

River Chess Association Public Meeting No. 7

1st May 2013, Loudwater Farm, Rickmansworth

In attendance

RCA Committee Members:

Paul Jennings (Chairman)

David Le Neve Foster

Kathryn Graves

Scott Horton

Roger Wotton

Speakers:

Denise Ashton (Wild Trout Trust)

Allen Beechey (Chilterns Chalk Streams Project)

And 30 members of the public.

Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Judith Aldridge, Ken Austin, David Gauke MP, Cheryl Gillan MP, Will Hobhouse, Jennifer Pearson, David Smallman and Terry Tyler.

1. Previous Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on the 22nd May 2012 were approved as a correct record.

2. Overview of RCA Activities

Paul Jennings provided a summary of the committee's activities since the last public meeting, including hosting a visit by the DEFRA Minister; contributing to the Charter for Chalk Streams (to be launched later in May); habitat enhancement; Trout in the Classroom; Mayfly in the Classroom; lobbying on abstraction and pollution; schools visits; and training volunteers in water vole surveying.

A considerable amount of the committee's time has been spent monitoring and lobbying on the unintentional sewage spills and intentional sewage releases that have occurred from the Chesham Sewage Treatment Works (CSTW) since December 2012. Several incidents have polluted a neighbouring property as well as the river.

A persistent sewage leak from a manhole in Holloway Lane, Chesham, led to sewage entering the river in February, when trout redds were present in the river. The impact of this pollution on fish recruitment is unknown.

Thames Water has now taken responsibility for the sewage detritus that is consistently found downstream of CSTW, but as of yet no solution has been implemented.

Members of the RCA Committee met with Thames Water representatives to address the multiple problems occurring at CSTW. Thames Water is preparing an investment programme for the plant to improve water quality and expand the facility to meet current and future capacity needs.

The committee is currently looking at a report produced for the Environment Agency which concludes that abstraction does not impact upon flows in the River Chess. We do not accept this conclusion and will be challenging the report.

3. Work of the Wild Trout Trust

Denise Ashton explained that the Wild Trout Trust (WTT) is a charity dedicated to the conservation of wild trout in Britain and Ireland, working to protect and restore their habitats by looking at the ecosystem as a whole. WTT provides both advice and practical help.

An example of the WTT's work is the Masterclass held on the Chess with RCA in 2012, to teach volunteers lots of different habitat restoration techniques. This was so successful that it prompted a whole series of practical demonstration days on a number of other rivers to help build capacity in river restoration. The WTT is actively involved in helping to create connected habitats by installing fish easements at weirs and culverts to assist fish movement around these obstructions.

In terms of education, WTT champions Mayfly in the Classroom, a cheap and simple way to get schoolchildren involved in river ecology. Mayfly in the Classroom is currently operating in three schools on the Chess. They are also developing a library of information, such as habitat management sheets and the Wild Trout Survival Guide. WTT also takes the latest scientific research and converts it into layman summaries.

4. RCA Projects

Scott Horton and Allen Beechey provided a summary of practical work undertaken on the Chess with the RCA, including fish habitat enhancement using woody debris at Rickmansworth; developing a hatchery on the river to breed River Chess trout that can be dispersed along the river; contributing to the Zoological Society of London's project to monitor elver migration; and weir removal at Sarratt Bottom to improve a fishery and its habitat.

5. Rivers Trusts

Kathryn Graves introduced some of the pros and cons associated with becoming a formal rivers trust, a step that the committee is currently considering. Whilst the RCA is already operating under the same ethos as rivers trusts and formal status would open up new funding streams to support its work, there are concerns as to whether a trust could operate effectively at the scale of just one river.

6. Research on the Chess

Roger Wotton provided a brief history of chalk stream research in the UK and directed people to the NERC LOCAR web site for information on a seven-year project on chalk streams. He then outlined some of the research that has been undertaken by undergraduate and postgraduate university students on the Chess, covering a broad range of topics. There is also a considerable amount of non-university research taking place, including monitoring by the Environment Agency and water companies and that carried out by conservation organisations and the RCA, including water vole surveys, eel monitoring and riverfly monitoring. All of this research will help us to gain a greater understanding of the river.

7. Update from the Chilterns Chalk Streams Project

Allen Beechey summarised some of the recent work undertaken by the project, including practical work on the Chess and other rivers; educational and advisory work such as the creation of river-specific advisory leaflets; and monitoring projects, including spreading riverfly monitoring out to the other Chilterns rivers. The project has also been a host to the Colne Catchment Approach, which has developed a draft plan for the whole Colne catchment from which improvements can be delivered.

8. Conclusion

Paul said that the RCA's focus will remain on pollution and over-abstraction. He thanked everyone who has helped the work of the RCA over the last year and said that anyone interested in volunteering should get in touch.