

ORC Water Permits Plan Change

Submission Reference no: 43

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Submitter Type: Not specified

Source: Web Form

Overall Notes:

Clause

Are you a trade competitor?

Position

I am a person who would not gain an advantage in trade competition through this submission

Notes

Clause

What are you submitting on? You can submit on specific parts of the plan change or the whole plan change.

Position

I am submitting on the whole plan change.

Notes

Clause

What is your view on the matter or the specific parts listed above? Please select one, if you have multiple views state clearly in the notes box below.

Position

Support

Notes

Clause

What decision would you like the Environment Court to make?

Position

Approve the plan change

Notes

Clause

The reason(s) for my view and/or any amendment(s) I am seeking are:

Notes

I agree with Peter Skelton's report that the ORC has issues with over allocation of the Manuherekia and with pollution of natural waterways. I am concerned that the ORC until now has not been collecting the needed scientific data to support a decision on minimum flow for the river or a sustainable amount for water permits for irrigators. Processes supervised by the ORC have continued to allow for the over-allocation of water resources. I have walked the length of the Manuherekia over seven days, with scientists from the ORC, from the source to the confluence with the Clutha/Matau-au. I have walked the river at 2.5 cumecs and also at 1 cumec. At 1 cumec the water was degraded, shallow, without life force and full of filamentous algae. The scientists I walked the river with said a river should not look like this, that there was something wrong. I submit that the operational water plan (Water for Otago - RPW) is inadequate to address such serious issues, and therefore permits issued by the ORC under that plan will consequently not be fit for purpose. Professor Skelton has said that such permits must be fit for purpose. Any consents issued going forward must anticipate the full implementation of the NPSFWM in their stated conditions. It is no longer acceptable to socialise the costs of freshwater management while privatising the benefit to consent holders. I agree with the ORC report 2017 that states for the Manuherekia to be ecologically healthy it needs a minimum flow of 2 cumecs. I've seen for myself the difference in the river when it flows at that rate. It definitely has its life force. I urge the EPA to support Plan Change 7. Thank you

Clause

Do you wish to be heard in support of your submission? All submissions will be considered by the Environment Court. Please

indicate if you wish to be heard in support of your submission.

Position

I wish to be heard in support of my submission

Notes

Clause

Please indicate your choice(s) below. If you do not indicate your intention to call experts, you can change your mind later and decide to call experts to give evidence in relation to your submission, provided you do so in time to meet any procedural direction the Environment Court might make.

Position

If others make a similar submission I/we would consider presenting a joint case with them at a hearing

Notes

Clause

Authority to act:

Position

I confirm I have the authority to sign this submission on behalf of the submitter

Notes

What if a River Wants to Sing?

By Jillian Sullivan

In the upper reaches of the river, it is the river's voice I feel with my skin, my cheeks, my ribs, my heart. For the water knows nothing of what is to come, only from where it has come – waterfall, spring, stream, cleft – to this, a ripple/tumble so vociferous and glassy and light-filled, so clattery and fresh, that to step into its wild push is to feel as if I, too, have come from gleam of snow and will end in the wide surge of sea.

There is no-one alive who has seen the Manuherekiā River as it once was, flowing with its own strength from beneath the Hawkdun Range and Mt St Bathans to where it slides into the Clutha/Mata-Au near Alexandra. Since the days of gold, we have cut channels and leaked the river's water away, so that in places it turns from tumbling alpine river into stream, from glassy waves to sluggish and shallow. On the banks the lucerne and choumolier thrive; on a farm bridge over the river a black and white dairy herd ambles to pasture. In the green fields, now denuded of beech and tussock, pivot irrigators turn and cast water upon ryegrass. And at Alexandra, where the beloved water slurps around knees, holds torsos and arms in warm, willowy afternoon haze, few are aware of the river's spangly beginning or its possibilities.

And that is why, in January, a group of scientists – freshwater ecologists and a hydrologist – have come to walk beside the river, to count each step of run, riffle and pool, to note each habitat, to be with the river along its whole length. We begin our first walk in the middle section of the river, while flows are still reasonable.

'We should have been doing this every year for the last seventeen years,' one scientist says. 'We were always told the upper reaches were fine. And they *looked* fine, at the key points we drove to. But we didn't know the impacts on the river over its length. I mean, a river this size shouldn't look like this.' Water silent of mayfly dance and hatch rising, of trout swirl, of quick flick of native galaxiids, of its own joyful voice. The rocks next to the river are coated in fine silt, baked white in the sun and grim to look at. Days later, when it rains and we are still walking, our feet slide on the slippery surfaces. In the shallows the stones are gauzed with long, filamentous algae. Green strands slip through the water. The brown-coated stones are treacherous on the edge, and in the middle of a swift rapid, the water piling against knee and thigh, the rounded rocks under my boots offer only slidiness, a moment of fear. The river has changed.

