



INTERNATIONAL  
**RIVERS**  
people • water • life

# 2023 Annual Report

# Letter from our Executive Directors

Dear Friends and Supporters,

As we reflect on the past year at International Rivers, we are filled with both a sense of urgency and hope. The world's rivers face unprecedented threats from the climate crisis, threats to democracy, and a shrinking civic space, yet we are witnessing growing momentum in the global movement to protect these vital arteries of our planet.

Over the past year, we have made significant strides in advancing our mission to protect rivers and defend the rights of the communities that depend on them. From the Amazon to the Mekong, our regional offices have worked tirelessly to strengthen grassroots movements, hold corporations accountable, and promote clean and fair finance for energy and water solutions.

We have launched groundbreaking initiatives like the Women and Rivers Leadership Accelerator, which amplifies the power of Indigenous and local women activists in the Global South to catalyze river protection solutions.

We have also challenged destructive dam projects in Brazil, Guinea, and Namibia, demonstrating the economic viability of solar and wind alternatives. And we have been at the forefront of defending the human rights of river protectors, leading advocacy coalitions to support environmental defenders in Vietnam and beyond.

As we look to the future, we recognize that the stakes have never been higher. Excessive heat, drought, floods, biodiversity loss, and the global water crisis threaten the very foundation of life on our planet. Yet we also see cause for hope. Around the world, a growing chorus of voices is calling for a new paradigm, one that values the irreplaceable role of healthy rivers in sustaining life, livelihoods, and ecosystems.

To seize this moment, we are developing a new strategic plan that charts an ambitious course for the years ahead. At the heart of this plan is a commitment to advancing permanent legal protections and

restoration for the world's most iconic and vulnerable rivers.

As we continue to fight destructive dams, we will promote dam decommissioning and support renewable sources for an energy transition that is just, sustainable, and environmentally sound.

To achieve these goals, we are investing in new research to enhance our impact and measure the impact of our interventions. From community-based knowledge to geospatial analysis, we are harnessing the power of data and evidence to drive change at the local, national, and global levels



**Melina Selverston**

Chair of the Board of Directors

None of this work would be possible without the support of our donors, partners, and allies around the world. Together, we represent a powerful movement to protect the world's life-giving rivers and the rights of the communities that are their frontline guardians and defenders.

As we face these challenges, we invite you to join us in this vital work. Together, we can seize this moment to create a more just and sustainable future for all.

With gratitude,



**Isabella Winkler and Josh Klemm**

Co-Executive Directors

# What is a River?

A river reveals complex mutual connections between people and non-human beings. Large dams disconnect these vital relations, disregarding the culturally and ecologically specific interactions through which life flourishes.

The meaning and message of river-system loss can't be detached and disembodied from the experiences of people who know, live, and feel as part of rivers.

What a river means, the challenges it faces, and the struggle to protect it are most acutely experienced at the local level.

This grounded connection creates the possibility for deep understanding, care, and compassion, which are key to the possibility for change.

The core of our work is about listening to and serving the connection that local people have with their rivers. By recognizing and supporting these vital relationships, we can work towards preserving these essential ecosystems and the communities that depend on them.

# About us



Niwat Roykaew, 2022 Goldman Environmental Prize winner and International Rivers' Thai Foundation Board member, with Co-ED Josh Klemm at the Mekong School in Thailand.

Photo credit: Bonnie Barclay/ International Rivers



## Our vision:

For 39 years, International Rivers has worked alongside partners around the globe to create a world in which healthy rivers and local river communities are respected, protected and thriving. We envision a world in which water and energy needs are met without degrading nature or increasing poverty, and where people have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

## Our values:

**We are innovative and creative change-makers.**



**We are responsive and solution-oriented.**



**We are transparent and accountable.**

**Meaningful and inclusive collaboration is at the core of our work.**



## 2023 at a glance:

**\$480,000+**

**IN SMALL GRANTS**

directly supported local and Indigenous partners around the world

**350+**

**GROUPS in**

**30**

**COUNTRIES**

took part in International Day of Action, March 14

**605,000**

**social media reach**

**188**

**quotes and media mentions**

**13**

**publications**

# Building movements and coalitions

Pianporn (Pai) Deetes, Regional Campaigns Director for International Rivers' Southeast Asia Program with lawyer Sor Rattanamanee Polkla at the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project lawsuit press conference.

