



# AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

*'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'*

## NEWSLETTER - AUGUST 2008

Dear ACA member

This is the second main Newsletter of 2008. If you know of members who do not receive e-mail, please help the Association by passing the information on.

We've had a very busy period since the AGM and I'd like to thank the Committee for all their work on behalf of the river - that's Ros Brousson, Maya Plass, Pat Cassidy, Wendy Bennetto, John Peters, Peter Marsh, Lawrence Woodward and Mike Garton-Sprenger - in no particular order.

I hope you will have seen the two advisory notes that we have published this year in parish magazines, on our website, as leaflets for local shops, etc. a) Cherish the Avon b) A Conservationists Guide to Fishing Around the Avon Estuary. If not, both documents are available on our website ([www.aca.aveton-gifford.co.uk](http://www.aca.aveton-gifford.co.uk)) or I can supply copies.

For some time I have held the view that local councils largely ignore the welfare of the Avon, despite the fact that several parish councillors are ACA members and the river and its estuary are major local assets. Partly, I'm sure this situation arises because the river often forms parish borders and seems to take care of itself; it is all too frequently taken for granted and is overlooked - until dramatic change occurs e.g. it floods. We are slowly working on changing this perception by developing closer relationships with Parish Councils and by trying to find out how much the river is used by parishioners and for what purposes. I know that Bigbury and Thurlestone parishes are in the process of formulating parish plans and I hope we can ensure that the river is not neglected during this process.

### Dates for your diary

August lectures, Thurlestone Parish Hall, 7.30pm I have had to do some last minute juggling with lecture dates and I apologise for any disappointment or inconvenience. The new arrangement is as follows:-

Laurence Couldrick will present our first talk on 12<sup>th</sup> August about the fantastic work of the West Country Rivers Trust in improving our SW rivers by - for example - re-introducing salmon to the upper Dart, improving the water quality of the Fal and Exe by tracing pollutants, understanding the effects of climate change, and in improving the understanding of the public through their 'Wet Feet' programme.

The second talk (originally planned for 5<sup>th</sup> August) will be on 19<sup>th</sup> August and concerns the mass of plastic material that ends up in the sea and on our shores. Regulars at our river clean ups will testify to the amazing and massive assortment of plastic that ends up in our own estuary. Although unsightly and a nuisance, this larger material is arguably not such an ecological hazard as the tiny plastic breakdown products which threaten very small organisms further down the food chain. Richard Thompson's talk will examine the fate of all this plastic and its consequences for our environment.

Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 1.30-3.30pm: 'Learn to Sea' - a guide for all ages to the use of the beach as a classroom - S Milton Sands with Maya Plass - contact Maya (01548 562449) for details.

Sunday 14th September, evening tide: combined 'Bring & Share' BBQ and 'Full Moon Flotilla', Cockleridge - just turn up with your boat and BBQ as and when the tide allows.

Saturday 20th September Cockleridge 'Adopt-a-Beach' clean-up, 3.00-5.00pm (also see below): contact Maya (01548 562449) for details.

### **Avon Estuary Management Plan**

Owing to a reorganisation in local Estuary Officers' responsibilities (the ACA contributed via the Devon Maritime Forum), the usual early summer Avon Estuary Forum did not take place this year. However, Nigel Mortimer's review of the Estuary Management Plan is proceeding - again with ACA input - and we have agreed to be formally associated with a number of objectives covering communication with the public and the conservation and improvement of the environment of the river. One such objective involves helping to keep the river clear of rubbish and we have decided to join the Marine Conservation Society's 'Adopt-a-Beach' scheme (see <http://www.mcsuk.org/support/how-to-help/volunteer+projects>) by adopting Cockleridge at Bigbury on Sea. This area accumulates a staggering amount of rubbish, much of which later washes upstream, causing further environmental nuisance. Additional clean-ups of upstream river banks will continue as usual.

### **Fish matters**

Members of the ACA committee have held several meetings and/ or online discussions with the Environment Agency (EA), Devon Sea Fisheries Committee (DSF) Avon Fishing Association (AFA) and others about an assortment of fish-related matters.

