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Mourning Rivers: A Way of Negotiating the Future

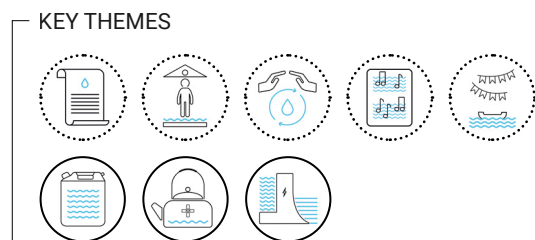
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Considering three examples of rivers in Europe, this article examines how ecological grief can trigger environmental discourses and awareness concerning the UN SDGs. We define heritage as a cultural practice involved in constructing and negotiating a range of values and understandings through engagement between people, things and places. Among humans, nature can be mourned and the emotions of loss, sadness and yearning can inspire activism. Organizing funerals for nature has become an important element of mourning the death of “loved ones” and fighting for their revival, thus drawing the attention of the wider society to ecological problems. In discourses seen as central to attracting support and making changes real, nature is represented using powerful metaphors of life and death. We argue that the symbolic mourning for rivers creates a space to collectively express ecological grief, loss and other feelings (Frantzen 2021) in a way that supports struggles for ecological justice. In shared loss, there could be restoration.



< Fig. 1 Protesters at the Mermaid of Warsaw, during the funeral for the Oder River (Source: Aleksandra Klimek Lipnicka, Courtesy of Cecylia Malik; CC BY 4.0 , via Wikimedia Commons).

Introduction

The cultural practice of heritage involves constructing and negotiating values and understandings through engagement between people, things and places (Harvey 2001). Heritage can tell important stories about past disasters to younger generations and in a way that can trigger strong emotional reactions. At the same time, disasters can become a catalyst for reimagining post-disaster futures and places.

A severe ecosystem change can cause the loss of ways of life and personal identity constructed in relation to local places of heritage (Tschakert et al. 2019). Rapid and unexpected change triggers feelings similar to those associated with the loss of a loved one. This sense of loss resulting from ecosystem change is known as ecological grief. Ecological grief involves

- 1) a strong negative emotion experienced as a consequence of place change and place loss and
- 2) anxiety, depression or anger in response to interrupted life. That loss must be appropriately mourned, grieved and resolved.

Many societies consider mourning a culturally accepted expression of grief that takes place in community rituals to enable people to acknowledge loss and ease traumatic experiences. However, there are no established Western rituals to grieve ecological loss. Historically, ecological grief has not been considered legitimate in Western cultures. And yet, “weeping” for lost nature has emerged as a form of ecological activism. Mourning as ecological activism can transform Western environmental discourses. This can be seen in three case studies in which people mourned the Tisza, Sztóla and Oder rivers after twenty-first century events devastated these waterways.

Tisza

Pollution of the Tisza River became a public issue in the 1980s. In the spring of 2000, cyanide and other heavy metals were released into the river by an Australian-owned gold mine located in Baia Mare, Romania. This polluted water flowed through several European countries: Romania, Hungary, Serbia and Bulgaria, finally reaching the Danube Delta (Harper 2005). The ecological disaster was referred to as “the largest man-made environmental disaster in Eastern Europe since the Chernobyl leak” (Koenig 2000) and was followed by two more spills that year. Later that year, the flood of the century discharged pollutants across the floodplain of “the most Hungarian of all the rivers” (Harper 2005; Lazar and Kiss 2002). All these events resulted in “an outpouring of patriotic sentiment in Hungary,” framing environmental pollution as a national crisis (Harper 2005). In response to the transnational damage, Hungarian soccer hooligans threw dead fish at the Romanian team (Harper 2005).

Tisza River funerals, organized in Budapest and other cities in the spring of 2000, resembled funerals of famous political leaders and historical figures (Harper 2005). Thousands of citizens participated in the procession and others hung black flags in their windows. The funeral procession-like protests used three “metaphors of the spill”: fish as biological life, gold as a life-supporting system, the golden rays of the sun and finally cyanide as death (Lazar and Kiss 2002). Symbolism referred to both patriotism and solidarity, building upon political transformation narratives (“political lives of dead bodies”) as a means of politicizing nature (“political lives of the dead fish”; Harper 2005). The communities affected by the closure of fisheries due to pollution have increased participation in local self-government, NGO activities, and subsist-



^ Fig. 2 Tisza Cyanide Spill in 2000 (Source: Délmagyarország/Karnok Csaba; CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

ence activities (Lazar and Kiss 2002).

The cyanide spill in Romania is not an isolated incident; similar events occur regularly in less economically developed regions (Lazar and Kiss 2002). Environmental protests in Hungary framed the disaster as “ecocolonialism” and “wild capitalism” – shortcomings of political and economic transformations of post-socialist society resulting in vulnerability to environmentally harmful activities, paired with weakness of civil society and low environmental awareness (Harper 2005).

