redefine Nature to include humans. That's something that feels like an enormous monumental shift, but actually it's the most sense making thing.

Paul: Yeah and Lawyers for Nature was involved in that campaign because it goes towards this cultural aspect, because actually I don't think we can like, I don't agree - people say you only just start with one thing and then we start with culture, we start with economics we start with politics or law whatever. We do all of them at once, we do need to be doing all of them and the cultural piece is an important one because law is politics codified, and politics will often follow culture.

You know, people always ask about how can we change the law in the and the UK Parliament can pass any law it wants - which is a bit terrifying sometimes -

Lucy: Deeply

Paul: Yeah there's no, as such, constitutional restriction on what…

Lucy: There's no red lines

Paul: So they can do anything, which is both liberating and also quite terrifying

Lucy: It's liberating and terrifying and they have demonstrated to us in the past that they don't value nature.

Paul: Yeah but the point is, that means that we need, you know, I'm involved in efforts to try and draft the UK Rights of Nature Bill, which is great to give an example of what it might look like but the Bill could be anything. Yeah, parliament could pass well not tomorrow cause we're currently in the middle of an election, but on July 5th parliament could pass a law giving full legal personhood to all aspects of Nature or giving substantive legal rights to Nature like Ecuador did. But the key question, the reason they won't is ‘cause of the politics.

Lucy: In the UK do you think that would be the best pathway, a blanket bill granting rights to Nature in general or do you think a more localized approach would be advantageous?

Paul: Both. Both. Everything. Rights of Nature everywhere all at once. You know, I think anyone who says there's one path in a country with the political, cultural, social, economic, legal distance from Nature we need to push every door and I think one will quite naturally lead to the other. As in, if we wait around to try and just have a political solution, so wait for them to wait for Parliament to pass the Nature Rights Act, like the Human Rights Act, so I might get a bit more detail what that might look like… we'll be waiting for a long time and it might never happen cause it's it'll be too too much of a leap.

But what if we were to do local based by-laws and local based motions that they have on the River Ouse, in Sussex in England to try and give rights to a local river. Now that that isn't the end, that can't be the end goal because it's only a local level so it doesn't have enough power to ultimately change things in the way that we need to be changed. But it's an amazing way to push the conversation forward, give some protection to the river in the meantime but crucially show that Rights of Nature is happening in the UK.

And similarly, I think there's a very interesting role for voluntary granting of rights to Nature by landowners. Landowners in the UK have a lot of power, so what if landowners were voluntarily to use legal mechanisms to give self ownership in person to their own bits of land? Again, that doesn't change things on the level it needs to be changed eventually, because there'll be huge bits of land which won't be protected and of course the kind of people who would do that who would wanna protect their land in that way, are probably protecting it anyway, but it shows that it's possible and drives the conversation forward.

Lucy: It gives you substance.

Paul: Yeah, so for instance I actually own a piece of the River Medway down in Kemp so I bought the auction.

Lucy: No way!

Paul: Yeah, and I really want to try and find a mechanism to have part of it owned by the river itself, just play with people's concepts. You know, having 100 meters of the river owning itself it's not gonna you know change things on a wider level but I think it shifts people's perspectives of what's possible.

Lucy: It's an imaginative exercise.

Paul: Yeah, it's imaginative - it's also a reality that actually this bit is actually like that and I can do that cause I own an inverted commons, the river.

Lucy: And because you have a legal background, you can play the game.

Paul: And what if that was to inspire other people who own bigger tracks of land? There are people who often with quite radical Nature policy do own large amounts of Nature and are doing good things for it, what if they were then to be inspired to do that for them and then other landowners follow suit. And then it shows it's not this like, strange importation of a principle - it's already happening.

And I think that that is what I think will eventually lead to the big ticket legislative legal changes is the fact that it's already happening on the ground, it's already being slowly - in a mycelium-like fashion - interwoven on a local, individual, private level, almost voluntary level into all these systems, then it becomes a much less scary thing to actually make those legal changes and that's where things like, you know Nature on the board… which is Lawyers for Nature has been doing, is putting Nature directors on the boards of companies. And again that by itself isn't enough because most companies that would voluntarily agree to that are already doing good stuff for Nature anyway like Faith in Nature, our first one and House of Hackney, our second. But it shifts the conversation, shows what's possible and makes the whole thing less kind of scary to adopt in full.

Lucy: Can you explain for listeners what the Nature on the board's movement or concept is in a nutshell?