We don't know the river's true magnificence. We also don't know the lowest threshold at which the water and all the water creatures can survive and thrive. But the day of

reckoning is near. On 1 October 2021 a number must be conjured – from the steps we count, and from the hydrologist, the ecologists, the planners, the economist, the community and the social impact studies – to establish a minimum flow: one that enables people to take water for various purposes and still allows aquatic ecosystems to thrive and the river to retain its natural character.

In 1865, water rights were granted to people for goldmining. These mining permits were not subjected to any minimum flow regulations. They were titled to the land and became deemed permits for farmers. Now, instead of sluicing the cliffs and hillsides to reveal gold, the water soaks the land. Whole communities are built around this.

But the river is calling us to account.

Today there are four of us on the walk beside and in the river: two water ecologists and two poet-environmentalists – Brian Turner and me. We start from the St Bathans Loop Road bridge, high up near Falls Dam. For the first few hours of walking, the river accompanies us with its tumbling and rushing in long stretches of ripples. The air is mineral scented from the wet rocks and water sparks. The rocks are slabby sandstone and rounded river boulders. On the banks grow tussock, briar rose, thistle, broom, buttercup, bugloss, woolly mullein and rushes. In the warm air their fragrance rises. The yellow flowers of buttercup thread through briar and grass, the bugloss that turquoise purple/blue, and the tussocks sing of how the land once was – golden fields of snowgrass, not this pasture that stretches away from the braided gravel banks to roll over the hill.

‘Come on! Come on!’ a voice yells, and on the other side of the river sheep pour over a slope. Two pied stilts rise up calling from the stones and fly into the sky, which is grey with patchy low cloud. The river grey too, over grey stones, and only the wildflowers weaving their brightness along the banks.

One scientist is long-legged and young, and strides ahead along the riverbank. The older scientist, whose turn it is to count and record every step he takes for the habitat assessment, stops to write figures and looks about at the braided fields of gravel.

‘Under the water plan,’ he says, ‘the river’s natural character has to be protected. This is good up here, so far. The Clutha above Lake Dunstan is good, too, but below the dams there’s hardly any of the natural character left.’

He tells us the Manuherekia is running at over 2.5 cumecs, or cubic metres of water per second. That this is enough to maintain the river’s health is evident by the ripple and roar of the flow, and by the clean stones, the clear water – so free of nutrients that he finds the

cotton-wool balls of didymo on rocks. Didymo is an invasive algae, one that threatens insect life and makes slimy and slippery the rock substrate of a river. It's a species that doesn't like excess nutrients: further downstream where the river is slower and runs through farmland, there'll be no didymo. 'It doesn't like phosphate,' he says.

He begins to step and count again. Ahead, the younger scientist stops where a small tributary burbles into the river and records the water temperature. 'Sixteen degrees', he says, adding that temperatures above 19.9 degrees are stressful for some invertebrates. We splash through a wide shallow ripple. Pied stilts calling. The sluiced cliffs tan and gold.

I come to a swift river crossing. The young man is far ahead, and I didn't see the route he took. In the rapid, the water is deep and clear and rugged over the rocks. Brian and the ecologist are standing by a pool discussing fish numbers. I don't want to ask either of them where I should cross, or how. If I were here by myself I would have to figure it out. I step into what looks the shallowest but fastest segment. The water piles against my knees. My boots slip, one then the other, and I pause, unsure, the water mid-thigh, my arms outstretched for balance. The two men have entered upstream from me where the water is slower, not so deep. My path is like horizontal rock climbing – the pause to find each foothold while the river, warm and glassy, surges against my thighs. It's a relief to reach the shallow edge again where the water laps the stones.

After four and a half hours we stop for lunch on a grassy bank. We take our boots off, empty out the pebbles, wring out our socks and lay them on the hot stones. The river sings by, rippling into a pool.

We set off on our walk again, the river beside us deepening in the riffles. The substrate is of smaller cobbles and the flow not so swift.

'I've seen twenty goats so far,' the younger scientist says. I thought I smelt something strangely sweet in the air. I'd bent to smell the purple thistle on the riverbank, thinking it was that. I'd seen deer hoofprints, though. A large stag, the older one thought.

'We flew over here with a hydrologist a few years back,' he tells us, 'and there were at least 300 deer on the riverbank.'

'Why were you in a helicopter?' I ask. 'Wouldn't it have been better to walk?'