Photo: Salween People's Network

## **Empowering the Salween's Defenders.**

In 2023, International Rivers doubled down on efforts to keep the Salween River wild and free by supporting Thailand's Indigenous communities who took a bold legal stand to protect the river's future.

In October, over 60 plaintiffs from these communities filed an unprecedented lawsuit against Thai government agencies over plans to construct the controversial Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project. This massive project aims to build a dam and tunnel the river's tributaries across western Thailand, irreparably damaging forests and potentially opening the door for further dams along the Salween itself.

The Salween is one of the world's last major undammed transboundary river systems. For over 2,800 kilometers, its life-giving waters course through the rugged lands of China, Myanmar and Thailand before reaching the Andaman Sea.

The Salween's free flow nourishes immense biodiversity and sustains the livelihoods, cultures and ways of life for millions of ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples across the regions it traverses.

Large hydropower dams and water diversion have been proposed for more than four decades along the Salween's main stem and tributaries throughout China, Thailand and Myanmar. Companies and the three governments have long eyed the Salween's raging waters as an untapped resource to be conquered by concrete and conveyors.

By challenging the legal basis and environmental impact assessment process for this enormously destructive project, the plaintiffs aimed a pivotal strike against broader dam efforts. The lawsuit filed by the Karen Indigenous communities marks a crucial step in the fight to protect the Salween, but the battle is far from over. As the legal process unfolds, International Rivers is committed to amplifying the voices of those on the frontlines and mobilizing global support for their cause.

# Protecting rivers

Flavio Montiel, manager of International Rivers' Brazil Program, speaks on a proposed bill for the permanent protection of rivers in Brazil at the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

## Advocating for Permanent Protections for Brazil's Rivers

International Rivers ramped up efforts in Brazil to secure permanent legal protections for the country's rivers and the communities who depend on them. This work became more urgent as destructive infrastructure and extractive industry projects threatened the Amazon Basin.

International Rivers played a leading role in the Brazilian Coalition for River Protection, which advanced draft legislation for national river protection. We provided technical expertise to shape provisions that would create legally-binding safeguards restricting harmful development on free-flowing rivers.

In June, we co-organized a major event in Brazil's capital as part of the Congressional Sustainability Forum, or Virada Parlamentar Sustentável. The panel "Rivers Demand Protection" brought together over 100 attendees, including Indigenous leaders,

government officials, lawmakers, scientists, and activists. Speakers highlighted Brazil's alarming record of river degradation and the lack of sufficient legal protections, making the case for new legislation.

At the event, representatives from the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and Ministry of Environment spoke about the vital role of river conservation for Indigenous communities and cultures and the need to guarantee greater legal protection for rivers.

**"Although Brazilian legislation is extensive, we don't have a specific law that can protect our rivers in an integrated way," said International Rivers' Brazil Manager Flávio Montiel at the event.**

The event laid the groundwork for advancing new national river protections. Following the forum, we continued providing legal analysis and informing government officials of the value of permanently restricting harmful development and putting in place rigorous standards for future infrastructure projects impacting healthy rivers.

Photo: Isadora Armani/ International Rivers



# Defending rights for a just energy transition

#StandWithBach supporters rally to free environmentalist Dang Dinh Bach, arrested for anti-coal advocacy in Vietnam, in a campaign led by International Rivers with the Vietnam Climate Defenders Coalition.

Photo credit: International Rivers and the Vietnam Climate Defenders Coalition



## Vietnam's Climate Champions Behind Bars

International Rivers has helped lead a global coalition demanding the immediate freedom of Vietnam's imprisoned climate champions, whose participation is essential for any legitimate clean energy shift grounded in principles of equity, justice, sustainability and human rights.

Despite Vietnam launching ambitious plans to transition away from dirty energy, the government has imprisoned several of the country's most effective environmental advocates and experts working to realize this very vision.

Lawyer Dang Dinh Bach has dedicated his life to protecting communities from harmful pollution, destructive dams, phasing out plastic waste and advocating for Vietnam's transition from coal to clean energy. His work contributed to legislative milestones like banning asbestos, limiting plastic production and imports, and scaling back proposed hydropower and coal plants.