Paul: So yeah a few years ago, Faith in Nature came to us and said we wanna make Nature our CEO and we'll investigate it and found out that was not really legally possible for various reasons but we found that actually it was very possible in UK company law to appoint a Nature director. So we changed their articles, they have to give due consideration to Nature's interest in their decision making and then entrench the director who would, into their company, who would represent the interests of Nature at board level. And so there are then committees that then advise that director as to how positions the company might impact Nature and then - I don't think that she has been any of the companies any kind of showdown votes yet, because actually they all agree to do what is in Nature's interest anyway.

But yeah it's bringing Nature's interest and voice into our economic system and again, this shows that approach that might seem like an ecosystem of interventions across all the different systems that humans have, because every single one of those systems impacts Nature and just passing a single Bill for one of them is not, I don't think, gonna bring about the magnitude of the change that we need.

Lucy: And it's not just the business of Dafra, it's the business of like you say, every department of the government, every level of the industry

Paul: Every company, every person

Lucy: Every company, every person!

Paul: Every council

Lucy: Yeah

Paul: And that, that's both slightly terrifying cause it's a lot, but it's also quite liberating cause it means that everyone has a role to play. I mean basically there's been a loose network of people working on Rights of Nature in the UK. We've been, I think quite far behind a lot of countries again, going back to that point of this is where it all began and this is where it probably needs to end and that's hard to do. But yeah last year a group of us got together for a talk in London about Rights of Nature, and we decided we just wanted a loose way to connect, currently just a WhatsApp group, but we're probably gonna go a little bit more formal by having our first sort of gathering next month and yeah, it brings together all different kinds of people and I think there's a real magic in that. It's not just lawyers, it's academics, researchers, poets and writers and students… and all people, interested in Rights of Nature just to connect and share our perspectives and our work and collaborate I guess.

Lucy: The collaboration is huge, and finding ways to share information quickly and freely I think it's huge within the UK and beyond and everywhere else. And making sure that we're using the work of others, we're using the research of others, so we're not wasting time by doubling up on tasks; we're just allowing information to flow.

Paul: And being held by community as well, it's quite, can be quite lonely especially being you know lawyer who does this, and a lot of lawyers think it's a bit mad and you know, sometimes a bit of a lonely thorough to to plow, and so having that support of a group behind you and people can go to for advice. Yeah.

Lucy: Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the work?

Paul: Yeah I mean there's a lot isn't there and it can get a bit much but… and sometimes I do wonder if I'm going off too many things, you know it's like, it's a lot of - but the problem is because it is all interconnected, there is a piece of weaving there, of weaving all the different parts together and so I can't help but keep doing that. You know what about, how does Rights

of Nature impact planning law, how does it impact this and this and this and this. And it is quite a lot, but I keep coming back to there's no other work I'd rather be doing at this time or that feels more important to me and is ultimately a task of love and joy.

And I was at the station a few weeks ago and I basically just, I let my mind wander in my mind I was just like wait a second, I get to like serve, I get to live in Nature and serve and restore Nature and thinking what a joy that was and what privilege, just started laughing out loud to myself like a mad person at the station just like wow, I get to do this, this is incredible. I get to like be in the forefront of a wave of complete, a wave of cultural physical legal change of reimagining our relationship to Nature. I believe it is going to happen this century, kind of has to happen and to be at the forefront of that, to imagine what it might be and to advocate for it is not always easy but a real privilege.

Lucy: Hmm I think it, once you're in to a certain point it becomes impossible to turn around and walk out because you see the possibility, you see the potential and the beauty of this movement, 'cause it is a stunning network of people working on this, often late into the night, often early in the morning or unpaid… but it's people who, like you say, couldn't imagine themselves doing anything else in quite a remarkable sense.

Is there anybody within the movement at the moment that you feel you've learnt a lot from or who you'd like to learn more from? Any particular people…

Paul: I mean it's quite hard to pinpoint one, because I think we all bring quite different things to it. I mean I am very much looking forward to Robert Mcfarlane's book "Is The River Alive?", cause I think that's gonna bring a big cultural piece of movement in the UK that it's very different to the angle that I come from, you know, there's a poetry and a beauty to that - I'm used to the legal aspect of it. But I think it's gonna be quite a big, big shift in the UK that's a real, I think cultural piece that's coming, so I'm really looking forward to seeing that. But I think I learn different things from all people in the movement in different ways.