'He was a key hydrologist, expensive. It was a better use of time to fly in and out of points to check. The hydrologists would like flow sites on every tributary, measuring and sending flow data electronically. They'd like forty years of data on the river to set a minimum flow. We've got two to four years of data, and this is a complex river. We've got no data before 1920. We don't know the natural river.'

Wading the river beside the young scientist, his long thighs above the water. He hardly pauses in his talk as we negotiate the flow.

‘Once I was working with a PhD student,’ he tells me. ‘We were crossing a river and he stopped in the middle and said, “I can’t go on.” The water was pulling at us. A big wide powerful river. I said to him, “You can do it. I can tell you a few things that will help.”’

‘Can you tell me those things?’ I ask him.

‘Sure. Make sure you’re crossing on an angle slightly down-river. Go with the flow instead of struggling against it.’

I don’t know why this had never occurred to me. I recalled the earlier crossing, stuck halfway across the river and attempting, if anything, to walk slightly upstream.

‘Second thing, don’t put your foot straight down on the rocks. Feel your way with your boot. Lower it towards the substrate, then let the river guide your foot down the last inch. It’s like skiing, sliding along the rocks.’

‘River skiing,’ I say, trying it out.

‘That way, you know you’re safe once you do put your foot down. And the third thing: if the going gets tough, wedge your boot in between rocks. Let the river wash your boot into place.’

I slide my boots through the water. For the next few crossings he stays beside me, not reaching for my arm to steady me, but his presence just downstream from me a reassurance.

‘There you go,’ he says, as I make the shallows.

With the low cloud it’s hard to read the depth of the water before entering. We cross upstream of ripples and angle slightly downstream. The flow is warm and rushy on my legs. There’s a harsh cry of a heron, long strutting body up ahead on the bank. It stands beside unruffled water, while the willows near me toss in a silent wind I cannot feel.

The day before, the first day of the river walk, we negotiated one of the lower sections, from Chatto Creek to Shaky Bridge, a long nine-hour day on the river. An open invitation to walk the river with the scientists had gone out to all those concerned with the river – the mayor, regional and district councillors, water users, their advisory contractors, Fish & Game and those in the community concerned about the Manuherekia. It’s early morning, the sun just rising when we gather on the riverbank above a blue and shiny river: three scientists, a Fish & Game officer called James and me. I don’t know any of them and wonder how I’ll cope, particularly with the river crossings. I’m still affected by concussion and a sprained elbow

from a riding fall. The concussion has challenged my talking and my balance. I think I'll be okay if I concentrate on every step, like the hydrologist who is counting and recording steps today. And plod. I know how to plod.

But I am frustrated that those charged with the responsibility of making decisions about the river aren't here, nor those who argue their right to the water. To know the river, that is the thing. I think of the plea made by New Zealand acclimatisation societies when they applied for a protection order on the Ahuriri River: 'The scenic qualities of the Ahuriri cannot be adequately conveyed in words ... or photographs,' their application read. 'It is hoped that the tribunal members will visit the river to form their own opinions.'

The sun casts our shadows across the stones. It's a clear morning, the stones bright, snow on the Old Man Range ahead of us and the river wide, defined by the scrawls of willows on each bank. I slide my legs down into the water, which is deep and cool, and follow the four men out onto the opposite gravel bed, my boots soaked for the day. Bird chitter in the willows, ripple of water, snatches of conversation.

I could ask questions, but I'm content to listen. 'Something's not right,' the older scientist says. The river's meekness, and places where the water is murky and slow under broken trees, as if we are in the bayou. We round a bend and splash through a shallow thirty-metre-wide riffle over bronze cobbles. Our boots send up sprays of light.

'All I know is that there's not enough water in the river,' he says. 'For the minimum flow, we shouldn't be starting with a number and working backwards to prove the river can sustain it. We should start at the beginning and use scientific processes to get a number for the river. Last year, with low flows, irrigators were taking a high percentage of the river: 213 water takes, 700 customers. We need to work together, all of us. Farmers, protect the river from your stock. Trout anglers, give up some space for native fish, they're becoming extinct. We have to protect them.'

We cross and re-cross the river. I count the birds I see: fourteen pied stilts, ten paradise ducks, ten mallards, one duck dead on the riverbank, one hawk cruising above. A river smell of wet willow leaves, drying silt and algae, water on rock. Closer to Alexandra, thyme perfumes the air. On the gravelly tracks beside the river, the pungent twiggy thyme, woolly mullein with its grey velvety leaves, broom.

