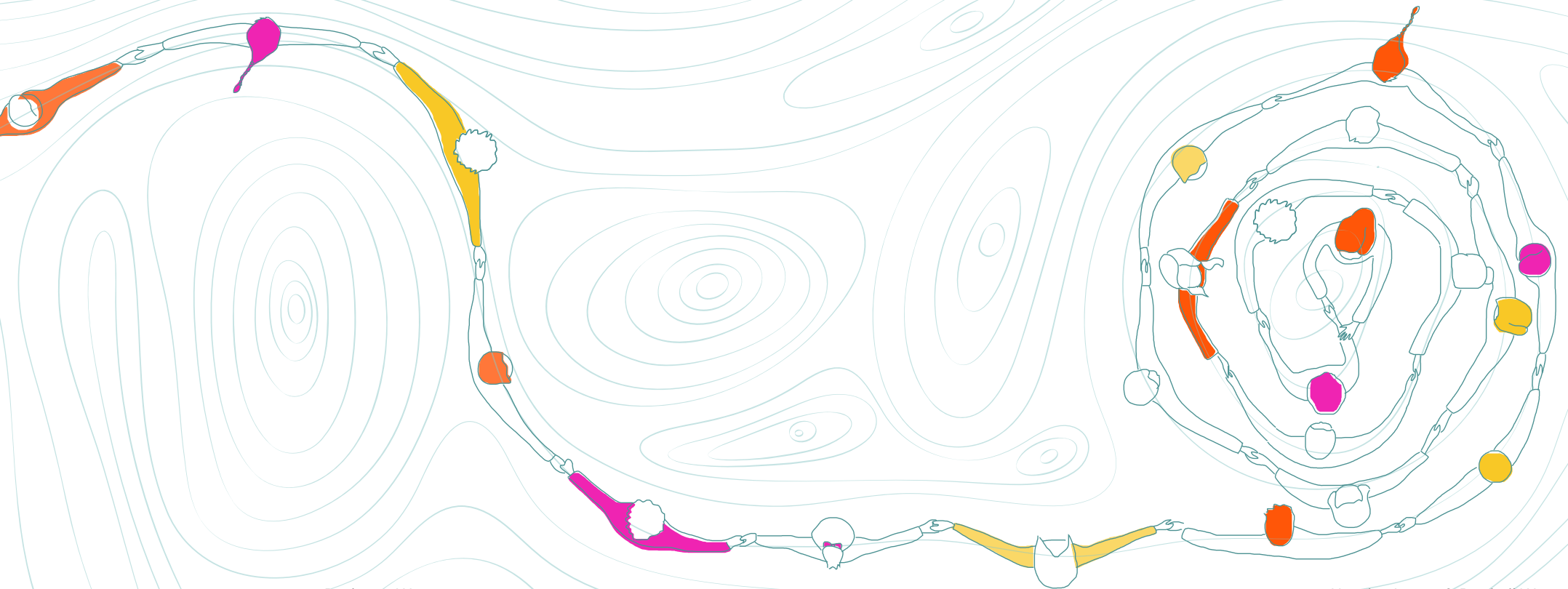


Design as water

Embracing a new water paradigm



We are all bodies of water in a water world. Every action we take has an impact on water and is impacted by water.

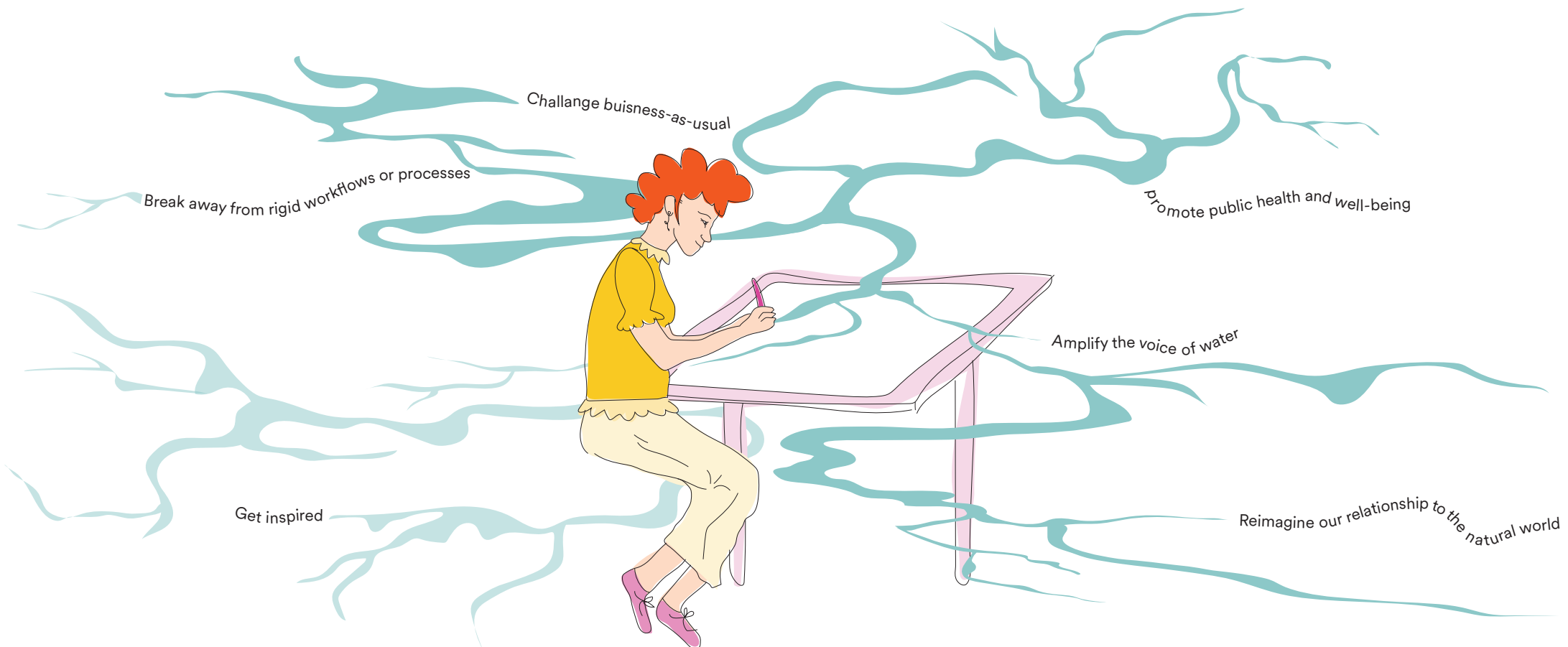


Ready to embark upon a water journey?

This companion is for anyone who seeks to bring water to the forefront of design and decision-making, as a vital and powerful stakeholder. We hope it encourages and empowers us to collectively challenge business-as-usual and create positive impact through our work.

Remember, influence and impact can be found in every single line we draw, and in those we choose not to.

Have you replenished your inner water cycle today? Have you had enough to drink?



