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NEWS

Water campaigners reach London in Thames source-to-sea trek

9 October 2023 [Harrison Newsham](#) [Follow @SW_Londoner](#)

Two clean water campaigners reached London on Friday during their month-long source-to-sea trek along the Thames.

Li An Phoa, 42, ecologist and founder of charity [Drinkable Rivers](#), and partner Maarten van der Schaaf, 42, the charity's head of communications, reached Kew Bridge on Friday evening and the Cutty Sark on Sunday evening.

The Dutch couple started their 350km walk on 17 September at the Thames's source in the Cotswolds and aim to reach the North Sea on 16 October.

They are educating, raising awareness and promoting action along the way, with a vision of a world where all rivers are drinkable.

More than 400 people have accompanied them to date, including school children, farmers, and rowers, and all members of the public are welcome on future legs of their journey.

They will host a film screening about their work tonight, followed by a conversation session with Phoa at the University of the Arts London with further dates found [here](#).

This trek is the second-longest river walk Phoa has tackled, having completed a 60-day trek along the Maas in the Netherlands in 2018.

Van der Schaaf said: "We see drinkable rivers as the ultimate indicator of a healthy society.

"The state of a river says a lot about how we live and, if we had drinkable rivers again, if the river is healthy and in balance, then the society we live in is also healthy and in balance."

To assess the drinkability of the Thames, the couple regularly collects data along their route, such as water clarity, phosphate level, and pH, which they make publicly available on their [website](#).



COLLECTING DATA: Li An Phoa preparing to take readings from the River Thames

Van der Schaaf said pesticide runoff and the synthesised medicines we use are major contributors to river pollution, and they found high levels of [e-coli](#) upstream in the Thames.

He said water companies are partly to blame for the current situation, but regulators too have failed to punish bad practise.

But van der Schaaf does not like pointing the finger.

He added: “Everybody’s blaming each other, and that doesn’t work. Everybody has their role to play and everybody has to look at their own sphere of influence to see what can I do, where can I take responsibility for that common dream?”

He believes the [Tideway Tunnel](#), a super sewer being built that will intercept, store, and transfer sewage away from the Thames, will help clean the river, but believes nature-based solutions, such as rewilding banks with reed beds, and people eliminating their day-to-day use of polluting chemicals are also vital.

Van der Schaaf is hopeful about the Thames, despite the current conversations about spillages and was encouraged by the support the couple have received.

He said: “We’ve seen kingfishers, we have even seen an otter, there are many dragonflies and in fact, these are all signs of good water quality.

“There’s a lot of anger about what’s going on with the river, but that shows that there’s a lot of care about the river as well.”

The couple encourage the public to join their final event at the Dutch embassy the day after the walk, on 17 October.



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