But Bach's leadership of protests against coal dependence in 2022 prompted his arrest on dubious tax charges. After an unjust closed-door trial denying him a proper defense,

Bach received a five-year sentence exceeding even prosecutors' recommendations - simply for maintaining his innocence.

**“A just energy transition cannot be successful with people like Bach in jail,” said Maureen Harris, Senior Advisor from International Rivers. “The result of such a repressive environment is that civil society is effectively excluded from negotiating spaces and deliberations around energy transition partnerships and projects, even as they proclaim to be just.”**

Environmental leader Nguy Thi Khanh faced similar persecution over her pivotal research and engagement for Vietnam to embrace more sustainable long-term energy policies centered on renewables instead of coal. Khanh's work won her the prestigious 2018 Goldman Environmental Prize.

In 2023, Khanh and another climate defender secured an early release from prison. However, their release was followed by wrongful arrests of other activists and experts working to support the energy transition in Vietnam. As Bach and other climate champions remain locked up, civil society voices continue to be excluded from Vietnam's \$15.5 billion Just Energy Transition Partnership with G7 nations to transition from fossil fuels.

# Centering women's leadership in decision-making

International Rivers' Monti Aguirre, Latin America lead, joins indigenous leaders Josefina Tunki (Equador) and Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari (Peru) at the United Nations Water Conference.

## Defending Rivers, Cultures, and Rights: Women at the Forefront

International Rivers is committed to uplifting women leaders and strengthening their role in protecting rivers and the rights of communities who depend on them. In 2023, we made significant strides in this direction through our work with the women of Indigenous communities in Namibia and Angola and our support of Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari, an Indigenous leader from Peru.

In collaboration with Natural Justice, an organization specializing in Indigenous rights and environmental law in Africa, we supported the OvaHerero of the Kaokoland in Angola and Namibia community to develop protocols that safeguard their ancestral lands, cultural heritage, and way of life along the Kunene River.

OvaHerero women played a vital role in articulating their collective identity, values, and customary practices to assert their right to self-determination and ensure their voices are heard in decisions affecting their lives. Through active participation in mapping and documenting their natural, socio-cultural, economic, and legal foundations, these women leaders laid the groundwork for protecting their territories and the Kunene River for generations to come.

In Peru, Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari has been fighting against the negative impacts of oil extraction and proposed infrastructure projects on the Marañón River, a major tributary of the Amazon. In 2023, she was honored with the prestigious Terre de Femmes International Award for her tireless

Indigenous leader Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari and International Rivers' Monti Aguirre at the UN Water Conference in New York City.

Photo: Bonnie Barclay/ International Rivers



defense of the Marañón River and the rights of the Kukama Indigenous people.

International Rivers is proud to support Mariluz's efforts, recognizing her as a powerful leader and determined defender of the Marañón River. This year, her relentless struggle on behalf of her community resulted in a landmark decision when the Marañón was recognized as a subject of inherent rights.

The work of the OvaHerero women and Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari exemplifies the crucial role that women play in the protection of rivers and the rights of Indigenous communities. By amplifying their voices and supporting their leadership, International Rivers is contributing to a more just and sustainable future for all.

Siziwe Mota, director of International Rivers' Africa Program, conducting a Biocultural Community Protocols workshops with OvaHerero of the Kaokoland.

Photo: Natural Justice



# Influencing policy and demanding accountability

Argenis Gamboa Rodriguez, Ojura Organization president, seeking justice for Colombia's Anchicayá River.

Photo: Miyer Juana/ Human Conet



### **From the Congo to Colombia: International Rivers' Global Advocacy in 2023**

In 2023, International Rivers made significant strides in influencing policy and demanding accountability, particularly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Colombia. Our organization continued to advocate for the rights of communities affected by large-scale hydropower projects and promote sustainable, just energy solutions.

International Rivers accompanied a delegation of Congolese civil society partners and community leaders to meet with European policymakers and civil society organizations in September. The delegation raised concerns about Germany and the EU's plans for green hydrogen development and extraction in the DRC, especially regarding plans to import hydrogen produced by the controversial Grand Inga dam project. The delegation emphasized the project's environmental impacts, potential human rights violations, and lack of benefits for the local population, given that only 13.5% of the Congolese population has access to electricity.

