

# ‘Fluvial’ from ‘Dorset Waterbodies, a Common / Weal’, Helen Moore

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## Abstract

‘Fluvial’, excerpt from ‘Dorset Waterbodies’, a new landscape ecopoem by Helen Moore

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‘Fluvial’ is the final section of my landscape ecopoem ‘Dorset Waterbodies, a Common / Weal’, which was made with the support of Arts Council England funding over the course of 2020/1. It was a commission for the RiverRun project led by Cape Farewell, a UK-based not-for-profit arts organisation, which has for many years focussed on the climate emergency by bringing scientists and artists together to develop a cultural response.

Located in and around Poole Bay and its watershed in Dorset, SW England, the RiverRun project has interrogated the way that land is farmed. Informed by the testimonies of organic farmers and the research of scientists (river ecologists, oceanographers, microbiologists) studying the rivers feeding into the bay, and their inhabitants (particularly the Salmon, who spawn upriver in delicate chalk streams), the five texts that comprise the poem voice the impacts of pollution and the climate crisis on the more-than-human world; they also point to people’s cooperative nature to inspire a collective response.

Finally, to note ‘commonweal’ is an archaic form of ‘commonwealth’, also meaning ‘the general welfare’. I use it as it contains the word ‘weal’, meaning ‘a red, swollen mark left on flesh by a blow or pressure’. The names of more-than-human beings are also capitalised to raise their status from the margins to which industrialised culture has relegated them.

## Bio

Helen Moore is a British ecopoet, socially engaged artist and writer. She has published three ecopoetry collections, *Hedge Fund, And Other Living Margins* (Shearsman Books, 2012), *ECOZOA* (Permanent Publications, 2015), acclaimed by John Kinsella as ‘a milestone in the journey of ecopoetics’, and *The Mother Country* (Awen Publications, 2019) exploring aspects of British colonial history. Helen offers an online mentoring programme, Wild Ways to Writing, and works with students internationally. In 2020 her work was nominated for the Forward and Pushcart Prizes and received grants from the Society of Authors, Royal Literary Fund and Arts Council England. [www.helenmoorepoet.com](http://www.helenmoorepoet.com)

## 5. Fluvial

Don’t call us ‘river’

as if we were singular –

a blue, serpentine line on a map,  
 an ‘s’ from source to estuary;  
 an abstraction  
 to be navigated, straightened.  
 fished, dredged. A **g a p i n g** mouth for waste disposal. If you must make us ‘river’, sense our communities  
 of muds, molluscs, marshes, mires;  
 of sedge-fen with Moorhen  
 & shy Water Rails. Of wet woodland & carr,  
 where scrubby Willows touch  
 Tussock Sedge, Lichens, Moss. Know us as centuries-weathered cliffs of apricot sandstone  
 that’s home to Martins, Kingfishers.  
 As thin tributaries tickling pebbles ...  
 as winterbournes roaring to life  
 with late November storms.  
 Feel us as sweet water becoming saline –  
 where does ‘river’ begin / end?  
 What does ‘river’ include?  
 Ask Swan, Heron, Cormorant, Mallard, Coot. Consult our tousle-haired Reeds stirred by summer breezes,  
 with wild words of Warblers, Buntings & Bearded Tits – watch these cinnamon-feathered acrobats  
 who flit  
 through crowds of waving stalks.  
 Take what you must for your thatch,  
 baskets, hurdles & traps.  
 Forage & fish where there’s plenty.  
 Water our meadows for grazing;  
 & tend our banks – as you have.  
 Yet comprehend that unlike your ancestors –  
 who kept us sacred,  
 revered Arnematia, Celtic goddess of springs, & Lympha, whose irrigating waters Roman farmers would  
 gratefully bless –  
 you industrialised peoples have **e n s l a v e d** ,  
 reduced us to a route to trade  
 timber, wool, stone, clay; a route to profit ceaselessly at our expense,  
 via your barges, cranes,  
 your wharves, warehouses, your moorings, marinas, your dredgers, Sunseekers.

For too long we've endured your 'd i f f u s e p o l l u t i o n' –

chemical spills, 'r u n – o f f', sediment choking our beds where Salmon build their redds; your nitrates & phosphates seeping via ditches from agribusiness.

Our waterbodies have ingested raw

shit, condoms, nappies, tampons; have swallowed hormone pills, Big pharma drugs that warp the tender gonads of Fish. Your industrialised life is our death by a thousand **c u t s** . . .

So don't speak to us of 'improvement'!

We, who've been here eons longer than your short spell on Earth, are sovereign communities, have the right to self-determine.

Hear us – how we ache to be flood-plain again,

to swell with rising tides & heavier rains,

to go unblamed for ruining your crops,

pouring under your doors,

spoiling rugs, sofas, curtains.

Instead, let's refresh carpets of rush-pasture with a weft of Creeping Bent & Yorkshire Fog. Let's restore delicate embroideries of Angelica, Ragged Robin, Meadow Rue, Skullcap, Marsh Valerian –

this host of wild medicines,

which your bodies know. Let Eels, Sticklebacks, Stone Loach, Minnows flourish.

Let kids swim among Water Lilies on hot July days.

Let Beaver, Marsh Harrier, Otter; Lapwing, Redshank, Snipe. Let old John bring his rod & writhing Ragworms wrapped in damp newspaper to catch a little supper from the towpath.

Live & let live Waterweeds in our braided channels,

where Midges, May Flies breed; where hunting Trout & Salmon lie concealed. Let there be Wagtail, Dipper, Ruddy Darter, Scarce Chaser, Banded Demoiselle.

Then, with your microscope, watch how our unseen peoples swim into view –

**x20. x40. x100.** See invisible 'river' reflected through microbiologist eyes.

From **o n e** drop of water,

our single-celled beings constellate like **s t a r s** . . . Protozoa, with emerald jewels enclosed in watery bodies, are tiny front-line workers

cleaning & aerating all the while. Let *Stentor*, *Lachrymaria*, *Euplotes* . . . & know there's no separation – as you hurt '**r i v e r**', so you hurt yourselves.

Come, bring gentler hands to co-operate –

let's be communities of diverse voices with a common future. A communion of subjects & one Commonweal

You can listen to the entire sequence of the poem via my SoundCloud (Helen Moore Ecopoet): <https://soundcloud.com/user-561958272/sets/dorset-waterbodies-a-common>