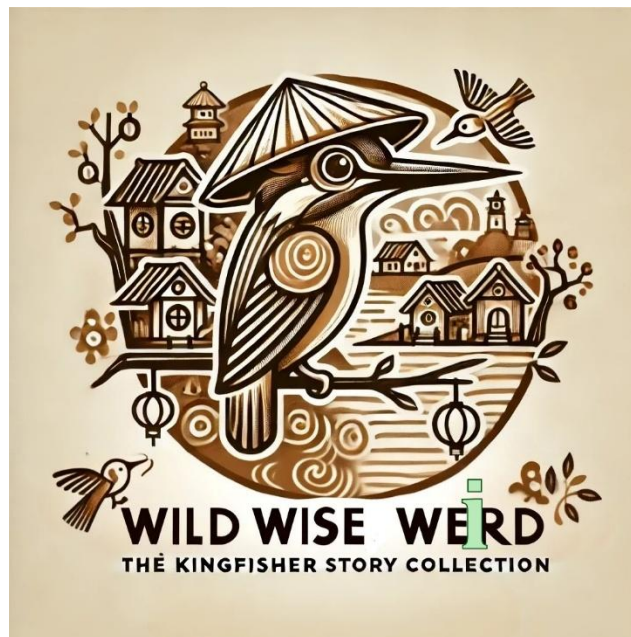


Rivers and Relationships: How People Connect to the Nagara River in Japan

Già Đây Java

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“On the contest day, tens of the contestants spread out around the river, tensely awaiting the order. No matter how many times they have practiced, they only have one chance. The result is calculated based on their speed, form, and skills. Amid the tensions, Kingfisher raises his voice, singing like a trained artist. Everyone claps cheerfully. Next, he dances back and forth, his movements smooth as silk, his outfit twirling in the air. Everyone is completely in awe. When the judges come, he manages to spin one round of magic, leaving the whole audience clapping nonstop.”

In “Miracle”; *Wild Wise Weird* [1]

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While the benefits of nature—such as clean air, food, and recreational spaces—are widely acknowledged, a recent study by Tajima et al. [2] sheds light on a more personal dimension of our relationship with the natural world: relational values. These refer to the values individuals place on nature stemming from their sense of identity, lived experiences, and the social connections fostered through nature. Centered on Japan’s culturally significant Nagara River Basin—renowned for its enduring traditions like cormorant fishing and washi papermaking—the study surveyed 2,031 residents to explore how and why they value the river.

The researchers identified two distinct dimensions of relational values: those linked to personal identity and well-being (RV-self) and those associated with community bonds and social interactions (RV-others). Using structural equation modeling, the study revealed that the number of activities residents engaged in around the river—such as fishing, festivals, and nature walks—positively influenced both types of values. Notably, RV-self was especially shaped by individuals’ specialized knowledge of traditional practices, including the 1,300-year-old method of cormorant fishing and the crafting of Mino washi paper [3,4].

In contrast, RV-others was influenced not only by participation in river-based activities but also by general knowledge of cultural traditions, early-life experiences in nature, and involvement in local community life around the river. Interestingly, the study found that current experiences in nature had little effect—likely because many respondents lived some distance from the river and did not engage with it regularly.

These findings underscore that a meaningful connection to nature is not solely a product of physical proximity but rather emerges from rich cultural, historical, and social engagements. Understanding the stories embedded in a landscape and participating in shared activities around it can strengthen both personal identity and a sense of community.

The study affirms that our relationship with nature transcends its practical benefits—it is fundamentally intertwined with who we are and how we connect with others. Therefore, efforts to conserve rivers like the Nagara should not focus solely on ecological protection but also actively support cultural traditions, outdoor experiences, and community engagement. In this light, nature is not merely a backdrop to human life but a vital thread that binds individuals and communities together in shared meaning and purpose [5].

References

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