Lucy: And there's a real hive of activity in London right now because of the Garden of Tomorrow festival. What is the role that you're playing within that festival?

Paul: Specifically I am introducing the Rights of Nature panel later today [laughs]. And I have seven minutes to describe what we're doing in an hour here [laughs], so we'll see how that goes!

Lucy: Will be interesting! Have you been to any of the other events at the Garden of Tomorrow

Paul: Yes I was there yesterday, there was a panel about We Are Nature, so the campaign to change the definition of Nature to include humans which is that cultural piece, and also Nature panel about sort of Nature on the board, ways to bringing Nature into governance as well.

Lucy: Feels like there's so much going on. If I asked you where you think the Rights of Nature movement will be, or what it will look like in the UK in 10 years, do you think you'll be able to to give me an idea?

Paul: I mean, who knows! Let me guess…

Lucy: You can wish as well

Paul: Yeah, I mean I do think genuinely and realistically it will be significantly big. It feels like it's increasing exponentially, lots and lots of people are hearing of it for the first time and getting involved in it. I think there will be… I don't know if we'll have, I don't think we'll see in 10 years we will have a big legal intervention like a right to, like an Ecuadorian style constitution intervention. I just don't think that's realistic at that time. But I think there will be clarity, it'll be clear what those demands are and there'll be a big movement behind making it happen. And even if they haven't yet enacted it, I think most politicians in the UK would have heard of Rights of Nature by that time.

And crucially there will be, I'm gonna say dozens maybe hundreds of - not that like grand set piece legal intervention - but there'll be dozens, probably hundreds of local and voluntary interventions. They'll be the first, easily the first significant piece of Nature that owns itself that for all intents and purposes has like legal personhood, through voluntary means, there'll be lots and lots of local by-laws and motions on it. And I think there'll be voluntary intervention in different sections like Nature in the board but for other places, there'll be so many of those that we haven't even thought of yet that'll be happening.

Lucy: I love the way you frame it, as a kind of ecosystem of interventions.

Paul: Yeah, the ecosystem will be significantly enhanced in 10 years time but it already is in one or two years, I think it's increasing rapidly.

Lucy: And the idea of Nature owning itself is fascinating as well. I feel like we could speak through an entire podcast series about that concept and the change that it would represent, the impacts that it would have. Just - I'm trying to condense this into one question - but I think it's useful to frame it in contrast to the role that property currently plays in environmental

protection in the UK… Could you give the listener some insight into that, so the role that property plays within environmental protection and the way that very often more than human life is given value based on whether it's owned and what it means in monetary terms to people?

Paul: Yeah I mean, the current system is akin to Nature to what slavery was for humans - the idea that you have absolute ownership over Nature and that you can largely destroy it at will is one of the most damaging concepts in our society. I just recently contributed a chapter to a book called Wild Service, it's called Why Nature Needs You with lots of different chapters from people involved in Right to Roam in the UK, so this is the movement for land access and basically saying why we need access to land in order to care for it and changing our underlying relationship to Nature.

And my chapter was called "From Ownership to Guardianship" and opens with this, as I mentioned before that I "own" a river bank, river bed out in on the River Medway in Kent and adjacent to the river bank there was this beautiful meadow that I used to love going in that was owned by an aristocrat and I came there one day to find they'd used herbicide just to kill the entire field and was completely brown and dead. And there was like almost a ruler straight line of brown and green where it met my land. And this like weird dawning realization that none of my river bank is legally protected, there's no protection so I could, if I wanted to, chop down every single tree, looking at this like beautiful strip of green with all of this wildlife and ecology, I could chop it all down there and then herbicide it, completely kill everything, destroy it salt the earth so nothing will grow again… all because my name was written in a government title register somewhere and it's like weird realization that I shouldn't have that power.

Lucy: And right now in the UK am I right in thinking that there would not be a repercussion if you did that?

Paul: Absolutely not

Lucy: Because you own it.