On the last kilometre-long stretch to the bridge the river is shallow, its wet width as wide as its banks. We walk in single file up the middle following the thalweg, the centre line of the river. It's a cobbly path we're on, the water over the tops of our boots. The blue sky has turned grey with low cloud and a bitter wind reminds of snow on the ranges. Plodding,

one splashy step after another. My sore arm tucked into my shirt for a sling. In the willow branches overhead the sparrows sing.

Ways to describe a river: run, riffle, (rapid) cascade, pool, backwater, glide (shallow, rapid, deep)

Ways to describe the substrate: bedrock, boulder, cobble, pebble, gravel, sand, silt

Ways to measure a river: count every step of run, riffle, pool. Measure the depth in twenty places at multiple cross-sections. Measure the wet width, the velocity, the riparian cover. Measure the temperature of tributaries as they enter the main stem. Measure the temperature of the main stem. Measure the nitrogen, the phosphorous, the faecal bacteria. Measure the clarity, turbidity, suspended sediments, the dissolved oxygen, the pH, the macroinvertebrate community, the fish species, the connectivity – for instance, does the river flow all the way from source to receptive body of water? Does the river flow?

It is not just the sights – an unexpected deep and limpid pool, a jewel-like blue/green beneath white limestone cliffs, where wild pigeons have enlarged narrow cracks into small dark homes that look out from the cliff-face like eyes, and the willow tree shading the riffle that feeds the pool, the water ruffling and tinkling over the cool stones and becoming almost still. These are place-markers on the way, but it is holding the river in one length in my mind that brings respect. From standing in the waters at the confluence of the east and west branches high up under the Hawkdun mountains, feeling the east water slower, warmer on my right thigh, the west branch swift and cool on my left thigh. Following the river from those clear alpine beginnings. The power of the water as I ford it, feet slipping on boulders, through the long length of braided strands where the pale, dried-silt-covered rocks glare in the sun and the way seems interminable to the far willows. The river each side clattering, gliding, making forays towards itself in shallow wide ripples, joining one braid then parting and rejoining, singing all the while, flowing silent behind townships, hidden behind willows and rucked paddocks of cows, behind Lauder and Becks and coming out at Ōmakau in pools and ripples beneath the bridge, the last pool deep to my thighs, the water warm, the rocks still slimed under my boots. And then the river turns through the valley again, that sequence of riffle, glide, pool, over and over, each bend bringing a new vision of light on water and the

continual voice of the river, rushing and clattering. Or the times of peace, quiet enough in a glide to hear quails snickering, or to watch a single blue heron turn and soar on outstretched wings and come in to land on stones. The river broadening, becoming one wide stretch between willows, water shallow over brown stones, the edges thick with silt and algae.

Sometimes the river narrows to a stream after a water intake. There are bulldozed ramparts where man has assured himself of his own plenty. Then as each tributary clatters in, the river grows again. Beyond the willows the pivot irrigators turn and spray, and between the willows, in braids and pools, the river makes its way. There's a smell of wet silt and algae, the beginning rot of things.

Under Shaky Bridge where the townspeople come to play, the Manuherekia, brown, shallow, is their river. There are children in small plastic boats, a young man standing in the shallows. Another man on a motorbike rides up the middle of the riverbed, past the bathers and toddlers, wheels churning the stones, and disappears around the corner, the throb of motor fading.

I have seen the river at its beginnings, at the tributaries falling silver from the mountains – the Ida Burn, Rocks Creek, the Dunstan. I have seen the wild shags on rock cliffs, the dart and joy of young fish in clear pools over clean stones, and felt the surge and thrust of the stream through stretches of tussock and rock, over boulders that glisten golden or white pierced through with green. In the wide expanse of tussock lands and through rocky valleys, the streams come to the river. I hold in my mind the whole length of the Manuherekia. To know the river like this, each step of it; to be beside it, to merge with the water, to be in its ripple and sing, hour after hour after hour, is to know one thing and that is this: the river is its own being and, as such, has the inherent right to thrive.

Trees that once grew here: mataī, miro, tōtara, beech

Fish that are endangered: Central Otago roundhead galaxias, alpine galaxias (Manuherekia), Clutha flathead galaxias, kōaro, tuna/longfin eel

Streams where moa-hunting tools were worked: Little Bremner Creek, Hills Creek (porcellanite, silcrete)

Birds that once lived here: moa, kiwi, kōkako, South Island saddleback/tīeke

Birds that are endangered or at risk: black-fronted tern/tarapirohe,
wrybill/ngutuparore, South Island pied oystercatcher/tōrea, pied stilt/poaka, banded
dotterel/tūturiwhatu

Tell the unspangled truth, suggests memoir teacher and writer Beth Kephart. And I want to, about our river. For today, when we walked the Manuherekia at a one-cumec flow, less than half the flow of the previous walk, the wonder has gone. There is no magic about the next corner or the next ripple pulling at our legs. From the rail bridge near Chatto Creek I see that the main river has shifted from its former channel. Now a group of us stands on a dry river bed with tumbled boulders. A month ago, crossing here on my first day of walking the river, a scientist had seen me attempting to roll my shorts further up my legs. ‘That’s not going to do you any good,’ he’d said, and I’d just had to slide into the deep water, right here, over these baked white boulders, and wade through, the water cool to the tops of my thighs.