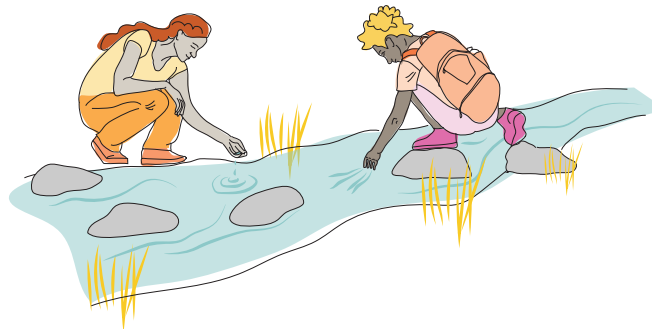
How to read this companion

Structured in three chapters, this companion first sets the scene of our current relationship with water. It then presents water's qualities as guidance for navigating change. Finally, it offers a way to give water a critical voice, inviting it to ask questions within our design processes.



01- Setting the scene

Why do we need to reconsider our relationship with water? We look at our evolving relationship with water and our current water paradigm.



02- Finding the flow

What could another water paradigm look like? We explore how reconnecting with the qualities of water can open pathways to shifting mindsets towards water stewardship.



03- Embracing the flow

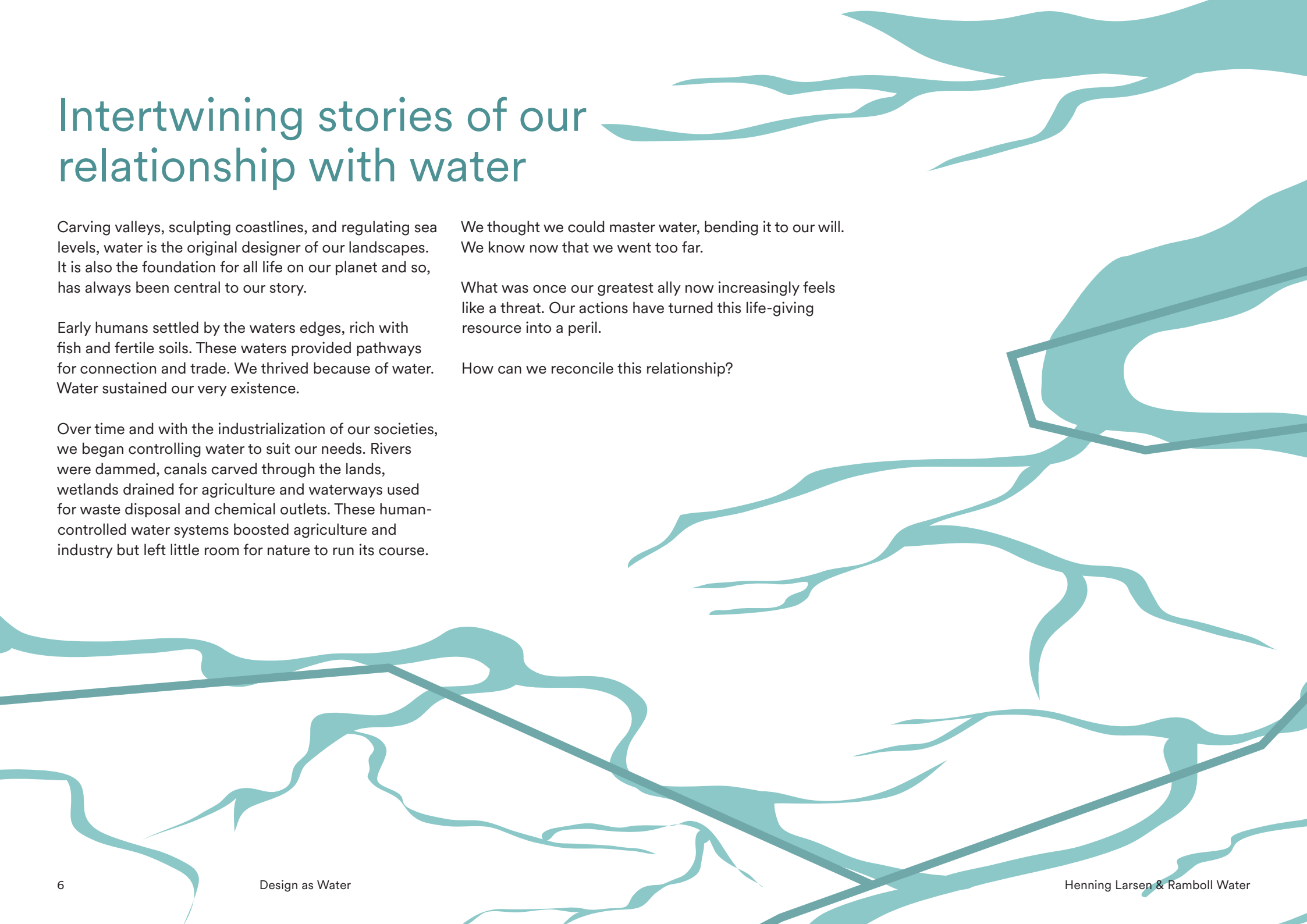
How do we take action as water stewards and embrace this new water paradigm? We ask new questions to give water a voice as a key stakeholder in our processes.

01- Setting the scene

Why do we need to reconsider our relationship with water?
We begin by looking at our evolving relationship with water
and our current water paradigm.



Intertwining stories of our relationship with water

An abstract graphic of flowing water in various shades of teal, with some areas appearing as solid blocks and others as thin, winding lines, creating a sense of movement and depth across the entire page.

Carving valleys, sculpting coastlines, and regulating sea levels, water is the original designer of our landscapes. It is also the foundation for all life on our planet and so, has always been central to our story.

Early humans settled by the waters edges, rich with fish and fertile soils. These waters provided pathways for connection and trade. We thrived because of water. Water sustained our very existence.

Over time and with the industrialization of our societies, we began controlling water to suit our needs. Rivers were dammed, canals carved through the lands, wetlands drained for agriculture and waterways used for waste disposal and chemical outlets. These human-controlled water systems boosted agriculture and industry but left little room for nature to run its course.

We thought we could master water, bending it to our will. We know now that we went too far.

What was once our greatest ally now increasingly feels like a threat. Our actions have turned this life-giving resource into a peril.

How can we reconcile this relationship?

From co-existence
to control...



"The idea that we can control
water has always been a fantasy."¹

Author and journalist, Erica Gies



Climate change is testing the resilience of our water paradigms.

By 2050, half of the global population is expected to live in water-stressed regions.² Already today, a staggering 90% of all natural disasters are water-related³ with floods and heavy rains surging over 50% since the 2010s.⁴

The climate crisis has intensified water's volatility. Our seas are rising, and storm and rainfall patterns changing with devastating effects. Extremes are becoming more extreme, and interconnected climate patterns are amplifying one another, leaving places to suffer both floods and droughts, each with their own cascading consequences.