Paul: Because I own it. And there's no - there are some environmental restrictions on some places, it's frankly even then people often ignore them and don't get punished for it. But for my rear bank there's no restrictions, so I can just destroy it and nothing would happen, which is mad

Lucy: Insane

Paul: And then, that was sort of the openings of chapter and then sort of goes into more depth looking at places around the world that have taken a different approach like the Whanganui River which is given self ownership and saying how that would be very possible in the UK and why we need to transition towards that. But then ends with a I think, quite a hopeful note that actually we can also approach Nature differently even if we don't own anything. So actually I don't own the River Roding, you know I have no, I had no permission when I first came here to come here and start doing this, and yet I just took it upon myself to act as a guardian and actually that is open to anyone to do that. And I think it's a very powerful way for ordinary people to challenge the current status quo, you know we may not get an act of Parliament that abolishes ownership or even moves ownership more towards guardianship of Nature in the next 10 years, but actually we don't need to wait for that, anyone can just start acting as a guardian of Nature right now even if you don't own the land, even if you have no official right to be there.

Lucy: The impact of that is huge

Paul: The way it changes Nature and the way it changes you as well. You know and I, a lot of people have come into Rights of Nature activism through a specific relationship with one part of Nature that was threatened, which is I think a far more powerful way than a kind of coming environment generalized sense of Nature in trouble. I think people tend to be more motivated by saving a specific part of Nature.

Lucy: I love hearing people speak about the parts of the wild world that they feel they have a relationship with, and the way it can light up a room when you go from talking about people's work to talking about people's connectedness to a set of trees or a body of water and it immediately shifts the tone of conversation. For you, do you feel that that is the Roding, the place in the world that you feel most connected to the rest of Nature, or is there somewhere else?

Paul: So it depends. The Roding or the Medway, they're different… in some ways the Medway is more intimate, because I have more so direct control over it and there's not as many people around like this space belongs to a lot of people, you know other than me, but they're very different. I think the more powerful relationship is to the Roding, because of the work that I've been doing on the river and the depth of connection with the whole river that I've taken on - the powerful depth of relationship or guardianship that I've taken on with it.

Lucy: That's fascinating. And to bring us back to where we are sitting, we're now we've moved under shelter cause it's starting to rain somewhat. I want to finish our conversation by just returning to your life here by the river… Do you feel that you'll always now need to live

somewhere that is rooted in with the rest of Nature or do you feel that you could go back to city living?

Paul: Well I mean, it's kind of a city living I mean we're in zone 4 London - this is the city - but I mean, if the question: do I think I could live in a normal house, I mean, you know I always thought that my boating life would be kind of temporary and I would eventually move into a house and have a family. I'm increasingly thinking that's kind of unlikely, I think I'd struggle to live in a house and maybe I could do it if the house was very much embedded in Nature, but I just generally have a need to live in amongst Nature, it's very soothing for my soul.

I think I would struggle to live in London if I was living not in Nature. And also there's a part of me that would love to move out to the countryside, but also London is the center of a lot of power and I also I think there's a danger of too many people care about Nature and Rights of Nature advocates moving out into the middle of Nature, which is great it's lovely being the middle of Nature, but ultimately, the system that is destroying Nature will carry on and it's decisions that about it are made in this city and it's quite hard to challenge those if you're not here. And I think that it's sometimes too easy to just like, go off into a little perfect Edens and try and pretend that the destruction of the Earth and Nature is not happening, because it is and as hard as that is to look at, I think actually more, as many Rights of Nature and Earth advocates as possible should at least somewhat, can live in and confront the realities of the system, because I think only by doing that can we be fully motivated to save it and to challenge the forces that are destroying it.

Lucy: And finally, what would you say to someone who says they feel hopeless, particularly in the United Kingdom, 'cause that's been the basis of our conversation… and I'm interested in hearing from you about the specific UK cultural political context… So what would you say to someone who in the UK - as we approach the election - is feeling hopeless about the protection of the Rights of Nature?

Paul: I think up until a year or two ago I would have taken a slightly harsh line saying that, you know we don't have the luxury of hopelessness, that we need to stand up and fight. I think I take a slightly different line now. What if we were to take, hmm how to put this? We mustn't give way to hopelessness because there's so much joy to be found in this work and in the protection of Nature. And I've really found that by mixing together, what I would call the micro and the macro, so doing kind of high level campaigning for Rights of Nature on a bigger you know, national sense but also planting trees and restoring Nature here. And the two combined I think give rise to a great sense of joy.

As I said earlier, even if all of this is to be destroyed, to have the privilege of being a guardian of this place, even for a limited time is magical. And similarly to be involved in trying to bring about the Rights of Nature in the UK - as stressful and hard as it sometimes is - is also a great privilege and joy.

Lucy: I love that emphasis on joy.