1. We have provided the EA with photographs taken by an AFA member of the river in full flood at the site of the proposed trout farm, downstream from Avon Mill Garden Centre. Interestingly, the Tidal Waters branch of EA have taken an interest in this new information, passing it on to their Land Drainage people who, otherwise, seemed unaware of any problem! In our view, the site is quite unsuitable for such a development for obvious environmental reasons related to land drainage but the relevant authorities seem slow to accept this. The grant for the development (£400,000) was awarded by the Marine Fisheries Agency - apparently, with little or no consultation with other bodies. Planning responsibility for the development and appropriate land drainage rests with SHDC with whom the developer is already in dispute over a related matter!
2. We are involved in on-going discussion with Tidal Waters staff of the EA and DSF about the trans-estuary netting that has been observed on several occasions at the river mouth. It appears the EA is primarily concerned about migrating Sea Trout and Salmon whilst DSF is only bothered about Bass. As so frequently seems to be the case, inter-agency politics, etc. obscure clear environmentally beneficial objectives - much to our frustration! If you see anybody netting, please report them to DSF on 01803 854648.
3. On a broader front, several of us share the concern of the AFA about the apparent lack of fish life in the river above Venn Weir. The EA reports that water quality upstream is very good but, if so, where are all the 'tiddlers', etc. that we might expect to see in a truly healthy river?

## John Crawford Environmental Awards

You will remember that we have set up an Environmental Award scheme in John's name to fund projects of particular relevance to the river. If you know of any local schools, colleges or individuals who might be able to make use of a small grant to help with a river-related project, please tell them to either consult our website or get in touch with me.

We have just agreed our first grant to help with the transport costs of a project studying the possible effects of oestrogen mimics (widespread water pollutants) on a particular species of clam, *Scrobicularia plana*, in the Avon. We shall keep you informed of progress.

I am also in discussion with Evans Estate about the possibility of placing a simple wooden memorial bench in Stiddicombe Wood whilst considering how best to maintain the Wood as a place of public enjoyment of unique aspects of the river.

## Projects

Some good news!

At our last AGM, we drew attention to the South Devon Coast Local Action Group's (SDCLAG) bid to gather together projects for local benefit into a major funding proposal to the Rural Development Programme for England scheme (DEFRA). I subsequently submitted several, rather hurried, outline proposals for the bid: 1) to extend our involvement in offering environmental advice to farmers about water and soil management (£15000) 2) to restore the groynes on Cockleridge to slow beach erosion (£10000) and 3) to improve signage around the river (£3000) e.g. on the Tidal Road. I understand that SDCLAG's bid was successful and, very recently, it has been awarded £1.8 million! So, I may need help in putting some meat on these outline proposals as soon as the application procedure is clarified - volunteers, please contact me. All the proposals will need 50% 'matched funding' to complement any DEFRA money, so we could be looking for sponsors as well.

I have just been told that the Avon is to be included as a 'Priority Catchment' area along with the Erme, Yealm and Kingsbridge/ Salcombe catchments in the next phase of DEFRA's Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative. This is excellent news and will enable us to help build on our local achievements of the first phase in which we were only an 'Associate Catchment'. Priority status should mean there will be additional funds and advice available to help reduce agricultural run-off into the river and to improve water quality; further details are awaited.

## Other

The South Devon and Dorset Coastal Authorities Group is in charge of developing 20-, 50- and 100-year Shoreline Management Plans (SMP) to protect 400 miles or so of our coast (including estuaries up to their tidal limits) from erosion and flood risks, on behalf of DEFRA. The ACA is registered as a stakeholder in the discussions and we have already made available all the results of our Avon Estuary Siltation Research Project to help develop local policy. John Peters and I attended a consultation meeting recently to hear about draft issues and objectives for SMP2 and I think we were both struck by the generality of what was presented, the lack of hard data on which to base decision-making and the absence of any obvious contingency planning for the long-term; global warming and progressive sea level rise were assumed as 'givens'. The available budget for what could turn out to be a highly expensive operation is obviously a limiting factor. The most likely local policies would probably involve 'No Active Intervention' or 'Managed Realignment' i.e. managed retreat of the shoreline. In contrast, our advice - based on observation and an awareness of local

tourism and property interests - would be to 'Hold the existing defence line' for areas such as Cockleridge, Folly Hill cliffs, Bantham Harbour, and Bantham and Bigbury on Sea beaches i.e. to maintain or upgrade the level of protection provided by defences, such as they are. We may only have 100 years to wait before policy makers are called to account!

By the way, the houseboat 'Gillaroo' is still in place at AG in contravention of the instructions of the Duchy of Cornwall. This long craft can often be seen broadside across the river, just downstream of the bridge, as it appears to be held fast only by a swinging bow mooring. Even that mooring is questionable as the boat is now (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> August) lodged against the opposite river bank - a navigational hazard on spring tides.

With best wishes

Stuart Watts (Chairman) - [sdmw2@btopenworld.com](mailto:sdmw2@btopenworld.com) or 01548 810373