Now the river is over by the opposite bank, favouring its smaller braid, moving dankly under the willows. We cross the boulders towards it. Morgan Trotter, from Otago Fish & Game, turns over a large rock in the dry stem. Underneath, two damselfly larvae scribble. ‘They’re big enough to have survived so far,’ Morgan says. He looks around and points to the pawprints of a wild cat in the still damp silt. ‘Cats would have eaten any fish stranded by the river shifting. They’ll be eating these damselfly nymphs too. Once we set up a time-lapse camera on a river that was dropping. There were certainly plenty of fish stranded on the rocks by that event, but when we came to the river, the fish were all gone. The cats get them.’

Matt Sole, an archaeologist and member of the Central Otago Environmental Society (COES), looks around at the boulders. ‘I swam here regularly over the summer and autumn months through the 1980s,’ he says. ‘I’ve never seen it empty like this.’ It was shocking, the dry exposed boulders, the defined channel stretching ahead of us, the force of the water gone.

We follow the limpid remaining channel: three of us from COES (Matt, Brian and myself), the water ecologist from Otago Regional Council, Morgan from Fish & Game, a farmer called Hamish (the only water-user to come on the river walks), and Christine from Landpro (‘Make the most of your land’).

We cross ripples ankle-deep, the water not even wetting my boot laces, and wade through glides up to our shins. I stop in one and stand there. The water still flows past my legs, but of the water’s presence, its muscly strength, there is nothing. It is a river you cross without halting your talk, without stopping to consider the safest place to enter. Boots still slip on the cobbles and rocks. You can see the fine coating of algae across the riverbed,

sometimes the matted back poisonous variety. Slip, slip on the stones, but no push back from the river. It smells of algae, has a brownish tinge, an insipid flow.

The silt fills and packs the interstitial spaces between the rocks and stones where the invertebrates make their homes. It carries its load of nitrate, phosphate, bacteria and toxic chemicals into our living waters. Thick algal growth leads to wide daily fluctuations in pH and oxygen levels, affecting the small creatures and degrading the river in its biology and beauty.

We come to the Galloway irrigation intake, where two-thirds of the already depleted river has been shunted off to the side by bulldozed banks. We know it is two-thirds because the hydrologist, who is waist-deep measuring cross-sections of the channel, tells us. Over to the right the main stem of the Manuherekia limps on. I cross it in two steps. All that consent asks of the irrigation company is that a river fifteen centimetres deep and thirty centimetres wide is left for the public's recreation.

Christine from Landpro walks ahead of me through the shallows. It's her first river walk. In the upper reaches I'd had to stop in the middle of the river, unsure of my next step. Here the river seems like nothing more than a utility for human convenience. I wade through the shallows and onto the silted stones, my head aching and a feeling of loss and sadness all through me. One foot after another.

'I'm just getting to learn about this river,' Christine says. 'But – it's not a *terrible* river.'

Is that the most we can expect from our treatment of the river – that the result should not be terrible?

'You can't have an understanding based on one trip to the river,' the ecologist had told us earlier. 'You have to walk the river at higher flows as well, otherwise you don't know what it's capable of. And we'll traverse this section again at an even lower flow.'

The ecologist and I walk together for a while, splashing across the ripples. He tells me about his trip to the Ahuriri.

'What a beautiful river,' he says. 'It's the only one in that district that's relatively unmodified. The Ahuriri runs from the mountains through Crown land. It's a river in its wild natural state. Oh, and the Ōtemātātā. That's a beautiful river too.'

No-one today is saying the Manuherekia is beautiful.

Once threatened by hydro-electric power schemes, the Ahuriri was protected in 1990 by a national water conservation order on the grounds of its wild and scenic beauty and the biological species it supported. The protection was awarded not only for the main stem of the

Ahuriri, but also for its tributaries and associated lagoons, ponds, tarns and swamps, from its sources to Lake Benmore.

‘What do you think of this?’ Brian asks me as we walk a long stretch of stones beside the Manuherekia.

‘I feel like crying,’ I say. ‘I thought the river would always be a source of wonder.’

