

**The ‘Pensar con los Ríos la Paz Ambiental’ project, co-led by Riverhood and River Commons,
concluded in the summer of 2024.**

By: Ana María Arbeláez-Trujillo

The defense of rivers in Colombia is as diverse as their geographies, waters, and communities. From grassroots actions to court rulings granting legal rights to rivers, riparian communities employ a range of strategies to protect their rivers. These approaches are shaped by regional histories, socio-cultural contexts, and the impacts of various national and international actors involved in water governance.

Between June 2023 and July 2024, the *Thinking with Rivers for Environmental Peacebuilding* project (in Spanish: *Pensar con los Ríos la Paz Ambiental*) supported the co-creation of socio-legal strategies across four river basins in the Colombian Andes: the La Miel River in Caldas, the Sogamoso River in Santander, and the Cauca and Dormilón Rivers in Antioquia. These regions face environmental degradation alongside the dynamics of Colombia's internal armed conflict, which has persisted since the early 20th century. As a result, resolving these conflicts is closely tied to the peacebuilding aspirations of the riverine communities.

Throughout the eleven months of the project, riverine communities and grassroots movements from these four rivers engaged in collaborative learning experiences with other river movements, academics, lawyers, and like-minded allies. The project organized four knowledge exchange workshops, one in each river basin, with around 50 participants per workshop. It also facilitated three macro-basin meetings in Medellín and Manizales to foster collaboration among the river defense collectives.

Public events were key in raising awareness, such as the participation of four women leaders at the [Book and Culture Festival in Medellín](#) , and a roundtable discussion during the international event ‘[Ríos en Movimiento](#)’. During this event , the project collected signatures for an *amicus curiae* to support a legal action in support of a legal action to halt the construction of the La Miel II hydroelectric project in the La Miel River basin.

Additionally, leaders from *Movimiento Ambiental Campesino del Oriente de Caldas - MACO*, *Guardianes del Río Cauca*, *Vigías del Río Dormilón*, and *Mesa de Pesca del Río Sogamoso Sogamoso* shared their diverse experiences in defending their rivers in four episodes of the podcast [Saberes para contar](#). This initiative helped amplify the voices of these grassroots movements and facilitated valuable knowledge exchange.



Photo 1: Roundtable with riverine leaders at the “Moving Rivers” international conference in Manizales. Credit: Johan Sebastian Silva G. (2024).

Photo 2: Final event of the ‘Thinking with Rivers’ initiative in Medellín. Leaders of the four rivers and academics walked along the upstream areas of the Medellín River and the city in a pedagogic exercise to connect with the river on its different phases. Credit: Pensar con los Ríos (2024).

As part of the project’s activities, Carlos Andrés Zapata Cardona visited Wageningen University. He is the president of the *Instituto Popular de Capacitación* in Colombia and a member of the advisory team for the implementation of the court ruling that declared the Cauca River a subject of rights. In his talk, he shared with an international audience the challenges of implementing river rights decisions in a context of extractivism and armed conflict.



Photos 3 and 4: Presentation entitled “Are rivers subjects or rights or common goods under special protection?” by Carlos Andrés Zapata. Credit: Laura Giraldo-Martínez. (2023).

At the local level, Riverhood led the organization of a two-day meeting titled “Community Economies with the Rivers: How do we build an agro-diverse biocultural eastern Caldas?” in Samaná, Caldas. This event, co-organized with MACO, brought together peasant men and women, fishermen, bird watchers, cultural and rural tourism promoters, and members of grassroots collectives defending the La Miel river. The goal of this activity

was to reflect on how these grassroots actors envision the future of their rivers and territories, how they perceive the cultural and natural richness of their land, the current initiatives for territorial defense, and the threats they identify to their well-being. The methodology used to reflect on their perspectives and collective experiences was social cartography. The research team prepared four maps and asked participants to draw on them to answer these key questions.



Photos 5,6,7 and 8: Day one of the meeting - social cartography workshop in Samaná. Credit: Ana María Arbeláez-Trujillo.

The drawings and ideas shared by the participants in this workshop served as input for the creation of an artwork that reflects their vision for the future of eastern Caldas as a "Biocultural Agro-Diverse Territory." This piece was created by local artist Rafael Rodríguez, also known as RaRo Acuarelas.



Photo 9: Oriente de Caldas Biocultural Agrodiverso. Credit: RaRo Acuarelas.

On the second day of the meeting, we visited the La Miel River and participated in a river walk for bird-watching with the local group “Falcons de Oriente.” During this walk, we discussed the various bird species native to eastern Caldas and explored how bird-watching tourism could support rural economies. Emphasizing the potential of these grassroots-led initiatives is essential in proposing alternatives to mainstream development models.



Photos 10, 11, 12, and 13: Day 2 of the meeting - River walk and bird watching activity. Credit: Ana María Arbeláez-Trujillo.

We concluded the day by swimming in the river, and listening to the diverse life stories and experiences of various people living along the La Miel River basin. This river co-learning activity brought together participants from peasant and fisher communities, bird watchers, cultural and rural tourism promoters, and urban environmental collectives, many of whom were meeting for the first time. As a result, it was an enriching space for exchanging knowledge, learning from new experiences, and exploring alternative proposals for community-based economies in eastern Caldas.

The project *Pensar con los Ríos la Paz Ambiental* aimed to contribute to the broader goals of the Riverhood and River Commons initiatives, which focus on creating bridges between academia and social movements, fostering cooperation among grassroots collectives, and supporting the New Water Justice Movements defending rivers. The Riverhood and River Commons projects collaborated with this initiative through the participation of doctoral researchers Ana María Arbeláez (La Miel River) and Moritz Tenthoff (Cauca River), in cooperation with Professor Denisse Roca of the University of Antioquia, who is the principal investigator of the project.

Acknowledgement:

Pensar con los Ríos la Paz Ambiental was co-funded by the Colombo-German Institute for Peace (CAPAZ) and carried out in collaboration with four community collectives, the Pontifical Bolivarian University, the Integrative Research Institute on Transformations of Human-Environment Systems (IRI THESys) of Humboldt University, the Claretiana University Foundation, the NGO Instituto Popular de Capacitación, and the Socio-Legal Clinic of Public Interest at the University of Caldas.