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Multispecies imaginaries for river justice: Mobilising in defence of the Piatúa River, Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on multispecies imaginaries and their relation to actions, movements, and coalitions for river justice. It does so based on the case of the Piatúa River, a free-flowing, highly biodiverse river in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Since 2014, the Piatúa has been threatened by hydropower development that would seriously impact its biodiversity and the livelihoods of local Kichwa communities. Members of these communities, working with allies (e.g., scientists, environmental NGOs working with Rights of Rivers, kayakers), mobilised against the dam. Their mobilisation is centrally informed by their river imaginaries, which assemble the Piatúa in plural, relational, fluid ways, sharing common ground in their political project of preserving this river as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies entity. We argue that, through these multispecies imaginaries, the Piatúa became a "boundary object" around which different actors were able to converge in river defence actions. This highlights the inherently political nature of imaginaries, which we recognise to be deeply grounded in material realities. We suggest that the strengthening and/or re-enlivening of particular imaginaries and the modes of relationship with rivers that they encourage is crucial for advancing multispecies justice.

1. Introduction

In this article we engage with multispecies imaginaries and how they relate to actions, movements, and coalitions for river justice. We do so by introducing the case of the Piatúa River, which is highly biodiverse, nearly unpolluted, and portrayed as one of the last free-flowing rivers of the Ecuadorian Amazon (see Fig. 1). Since 2014, the threat of hydropower development has loomed over this river and its multispecies communities. Local Kichwa communities, organised as PONAKICSC (*Pueblo Originario de la Nacionalidad Kichwa del Cantón de Santa Clara*), and later also as the youth-led collective *Piatúa Resiste*, quickly opposed the dam project. They set up protests; engaged in alliances with local, regional, and international actors (e.g., scientists; environmental NGOs working with Rights of Rivers; kayakers); and took the case to the courts. They mobilised to preserve the Piatúa as what they conceive of as a sacred living being, constituted by and home to multiple (human, animal, plant, and spiritual) communities.

The Piatúa is representative of a larger societal phenomenon currently unfolding around the world. We are witnessing a dynamic confrontation of river imaginaries, standing at the core of socio-environmental struggles for river justice. Damming, mining, pollution, depletion, and other forms of encroachment and exploitation of rivers – as well as the diverse resistance strategies that are emerging in response to them (Boelens, Escobar, Bakker, Hommes, Swyngedouw et al., 2023) – are fundamentally political processes deeply rooted in conflicting imaginaries of rivers and riverine actors/subjects. Human actors involved with rivers relate and organise around the latter according to *plural river ontologies*; that is, according to multiple, fluid, and always situated understandings of what or who rivers are (Houart et al., 2024).

Dominant imaginaries of river-as-resource or river-as-commodity have been especially prevalent within the capitalist political economy, which requires the exploitation of living beings, lands, and waters (Laborde & Jackson, 2022; Roca-Servat et al., 2020). This system is structurally informed by modernist, anthropocentric narratives that are partly the legacy of colonial and cartesian thinking (Merchant, 1980). Alternative imaginaries of rivers as free-flowing, multispecies entities often stem from or are informed by grassroots and Indigenous cosmologies and knowledge systems that perceive and engage with rivers as

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Fig. 1. The Piatúa River.Picture by Houart (2023).

living beings, ancestors, kin (e.g., Luisetti, 2023; Magallanes, 2020; Wooltorton et al., 2022; Yates, 2022).[1] In multiple instances of conflict and encroachment, these alternative river imaginaries are also consciously and strategically shaped in cultural-political circles, to confront powerful adversaries (e.g., Baud, 2010; Wölfle Hazard, 2022). Therefore, these struggles for river justice – which we address as socio-ecological conservation and restoration – are inextricable from territorial and geopolitical struggles against the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and capitalist extractivism (Luisetti, 2019; Parsons et al., 2021; Whyte, 2016).

Here, we deliberately focus on these alternative river imaginaries that pave the way for the protection of rivers' integrity and socio-ecological sustainability. We do so by addressing a central research question: *How have imaginaries of rivers as lively, free-flowing, multispecies entities enabled different actors across scales, geographies, cultures, and movements to converge in defence of the Piatúa River*? We build on previous work on rivers and multispecies justice (Houart et al., 2024) and engage with these topics from a political ecology perspective that explicitly attends to the subjecthood, agency, and entanglement of diverse human and other-than-human subjects and actors.

In doing so, we contribute to a growing body of work. More-than-human approaches have been increasingly demonstrating how socio-political processes are always co-fabrications shaped by a plurality of human and non-human actors (e.g., Neimanis, 2009; Fleischmann, 2023). They challenge cartesian thinking and its nature/culture, human/animal, subject/object binaries. Furthermore, such approaches have also encouraged the reformulation of central concepts in political geography by critically reflecting on the agency and roles of different non-human beings in political matters (Fleischmann, 2023). We contribute to this by reflecting on how non-humans (e.g., rivers, animals, plants) can also be considered as "elements of networks of power" and as "entangled in asymmetrical hierarchies with humans and other species" (ibid.: 3). That necessarily renders these processes a matter of multispecies justice (MSJ). The ethic of MSJ "attends to intersecting dynamics of oppression across human categories like race, class, gender, and sexuality, across species, and across the living/non-living binary (Clare, 2016) to acknowledge, resist, prevent, and respond to violence enacted against all kinds of beings (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017)" (Celermajer et al., 2021, p. 124).

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework. In it we explore how river imaginaries relate to political action and mobilisation, forming the basis for the analysis of the case study. The third section presents the methodology. The fourth and fifth sections focus on the case study (on multispecies imaginaries of the Piatúa, and on the multi-scalar political mobilisation in defence of the river). The sixth section concludes with a discussion on imaginaries, political action, and MSJ in rivers.

2. River imaginaries and political mobilisation for river justice

We depart from the concept of imaginaries as the worldviews that actors have about how the world is, was, or should become (Hommes et al., 2022). Through imaginaries, actors make sense of the world and the different elements and relations that compose it (Hoogesteger, Konijnenberg, et al., 2023). Imaginaries – as worldviews – also form the basis upon which actors make sense of their own actions, and of the relations within which these take place.[2] They are therefore based on culture and knowledge systems, networks, social practices, and socio-natural relations. Imaginaries are expressed in narratives and discourses, in actions and material practices, in networks and modes of relationship, and in the symbolic and material relations binding all of these together (Björkdahl, 2018; Hoogesteger, Suhardiman, et al., 2023). They stem from a profoundly diverse array of socio-material contexts that inform specific ontologies and epistemologies, ranging from indigenous or animistic to modernist-scientific (Laborde & Jackson, 2022).

