River Walks
YI-TING WANG

River Walk was a series of cross-disciplinary, on-site explorations along the Saar River, held in June and July 2026. Each session was led by a regional specialist who guided participants in exploring the river's material traces: industrial pollution, carried debris, gendered labour, flood dynamics, and geological sedimentation. Together, these sessions assembled a situated, multi-layered knowledge of the Saar:

- **1.** *The Nature of De-Industrialisation* walked through living archives of polluted sites, bodies and environmental protest;
- **2.** *The Saar's Carried Objects* collected debris as material traces of consumption carried downstream;
- **3.** *Women and the Saar* brought to light the forgotten histories of gendered labour;
- **4.** *Simulation and Gaming for the Saar* explored alternative scenarios of flooding, military legacy, and renaturation;
- **5.** *The Saar's 100-Million-Year History* read and sampled geological transformation registered in the river's sediments.

River Walk was part of the CURE initiative Rivers Beyond Borders. From 13 May to 19 June 2026, the exhibition Rights of Nature: A Global Movement at Stiftung Demokratie Saarland presented an installation by Camille de Toledo alongside the River Walk section. The walks and their outputs contributed to the civic forum The Saar as a Worker (4 July 2026, Kulturgut Ost, Saarbrücken), which deliberated on the question of legal personhood for the Saar.

The Five Sessions

1. The Nature of De-Industrialisation

Saturday 13 June 2026, 3:00–5:00 PM Led by Dr Birgit Metzger (historian, Saarland University) Route: Völklinger Hütte UNESCO World Heritage Site → Rossel confluence → Wehrden → Paradise

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Historian Birgit Metzger guided participants through the environmental and social history of the Völklinger Hütte (1873–1986) and its adjacent area. The walk began at

the main car park of the Völklinger Hütte — a 20,000 m2 asphalted surface, built to seal the contaminated ground of former coal-chemical plants. From there, the route crossed the Saar to the mouth of the Rossel, a tributary once known as one of the dirtiest rivers in Europe. Here, Metzger recovered histories of local resistance to pollution: in 1914, a female mill owner filed a complaint against mine discharges into the Rossel; in the 1950s, residents downstream organised one of the region's first citizen initiatives against water contamination. In Wehrden, a former working-class neighbourhood next to the ironworks, Italian and Turkish migrant workers from the late 1960s onward lived closest to the sources of pollution. The walk ended in the "Paradise" — the site of the former coking plant, demolished after closure and left unmanaged. Rare plant species now grow on industrial soil. Metzger questioned this narrative of recovery and harmony. She argued that the concept of "Industry-Nature" offers an aestheticised narrative that can obscure the contamination still present across the site and the social costs that industrialisation and deindustrialisation left behind. Metzger framed the walk through the concept of "pollutant archive": industrial emissions are not simply past events but remain materially registered in soil, water, and the vegetation of the site.

2. The Saar's Carried Objects

Wednesday 1 July 2026, 6:30–8:30 PM
Led by Cleanup Saarland e.V. (coordination: Sarah, Arno)
Route: Schanzenbergbrücke → northern riverside → Bürgerpark Hafeninsel

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This cleanup walk, organised in collaboration with the regional environmental organisation Cleanup Saarland e.V., used a citizen-science methodology called the Brand Audit to collect, sort, and interpret debris along the Saar's banks. Each object was categorised by brand, material, and location — transforming litter into data. Each participant was interviewed on camera about the object they collected, bearing witnesses to what the river carries: a plastic bottle from France, probably discarded because it carries no deposit refund, becomes a record of cross-border consumption patterns; a drink can, shredded into fragments by municipal mowing along the riverbank, becomes evidence of maintenance practices that scatter waste beyond the possibility of collection; a pile of clothes and shoes at the water's edge is not merely illegal dumping but a trace of someone living near the river. The collected objects were subsequently displayed as forensic evidence at the civic forum on 4 July, sorted and numbered, alongside edited video interviews from the walk. The Brand Audit produces a contemporary diary of the river — an inventory of the material traces of consumption, policy, and flow.