There’s a roaring sound over by the bank as if the river is churning to life again. I turn my head to check, but it’s the wind tossing and filtering through the willows. Above us, terns cry out and circle in the sky.

Matt’s camera battery is flat. ‘Take a picture of the rope swing and the dam,’ he tells me. A rope swing dangles abandoned over a pool that is cut off from the river, the water fetid and murky. Nearby, a small dam has been built with stones. Perhaps it created a pool for a child, but now the dam is a ridge of stones on a dry riverbed, evidence that families played here once.

A flood has tossed a pile of willow sticks onto the bank. Christine and I stop to examine them. She picks up a narrow pole.

‘That’s a good walking stick,’ I say. She hands it to me.

‘No, you have it,’ I say, but she passes me the stick, and it is a help for the following hours of the walk. And there, at last, our vehicles waiting on the edge of the bank. Beyond us, the water flows on towards Alexandra.

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The council asks us: ‘What sort of river do you want?’

The scientists say: ‘We can give you figures and scenarios. We can tell you at this flow, the river will look like this. But it’s all up to you, what you as a community choose, what the river will look like.’

The council sends out an invitation: ‘Let us know what is important to you – economic survival, cultural values, fishing ...’

... always the river is subject to our gaze and to our requirements. Nobody is asking the river what it desires.

‘If a river wants to braid, let it braid,’ the ecologist said on one of the stretches we walked. ‘Don’t just confine it to one channel.’

What if a river wants to sing?

What if a river wants to be clean?

What if a river wants nothing between itself and the stones?

What if a river wants to feel each thriving entry of the tributary streams?

What if a river wants to flow along its whole length and not be drained into pools and dry gravel?

What if a river doesn’t want to be dammed?

What if a river doesn’t want to be ‘dewatered’?

What if the council thought about what the river needed in order to thrive, and didn’t ask us, the people? For we cannot be trusted. Will enough people who care for the river for the river’s sake answer the questions? Or will the questions be answered mainly by those who have a financial stake in the river? They may want a river that only moves enough to bring the water to their gate. Ecologist Mike Joy points out that while community consensus sounds great, it requires compromise from all sides, and therein lies the flaw: ‘The reality is that farmers can compromise, industrial and recreational users can compromise, but already stressed freshwater systems cannot.’

But if you go again and again to the waters, there – under the wheeling of skylark, under the wings of blue heron, under the brightness of duck wing, in the shallows where small fish dart, under the willows where the pool is deep and lucid, around the next bend where the light falls so hard on the ripples it splinters and bounces like rain – there you might find your answers.

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It is autumn when I come to the last stretch of the river. What had been summer and long hot days on the stones, the pools beckoning under the willows, has turned to frost in the mornings. Late-ripening tomatoes caught frozen on their browned and ruined stalks, and the foggy grass bent with the weight of ice that looks silver in the early morning light.

Along the Manuherekia from Shaky Bridge to the confluence with the Clutha/Mata-Au, the willows are green and yellow and the poplars spires of gold. The sky is deep blue and flawless, no wind to stir the trees or the water so that the river is as burnished as a lake.

Although I am in the bounds of the town, for a while it is just the river – no sign of houses or vehicles or people or animals. Birds chitter in the trees and far off a dog barks, but for some minutes the river is a realm of autumn solitude. I walk on the stones as far as I can until the river turns, and then I take my shoes and socks off and push up my jeans. The water is chilled with the memory of frost and the early snow on the Hawkduns. It's 200 metres now to the confluence. The great river Clutha Mata-Au flows below Bridge Hill, where houses are colourful in the afternoon light. There are ducks under the willow branches, in small groups on the gravel, and flying low over the water.

I walk towards the mouth of the Manuherekia, one foot after the other in the shallow edge of the river. Beside me, the water deepens. There is so much silt from last week's heavy rain. It's packed between the stones I walk on, each footfall cushioned by mud. The river is deep, quiet, mysterious. It holds the soil washed down from the tributaries and from the fields newly ploughed for winter brassica crops. It holds whatever has been put on that soil.

Yet here, in the still autumn air, the river is beautiful. It is the light that sings over it. The water like a gracious queen, holding wounds deep within yet moving regally, head high, elegant and gracious and alone. From its bright promise, as a silver tumbling thread through tussock under a sky that only saw hill and hawk and rock, to this: aged and slow and laden.

In this stillness the two rivers merge, the Manuherekia moving towards the Clutha/Mata-Au, the Clutha/Mata-Au moving into the Manuherekia. The ducks honk. The water around my feet deepens until I cannot take another step without plunging into the depths. The river is gone from me now, dispersed drop by drop into the stronger current.