Imaginaries also include a notion of time that links the past, the present, and a desired or planned future. This means that they are both interpretative (they make sense of the past and how it led to the present) and performative or aspirational (they project desires toward a future that is yet to come) (Fry & Murphy, 2021). Regarding rivers, we could say that imaginaries are the worldviews through which individuals and/or collectives understand and engage with rivers as complex assemblages of human and other-than-human, living and non-living elements (see also Anderson et al., 2012; Neimanis, 2009; Reyes Escate et al., 2022). A river can be understood as an assemblage formed by a diversity of living and non-living elements (e.g., human and non-human animals, plants, water, stones, infrastructure, technology, spirits, laws) that human actors acknowledge or don't acknowledge based on their specific worldviews and beliefs. These elements are ascribed meaning and value according to actors' imaginaries. It is crucial to emphasize that, when different actors talk about a river, they are most likely not talking about "the same thing" (Götz & Middleton, 2020); that is, river imaginaries are always situated, place-based, deeply subjective, and also fluid and shapeshifting (see also Castoriadis, 2007). They are "about what a river is, what a river was, what a river ought to be, and what a river cannot be" (De Jong et al., 2024, p. 3).

Importantly, "plural, lively, and relational ontological understandings of rivers have historically led to specific modes of relationship with them – especially, modes of relationship that preserve, protect, or seek to restore the integrity of rivers and their multispecies communities" (Houart et al., 2024, p. 8). This denotes the inherently political nature of imaginaries; that they materialize in concrete practices and are always embedded in (most frequently asymmetrical) power (ibid.). Indeed, imaginaries are inextricable from actors' material realities, socio-cultural contexts, political-economic systems, and uneven geometries of power (e.g., Massey, 1999). All condition how (in what ways, spaces, contexts) actors can or are inclined to act (politically) based on their imaginaries. River imaginaries can therefore inform political action for radical transformation that challenges the status quo and related power (a)symmetries; but can likewise, lead to the reproduction of existing systems, hierarchies, and injustices.

In terms of imaginaries underlying movements for river justice,

[1] Western or non-Indigenous environmentalist groups may also share this imaginary of rivers as living, free-flowing, multispecies entities (see De Jong et al., 2024; Reason, 2024 for examples).

[2] See also Wahinkpe Topa and Narvaez, 2022

Wölfle Hazard's (2022) work in the USA, among others, is interesting here. The concept of grassroots imaginaries "describes a felt sense of connection to other people, waters, and species, which people develop as they work in and seek to protect their home landscapes" (ibid.: 42). Thus, "grassroots environmental movements often catalyze this sense of connection, as people respond to threats to the places they care for and rely on" (ibid.). The rootedness of river imaginaries in specific places and territories is a crucial aspect of local movements for river justice, as they sprout from place-based cultural dwelling and grounded political struggles (Escobar, 2001; Vos et al., 2020; Wooltorton et al., 2022). A relevant question is: how can local movements with specifically situated river imaginaries converge with actors, networks, and movements for river justice at a broader scale (e.g., those mobilising for Rights of Rivers) in a spirit of political solidarity?

Wölfle Hazard (2022: 42) observes that "as water imaginaries travel, via media and social networks, from local environmental actions to global forums, they materialize 'vast networks of interlinking, discursive themes, motifs, and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time, and articulate its psychic and social dimensions'". As mentioned above, imaginaries are thereby not static or fixed; they are plural and dynamic. Ultimately, they are powerful because they fundamentally (in)form narratives about specific worlds and the actors who inhabit such worlds, and they lead to very real, concrete practices and modes of relationship based on that. For instance, the "multispecies commons imaginaries" that Wölfle Hazard (2022) describes think riverscapes as more-than-human relational networks, whereby rivers are constituted by and *belong to* multiple human *and* non-human beings.

We suggest that specific river imaginaries can turn rivers into "boundary objects" around which different actors across scales, geographies, cultures, and movements are able to converge in actions and coalitions for river defence. Boundary objects are "any object that is part of multiple social worlds and facilitates communication between them; it has a different identity in each social world that it inhabits" (Star & Griesemer, 1989). A river-as-(legal)-subject imaginary, such as broadly advanced through the RoR movement, can thus become a common reference point around which diverse actors strategically converge in river defence alliances. As Tănăsescu et al. (2024: 15) point out, Indigenous communities are "well versed in dealing in Western concepts to advance their own claims and interests" – something that was largely forced upon them through colonisation.

Simultaneously, international movements and networks like RoR resource from specific local cases to strengthen their numbers, legitimacy, and struggles. These movements and networks also adopt the specific, situated imaginaries of rivers and riverine communities, for example river-as-ancestor or river-as-sentient-landscape (e.g., Bacigalupo, 2021). Plural river imaginaries (or ontologies) then relate to one another across scales, geographies, and cultures, forming convergence spaces (Cumbers et al., 2008) in which different actors are able to come together (despite their different identities and specific views or strategies) around the boundary object that a specific river becomes. This allows for the articulation of a shared political project that is based on "certain collective visions", generating "a politics of mutual solidarity […] a participatory way of practicing effective politics, articulating the (albeit imperfect) ability of heterogeneous movements [and actors] to be able to work together" (Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 193).

We find this notion of "boundary object" helpful to understand how a river like the Piatúa can inhabit a variety of social worlds, belonging to different actors (e.g., local Kichwa, scientists, environmental NGOs, kayakers), who assemble it in distinct, deeply personal ways, and who – despite disagreements they may and do have – manage to work together toward a common purpose and political project: to preserve the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies river. This convergence space arises even with the existence of tensions or divergences regarding the means to achieve the common purpose, or the specific contours of the political project (e.g., for local Indigenous communities it might be fundamentally about territorial sovereignty in settler colonial societies; for scientists, it might be river and biodiversity conservation; for environmental NGOs working with RoR, it might be the acknowledgment of another river as subject of rights).

As noted by Cumbers et al. (2008: 196), "convergence spaces are sites of contested social and power relations"; "unequal discursive and material power relations exist" that position actors within these spaces differently. For example, members of local communities whose daily lives depend on a lively, free-flowing, multispecies river may resist a dam project even by risking their own lives; whereas international NGOs working from geographically distant offices do not have as much to lose and do not get as directly involved. On the other hand, they might have access to political decision-making spaces that local community members do not have the resources to access.

Convergence spaces in which broad common purposes are advanced also run the risk of silencing or side-stepping the imaginaries and related demands of divergent or less powerful members of a movement or community; and they might not align with the "more radical" political demands of specific local and Indigenous communities (e.g., RiverOfLife et al., 2021). The existence of power asymmetries at all scales and in all networks means that "particular places and movements [and actors] become empowered while others remain marginal within the operations of [river] justice networks" (Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 195). That is why it is crucial to critically look at how actions and coalitions for river justice develop, and at how they can be solidary and empower each other across scales and despite differences.

Finally, because the actions and political mobilisation of river justice coalitions have real impacts on both human *and* other-than-human lives, it is important to examine them through a *multispecies* justice (MSJ) perspective. The actors that are rendered visible or invisible, included or excluded in specific struggles for river defence are both human *and* non-human actors. We could thus ask: concerning a river like the Piatúa, how are the *carachamas* or the *bocachicos*, the frogs, the orchids, the *chunchos*, or even the spiritual entities that are said to inhabit stones in the river featured (or not) in the struggle in defence of the river? Who represents them, how, and to what end(s)?