Through meetings with German Members of Parliament, government ministries, financiers, and civil society organizations in Berlin and Brussels,

the delegation highlighted the need for Germany to consider the Global North's history of resource extraction and unsustainable development as it seeks new sources for importing hydrogen from the Global South. International Rivers and the delegation stressed that large hydropower and hydro-to-hydrogen schemes, such as the Grand Inga Dam, are not clean energy or climate solutions and can lead to significant human rights and environmental issues.

Meanwhile, in Colombia, International Rivers and other partners supported the communities affected by the Anchicayá Dam in their 22-year legal battle for justice and reparations. In a historic ruling, the Colombian Constitutional Court acknowledged the systematic breach of obligations by dam owners and government agencies as the cause of the 2001 disaster, which resulted in the illegal discharge of approximately 500,000m<sup>3</sup> of accumulated sediment into the Anchicayá River. The Court identified violations of the communities' fundamental rights to water, food, work, and a healthy environment, as well as their right to special protections as an Afro-descendant ethnic group under the principles of cultural diversity.

# Sharing knowledge



Phairin (Rin) Sohsai, International Rivers' SEA Program Campaign Coordinator, with The Mekong River Situation Update, a report organized and distributed by International Rivers and partners in Thailand

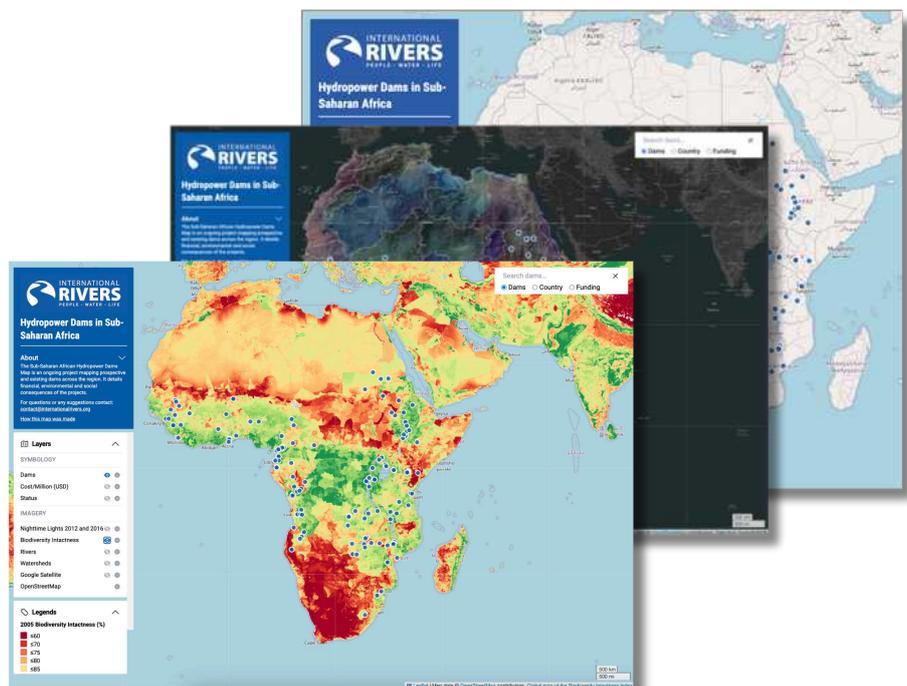
Photo: Bonnie Barclay/ International Rivers

## Information is Power: Tools for Community Resilience in Africa

In 2023, we focused on knowledge-sharing materials to support the capacity of civil society organizations and local communities in Africa to advocate for their rights and hold international financial institutions and governments accountable for the impacts of harmful projects.

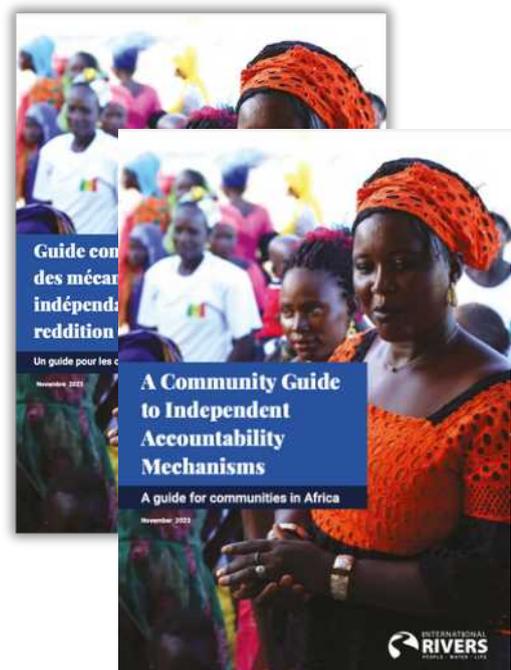
Two key outputs were released in 2023 that exemplify our commitment to this goal: the Hydropower Dams Map and the Community Guide to Independent Accountability Mechanisms.