3. Women and the Saar

Sunday 28 June 2026, 10:00 AM–12:00 PM
Led by Dr Susanne Nimmesgern (historian, Frauenbeauftragte des Saarpfalz-Kreises)
In collaboration with FrauenGenderBibliothekSaar
Route: Saarbrücker Schloss → Alte Brücke → Saarkran → St. Johanner Markt → Saarbrücker Rathaus

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Historian Susanne Nimmesgern traced the economic lives of women along the Saar from the medieval period to the twentieth century. The walk began at the Saarbrücker Schloss, the region's seat of power, where eight women—typically widows governing on behalf of underage sons—held the regency. At the Saarkran and the Saar meadows, the river itself came into view as a workplace. Women washed and bleached laundry on the banks. The "Erzengel"—ore angels—unloaded barges by hand, carrying ore in baskets on their heads. Market women arrived by boat from Liesdorf. Widows ran glassworks, ironworks, and breweries. At the Fröschengasse, Nimmesgern told the story of Sophie Krämer, who took over the St. Ingbert ironworks after her husband's death, built the workers' settlement that still stands, and founded branch operations in the Eifel. At the Gasthaus zum Stiefel, Caroline Bruch managed the Bruch brewery after her husband's death and founded the Großwald brewery in Eiweiler to secure an inheritance for her own children. The walk also traced a narrowing. In the nineteenth century, access to higher education was denied to girls, and standardised qualifications increasingly determined professional advancement. The century that industrialised the river also formalised women's exclusion from the institutions that governed it.

4. Simulation and Gaming for the Saar

Saturday 4 July 2026, 1:00–3:00 PM (within the civic forum)
Led by Dr Isabelle Charpentier (computer scientist, CNRS / ICube, University of Strasbourg) Kulturgut Ost, Saarbrücken

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This indoor workshop, integrated into the civic forum, introduced digital tools developed from Charpentier's research in wetland monitoring and hydrological modelling. *ReFlood*, a real-time 3D flood simulator, allowed participants to replay the Saar flood of May 2024 and manipulate the conditions: raising a dyke, removing a bridge, and observing how the water moved differently. In *Miroirs*, players explored aquatic environments and recorded their perceptions of the water's condition, generating data on aquatic well-being. Two games from the *Beaverse* shifted the

perspective further: *BeaVR*, a virtual reality experience in which players inhabited a beaver's perspective at water level; and *Castor Drama*, a 2D game in which players controlled a beaver foraging, transporting branches, and repairing dam leaks. Alongside the digital tools, participants worked with a printed A0 interactive timeline, inspired by *Chronic*, an interactive digital tool developed by Charpentier. The timeline was organised across five thematic registers corresponding to the five River Walks. It was pre-filled with events drawn from each walk contributor's research and invited participants to add their own dates, memories, and observations.

5. The Saar's 100-Million-Year History

Saturday 11 July 2026, 9:00 AM–2:00 PM
Led by Prof. Dr Jochen Kubiniok (physical geographer, Saarland University)
Sites around Wallerfangen: Altarm → Primsmündung → Teufelsburg → spring in farmland

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Physical geographer Jochen Kubiniok led participants through sites around Wallerfangen, downstream of Völklingen, reading the Saar's geological and environmental transformation across multiple timescales. The walk began at an oxbow lake—a meander cut off when the Saar was expanded into a federal shipping waterway in the 1980s. Its undisturbed sediments function like tree rings: a core drilled from the lake bed shows a band of pure coal slag buried over a metre deep, and in those layers, heavy metal concentrations peak—lead, zinc, cadmium. Nearby, at the confluence of the Prims and the Saar, participants compared the canalised Saar with the more natural banks of the Prims. From the Teufelsburg, participants read the river's hundred-million-year geological history from above. At a spring in the surrounding farmland, Kubiniok explained that spring water integrates an entire catchment: a glass of spring water is a report on twenty years of agricultural practice upstream. His research team has monitored fifty-five springs across Saarland since 2002.

Contributors and Partners

Walk contributors (by order of date): Dr Birgit Metzger, historian, Saarland University Cleanup Saarland e.V., Dr Susanne Nimmesgern, historian, Women's Affairs Officer for the Saarpfalz District, Dr Isabelle Charpentier, computer scientist, CNRS / ICube, University of Strasbourg, Prof. Dr Jochen Kubiniok, physical geographer, Saarland University

Institutional partners: UNESCO World Heritage Site Völklinger Hütte, FrauenGenderBibliothekSaar, Cleanup Saarland e.V., Stiftung Demokratie Saarland, Saarland University, University of Strasbourg (CNRS / ICube), Goethe-Institut Nancy

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