Increasing droughts and floods are devastating communities, damaging homes, infrastructure and supply systems and leading to loss of life and long-term economic hardship. Droughts drain water reserves, reducing the ability to dilute pollutants, worsening water quality and creating dangerously dry conditions that fuel catastrophic wildfires. Water is at the heart of our planetary crisis but our rigid water systems seem ill-suited to adapt to these climate changes.

But water's story should not be reduced to one of crisis and damage. We would be doing water and ourselves a disservice. Instead we should celebrate its unique qualities, as a prerequisite for all life, a connector of all our systems and a significant stakeholders on our path to resilience.

But how do we change our water paradigm?

Water confronts us with a harsh reality. While water does not need us, we cannot survive without it.

How might we design a future in which we become a service to water and by that, a service to ourselves?

02- Finding the flow

We explore how reconnecting with the qualities of water can open pathways to shifting mindsets towards water stewardship.



The path to a renewed paradigm

Imagine a water paradigm rooted in connectivity - one where we work with water, not against it. By recognizing ourselves as part of nature, as bodies of water, we can intervene with humility to co-create conditions that support life. With water as our catalyst, we can design for co-evolution, self-healing, and regeneration.

Conventional

Resource extraction, direct discharges, combined overflows and inefficient use of water. High water consumption with little regard for environmental impact.

'An exploited resource.'

Green

Water conservation, protection of catchment areas, minimizing waste, improving water efficiency, reducing environmental impact by treating overflows and separating sewers.

'Reduce negative impacts.'

Sustainable

Reducing negative impacts and meeting the needs of the present without compromising those of the future, emphasizing long-term resource availability and minimal environmental harm.

'Do no harm today, for tomorrow.'

Restorative

Phasing out controlling infrastructure systems and rehabilitating water ecosystems that have been degraded or damaged by past water practices.

'Heal and give back.'

Regenerative

Intervene humbly as part of nature and as stewards of water. Co-create conditions conducive to life with water as a catalyst for positive change.

'Co-evolve and self-heal!'

This is where we need to go

Embracing a new point of departure

How we start matters. Creating change demands that we do things differently.

But let's be honest, when we approach a project, we're not expected to empathise. We're expected to 'solve'. Stringent timelines, strict deliverables, and tight budgets often create rigid project processes and limit creativity, long-term thinking, and overall accountability. As we embark on our journey to become water stewards we have to reconsider our role as designers, engineers, planners, and project team members.

We have to reimagine our responsibility.

As water stewards we act in service of our planet, we raise awareness, build capacity, and give voice to water. We ask open-ended questions to create space for reflection and to activate our collective intelligence in the project team.



Embodying water's qualities to inspire a new mindset

Water is a substance and agent, but also an entity filled with memories, symbols and beliefs. Water is humble and nurturing, mighty and wilful. It is not static or final. Water is always present and changing, shapeshifting as it moves through our landscapes and biosphere. It is measurable and yet charged with intangible qualities. It is rooted in place and yet flowing beyond it. Water is always in motion.

Understanding water in this way can inspire us to integrate its qualities into our projects and design in ways that resonate with its essence.

Connected

To understand the world as an interconnected, complex system. To embrace complexity and empathy while focusing on relationships, and activating our collective intelligence.

Playful

To champion openness, creativity and bold imagination. To pioneer curiosity by asking questions together.

Responsive

To act and react with intention. To challenge, to push, to transform. To design for flexibility and resilient living systems.

Transparent

To work transparently and to embrace accountability, with every line we do and don't decide to draw.

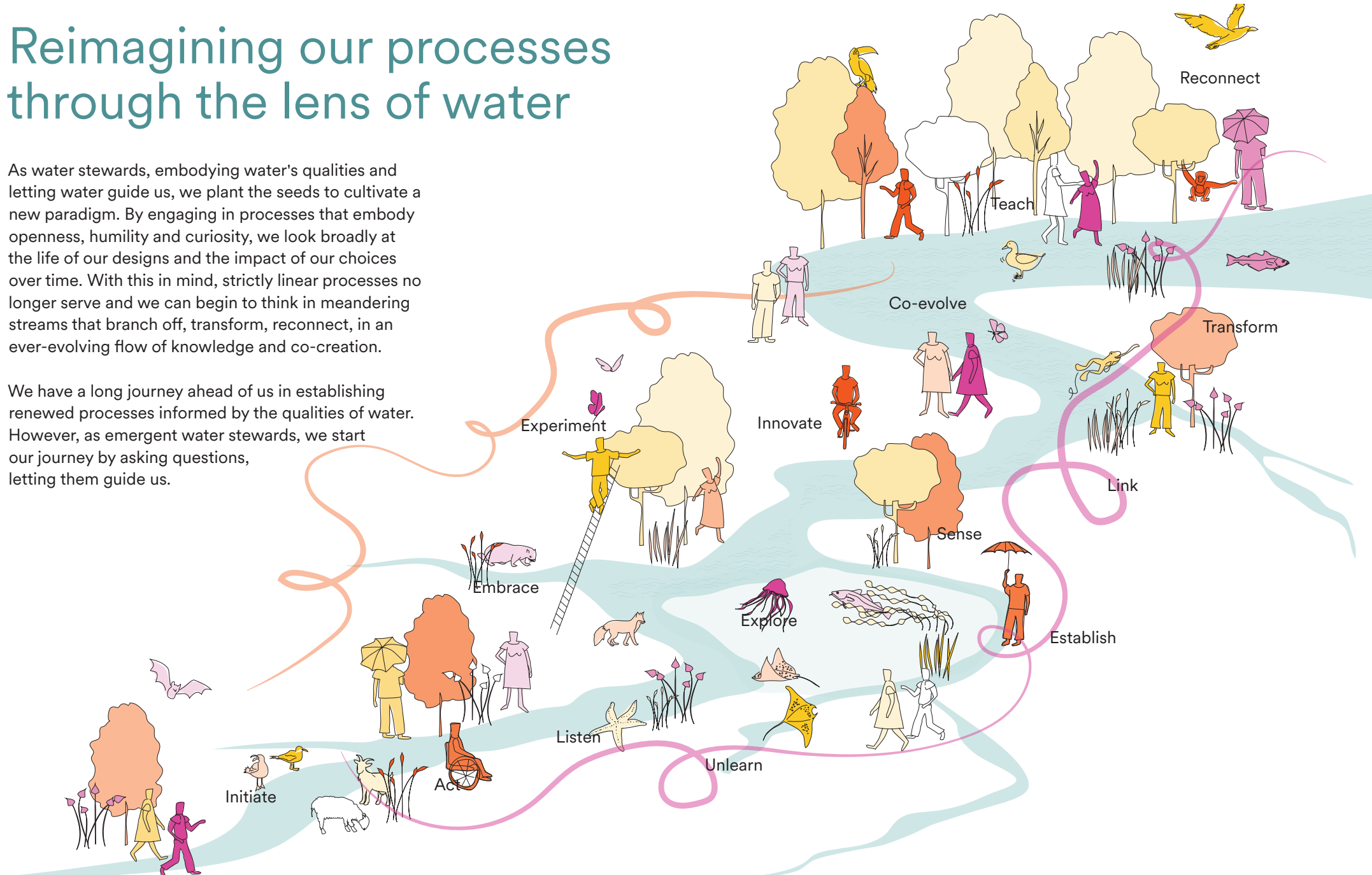
Ever-evolving

To learn and unlearn, adapting to new challenges and embracing change as we design for all life to unfold.