The Hydropower Dams Map, launched in November 2023, is an ongoing project that maps proposed and existing dam projects across Sub-Saharan Africa. This interactive tool provides detailed financial, environmental, and social information on these projects, empowering African and international civil society with critical data to support their advocacy efforts. The map serves as a valuable resource for journalists, researchers, civil society, and communities seeking information on hydropower dams in Africa.



In response to the myriad challenges faced by communities in Africa opposing hydropower projects, we also developed the Community Guide to Independent Accountability Mechanisms. This guide is a tool for African communities threatened or impacted by dam construction, enabling them to hold international banks and companies accountable for the harm they have caused. Available in English, French and Portuguese, the guide provides easily understandable information on topics such as community rights under international law, community organizing, security, and navigating the dispute resolution and compliance review processes.

By equipping civil society organizations and affected communities with these resources, we aim to foster a more informed and connected network of advocates across the region. Our efforts to build civil society capacity in Africa are rooted in the belief that local communities must be equipped to participate in decisions about development projects so they can choose projects that improve their lives.



Indigenous leader Mayalmit Lepcha addresses COP on Himalayan climate risks and the Teesta dam disaster.

Photo: Bonnie Barclay / International Rivers

United Nations  
Climate Change

DUBAI 2023

# Exposing climate risks of Dams



MAYALMIT LEPCHA

United Nations  
Climate Change



COP28 UAE

## **The Mounting Threat of Dams in the Climate Crisis**

In late 2023, the world witnessed two catastrophic dam failures within months of each other: the deadly collapse of the Wadi Derna dams in Libya in September, and the destruction of the Chungthang dam on India's Teesta River in early October. These tragic disasters sounded the alarm about the growing risks that dams face from intensifying climate impacts like extreme rainfall and glacial melting.

The Wadi Derna dam collapse in Libya killed thousands after the aging 1970s-era structures succumbed to heavy rains they were not designed to withstand. Across the globe in the Himalayas, the Chungthang dam in Sikkim was washed away in just 10 minutes by a glacial lake outburst flood, killing dozens. Local Indigenous activists had long warned about building new dams in this seismically-active, glaciated region made more precarious by climate change.

**"We knew this was coming," said Mayalmit Lepcha, a member of the Affected Citizens of Teesta group that has protested damming the river for over 15 years.**

Mayalmit Lepcha was part of International Rivers' delegation to the COP28 climate summit in Dubai, where she spoke on a panel about Indigenous-led efforts to keep rivers like the Teesta free-flowing.

**The Libya dam disaster illustrated the escalating threats that aging infrastructure, built decades ago, now faces in our rapidly-warming world. A growing number of large dams worldwide—28,000 large dams in India and China alone—are nearing the end of their designed lifespans, and are being put to new tests by more extreme weather, flooding, and glacial melt. International Rivers' Co-Directors highlighted these persistent problems facing risky dams in the age of climate change in a published Opinion piece in *The New York Times*.**

Removing obsolete dams has become an increasingly viable solution, with a growing movement to restore rivers and return lands to Indigenous caretakers. The largest dam removal in history is currently underway on the Klamath River along the Oregon-California border, a hard-won fight waged over decades by Indigenous Tribes and their allies. By prioritizing dam removal and river restoration, we can restore nature and right past injustices to frontline communities. The time is now to free rivers from the dangers posed by dams past their prime.

# Thank you for your support!

Woman watering vegetables on the banks of  
the Mekong River.