I remember how, in only my skin, I lay down in the Ida Burn, in that cool mountain tributary up near the source, filling all the space between stone and the water's surface as if I too were a tributary, or as if the water flowing over me also flowed through me, making us one.

On the riverbank a tent, possibly abandoned, a shopping trolley on its side, beer bottles, cardboard boxes, damp flags of clothing. The impulse to come to the riverbank perhaps had its home in beauty. The rubbish a symptom of a deeper problem of despoliation and disrespect.

A clattering on the stairs, 6.30 in the morning and three children calling out 'Grandma!' My pen races to write down words about the river, and then they are beside me.

‘Did you write all those words?’ asks Sonny, who is five. ‘How can you write so fast? Are you going to write to the end of the page?’

I tell them I’m writing about my river.

‘Does the river flow into a bigger river?’ asks Sonny.

‘Yes, my river, the Manuherekia, flows into the Clutha/Mata-Au. Just like the Kawarau flows into the Clutha.’

‘That’s not the Kawarau out by us,’ says Phoenix, who is eight. ‘That’s the Shotover River. That flows into the Kawarau.’

‘And the Kawarau flows into the Clutha/Mata-Au. Our rivers are together.’

Lucia, who is three, keeps her hand on my writing book.

‘I hold it here, and your hand holds it there,’ she says.

‘I wrote one page and then another page at school yesterday,’ says Phoenix.

They are warm beside me, their favourite soft toys as well – Panda, Teddy, Baby. Outside, the sky is layered blue, mist, the pink striations of dawn. The image of the Manuherekia recedes. It’s flowing, mixed up with the Kawarau and their Shotover, all moving towards the ocean.

‘Why are you writing about the river?’ Phoenix asks.

‘Because I care about it,’ I say.

And then I want nothing but their tousled heads, and to hold them.

The day Brian and I biked and walked the east branch of the Manuherekia, the radio had forecast southerlies and rain. We travelled through fields of lucerne and irrigated pasture, then tussock and native grass, matagouri, Spaniard grass and the fine-leafed grey shrubs, olearia, *Coprosma propinqua* or mingimingi. And then we were near the confluence of the east and west branches.

I took my camera and ran through grass along a sheep track until I came to where the east clattered into the west. The waters were clear and fast, running musically, eternally, over the stones. Oh Manuherekia, who would transform downstream. I knew your story, but here I was reminded of hope again. There were the hills coming down to the tussocked flats, all gold, the sky grey, the water and rocks grey, the moody wildness and colour of the high country.

We wheeled our bikes into the water of the west branch, which was cool to the knees, the substrate bouldery, and pushed through to the gravel road that climbed ahead to the mountains, the wind in our faces. No farmed animals, no cultivation, no fences or buildings,

only the track, the hills and the sound of the river, which up here was the size of a strong alpine stream. We came upon the stream again and again – here wide and braided in a bouldered valley and, higher up, falling over small precipices of rocks, so that even from far above we could hear its rushy, tripletty call. Sun flashed on small glimpses of stream hidden by tussock. Every flank of hill had a crevasse where water ran down, and through matagouri, wetlands, grasses and bunchy snow tussock, these trickles found the stream and the stream gurgled, deepened, ran away down the valley. We were on rewind from the river, the path so steep and rocky we pushed our bikes for kilometres into the hills. Brian's blue cycling jacket was the brightest colour in the damp land, where first there was wind, then rain. I pushed, riding on the flatter stretches, wheels skidding, heart thumping. A hawk with large dark wings flew low above us, swept over the tussock and up into the air.

Around each corner, I thought, surely: the summit will be here. But the track kept rising and twisting, the hills pressing closer until the valley became a channel for tussock and the stream, which we heard but could no longer see. I pushed my bike until I couldn't then placed it on the ground and lay face down on the alpine grass. Brian bent over me.

'I'm all right, I'm all right,' I said. After a minute, the lure of the next corner enticed me up to push the bike again. Around the next corner, another cyclist. He'd biked, he said, from the Ōmarama side of the pass.

'How far to the top of the pass?' I asked. He looked at his recorder.

'Seven kilometres.'

On we pushed. A golden hill rose in front of us. Surely that would be the pass. Then around a corner Brian called out his tyre was flat and the pump didn't work.

'You carry on a bit,' he said. 'I'll try and sort it out.'

I laid my bike in the gravel and kept walking. Below, the rushy stream gurgled and poured. The air chilled with a smell of wet grass and rock. Around the next corner the track veered sharp left and climbed steeply to the pass to the Mackenzie country. If the clouds had cleared I might have seen Aoraki, Cloud-piercer. Instead, my eyes and my heart followed the stream, under the track and upwards to where the golden hills came together. Beyond them was only sky. There, in silver threads, the Manuherekia begins, up there in the silence and the rain.