Reimagining our processes through the lens of water

As water stewards, embodying water's qualities and letting water guide us, we plant the seeds to cultivate a new paradigm. By engaging in processes that embody openness, humility and curiosity, we look broadly at the life of our designs and the impact of our choices over time. With this in mind, strictly linear processes no longer serve and we can begin to think in meandering streams that branch off, transform, reconnect, in an ever-evolving flow of knowledge and co-creation.

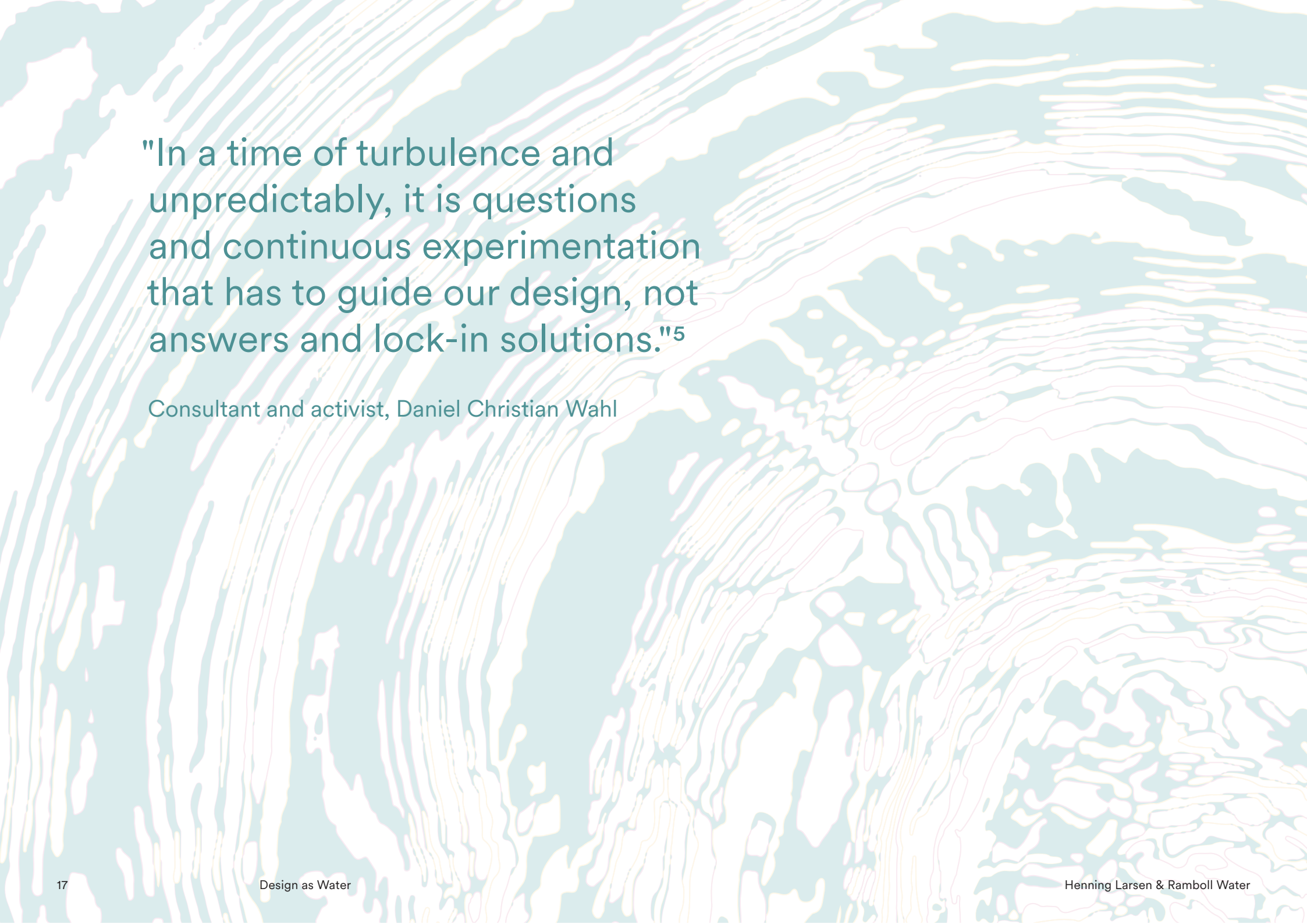
We have a long journey ahead of us in establishing renewed processes informed by the qualities of water. However, as emergent water stewards, we start our journey by asking questions, letting them guide us.



03- Embracing the flow

How do we take action as water stewards and embrace this new water paradigm? We ask new questions to give water a voice as a key stakeholder in our processes.





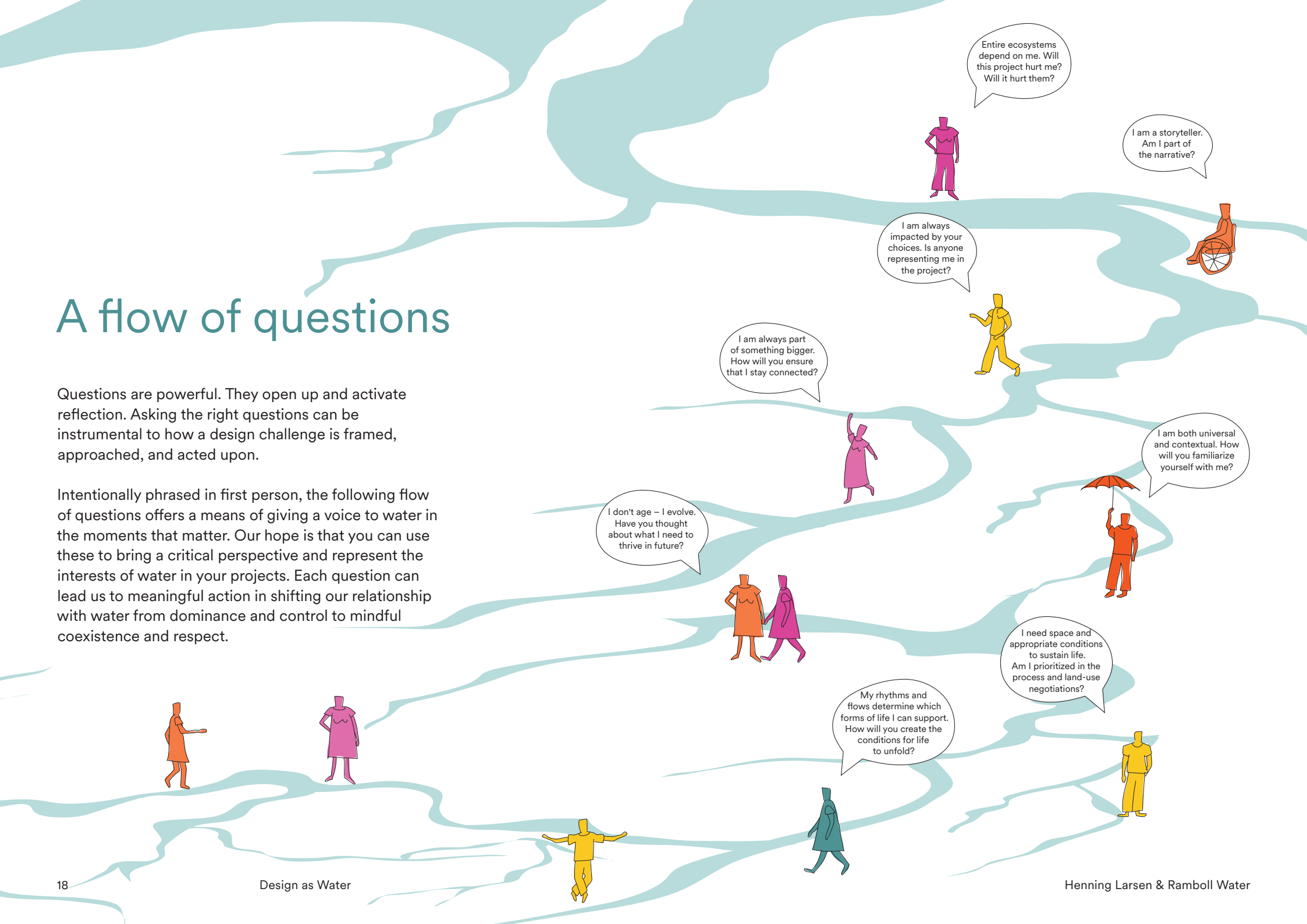
"In a time of turbulence and unpredictably, it is questions and continuous experimentation that has to guide our design, not answers and lock-in solutions."⁵