3. Methodology

Our case study concerns action research conducted by the first author. Because positionality and the situatedness of knowledge are centrally important to us, this section and the empirical sections are written in the first person. The research methods employed include: participant observation, field notes, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, audiovisual recordings, river walks, literature review, and secondary data analysis (of political manifestos, legal documents, online material such as news articles and documentaries). Interviewees' names were anonymised for safety purposes, except when the interviewee explicitly requested to be named.

Research began in 2022, and fieldwork took place in 2023. The first author also participated in a cultural heritage project led by grassroots movements in November 2023, which consisted of assisting Alexandra Knott, a Canadian anthropologist who became part of PONAKICSC through marriage and who has been leading an ethnographic initiative to register Kichwa narratives, practices, and cultural traditions associated with the Piatúa. The goal of this grassroots cultural heritage project is to establish an official cosmovision of the Piatúa according to local Kichwa communities, which might enable the latter to declare the river

Kichwa cultural heritage through self-determination. Before, during, and after fieldwork, the three authors have been involved in ongoing discussions about the topic of the research, framed within their long-term involvement in action research with different rivers around the world, namely in Ecuador.[3]

In 2023, I (the first author) travelled to Ecuador twice to visit the Piatúa and meet members of the local Kichwa communities who have been actively resisting the dam project, as well as a few other actors (e.g., kayakers and members of environmental NGOs). My contact points were river defenders, members of PONAKICSC and *Piatúa Resiste*. The location of the Piatúa and some of the communities I visited is difficult to reach as an outsider. Being a female researcher working alone also made it important to be accompanied by local people during fieldwork. The river defenders who were my first contacts thus acted as my gatekeepers. While I was informed by my companions of the existence of intra- and inter-community disagreement regarding the dam project, and of tensions among people due to this, I did not engage directly with individuals in favour of the dam – namely because of said tensions. However, for the purposes of this article, our main intention was to understand the specific imaginaries (and the political mobilisation that they encourage) of river *defenders*; those individuals who resist the dam and who desire to preserve the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multi-species river.

Throughout my research with the Piatúa, I tried to engage in multispecies ethnography, "a more-than-human approach to ethnographic research and writing (…) that acknowledges the interconnectedness and inseparability of humans and other life forms, and thus seeks to extend ethnography beyond the solely human realm" (Locke and Münster, 2015: 2). Spending hours by the river, sleeping on the riverbanks, careful observation and active listening (Rose, 2013) are practices I engaged in, drawing inspiration from what Van Dooren et al. (2016) call *cultivating the arts of attentiveness*, or what Tsing (2015) terms *the arts of noticing*. These helped me engage with the Piatúa as a research subject, a more-than-human entity who is only partially knowable. Mostly, my understanding of the river evolved through conversations with different local Kichwa community members. The latter expressed through myriad ways (songs, artifacts, drawings, specific habits and actions like bathing in the river for healing purposes or fetching water from the river to cook) how they understand the Piatúa.

4. Local Kichwa imaginaries of the Piatúa River

The Piatúa is born in the mountain range of the Llanganates National Park and runs across the rainforest at the border between the provinces of Napo and Pastaza (see Fig. 2). It connects Andean and Amazonian landscapes and is located in one of the most biodiverse regions of the planet, home to endemic, rare, and endangered species of fauna and flora (Time, October 25, 2022). The river is characterised by crystalline cold waters, countless stones and rocks, and a rapidly changing water volume and flow that are influenced by frequent, heavy rains in the cloud forest ecosystem of the Llanganates. It is portrayed as one of the last rivers in the Ecuadorian Amazon to have so far escaped large-scale disruptive human interference from mining, pollution, or dams.

Nevertheless, since 2014, Ecuadorian energy company Genefran, working under the umbrella of international energy corporation ElitCorp, has been trying to build a 30 MW hydroelectric dam in the Piatúa. The project was approved by the Ecuadorian Ministry of the Environment, Water and Ecological Transition, but was quickly denounced by

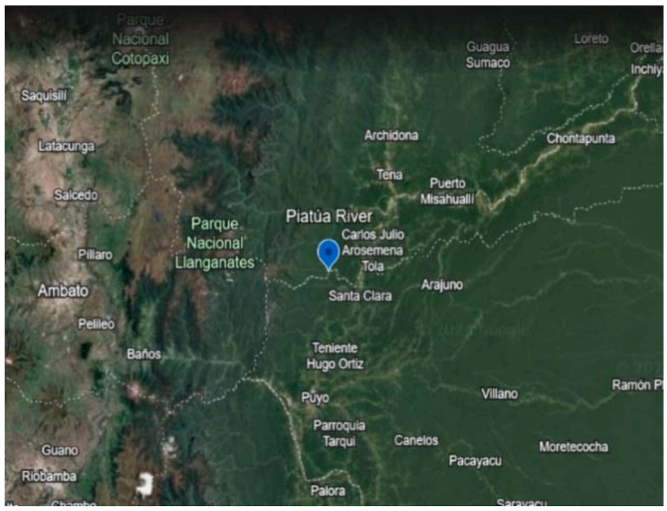

Fig. 2. Map of the Piatúa River, Ecuador (source: *Google Earth*).

local Kichwa communities as having undergone no free, prior, and informed consultation process. According to biologists, the dam would threaten the lives and habitats of animal and plant species, including a species of catfish that is endemic to the area; at least nine species of critically endangered frogs; and multiple endemic species of orchids (Mongabay, 2019). Approximately 90% of the Piatúa's water volume would be diverted, and its diverted waters would be discharged through a neighbouring river, the Jandiayaku, with a much lower volume, which would also impact the latter. Local Kichwa communities quickly mobilised against the dam, arguing that it would constitute a violation of Indigenous People's territorial rights and of the rights of the Piatúa itself, according to Ecuador's constitutional chapter on Rights of Nature.[4]

Kichwa communities have inhabited the Piatúa's riverbanks and formed physical-material and cultural-spiritual relationships with the river and its many beings across several generations. Petroglyphs found on rocks near the river indicate human presence for what could possibly be thousands of years. The Kichwa communities form part of the Santa Clara canton, province of Pastaza. There are twenty-two communities in PONAKICSC, some of which are directly located on the riverbanks, with families spreading along the river's course. Local inhabitants, especially those living closest to the river, practice subsistence agriculture, hunting, fishing, but often members of the family, particularly men, seek employment in nearby towns and cities. The river's water is used for domestic purposes, namely fishing, bathing, cooking, drinking, and for medicinal and spiritual purposes. The Piatúa is also a popular destination for recreational activities and whitewater sports. It is, too, a source of inspiration for artistic creation in the form of songs and artifacts. During my fieldwork visits, members of local communities sang songs about the sacred places and beings of the Piatúa.