For weeks after walking the river I felt unsettled. I longed to be back in the water, just walking, with every corner ahead of me a delight. Constrained in the car crossing a bridge, the river below, I felt like a prisoner looking out on a freedom I'd once had. If it rained I

wanted to feel the strength in the river's flow; if it was windy, to hear the willows' surge, loud as a long-gone train, and see the leaves tumbling to the water.

The river had been my refuge, I realised, my peacemaker, head-healer, teacher. Waking early each day to tug on wet boots and warm tights before driving to the river to find a way down the bank. In those seven days there was no other reason in life except to see where the water led me.

But if my days on land are charged by loss of the river, so is my attitude to society. Whereas before I had sat for long hours in the Environment Court hearings for the Lindis River, listening to those who stood for the water users, interested but alarmed, now I feel despair and distaste. What was happening in the fight for the rights to the Lindis would also happen for the Manuherehia.

In its natural state the Manuherehia is about a four-cumec river. In summer, water users take the river down to 0.9 of a cumec, to 0.8. NIWA estimates the natural flow in the lower reaches is about a quarter of what it would be without irrigation takes. The water users will petition to be allowed to continue to take three quarters of a river's strength. I see it in the letters to the newspaper and around the table with the council. For some, the cost of their pivot irrigators means that if they can't continue to take all they need, their enterprise will no longer be viable.

What does it mean for the river when it barely clears a depth above our ankles, silt covers its stones and long threads of algae sag in its waters, when mayflies don't hatch and the small living beings and sleek eels are no longer able to live in it?

Thirty years ago a date was set for the re-allocation of water rights on the Manuherehia. Every water user knows this. The date was set to decide a safer minimum flow for the river and its biotic community. But what is this level? Why not say half the water for the river, half for the water users? A technical report by Otago Regional Council in 2017 recommends just that: a flow of 2–3 cumecs at Ophir. But the emails coming to me from contractors and lawyers representing water users show they will use whatever data they can to prove: we can take this much before the river is ruined. I don't even want to read them.

How close they want to go.

And I am sick of the fight already. Before we even go to court. Before we even go to mediation. Before we even listen to the final summing up.

The river is strong enough to wear its way down through schist. It is long enough to link a high mountain valley with the great Clutha/Mata-Au. It stretches between those two homes, vulnerable and individual, at the beck and call of the powers of wind and rain and

snowmelt, and utterly harnessed to human desire. It is a cattle beast on a truck, hemmed in, on the way to slaughter, eyes rolling, fear a stench on the breeze. It is something we want to consume.

I am changed by the river. When the time comes I will get up again and speak. I'm speaking now. But I have seen how humans stand apart from the natural world and say this is not us, but *for* us. To say the river has rights and needs, to say the river deserves our responsibility to further generations, to say the river is one being from mountain torrent to the wide, luminous stretch between shingled banks, is to go against those who have the voice of power, against those who say we need 'the courage to dam the rivers'. I have lost my faith in those with power. What will happen to our rivers? To *the* rivers, not *our* rivers. What will happen to the Manuherekiā?

Can we lie down on the river's banks among the slime and silt? Can we glue ourselves to pivot irrigators? Can we stand on the riverbanks with signs? Or shall we walk the river? Yes, each one who would use it, who desires its strength and bounty, must walk its length. Not just gaze upon it; not say, without knowledge, 'This is not a terrible river.' Know the river. Be with it along its whole length.

Mayors – do this.

Councillors – do this.

Scientists – do this.

All those who love to look upon a river – do this.

Young people – do this, so you will know what is being drained from your future.

American agrarian Wendell Berry writes:

We have the world to live in on the condition that we will take good care of it. And to take good care of it, we have to know it. And to know it and to be willing to take good care of it, we have to love it.

In his essay 'Land Ethic', American writer Aldo Leopold says: 'A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community; it is wrong when it tends otherwise.'

Mike Joy says: 'Healthy functioning ecosystems are no longer just a "nice to have", they are a prerequisite for the continuation of civilization, not to speak of our responsibility to future generations.'

The river says ...

(you know what the river is saying
without being told. You hear
what the river is singing
without knowing the words
to the song.

Brian Turner)

Under autumn sky, in a pool deep from snowmelt and rain, the surface so bright and pure it holds sky and golden poplar and sun and duck on its surface, a mirror reflecting this world we've been bequeathed. And in the air the coolness of frost soon to descend, the whiff of snow from where the river begins, that age-old cycle the river holds in its sheen, in its mystery. Willow leaves, small golden offerings, on its skin.