Sztola

The Sztola River, affectionately called the Emerald River in the Bukowno mining community in Poland, disappeared in January 2022. In con-

trast to the transnational Tisza case, the Sztola was a relatively small local river in Poland. The drying out of the Sztola resulted from the cessation of mining operations at a nearby zinc and lead mine which was recently acquired by an international company. Experts and members of the local society foresaw this “vanishing” and yet did not organize themselves to keep the river alive. Instead, before the planned disappearance of the river, local communities engaged in a variety of farewell and tribute events organized by local tourist organizations and kayaking groups. Social media posts by these local groups often expressed sadness and anger, as well as gratitude to the river for the chance to experience its beauty over the years. Grieving was blended with “solastalgia” – an environmentally induced distress that impacts people’s connection with their home environment (Albrecht et al. 2007) – and passive acceptance for losing



^ Fig. 3 Funeral for the Sztola River, a protest inspired by Paulina Poniewska; concept by Cecylia Malik; organized by River Sisters Collective (Source: Stan Barański, Courtesy of Cecylia Malik; CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).



^ Fig. 4 River Sisters pouring water into the Sztola's dry riverbed (Source: Stan Barański, Courtesy of Cecylia Malik; CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

an important part of local culture and heritage. The “artist” collective River Sisters – using art to push political agendas or achieve social goals by changing minds and raising awareness – organized a symbolic funeral for the Sztola River right after the river disappeared (fig. 3). Although attended mostly by people from outside the local community, the event called for action to bring back the Sztola River and to shame the mining company for their part in causing environmental degradation. The protesters symbolically poured water into the dry riverbed (fig. 4) and sang dirges inspired by the feelings of environmental harm and grief and lamenting human responsibility for the loss of the river (appendix 1: S1).

Oder

About six months after the disappearance of the Sztola, in July 2022, the Oder River was contaminated, leading to massive fish deaths within a few hundred kilometers of the watercourse. The Oder is a river that Poland shares with Germany and the Czech Republic. Highly regulated for inland sailing and river transportation, the Oder flows through the most industrial regions of Poland. The case of the Oder River illustrates a new type of environmental disaster, one grounded in the context of global environmental change and its regional impacts on rivers in Poland. For the first time, the combination of industrial pollution, drought and heat prompted the loss of Oder River ecosystems. There is no doubt that the loss was the result of human activity. According to experts, the ecosystem may need several decades to regenerate, however the ecological damage is irreversible (PAN 2022).

The largest mourning procession was organized in Warsaw, Poland, in August 2022 (fig. 5). It

was officially attended by over 30 organizations, included many artists and hundreds of citizens. It was led by a silent procession of warrior-like dancers (inspired by *tessens* – Japanese war fans) in the role of traditional weepers, followed by a wind quartet playing funeral procession music. The head of the procession carried black banners with an epitaph for the Oder River and banners with the names of other Polish rivers. The entire event was carefully planned as an artistic and political performance, with guidelines for participants that included remaining silent and avoiding the use of other banners (Michnik 2022). The event was designed to build a sense of community and organizers encouraged people who could not participate in the main event to engage in online activities, such as posting photos of people lighting candles at the banks of other rivers in Poland as a form of paying tribute to the Oder. The funeral speech poetically expressed the emotional, ecological, community-building and political goals of the mourning ceremony (appendix 1: S2).

The catastrophe of the Oder River has been defined as “ecocide,” meaning a crime against nature and people. While the “Oder was killed by humans,” the event caused suffering to non-humans. Ecological discourse provided a space for people to express their ecological grief and mourn the loss of the Oder. It is important to note that this ecological catastrophe could have been avoided simply with proper environmental monitoring and the immediate response of public institutions (PAN 2022), without engaging in more-than-human ethics. Unfortunately, to avoid any responsibility, the Polish government at the time argued that the disaster was the result of natural causes (WWF 2022). Mourners’ anger and sense of helplessness led to the claim that the Oder River is legally a person, must have rights and can be represented and defended in the court. The initiative is still



^ Fig. 5 Funeral processions for the Oder River, Warsaw. (Source: Aleksandra Klimek Lipnicka; Courtesy of Cecylia Malik, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons).

ongoing with over 8,000 signatures collected for the petition. Celebrities, artists and other famous people have joined “the Oder Tribe” with the motto: “I am the river, and the river is me” (www.osobaodra.pl).