Paul: And I would also say it does seem hopeless, but green shoots are there. Nature is incredibly resilient, and the task is ours really, isn't it? As earlier, you know law is politics encoded basically, if we can persuade enough people to take a Rights of Nature approach it can and will change. And that's one of these, I give talks to people within my profession within all different circles I move in and I know that a number of people have moved across this approach because of me advocating it. And everyone can do that - you've probably found that too - people have started just by talking about it, people really warm to it.

Lucy: Conversation goes a long way.

Paul: Yeah I genuinely say Rights of Nature is, I think, has the best ratio of people who haven't heard of it versus when they have heard of it think it's a good idea.

Lucy: That's a really interesting framing.

Paul: Yeah, when I give talks like I'll say have you heard of Rights of Nature? Like a festival or something, and you know, well over half the room will usually put their hand up saying they haven't heard it. And then by the end you know people say, did most people agree? When you've explained it succinctly or when you explained it to people - most people of course [think] Nature should have a role in their voice and that legal system yeah of course they should.

Lucy: And have enough time to explain. I think the Rights of Nature is an amalgamation of dealing with feelings of despair and fear because there is a fear and combating that with joy and with kind of unapologetic aspiration for the world that we need to see.

Paul: I'd also say that like direct Nature activism is an incredibly powerful thing to do. It remains, the times that I've done it, remain some of the most vivid, powerful and proud memories that I have.

There's a story of Julia Butterfly Hill who occupied a tree in North America for I think two years to stop it being chopped down and like describes it as in - you know you think oh that was

really hard and actually kind of was, but also incredibly beautiful and powerful. And like yeah I mentioned the Sheffield tree thing earlier I did an advice that helped to stop people being arrested and therefore save trees. And was a really pivotal moment in that campaign. But writing that advice was one of the best things I've ever done. I still look back upon it with such happiness and pride.

And you know a few years ago, so 18 months ago, I occupied a tree that used to be chopped down in a place in Wellingbrook in the UK and you know I wasn't prepared to climb that tree, I didn't have adequate clothing it was the middle of winter, I didn't really have foods or water and you know I was up a tree so I'd like wee in a bottle and then pour it down the tree and it was like objectively, physically a hard thing to do. And yet there was the feeling of being up there, this like knowing that that was the right thing to do. Knowing that I will stay up there as long as it took to save that tree, that feeling of resolute…

Lucy: Clarity.

Paul: Yes, a real resolute clarity… is a wonderful feeling. I had a great time just sitting there knowing that's where I was supposed to be.

Lucy: So remarkable.

Paul: So I really, and people would be like "oh thank you so much" doing some you know, it's nice to get that but otherwise just doing it was really actually great [laughs]. I really can't recommend it enough. Direct action to save Nature is a really, it's a really great thing to do and a really great antidote to despair, because it's like whatever else happened well, that tree still exists.

Lucy: Go climb a tree.

Paul: Yeah, or just you know, stand underneath one, you see that one right there she's just over there - they were about to chop that down probably years ago, I just like went and sat underneath it, now it still exists because I wouldn't leave [laughs].

Lucy: Is that a birch?

Paul: That's an aspen. Yeah it's really beautiful like really lovely leaves and actually exists because I went to underneath it.

Lucy: I think that's a perfect place to draw the recording to a close. And I'm sure this will not be the last of our conversation or the last of the listener's interaction with your work. I hope it's just the beginning for anybody listening. Thank you so much.

Thank you for listening to episode 10 of Conversations with Mother Nature. Together, we have reached the end of our very first series, so now feels like a good time to share a brief message from the people behind this project.

As a team we are immensely grateful to everyone who has given their time speaking to us within and beyond the bounds of our recorded conversations. The podcast has been a labor of love and has been woven into the working lives of those of us who have been on the technical and creative side of its production. We hope the series becomes the lasting archive of stories, from and about the people behind the legal initiatives making up the Rights of Nature movement.

If you've listened to any of our previous episodes, you might have heard my voice before. My name is Lucy Gavahan and I've been working on this project alongside GARN's communications facilitator Josefina Mosle, our audio producer Juan Diego Valdo Fierzo and technical support from Gallo Shiropoga. Behind the scenes, we've all learnt so much from this process, the people we have encountered and all that they have shared.

Thank you for listening and we hope you may feel moved to share some of these episodes, relisten if you wish and stay tuned for the stories GARN is yet to tell. From our hearts, thank you.

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