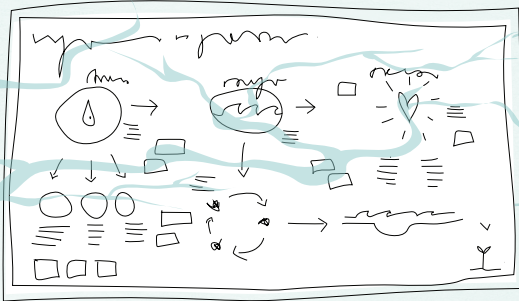
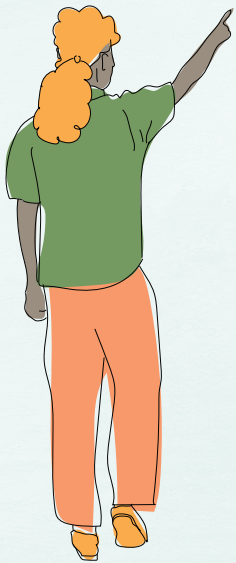
Consultant and activist, Daniel Christian Wahl

A flow of questions

Questions are powerful. They open up and activate reflection. Asking the right questions can be instrumental to how a design challenge is framed, approached, and acted upon.

Intentionally phrased in first person, the following flow of questions offers a means of giving a voice to water in the moments that matter. Our hope is that you can use these to bring a critical perspective and represent the interests of water in your projects. Each question can lead us to meaningful action in shifting our relationship with water from dominance and control to mindful coexistence and respect.





Entire ecosystems are dependent on me and are influenced by my cycles. Will this project hurt me? Will it hurt them?

No one likes to be the roadblock in decision-making or in a creative process but diving into solutions simply won't allow for critical perspectives to emerge. Take a step back to ask questions, remembering that whenever we build we alter water cycles, and by that, also alter the conditions for life to unfold.

Challenging the brief is one of the most powerful tools we have for critical engagement. It's not just about refining the task; it's about questioning its foundations.

What is the brief really asking? What assumptions does it carry? Will it solve an issue or create problems? Who is defining the challenge, and who is left unheard? What if water was our client, how would that change the brief?

Refuse or reconsider.
Introduce the impact on water as an assessment tool in your project screening processes.



I am a storyteller. Am I part of the narrative?

Water is ancient. It has moved through species and generations, telling stories, connecting us through time and place. It is more than a resource—it is a presence and a force that shapes spaces and experiences. It follows that water, and its many qualities, can transform your project into something extraordinary.

But is water even part of the story?
Ask yourself: Where is water in this project?

Is it merely a resource to be managed? A backdrop for human activity? Or is it recognized as a presence shaping the world around it?

Bring water into your project's hero image, the project vision statement, and the very essence of your design. Let it flow through the earliest design decisions through to the narrative, making its presence felt, seen, understood, and non-negotiable. Let water tell its story.



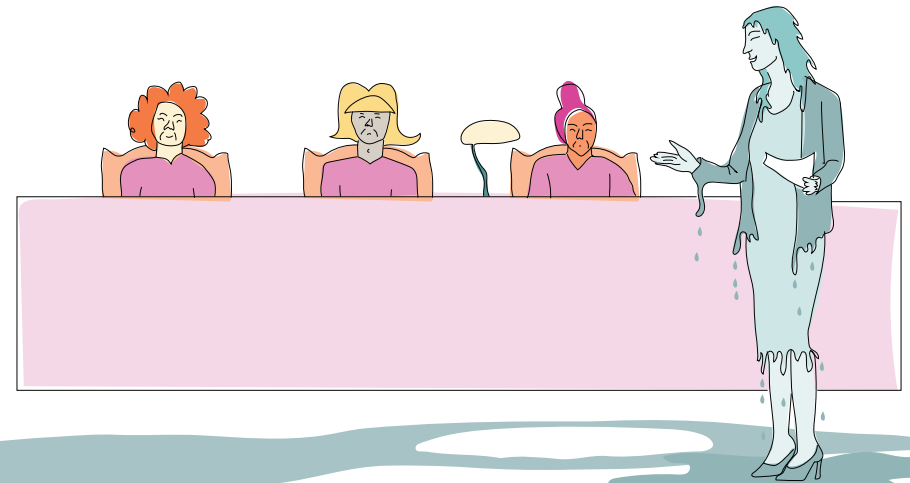
I am always impacted by your choices. Is anyone representing me in the project?

Any site anywhere has a unique water cycle supporting local livelihoods and ecosystems. When we alter land use, we alter water cycles; often without understanding the cascading effects.

But there are experts whose perspectives we can seek. These are people who have listened to water and studied its rhythms; whether locally, globally, academically or spiritually, whether through longstanding traditions over generations or calculated projections for the future.

Their knowledge is not a nice to have; it is a necessity.

If we are to move from dominance to coexistence, we must begin by actively listening to those who can represent water in our processes. Appoint a water steward in your project team who advocates for water's needs. Include a water expert, who can help understand the unique water-related dynamics of the place.



Appoint a water steward and integrate a water expert in your team.