This is one of the most remarkable features of the river: it is known to be inhabited by supernatural, spiritual entities that exist on specific stones and rocks along the river, both on the riverbed and banks. They give the Piatúa its Kichwa nickname: *Mayu Waka Rumi*, (River of Sacred Stones). Besides its human inhabitants, the Piatúa and surrounding territory are home to an almost innumerable diversity of animal and plant species, including: *nutrias*, frogs, sardine, catfish, jaguars, anacondas, toucans, tapir, agoutis (*guatusas*), monkeys, sloths, deer, owls,

[3] We are all part of the international, interdisciplinary action research project "Riverhood: Living Rivers and New Water Justice Movements", which connects a vast network of engaged scholars, socio-environmental movements, and river defenders across different countries of the world, all of whom are engaged with the conservation or restoration of specific, diverse rivers. www.movingrivers.org.

[4] In Ecuador, legal discussions on multispecies justice are often related to RoN, as it is the first country in the world that has enshrined RoN in its 2008 Constitution. Most legal mobilisation for the protection, conservation, or restoration of non-human nature (specific ecosystems, natural entities such as rivers and forests, and even specific species or individuals) has been done through the RoN framework (see Tănăsescu et al., 2024).

butterflies, orchids, ferns, ceibo trees, cedrorana (*chunchos*) – to name just a few.

For the Kichwa people of Santa Clara, the Piatúa is a living, conscious, sacred being. *Mayu Waka Rumi* is believed to possess healing powers, inherent wisdom, changing moods, and a strong personality. *When people go to the river, they should ask for permission before entering its waters. They should not be too loud, jump a lot, or spit in the water*, I was told by my hosts, members of a family in San Juan de Piatúa, with whom I stayed for a couple of nights camping on the riverbanks. *If people act disrespectfully, the sky might turn dark and cloudy; and the river may suddenly grow and take them away with its strong current. The Piatúa's moods are known to change quickly*.

Several people described to me an event that took place in 2022, when the river's water volume grew exponentially over a couple of hours and awoke them in the middle of the night with the roaring sound of stones and rocks rolling downstream, pushed by torrential waters. People were afraid that the river would swallow their homes and *chakras*, and they ran to higher ground. The next morning, the Piatúa's waters had quieted down and receded from the sandy riverbanks, leaving behind the countless bodies of dead fish. Some individuals suggested there might be a link between this event and the dam threat, almost as if the Piatúa had wanted to remind people of its nonhuman power, to demand respect.

These descriptions express an understanding of the river as a sentient riverscape with its own agency, power, personality. This is also expressed in a manifesto written by local Kichwa youth, stating that "the Piatúa is a living and conscious being who represents an integral part of our identity as an Indigenous people, as well as our collective ability to continue to thrive and protect all living beings, spirits, and healing sources that exist within the river and our territory" (Manifesto, 2021). Apart from water's crucial value for life, the Piatúa is "a river considered especially sacred for its healing properties" (ibid.). Local Kichwa inhabitants have traditionally used the river's water and stones to heal ailments and diseases. Kichwa youth grew up listening to stories from their grandparents, and they have also witnessed firsthand how Piatúa has cured illnesses such as bone pain, fever, stomach pain. According to their cosmovision, "Piatúa is considered to heal bad energy – a kind of spiritual healing that charges energies, brings serenity, and is a source of knowledge" (ibid.).

Some of the stones on the riverbed and banks are seen as portals into an Otherworld, other dimensions where people may have access to specific kinds of knowledge or receive teachings that may allow them to become *yachak* (wisdom keepers/healers). Many stones are believed to be inhabited by magical, supernatural creatures with different identities, powers, and intentions. For instance, *Sirena Rumi* (Mermaid Stone) is said to be the home of the *Yaku Warmi* (Woman of the Water), a mythological being with the body of a boa and the head of a beautiful, long-haired woman. Other spirits inhabit other stones, having benevolent and/or malevolent predispositions. One stone resembles a monkey's face and is said to be inhabited by a monkey spirit. Some stones on the lower part of the river are known as the "trail of the puma", or the resting place of a giant boa. Multiple people who claim to have been affected by the stones' spiritual entities, to have heard them, seen them, or felt them, still live in the area. I listened to some of them narrating their personal experiences. Importantly, these spirits do not only inhabit the river's stones. They exist within a broader, interconnected world where the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary are blurry, as exemplified by spirits who inhabit big, old *chuncho* trees in the area, or the jungle in the vicinity of houses and the riverbanks.

Many stories connected not only with the Piatúa but with the lands and waters surrounding it, like the Llanganates mountains (where the river is born), are infused with the agency of animals, plants, and spirits who form part of a large assemblage of beings. Oftentimes, human characters in these stories encounter other-than-human beings who teach them, challenge them, and change them. One of the perceived effects of these stories is that they nurture a sense of fear, esteem, and respect for these territories and their co-inhabitants, leading to ethical norms, principles of coexistence, and an ethics of care (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017) that can help keep people's actions in check.

For instance, Jessica Grefa, a young Kichwa woman who is the first and current president of *Piatúa Resiste* and a biologist documenting local biodiversity in the Piatúa territory, described how her connection with the Piatúa began during her teenage years; how the threat of the dam awoke her to the reality of the Piatúa's sacred character, and to her responsibility as a local Indigenous person to stand up for the river:

> "When the conflict took place [it was like] I was reborn! Lying in the water, on the sand, touching, feeling (…) walking among the communities, talking [with people], I realised that perhaps the spirits who I had left aside were always there with me. It is strange, because my dreams have always been with rivers. It is like I had left rivers behind [*becoming distanced from her local culture*], but the rivers were always with me." (interview, 27-11-24)

When asked what the Piatúa means to her now that she has been involved in the struggle and is reconnected with her Kichwa culture and communities, she said:

> "I don't have that same connection [with the river] as our ancestors, I can't call the spirits, but in a way, I feel that they are always there watching us. (…) For us, according to our cosmovision, it is a sacred river. The river tells you, 'I take care of you if you take care of me. I give you clean water, I give you food (…) but you also [must] defend me, protect me!' (…) Somehow, I might've lost the language [*that the spirits communicate in*] but I can still feel it. And that is something that sustains me, grounds me, in our culture."

The Kichwa imaginaries of the Piatúa – as I was told by several people along the river – are multispecies, portraying a lively, agentic, and relational assemblage of beings where the river itself, as the living subject at the core of this cosmovision, is entangled in a web of relationships with other human, animal, vegetal, mineral, and spiritual lives.

The lively, multispecies assemblage of the Piatúa according to these imaginaries is also illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4, which were drawn by Darling Kaniras, one of the founding members of *Piatúa Resiste* and member of PONAKICSC, a young man who is an environmental engineer, artist, and teacher. His counter-cartography maps allude to multiple elements, like water, animals, plants, humans, infrastructure, mountains, stones, spirits, etc. In such imaginaries and assemblage-making processes, human agency, knowledge, voice, and powers constantly intersect with other-than-human ones. These maps were the central topic of my first encounter with Darling and Alex Knott, and were used to explain to me the local context, the struggle involving Piatúa, and the local imaginaries connected to the river and to the communities' resistance. The maps have also been shared on social media platforms of *Piatúa Resiste*/PONAKICSC and are used as a tool in the resistance against the dam project. They remind their viewers of the complex, multispecies character of the Piatúa River and its surrounding lands, waters, and communities.

