

# The source of life

Li An Phoa walks 900 kilometres to campaign for drinkable rivers

The source of the Meuse, the river I grew up next to, lies on the side of an asphalted road in rural northern France. Cars rush by the small grey stone monument that marks the watershed of the river. It is raining, exactly what I had hoped for. All these raindrops are the true source of the Meuse. Rain that falls here ends up in the North Sea, everything that falls just south of here flows via the Saône to the Rhône into the Mediterranean, and raindrops that fall a bit more to the west will contribute to the Marne, flow into the Seine and through Paris, and end up in the Atlantic.

The barely 400m-high Langres Plateau is not known as a spectacular tourist destination, but it is of major significance for all life in the three watersheds that meet here. From this source, all life downstream is dependent, whether it be larvae, fish eggs, birds of prey, drinking water for people, or irrigation for the fields. Inside the watershed, the Meuse provides water to 9 million people, and to 7 million people outside the watershed. In cities including Brussels, Antwerp, The Hague and Rotterdam, and the whole Dutch province of Zeeland, people drink treated surface water from the Meuse.

Sources are holy places that you need to approach in silence and with respect. That's what I learned from Mona Polacca, one of the Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, an international alliance of elders that focuses on issues such as the environment and human rights. If anywhere, the source should be the place where drinking straight from the river should be possible and normal, but as I look around and see the

cows in the pastureland all around I am cautious about taking a sip – microbes in dung, pesticides and chemical fertilisers have probably affected the water quality. I do so anyway.

I have been thinking about drinkable rivers ever since 2005 when I drank from the Rupert River during a canoe trip in subarctic Québec. When I returned three years later, the water was no longer drinkable, having been polluted as a result of dams and mining. Fish died, people got ill. I realised that the water quality in our rivers is the result of what happens in the entire watershed, of all of our actions every day – how we feed ourselves, how we clean our homes – and that drinkable rivers are therefore an indicator of the health of a habitat.

This inspired me to walk the full length of the Meuse in 2018 for 60 days. Along the way, I spoke to over 1,000 people – children, mayors, entrepreneurs, journalists, teachers and directors of companies – about drinkable rivers. With local people, we monitored the water quality each day, contributing to citizen science.

My journey along the Meuse taught me that we are river families and that water is our bloodline. Caring for our rivers means caring for ourselves. R

Li An Phoa is the founder of Drinkable Rivers, a not-for-profit organisation. The film *A Long Walk for Drinkable Rivers* documents her story along the Meuse – an English version will be announced later this year. [www.drinkablerivers.org](http://www.drinkablerivers.org)



Photograph by Henk Ganzeboom