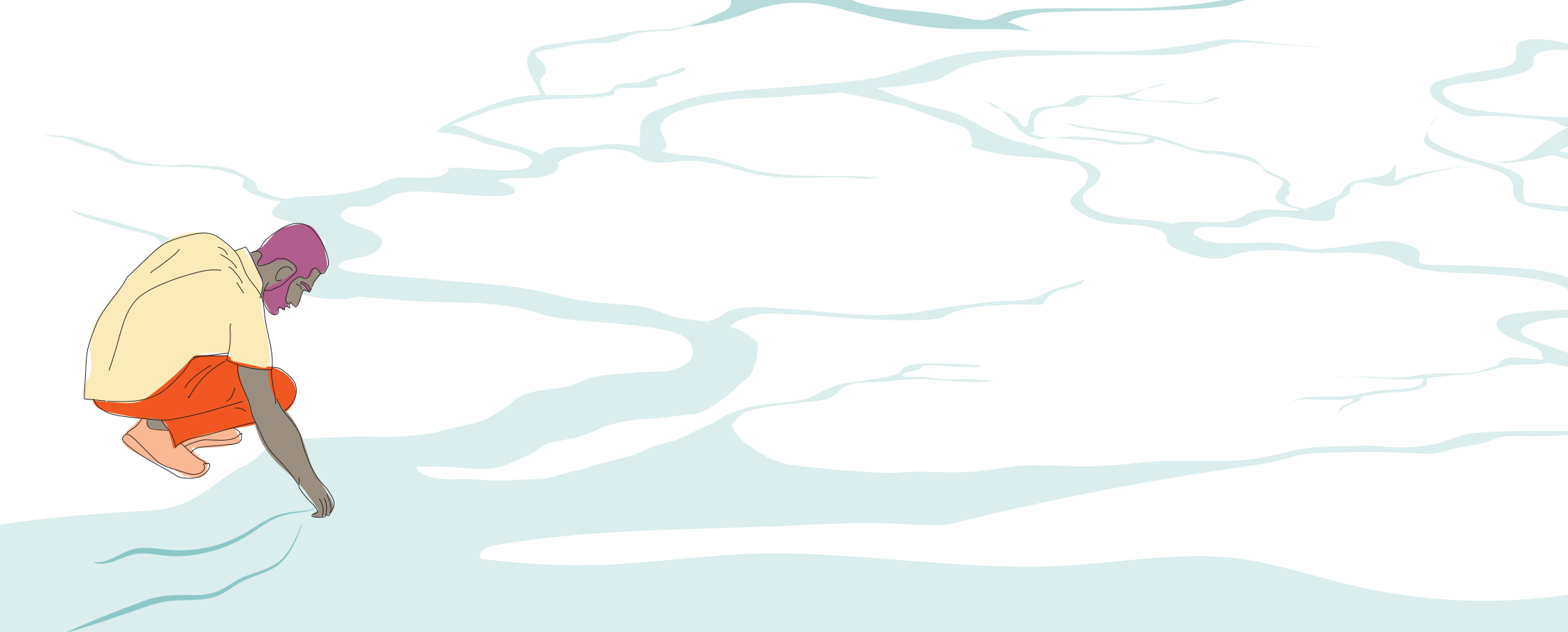




I am always part of
something bigger.
How will you
ensure that I stay
connected? Where
do I start, where do
I end?

Projects sites have clear boundaries, but water is everywhere. It is above ground and underground. It carries life, movement, and change. It is important that we understand site boundaries as human constructs and that water, like many plant and animal species, simply does not recognize them.

To truly understand the water systems of a place, we must look beyond its drawn edges. Where does water come from, and where does it go? How does it connect to larger systems—rivers, groundwater, tides, ecosystems? A site is never isolated when seen through the lens of water.



I am both universal and contextual.
How will you familiarize yourself with
me? Can you feel me? Do you know me?

To truly understand water, we must be with it. By taking the time to be with water, whether standing at its edge or immersing in its depths, we allow it to reveal itself beyond function or form. It is in these moments that we begin to know water—not as an abstract element, but as a living force and active agent.

To design as water, we must first connect with its rhythms, reflections, and currents. Only then does it speak to us and only then can we respond.



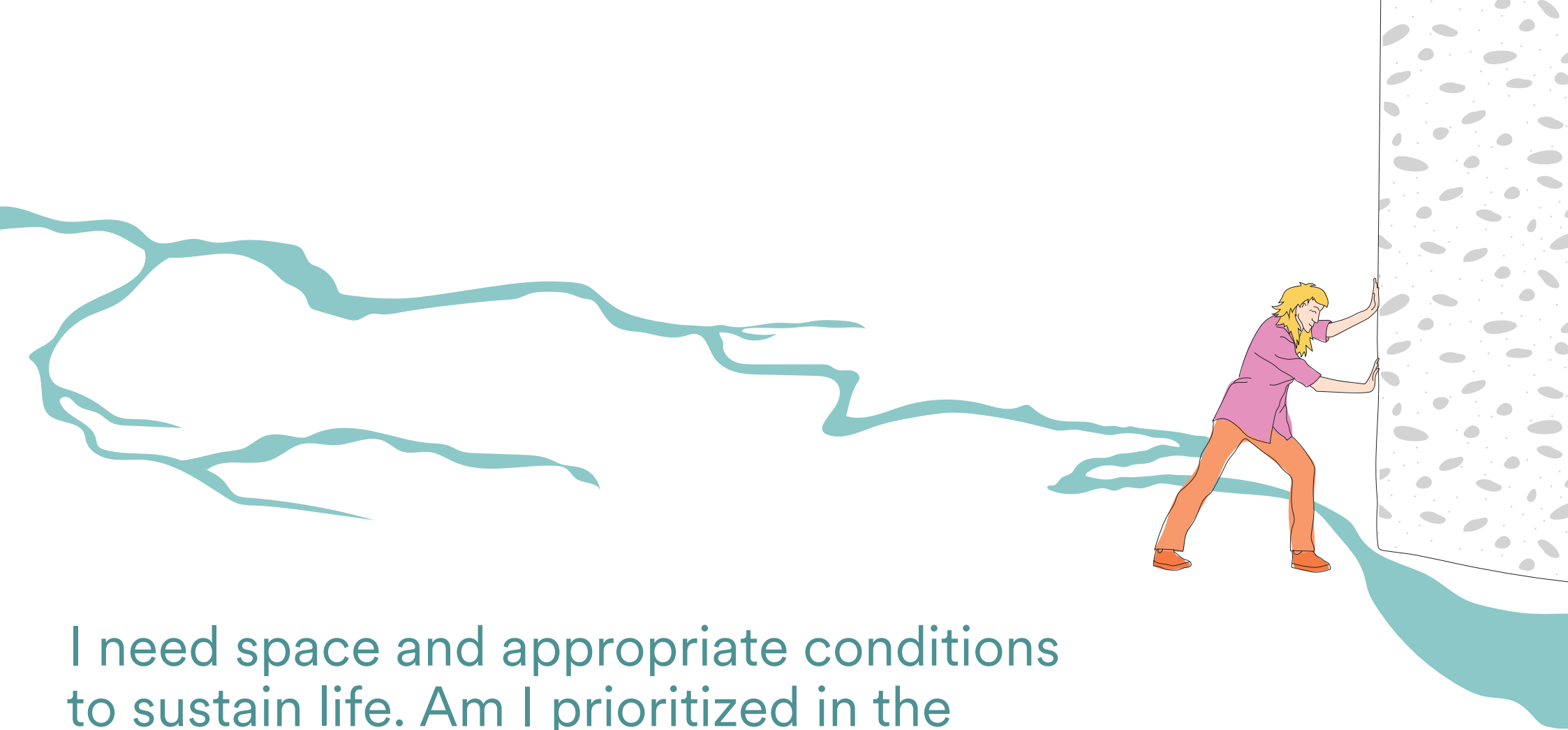
Take time for a meaningful site visit. Be present as you seek water where it is obvious and where it is hidden.