Multispecies encounters form part of the everyday life of the people who live closest by the river, and also regularly take place in dreams. As explained by anthropologist Alex Knott:

> "Often people's experiences with the river [are] through dreaming. You can kind of distinguish dreams that you have when you're asleep, but also people often talk about dreams that are waking dreams. (…) For example, people talk about having gone to *Supay Rumi*, and then falling asleep there basically. And then, when they wake up, being followed back by the *Supay* (…) the spirit of the rock." (interview with Alex Knott, 12-11-2023)

During these dreams, different beings communicate with humans. For instance:

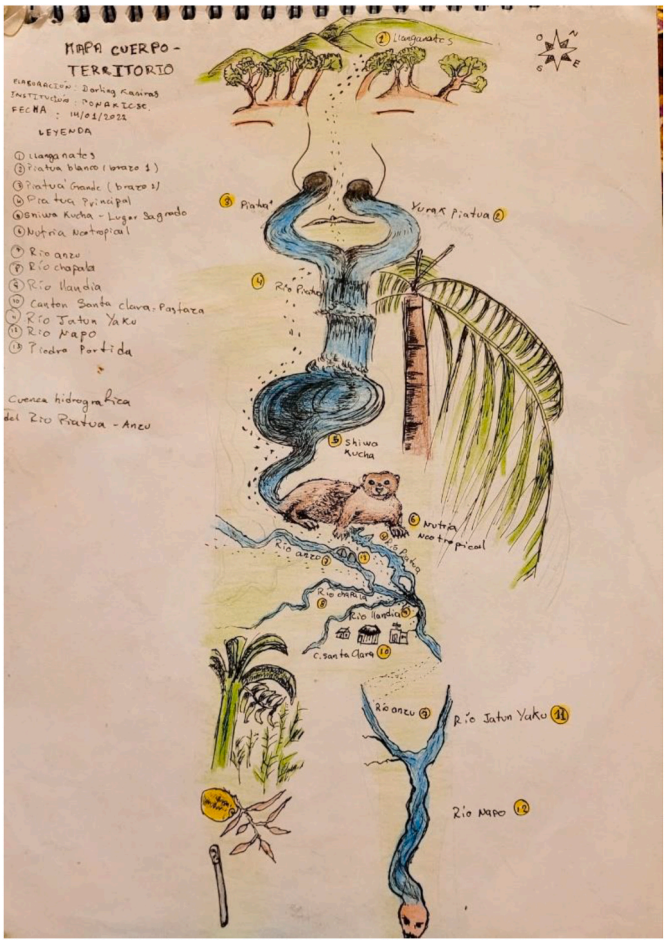

Fig. 3. Map of the Piatúa and some of its relations. Author: Darling Kaniras.

> "I remember this one guy talked about – he had a hard time killing. He was hunting, and I can't remember what animal it was [later Alex told me it was a wild boar], but he wasn't killing it quickly, so it suffered a lot, and then he dreamed of the animal saying like 'you know, you really hurt me', and so that sort of communication happening." (interview with Alex Knott, 12-11-2023)

The importance of such dreams and other multispecies encounters is that they have actual performative power in current relationships, individual and collective behaviour. They lead local people to develop and transform their imaginaries and understandings of subjecthood, agency, voice, and expression. In this case, that riverscapes are communities shared with non-human beings to whom they are bound in reciprocal relationships of vulnerability, life, and death. This can also influence how local inhabitants perceive their own responsibilities:

> "(…) Last weekend, when we were talking to P. and I., they were talking about the animals [agoutis, tapirs, rats, deer, sloths] eating all their harvest. But then they're obviously thinking about 'why is this?'. 'Oh, it's because we cut down these plant beings that were feeding them, and so now these animal beings cannot eat those, and so they're eating our planted food'. […] all kind of come together in a web, so, I would say definitely the awareness here is 'we are one being amongst many'." (interview with Alex Knott, 12-11-2023)

Indeed, in the instance referred to, P. told us that despite the fact that his family had to cut down trees to make space for their *chakras*, they also selected areas of the forest that they would not cut, specifically for the sake of the animals. Parts of the primary forest on the riverbanks were also left untouched for the benefit of the river.

During an interview, Darling Kaniras, the author of the counter-cartography maps, expressed that:

> "Well, when I go to the river I am always talking. Talking with – I don't know if I'm talking with myself or with the river. It's like an omnipresent presence, you could say. (…) When I walk there, I just talk, and I feel that somebody is listening." (interview, 13-11-2023)

Living in close relationship with the river and its multispecies communities means acquiring specific imaginaries, as well as knowledge about, the entanglements of life, actors, and events that take place in this river territory. For instance:

> "(…) you spend your life with it, you know. You always anticipate the behaviour of the river; you can really anticipate it. With the

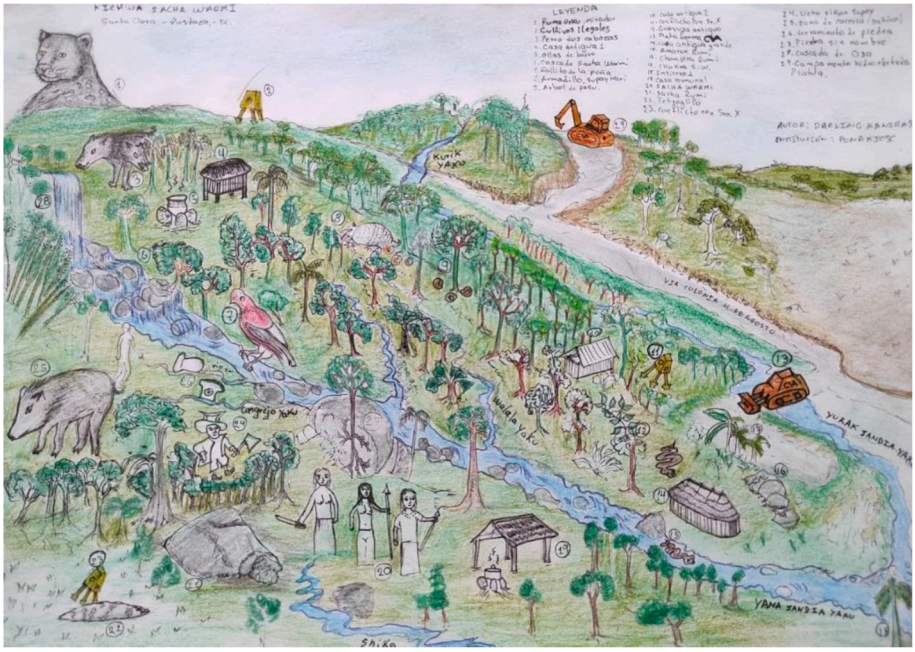

Fig. 4. Counter-cartography map of the community of Sacha Warmi. Author: Darling Kaniras.

winds, with the clouds, with the birds … the colour of the water itself … When it grows, it is telling you: 'we are growing. Go'. That's it: you just raise your head, and you know that something is happening. (…) As Alex said, it is not something that you can learn through lessons and classes. It's just something that you feel, that's it." (interview, 13-11-2023)

