

## **What Makes a Healthy River from Peat to Paddling?**

A simple enough question and one which some of Yorkshire's best environmental campaigners debated at our successful September 2022 conference...

With drought, hosepipe bans and the large-scale discharge of sewage making the headlines for much of the summer, our conference debating the health of our country's rivers, with a special emphasis on the River Wharfe, was timely, drawing more than 160 people to Grassington Town Hall.

River experts from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds built a case for what they saw as the main issues affecting our precious water courses – which, according to one of our guest speakers, Charlotte Simons of the Dales to Vale Rivers Network, only 14% are in a good ecological state.

Reporting on the issues from the River Wharfe's catchment on Fleet Moss was speaker, Tim Thom, peat programme manager for Yorkshire Peat Partnership, who highlighted the vital importance of healthy peatlands for carbon storage, water storage and clean water, saying "our peatlands are like Cinderella; doing all the work and storing all our water and we've treated them really badly." (See our Peatlands Policy and campaign)

Charlotte Simons and fellow speaker, Professor Jonathan Grey of the Wild Trout Trust both made the case for the importance of landowners, councils and water companies being encouraged and educated to stop thinking about rivers as merely 'water conveyance channels'. Both explained that despite appearing 'wiggly', 94% of the River Wharfe is artificially constrained by banks, channels and weirs. Such 'engineering' significantly increases water power and speed, encouraging greater and faster erosion, washing away habitats, riparian vegetation and biodiversity. Professor Grey reminded us that, "physical diversity begets biological diversity."

The other major issue blighting our rivers, including the River Wharfe, is pollution. Our Vice President, Professor Rick Battarbee of University College, London – a founder member of the Ilkley Clean River Group, which designated the Wharfe in Ilkley as the first official bathing water in the UK, revealed some disturbing facts about the chemical and bacterial pollution levels of the Wharfe, collated through the iWharfe citizen scientist / UCL project. His findings were also corroborated by speaker, Dr Martin Christmas, environment planning and engagement manager for the Environment Agency. The main causes of pollution are storm overflows pumping raw sewage and grey water into the Wharfe during moderate and heavy rainfall and agricultural runoff – both direct and indirect during rainfall. Wild swimmers and other river leisure users may be interested to know that the only consistently unpolluted part of the River Wharfe belongs to the section above Hubberholme Bridge!

Although the answers and solutions to addressing the ill health of our rivers may feel out of reach for us as individuals, the biologist and writer, our honorary President, Dr Amy-Jane Beer reminded audience members that rivers used to be revered as the 'life blood' of our planet, before adding that, "it is a connection we have become dissociated from now the river comes out of our taps."

Reasserting and rekindling that bond was universally agreed as a first and vital step to improving river health, with educating children and young people in how the river ecosystem works agreed as a good place to start.

Other actions we can all take include:

- Conserving water at home through the use of water butts / using less
- Checking pets are not contaminating river water and grey water via home bathing through the use of highly toxic *topical* flea and tick treatments ([www.wildtrout.org/news/pet-flea-treatments-in-our-rivers](http://www.wildtrout.org/news/pet-flea-treatments-in-our-rivers)) – speak to your vet about switching to safer oral supplements
- Water users should aim to adopt the 'Check, Clean, Dry' campaign to prevent aquatic plants and animals unwittingly being transported by equipment, such as kayaks and fishing gear to new delicate water environments as invasive species.
- Litter picking in and besides rivers – where safe to do so
- Encouraging children and young people to love and respect rivers and river life – a range of ideas and educational resources are available at: [www.ydrt.org.uk/resources/education-resources/](http://www.ydrt.org.uk/resources/education-resources/)
- Finally, with more than half of sewer flooding caused by blockages in sewers and drains, a significant cause of flooding and pollution – do your part by only flushing 'the three Ps', i.e. 'poo, pee and paper'. So-called other 'flushable' products, such as wipes cause blockages and never pour fats, oils and greases down the sink.

So, you could say the answer to the question of 'what makes a healthy river' is 'us'. People behave 'badly' when they don't know how to behave well, so let's start sharing all these messages so we can all start to behave better and protect our rivers which in turn will protect nature, wildlife and ultimately ourselves.

By Membership & Events Officer, Victoria Benn