The background of the page is decorated with several thick, overlapping, wavy lines in various shades of teal and light blue. These lines flow across the top and right sides of the page, creating a sense of movement and fluidity, reminiscent of water currents or ripples.

I don't age – I evolve. Have you thought about what I need to thrive in 10, 50, 100, 500 years?

Water evolves. It moves, it transforms, it finds a way. As climate changes, so does our water cycles. Water carves landscapes, nourishes life, and carries history within its flow. A river today is not the same as it was a century ago, sometimes it is no longer. Water doesn't follow our forced timelines, but it does respond to our decisions and designs.

The choices we make today will ripple forward—50 years, 100 years, and beyond. How do we design for harmony with water's journeys of tomorrow? How do we mitigate future climate impacts on the water cycles in our designs? How do we reverse historic interventions limiting waters flows? How do we design for adaptive life on water's terms?



I need space and appropriate conditions to sustain life. Am I prioritized in the process and land-use negotiations?

Water is a living system that will not be confined to lines on a blueprint. But when we force water into artificial boundaries—into pipes and culverts, into places it does not belong—we're designing with water as the afterthought. We're designing without consideration of its natural flows. But water resists. It seeps, it overflows, it breaks through.

Instead of controlling water, give it space. Understand its patterns. Let it move as it wants to move—through wetlands, floodplains, underground flows, and surface paths. If we start with water, we create landscapes that work with it, rather than against it. When water is forced, it will eventually reclaim what was taken. When it is respected, it sustains life, resilience, and balance.



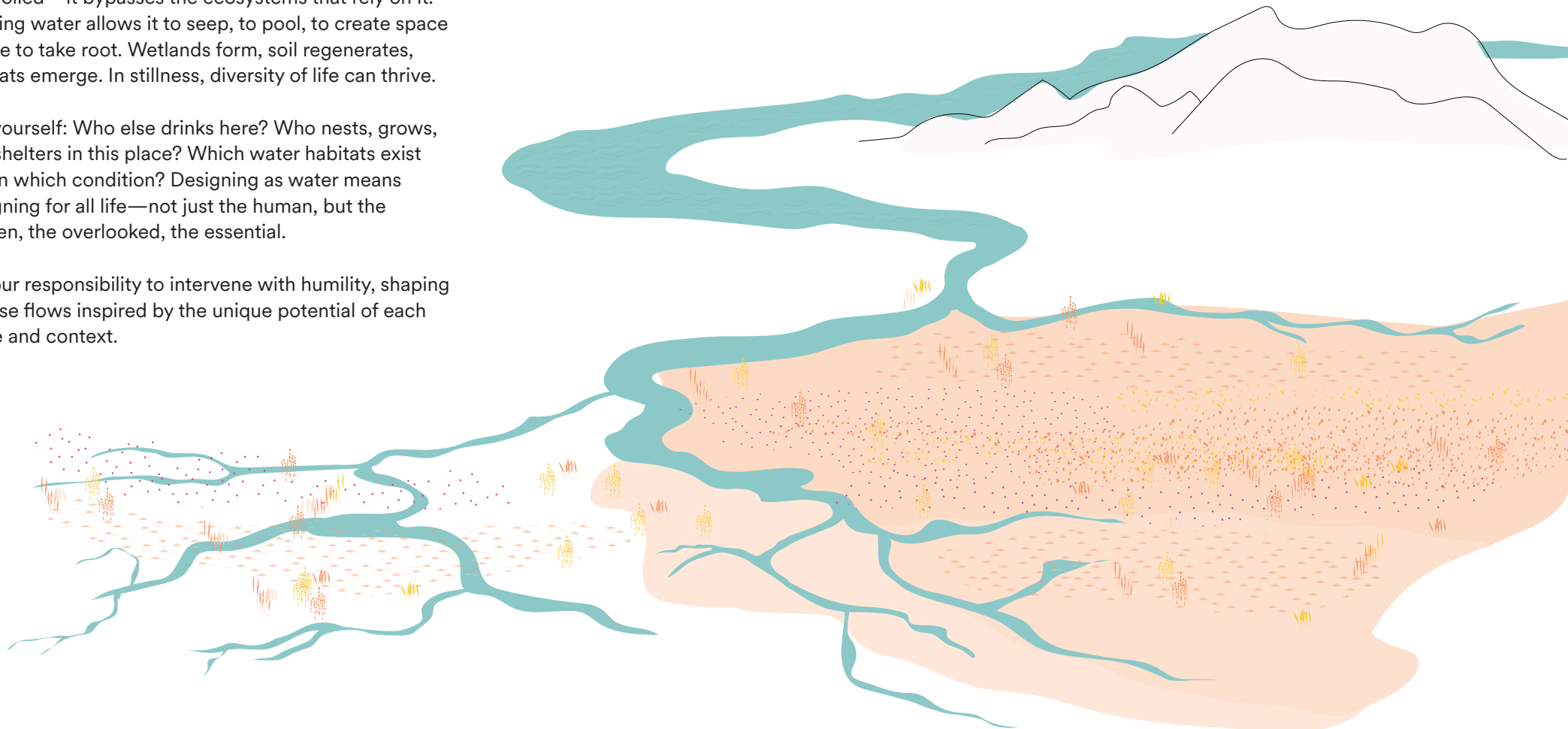
Start with water. Buildings and other functions of land-use come second.

My rhythms and flows determine which forms of life I can support. How will you create the conditions for life to unfold?

When water rushes too quickly—channelled, diverted, controlled—it bypasses the ecosystems that rely on it. Slowing water allows it to seep, to pool, to create space for life to take root. Wetlands form, soil regenerates, habitats emerge. In stillness, diversity of life can thrive.

Ask yourself: Who else drinks here? Who nests, grows, and shelters in this place? Which water habitats exist and in which condition? Designing as water means designing for all life—not just the human, but the unseen, the overlooked, the essential.

It is our responsibility to intervene with humility, shaping diverse flows inspired by the unique potential of each place and context.