There is also an understanding that the river has multiple human *and* non-human voices:

"Like I said, the river does have a voice. It does. For example, C. is a voice of the river. I. [also]. They are voices of the river. All the knowledge that they have is thanks to the river, to the jungle, that are there. So, I think that they are the voices. And more than anything, to give voice to the river through drawings would be … a lot more … Because the river is a person, but to me it is a person that I don't know how to represent graphically. Because if you see a river you're going [to draw] a river, but inside there is the boa, there is the mermaid, there is the other one of the stone … so it is a composition of many things, I think. And each part of the river has its own voice, has its own messenger, has its own place." (interview, 13-11-2023)

This everyday reality that forms the lively, multispecies imaginaries of the Piatúa River shared by members of the Kichwa communities lies at the core of their mobilisation in defence of the river and its co-inhabitants. It is understood that there is a common responsibility to keep the balance of the whole (eco)system: the river assemblage that includes the river, the jungle, the Llanganates where the Piatúa is born, the animals, plants, humans, stones and spirits, water, etc. The everyday life through which, for instance, local women formed their imaginaries of the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies entity led these women to become active vocal defenders of the river.

Since the start of the dam project, many of these women instantly raised their voices against it, speaking on behalf of the Piatúa and of its many beings. This explicit recognition of using their voice not only for their sake but also, specifically, for that of the animals and plants of the Piatúa territory was also expressed to me by another local male inhabitant. R. sees it as his responsibility to speak on behalf of the animals and plants of the river, since they "cannot speak for themselves". [5]

Parallel to supernatural accounts of this assemblage, there is also an actual ecological awareness of the liveliness of this riverine territory:

"Yes, that's the idea, no? To leave it as it is. Because I understand a bit of the dynamic of this ecosystem, and I know that one of the reasons why the river is so wild is because of the wind currents that come here, in the Sub-Andean Mountain range. The wind currents that come from the north, they collide against the wall of that mountain (*signals the mountain on the horizon*) and therefore generate turbulence, rains, and that also blocks our own access to that region (…)." (interview with Darling Kaniras, 13-11-2023)

According to the lively, multispecies imaginaries of the Kichwa communities, there isn't necessarily a conflict or tension between the material, geographical, environmental explanations of particular phenomena involving the river and the other, more mystical or extraordinary explanations they refer to:

"So they say that that is where the door to the Otherworld [is]. That there is an immense reserve of animals there, that if you open it [the door] they will all come out. All the animals, including the ones you've never seen in your life. That is what the shamans say. That there is a lock, a lock that you put in it. (…) They [the shamans] close the doors, they lock something in. (…) They control and somehow maintain a balance, you could say. That's when they close doors, because this river was very wild. There were things that we didn't understand. There were *Supay*, there were wild animals. Wild, wild. So, they said they closed it. They put locks so that this place remains here. Far, apart. For nobody to reach it." (interview, 13-11-2023)

Miners, loggers, oil and hydropower companies are believed to be trying to reach these wild, protected places that *yachak* and local Indigenous people have been keeping in balance within the whole territory. That is also a central reason for people to act: the Piatúa is understood as a frontier that blocks access from the wildest and furthest regions of the Llanganates National Park, regions that are sacred, allegedly pristine, and that must be protected. Mobilisation by members of the local Kichwa communities on behalf of the river is consequently *also* on behalf of the larger assemblage of the jungle, rainforest, cloud forest, and the more-than-human communities that depend on the protection of human beings against mining, dams, oil extraction, and other threats. We would therefore suggest that it is a mobilisation for multispecies justice (MSJ).

5. Converging political mobilisation in defence of the Piatúa River

In 2018, Genefran began construction works near the river. People from more than 19 communities gathered in Santa Clara in a general assembly of PONAKICSC. Approximately 300 individuals then marched on the construction site to stop the works. Police was sent in by governmental authorities, but eventually, representatives of CONFENIAE[6] reached an agreement with the head of the company, according to whom the machinery would be removed as long as protesters disbanded. The people left, but the machinery remained. In response, members of the communities closed the central amazonian road connecting Puyo and Tena, drawing attention from national media outlets.

Around that time, a group of Kichwa youth formed the collective *Piatúa Resiste*, under the umbrella of PONAKICSC. They wanted to amplify the youth's role in opposing the dam and to take on the role of nature guardians that was part of their cultural heritage. They used social media to share their story and gather support from national and international allies (Mirror, March 12, 2022). They thus created multi-scalar alliances with environmental NGOs, legal experts, academics, which Amazonian Indigenous communities have historically done in the context of socio-environmental struggles for justice (Perreault, 2003). A network thus began to form around the Piatúa River, connecting it to broader struggles against hydro-extractivism and Indigenous people's resistance.

It was through contact with an environmental NGO that the president of *Piatúa Resiste* heard about Rights of Nature (RoN), communicated it to her peers, and the concept was embraced as part of their struggle to defend the Piatúa. In May 2019, the leadership of PONAKICSC presented an *acción de protección* to the Provincial Court of Pastaza on behalf of Piatúa, calling for respect for the river's rights and for free, prior, and informed consultation. The Kichwa People of Santa Clara stand out as one example of an Indigenous group bringing a RoN action to Ecuadorian courts (Tănăsescu et al., 2024). According to the then leader of PONAKICSC, the dam project's planned diversion of more than 90% of the river's flow would leave the communities with too little: "That is the problem, that by drying a river all the animal life will be destroyed (…)" (Piatúa Resiste documentary, 2019).

Multiple threats to biodiversity were pointed out by biologists, zoologists, geographers, and hydrologists, who demonstrated concern over

[5] It is also interesting to note the contradiction between previous statements (that non-human beings communicate with humans on different occasions) and this statement (that they "do not speak for themselves"). This tension illustrates the existence of multiple, varying imaginaries (of rivers, non-human beings) that are not mutually exclusive and may co-exist (ambiguously) in one individual or within one community, and between different individuals and communities within the same territory.

[6] Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana.

lack of accuracy, mistakes, and omissions within the environmental impact assessment of Genefran (Mongabay, 23 July 2019). According to one biologist, 60% of the orchid species in the zone are endemic, and four new species of frogs have been found in the last decade alone (ibid.). The Piatúa represents "a unique place for conservation in Ecuador. All this biotic richness is not considered by the company, who actually omits this data" (ibid.). The clearing of primary forest that would be required to build the dam would sever biological corridors and ecological niches of the Piatúa's territory (ibid.).

A researcher from the Universidad Regional Amazónica Ikiam claimed that "the headwaters of Amazonian rivers form habitats where multiple species of migratory fish go to spawn. Unlike other rivers in the region, the Piatúa constitutes an ideal refuge for those fish due to the absence of visible effects from mining activities" (ibid.). Genefran only lists 5 species of fish in its EIA. However, due to the river's location and characteristics, "you'd expect to find a much bigger diversity of fish (at least 20 to 30 species, approximately) including species such as the *carachamas* (*Loricariidae*), migratory species like the *bocachico* (*Prochilodus nigricans*) and the *sábalo* (*Brycon sp.*)" (ibid.). Indeed, local inhabitants mention the presence of these fish, like the *carachamas*, represented in local artifacts (see Fig. 5).

