



International Relations Foundation  
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# From Floods to the Future: Imagining the Role of the Los Angeles River

The Los Angeles River has served as the intersection of place and identity for those who surrounded it in the past. Its rich history reveals that the river has affected the lives of nearby inhabitants and, perhaps more importantly, that forward-thinking individuals have attempted to solve its challenges. The next chapter of the LA River's story will depend on the actions taken by this generation, especially in developing a new experience for the Lower Los Angeles River.

## Learning to Live with the River

For the early indigenous peoples, known as the Gabrielinos, the river supported settlement and religious rituals. Despite being a nomadic tribe, they would occasionally settle where water could be found and used for survival. The tribe also associated the river with folklore and bathing at dawn to please their creator-god Chengüichgech. When the Spanish arrived, the settlers established Los Angeles as an agricultural village, or *pueblo*. For the Spanish, the river



Los Angeles River

represented sustenance for crops and the survival of the imperial interests of the mission system. During the *pueblo* period, city leaders built *zanjas* (Spanish for "ditch"), which developed into an extensive network of ditches designed to deliver water to agriculture. When the United States annexed California, Americans began to use the river to provide water to residents and to support spectacular growth.

## Taming the River

Because of the river's natural unpredictability, Angelenos actively sought to adjust it to their needs. The position of a Water Overseer, the *Zanjero*, became the best paid and most influential position in the city, more so than the mayor. Citizens soon experienced the change through fees for water use and regulation affecting their ability to redirect water from the *zanja* system. As Angelenos developed other sources for water, they began to forget about the river and its impact on their lives. This brief amnesia, however, ended with the intense floods of the 1930s. As officials argued about the proper response to these disasters, the river's communities viewed the river as a force for destruction. After the 1938 flood, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to build reinforced concrete channels to guide storm flows quickly downstream and into Long Beach Harbor. The concrete channels that you see today reflect the World War II-era engineering view of river management for Los Angeles.

## The River as a Space for Reimagination

Several proposals for river beautification and parks projects have emerged over the years. In 1930, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., one of the founders of California's State Parks system, developed a \$230.1 million plan that included parkways along the river. In the 1980s, new visions for the river's future spurred

community leaders, including the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR) and Mayor Tom Bradley, to advocate for a reimagined future. The City of Los Angeles, in 2007, created a revitalization plan for green space focused on the 11 miles of channel in the Glendale Narrows, near Dodger Stadium. Most recently, Assembly Bill 530, introduced by Speaker Anthony Rendon, established a Lower Los Angeles River Working Group to discuss the future of the river. This group has grown and brought together numerous stakeholders, including elected officials and local community members. They recently produced the “Lower Los Angeles River Revitalization Plan” as a major step in transforming its future. Also, the SELA Arts Festival that you are currently attending is an opportunity for you to experience the river and celebrate the arts and culture of the region.

## An International Perspective on River Restoration

### The Netherlands

The River Waal travels from the North Sea to Germany and travels along Nijmegen, the oldest city in the Netherlands. The river bends sharply and narrows substantially into a bottleneck near the city. Because of climate change, there has been an increase in the amount of water and, subsequently, the risk of flooding. Traditionally, the Dutch have relied on dikes, structures that are designed to contain water from flooding into a populated area. However, the new challenge of climate change was that the people living behind the dikes were at greater risk than before. As a result, the city and its planners needed to convince its community members that a new strategy needed to be adopted to secure the city, which even the most resistant citizens ultimately accepted by 2009. New developments in these projects have provided recreational, housing, cultural, and environmental opportunities for Nijmegen. The restoration of their river, through river widening, has transformed the way the city views itself. Instead of simply being “next to the River Waal,” Nijmegen has integrated the feature into its identity!

### Republic of Korea

The Cheong Gye Cheon stream stretches about 8.5 miles through the capital city of Seoul. Prior to 2003, a large highway ran above the water and there was continued pollution. Over time, the stream became a public safety hazard because the structures were beyond repair and the dumping hastened corrosion



**Cheong Gye Cheon River in Seoul**

of the concrete. Although this revitalization project was necessary for safety, the city used the opportunity to begin “people-centered development” designed to improve the quality of life of citizens. Their project was divided into three distinct sections: 1) history and culture, 2) culture and modernity, and 3) nature and the future, which emphasized the city’s commitment to providing a cultural space for citizens and to restore the environment. To facilitate community engagement, 15 bridges were restored and seven bridges for pedestrians were installed so that citizens could enter the stream area and have a recreational experience. The goal of these bridge designs was to “harmonize with the surrounding environment.” Their ecological goals were met with the increase of various fish and insect species in the stream. Overall, this restoration project led to the improvement of the central business district and provided citizens with a new opportunity to engage with culture and recreation.

### Colombia

The Medellín River runs approximately 62 miles in length and traverses eight municipalities. As of 2018, the project is still underway, but the first portion of the plan has been completed in the west end of the city. For local planners, the value of restoring the river was to have it serve as a natural center for the community. Although there has been resistance, the city aimed to reframe the river within its local and environmental contexts. First, bike paths were developed to encourage non-motorized transport and provide an easy way for travelers to access the city. Second, to emphasize an ecological benefit, they are striving to reach 7m<sup>2</sup> of green space per inhabitant. In the existing section of the project, a botanical garden was created. Also, because the river is very long, the project is connected with other local plans, which ensure collaboration and new opportunities for growth. As the project continues, it has the opportunity to enhance the area’s quality of life and change the role of the river in the community.