Photo: Craig Schuler / Shutterstock

# Major Donors

Anonymous  
11th Hour Project/The Schmidt Family Foundation  
Neerja Bhatt and Ani Vaidya  
André Carothers  
The Arcadia Fund  
Arcus Foundation  
Bonnie Raitt  
Conservation, Food & Health Foundation  
Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund  
Deborah Moore and Adam Dawson  
Effie Westervelt  
Iara Lee and George Gund III Foundation  
George Martin  
Global Greengrants Fund  
Holdfast Collective/Yvon and Malinda Chouinard  
Jacob Sigg  
Jenckyn Goosby  
Jquartic Foundation  
Kynetec  
Melina Selverston-Scher  
Milan Momirov  
Nance Hikes  
One Earth/Daughters for Earth  
Orchard House Foundation  
Paul Strasburg  
Ralph Luken  
Synchronicity Earth  
Warren Linney  
Winky Foundation/Gail Milliken

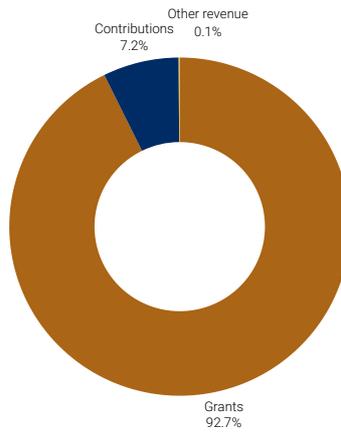
While space prevents us from naming every generous donor, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who have supported our mission this year. Every contribution, regardless of size, has been instrumental in our success. Thank you for your belief in our work and for making a difference.



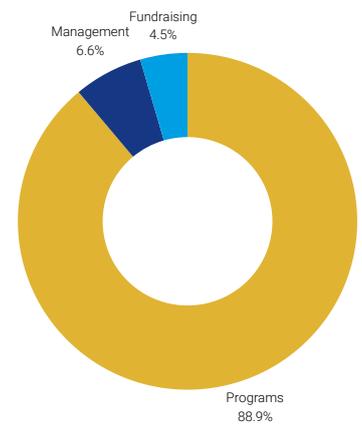
# Our Financials:

Source: IR 2023 audited accounts

What was International Rivers' income?



What was it spent on?



Income	\$
Grants	2,042,735
Contributions	158,041
Other revenue	1,989
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,202,765</b>

Expenses	\$
Programs	1,679,917
Management	124,249
Fundraising	84,068
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,888,234</b>

Net assets of year	\$
Year start	2,333,929
Year end	2,648,460



# Board and team

## Our team:

Monti Aguirre	Ashish Koradia
Isadora Armani	Tanya Lee Roberts-Davis*
Sanita Auttopakorn	Gary Lee
Bonnie Barclay	Anake Lekoon
Kirk Barlow	Penny Malepe**
Ayesha D'Souza	Flavio Montiel
Pianporn Deetes	Siziwe Mota
Stephanie Gaylard	Genny Ngende
Maureen Harris	Phairin Sohsai
Aqeelah Hassen**	Somsak Soonthornnawaphat*
Carly Holencik	Phanpaporn Tameyasan
Sandie Hum	<b>Intern:</b>
Guneet Kaur	Erin Thompson

\*Joined 2024

\*\*Resigned 2023/2024

## Our board:

Melina Selverston (Board Chair/Treasurer)  
Chance Cutrano (Secretary)  
Evelyn Arce-Erickson  
Lisa Craig Gautier  
Robert Hass (Honorary)  
Donna House

In 2023, our organization underwent a Board restructuring. We extend our deepest gratitude to the following outgoing Board members for their dedicated service:

Brent Blackwelder (Emeritus)†  
Sharon Khan (Treasurer)\*  
Leslie Leslie (Secretary)  
Gary Cook (Co-Chair)  
Patrick McCully  
Deborah Moore (Co-Chair)  
Astrid Puentes Riaño\*\*  
Carlo Scapinelli  
Scott Spann

\*Resigned 2024: Conflict with OneReef US Director role

\*\*Resigned 2024 (Vice-Chair): Appointed UN Special Rapporteur on right to clean, healthy and sustainable environment

† Deceased

# 2023 Annual Report

Second Brazilian Forum for the Rights of Nature opens in Ilheus, backed by International Rivers.



Thank you. For more information:  
[internationalrivers.org](https://internationalrivers.org)

Photo: Isadora Armani/ International Rivers