"The water in your body is just visiting.
It was a thunderstorm a week ago. It will be
the ocean soon enough. Most of your cells
come and go like morning dew. We are
more weather pattern than stone monument.
Sunlight on mist. Summer lightning.
Your choices outweigh your substance."⁶

Author, Jarod K. Anderson

Be the voice of water, be a water steward

Water is all around us and within us. This is not poetry but fact. And yet, statements such as this are most often read as too much, too fluffy, too out there.

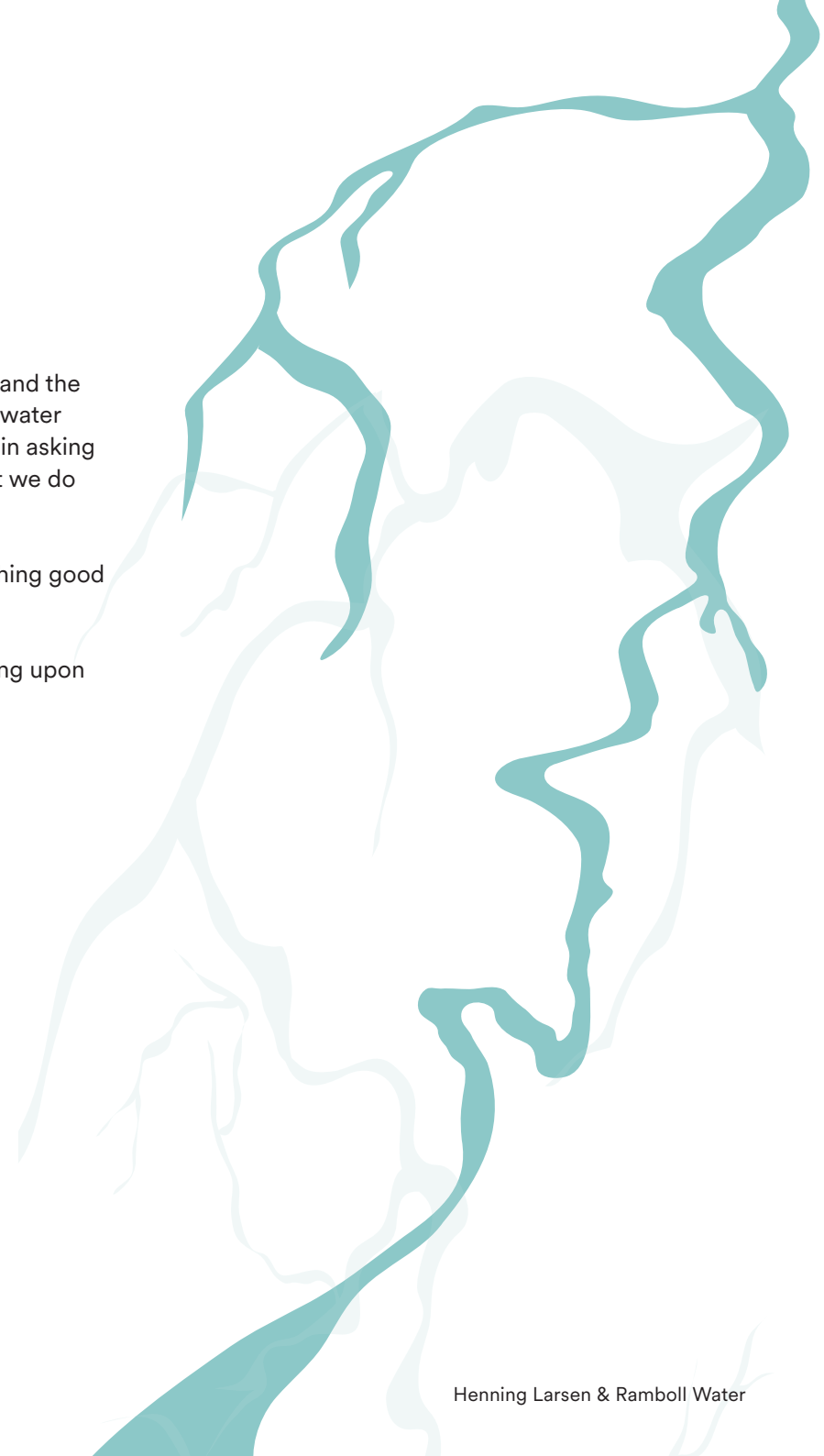
It's troubling. It's troubling because we know that every action we take has a water-related consequence. Every seed we plant, every raw material we excavate, every kilo of cement we mix, every structure we build. There is always an impact on water and its cycles.

We know that design alone cannot fix our water world or radically reframe our view of nature. But we do also know that design, like water, is powerful. It has real consequences for communities, people and animals alike. We understand water as a lens through which we can observe the connections that surround us and the interdependence that defines our planet. Water can help us listen. Water can help us understand what we must change.

From ethics and social impact, to ecosystems and the rights of nature, our hope is that we can bring water into design discourse, and allow it to guide us in asking new and critical questions about the work that we do and the impact we create.

If nothing else, water is a catalyst to do something good in a world that needs it.

Thank you for dedicating your time to embarking upon this journey. This water world needs you!





This companion was developed through a co-creative process, embracing diverse methods and non-linear exploration. External contributions, continuous feedback, and open reflection are key in shaping its evolving direction.

Thank you to our many collaborators and contributors.

Vita Rehberger, Marina Ferreira Mariano Ramos, Yalda Pilehchian, Maya Shpiro, Nanna Marie Vindelov, Trine Stausgaard Munk, Dorte Buchardt Westergaard, Damian Cronin, Ida Marie Knudsen, Rikke Skov Premer, Anne Lørup Arildsen, Stine Dybkjær, Andreea Florea, Nichlas Claus Rasmussen, Victoria Woollorton, Franziska Meisel, Jakob Strømmand-Andersen, Christian Nyerup Nielsen, Charlotte Lin Pedersen, and Jacqueline Bonet Kerr.

We were inspired by numerous thinkers around the globe but a special thanks should go out to:

Daniel Christian Wahl, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Astrida Neimanis, Erica Gies, Julie Watson, Patty Krawec, Isabel Allende, Laura Storm, Rachel Carson, Jarod K. Anderson, Giles Hutchins, Nicholas Kawa, Rights of Rivers, Griffith Center for Innovation, and Den Grønne Ungdomsbevægelse.

Bibliography

¹Gies, E. (2022). Water always wins: Thriving in an Age of Drought and Deluge. Bloomsbury Publishing.

²Boretti, A., Rosa, L. Reassessing the projections of the World Water Development Report. npj Clean Water 2, 15 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41545-019-0039-9>

³Climate Change and Water-Related Disasters. (n.d.-b). UNEP - UN Environment Programme. <https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and-water-related-disasters>

⁴Neslen, A. (2018b, March 22). Flooding and heavy rains rise 50% worldwide in a decade, figures show. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/21/flooding-and-heavy-rains-rise-50-worldwide-in-a-decade-figures-show>

⁵Wahl, D. C. (2016). Designing regenerative cultures. Triarchy Press Limited.

⁶Anderson, J. K. (2020). Field Guide to the Haunted Forest.

Old pond a frog jumps in sound of water

Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694)