In June 2019, the first-instance hearings of the legal case took place in Pastaza. After four days of hearings, the presiding judge denied the *acción de protección*. His sentence was based on the judge's questioning of the local communities' "true" Indigenous status, because the witnesses had given testimonies in Spanish and were not wearing traditional clothes. In September 2019, the same judge was arrested for attempted bribery of another judge. The Provincial Court of Pastaza then overruled the first sentence. This event illustrates a tendency for corruption scandals and the "contentious relationship between the executive and legislative branches of government and Indigenous social movements" that has been leading to growing political instability and social unrest in Ecuador over the past decades (Tănăsescu et al., 2024: 2).

The legal case was subsequently taken to the Constitutional Court of Ecuador, where it is still (at the end of 2024) pending a ruling. Currently, no construction work is taking place in the area, but members of local communities express concern over the fact that, in early 2023, the mayor of Santa Clara who originally green-lighted Genefran's project was re-elected. Others remain cautiously optimistic, claiming that the company and government know that people will rise again in defence of Piatúa if they see movement in the area. Advocacy for the river and for Indigenous territorial struggles in general did not stop: members of *Piatúa Resiste* have been participating in the latest COPs and other high-profile international events to share their story.[7]

Fig. 5. Fish artifact made by a local inhabitant. Picture by Houart (2023).

To highlight that their struggle is on behalf of the river and all the beings connected to it, local river defenders have used specific imagery to demonstrate the multispecies character of their struggle – even if they do not use that specific term. For example, the banner of *Piatúa Resiste* (Fig. 6), which was drawn by founding members of the group, depicts a jaguar, a boa, trees, the Piatúa itself, and other beings. Besides the counter-cartography maps that depict the Piatúa and its relations or other communities of PONAKICSC (Figs. 3 and 4) that are intrinsically connected to the river, they also created maps that represent all the sacred places along the river's course, inhabited by spiritual entities like the *Yaku Warmi* (Fig. 7).

According to members of local communities, mobilising for the Piatúa began a process of re-enlivening their cultural identity as Kichwa. The grassroots mobilisation against the dam empowered people to act also in other territorial and legal struggles involving settlement in Kichwa lands by who they refer to as *colonos* or *mestizos*. Furthermore, it prompted the cultural heritage project mentioned in the methodology section.

Fieldwork also revealed the existence of diverse views regarding the river and the dam project. Opinions are mixed and division strong within the communities. Although in this paper we do not address such micropolitics (Horowitz, 2011), it is still relevant to note how differences are explained along the lines of, for example, gender. According to local inhabitants, it is mostly women who consistently opposed the dam from the start. Different arguments were presented to explain these differences. There is an assertion that women are more intimately connected with the river because they spend more time with it, thus deepening their cultural-spiritual relationship with Piatúa and its beings. As one interviewee revealed, the women of families living on the riverbanks are sometimes referred to as "voices of the Piatúa". According to the president of *Piatúa Resiste* (a woman herself), "in these struggles women 'put on the shirt' [of leading the resistance] because they have (…) the feelings of caring for, protecting (…) they have so many feelings of connection with the *chakras*, the rivers, the animals that live there".

This spiritual connection is also linked to labour and economic factors. Men usually have to look for employment elsewhere, spending less time by the river. Furthermore, as they may be the primary financial providers of the family, they may be more inclined to favour economic criteria (like promises of employment offered by Genefran). Finally, some individuals changed their mind over time. A young man who is a member of PONAKICSC and of *Piatúa Resiste*, and who received death threats for his mobilisation against the dam, was originally in favour of it. Having worked in Ecuador's biggest hydroelectric dam (Coca Codo Sinclair), and witnessed its environmental damage, he changed his mind and became active in the struggle in defence of the Piatúa.

Although grassroots mobilisation spearheaded the struggle, non-local actors also got involved. A coalition of environmental NGOs, led by US-based Earth Law Center (ELC), presented an *amicus curiae* to the Constitutional Court regarding the rights of the Piatúa in 2020. The coalition included local environmental NGOs in the region of Napo/Pastaza; national environmental NGOs; and international environmental NGOs that signed the legal document, such as International Rivers and the Center for Biological Diversity, as well as USA whitewater sports organisations. The ELC is one of the main international environmental NGOs currently championing RoN/RoR on an international scale, particularly Latin America, and one of the main strategies it uses is filing amicus briefs. *Amicus curiae* produced by the ELC, with fellow signatories, have already informed the Constitutional Court's judgment in other cases in Ecuador (Tănăsescu et al., 2024). As stated by an ELC staff member, the amicus briefs are "a way to push for [a particular]

[7] They also produced an independent documentary to be released in 2024.

Fig. 6. The *Piatúa Resiste* banner during a protest against the dam project, 19-03-22. Author: Darling Kaniras.

Fig. 7. Map of the sacred places along the Piatúa River basin, during a local protest on 19-03-22. Author: Alex Knott.

interpretation of the law" (interview, 11-01-24). This interpretation also concerns specific river imaginaries, namely of rivers as subjects of rights.

The *amicus curiae* concerning the Piatúa claims that this case must be discussed based on the fact that "the Piatúa is not an object, but a subject of rights and juridical protection" (ELC et al., 2020). To substantiate their arguments, the authors refer to both national and international legislation (the Constitution, the UN, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights). They mention other cases of rivers that were acknowledged as subjects of rights in different countries, like the Whanganui (New Zealand), the Atrato (Colombia) or the Ganges and Yamuna (India); and they refer to the Universal Declaration of Rights of Rivers. We see this cross-scalar (legal) activism for river justice as forming a sort of convergence space. There are different dynamics taking place here simultaneously. On the one hand, participating in justice networks like RoR "allows activists embedded in territorial (and often historically rooted) struggles to expand their spatial horizons" (Cumbers et al., 2008, p. 192). This underlines the fact that "convergence spaces are comprised of place-based, but not necessarily, place-bound movements" (ibid.). Actors like the local Kichwa community members defending the Piatúa draw on the strength and popularity of international movements and networks such as RoN/RoR.

In the Piatúa case, the ELC did not have direct contact with the Kichwa communities. Its involvement came through the intermediation of another actor, a regional organisation (Ecuadorian Rivers Institute) that is mobilising for river protection in the region. When I asked local river defenders what they thought about the ELC's involvement, they said they saw it as helpful because it strengthened their cause. However, they stressed their role as primary guardians of the river (something that the ELC staff member also emphasised). We underline the importance of these forms of legal-political mobilisation undertaken by external actors to be conducted in *horizontal dialogue* and *active engagement* with local and Indigenous communities.