Conclusion

Disasters present opportunities to transform social institutions as well as our understanding of cultural heritage (Harper 2005). In the case of the Tisza River, the disaster stimulated discussion about the ecological, political, and economic conditions of Central and Eastern Europe. It strengthened the ecological movement and demands for better transboundary river governance (Koenig 2000). The disaster at the Oder River initiated consideration of rivers as legal persons in Poland and highlighted the need to restore highly altered river ecosystems in the country. Finally, the disaster at the Sztola River illustrates that emotional engagement alone is not always sufficient to defend community heritage practices. Experiencing loss and expressing grief can lead to passive acceptance and reconciliation on an individual level, however new emerging heritage practices, such as funeral-like protests, attempt to inspire collective action at the community level.

The symbolic representation of nature in changing discourses is central to attracting support and making change real (Harper 2005). In Western cultures, these new mourning rituals have emerged as a form of activism that seeks to create desirable heritage futures. Their broader purpose is to change dominant environmental discourses and discover futures through place-based practices of cultural heritage. Such “mourning activism” is a powerful tool that can bring attention to ecological issues and redefine the future of a community. Its strengths

lie in powerful metaphors of life and death, the ability to mobilize people for collective action, and the ability to elicit emotions to facilitate desirable outcomes. Here, feelings and rationality act together to pursue mourning as part of the struggle against political marasmus in the wake of environmental crises (Michnik 2022; PAN 2022).

Acknowledgment

This article has been supported by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange under the Urgency Grants program. This contribution was peer-reviewed. It was edited by members of the editorial team of the UNESCO Chair Water, Ports and Historic Cities: Carola Hein and Carlien Donkor.

Appendix

S1:

[original in Polish]

“(…) Ludzie wody mi zgonili.
Do wyrobisk spuścili.
Jam nie Sztolnia, ale Sztola.
Po co mi do tego doła?
O ty Sztolo, ty Czartorio!
Gdzieżeś ty ze swą glorią?
Jam w podziemia spać poszła.
Płaczem wody żem zanosła.
I my po tobie płaczemy.
Ze zwierzęty wyjemy! (…)”

[translated by Deja DeMoss]

“(…) People drained my waters
Into the mining excavation.
I am not an adit, I am the Sztola!
Why should I go into this hole
Our dear Sztola, our ancient Czartoria!
Where are you in your magnificent glory?
I quietly went to sleep under your feet
as my waters flowed away with my tears.
We also cry for you, oh Sztola.
And now we howl with the animals! (…)”

Zofia Szyrajew, *River Sisters* (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jPDu1byc258>).

S2:

[original in Polish]

Odro, rzeko, rybo, ptaku, małżo, ziemio...
Przyszliśmy i przyszedliśmy tu dziś dla Ciebie, dla
Was, a także dla nas samych.

Chcemy Cię opłakiwać – wspólnie, publicznie,
w widoczny sposób, oficjalny – bo na to zasłu-
gujesz.

Rzeko, która doznałaś krzywdy. Pragnie-
my zatrzymać się na tej krzywdzie, bo nami
wstrząsnęła.

(...)

To także akt polityczny. Nie jesteśmy tu po to,
by Cię pogrzebać czy zapomnieć. Nie jesteśmy
tu, bo chcemy się poddać. Przyszliśmy i przys-
zedliśmy dlatego, że chcemy o TOBIE PAMIĘTAĆ,
MÓWIĆ, UPOMINAĆ SIĘ w sposób, który oddaje
to, że jesteś złożonym, pięknym, fascynującym
bytem. Domem dla milionów czujących istot.
Potężną wodą.

(...)

Myślę, że tym marszem budujemy nową jakość
tożsamości – oficjalne, kolektywne opłakiwanie
tego, co nam bardzo bliskie, a co przez lata było
lekceważone. Tożsamość ludzi związanych z
rzekami. A łączy ich to tego nieuniknioną drogą.

[translated by Deja DeMoss]

Oh you Oder, Oh you River, Oh you Fish, Oh you
Bird, Oh you Clam, Oh you Earth... We came... We
came here for you. We came here for you all. We
came here for us all.

We want to cry... We want to cry for you. We
want to cry together, We want to cry publicly, We
want to cry visibly, We want to cry officially, We
want to cry... because you deserve it.

Oh you river... You, who has been hurt. We wish
to pause for your pain because it has shaken us.

(...)

This is also a political act. We are not here to
bury you and forget. We are not here because
we have given up. We came... We came because
we want to REMEMBER YOU, We want to SPEAK
ABOUT YOU, We came to DEMAND in a way that
reflects your complex, beautiful, and fascinat-
ing being. You are home to millions of feeling
creatures. You are powerful water.

(...)

I think that with this march we are building a new
identity, we are officially and collectively crying
for what is very close to us, but that which was
neglected for years. We are building the identity
of people who are connected to rivers and tears
are the necessary way.

Letter to the Oder River and her inhabitants, by Karolina Kuszlewicz (Source: magazynpismo.pl/idee/felietony/list-do-odry-i-jej-mieszkancow/).

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