Another group of actors that was involved in the Piatúa case is kayakers and practitioners of whitewater sports. Despite being in a smaller number than the members of local Kichwa communities, some kayakers pursued their own strategies (rallying support from

international NGOs, providing funds for legal support) to help preserve the Piatúa as a wild, free-flowing, pristine river – essential features for whitewater sports. As I was told by the ELC staff member:

> "Not only (…) Indigenous People, but also other big guardians [of the river] are the people who develop one kind of sport in natural entities, for example kayaking. They are incredible guardians of the place where they practice these outdoor activities. And that is, for me, also because one of the big arguments here made by them, about how important for them is the beauty of the place, is to use [the river] in a recreational way." (interview with ELC staff member, 11-01-2024)

Interestingly, a local kayaker who is actively involved in river defence in the region of Napo/Pastaza conveyed to me his frustration at the fact that most members of the kayaking community, in his view, are *not* actively engaged. It might be that some kayakers are not truly interested in mobilising for river defence; but as another kayaker of the area told me, mobilisation can entail a direct personal risk that they cannot (or will not) incur. It also matters whether the kayakers are local Ecuadorians or international (e.g., North American), because both their resources and their stakes differ. A local kayaker who also cares about river protection (he sometimes uses his GoPro camera to film illegal mining activities in rivers when he is rafting, and then sends the footage to local authorities) told me: "For me, all rivers are sacred"; and that "you must have a special relationship with them to *bajarlos bien* [kayak properly]". He does not personally believe the Kichwa stories about the spirits inhabiting the Piatúa's stones; for him, those stories feel too "extraordinary" – but that does not prevent him from also seeing the river as sacred and supporting the Kichwa mobilisation.

Ultimately, different people have worked simultaneously across scales, with different strategies and tools, sometimes intersecting in their efforts, sometimes disagreeing and diverging. What has allowed these different groups to converge in their (multi-scalar) political mobilisation is their desire to preserve the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies river. The lively, free-flowing, multispecies Piatúa River has thus become a boundary object through these different actors' imaginaries, around which not only local Kichwa community members, but also non-local actors (scientists, environmental NGOs, kayakers) have organised and mobilised. This has enabled them to dialogue across differences, to act together and/or separately, in direct or indirect alliance with each other, ultimately converging in their efforts to defend the river from the dam.

6. Conclusion: imaginaries and political action for multispecies justice in rivers

In this article we addressed a central research question: *How have imaginaries of rivers as lively, free-flowing, multispecies entities enabled different actors across scales, geographies, cultures, and movements to converge in defence of the Piatúa River*? Our research revealed that different actors who engaged in this case – above all, local Kichwa community members, but also scientists, environmental NGOs working with RoR, kayakers – all have particularly situated, relational, and fluid imaginaries of the river. Namely, Kichwa communities understand the Piatúa as a sacred, living entity who is home to and co-constituted by multiple human, animal, plant, mineral, and spiritual beings. University scientists understand the Piatúa as a highly biodiverse river system, part of a broader ecosystem with rare, endangered, and endemic species that depend on the river's integrity and ecological health. Environmental NGOs working with RoR understand the Piatúa as a subject of rights that ought to be acknowledged by law. Kayakers understand the Piatúa as a wild, pristine, free-flowing river with excellent characteristics for whitewater sports. Their river imaginaries are all somewhat different and specifically defined by their identities, cultures, and modes of relationship with the river; but they share particular key elements, including a common understanding of the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies river that ought to be preserved as such. Thus, the river can be understood as having become a "boundary object" around which different actors have been able to converge in a multi-scalar political mobilisation, seeking to defend the Piatúa from the hydroelectric dam project.

This plurality and unity-in-diversity of imaginaries matches the multiplicity of actions, strategies, and coalitions that local and trans-local movements for river justice are currently resorting to in different countries around the world. Our findings support the idea that particular river imaginaries and the modes of relationship with rivers that they encourage (e.g., rivers as living entities, sacred beings, biodiverse systems) lead to the protection of rivers' integrity and socio-ecological sustainability. They support the claim that imaginaries and related processes of assemblage-making are ontological-political struggles (Escobar, 2015).

Imaginaries not only have the power to lead to specific political actions; they also directly affect the lives of human and other-than-human beings, including relationships between them, and thus also represent struggles for *multispecies* justice (MSJ). We see the mobilisation in defence of the Piatúa as a struggle for, and an attempt to achieve, MSJ, even if the Piatúa's defenders themselves do not phrase it in this term. Through their actions and according to their imaginaries, they aim to preserve the Piatúa as a lively, free-flowing, multispecies river for their sake; the sake of the river; and the sake of all beings who depend on the Piatúa. We consequently see the preservation and/or re-enlivening of these alternative river imaginaries – the ones that *refuse* to understand and engage with rivers as resources, commodities, inert matter or passive riverscape – as crucial regarding the present scenario of river enclosure and destruction, biodiversity loss, and the marginalisation and dispossession of local and Indigenous communities.

Indeed, practices of MSJ in rivers may be understood as an attempt to *create new and/or to defend already* existing modes of relationship between human and other-than-human beings (Houart et al., 2024). In the Piatúa case, the struggle against the dam is also encouraging the local Kichwa to re-enliven their cultural-spiritual and physical-material relationships with the river, in an effort to deepen those relationships and strengthen the people to defend their territory now and in the future.

Finally, imaginaries and the forms of political mobilisation they encourage are always inextricable from the material, political, economic, and socio-environmental realities that specific individuals and groups live in. They are inseparable from asymmetrical power relations that situate these actors differently. Attending to the unevenness of power geometries in river justice networks and convergence spaces raises fundamental questions about how these networks and spaces can function at different scales. How can different actors develop a politics of mutual solidarity that is intersectional, attentive to power asymmetries, and actually empowering in its strategies, actions, and the outcomes they seek to achieve? The question becomes even more challenging when we broaden the scope of inclusion to also consider non-human beings. How are these (e.g., rivers, animals, plants) represented in such networks, who represents them, and to what end(s)?

The Piatúa River case adds to this critical discussion by showing how different actors were able to converge politically in their river defence efforts – and how, nevertheless, this convergence space is still always marked by particular differences in imaginaries, political power, identities, socio-economic status, and other factors that influence how, in what spaces, moments, and contexts actors can mobilise politically. In this case, local Kichwa river defenders acted in representation not only of their human interests but also of the interests and needs of their fellow, non-human co-inhabitants of the Piatúa territory. They visually (through their maps and banners) and vocally (through their stories and songs) sought to include other-than-human beings in their struggle. Future research could dwell on how other-than-human beings might "travel" across scales in river justice networks and coalitions, rendering these international alliances more interspecies, more inclusive of different voices and beings. For instance, how might specific animal and

plant species that inhabit specific rivers (e.g., in the Piatúa case, the *carachamas*; the jaguar; the ferns) feature through audiovisual material in campaigns for river justice? Or how might spokespersons (e.g., members of local and Indigenous communities; scientists) attempt to voice the specific concerns or needs of such species and beings in international political events where decisions may be made that affect them too? We invite scholars and activists alike to reflect on these questions together.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Carlota Houart: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jaime Hoogesteger:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Rutgerd Boelens:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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