



AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'

NEWSLETTER - SEPTEMBER 2006

A lot has happened since March's Newsletter and April's AGM although much remains undone. I'll endeavour to fill in some detail.

Membership is growing at a slow but steady rate. We now have 191 registered members, 61 of them Joint Memberships so the total number of individuals is over 250. Unfortunately, only about 80 members currently are listed on our e-mail database which means that our regular e-mailings do not reach an appreciable chunk of our membership. For this I apologise but you will appreciate that the costs of regularly posting 191 communications is prohibitively high. If you have an e-mail address and our e-communications are not reaching you, please let me know (sdmw2@btopenworld.com). Additionally, you can keep up to date by looking at the website, www.aca.aveton-gifford.co.uk

We are particularly keen to attract more members from upstream, above Aveton Gifford, where we feel under-represented. A surprising amount of interest and potential concern to the ACA happens upstream – just look at the planning applications in the local paper and see below under 'Conservation'. Man's influence on the river starts as soon as it leaves the moor, of course, and it is not always benign.

Social

The Cream Tea arranged by Mike Garton-Sprenger at Villa Crusoe and generously hosted by Rachel and John Carter was tremendously popular and a great success. Arrival by boat was a big novelty for some, although the trek by road was almost as adventurous.

Our series of three August Lectures in Thurlestone organised by John Crawford attracted a large audience on each occasion and proved both a good fund-raiser and an effective recruiting sergeant. Although we might repeat the exercise in future it would be difficult to improve on the standard and content of the presentations by John Peters, Peter Marsh, Andy Elliott and Nigel Mortimer. We intend to try and capture some of the images in an archive we are discussing for the Siltation Research Project.

The Moonlight Flotilla in early August was very popular, despite the absence of moonlight owing to the relatively early tide. A motley assortment of craft roped up in a raft-like manner and drifted around, downstream of AG whilst the occupants passed around assorted food and drink. It's surprising who one meets on such occasions!

We have not forgotten our traditional re-unions. One is planned for lunchtime on Wednesday 8th November at the Royal Oak, Bigbury, and another, elsewhere, sometime in February. We certainly view these occasions as important features of our social programme and, routinely, shall be including invitations to attend on the website. **However, if you would like to continue receiving personal notification of any forthcoming re-unions, please contact Mike Garton-Sprenger (m.gartonsprenger@btopenworld.com or 01548 810920).**

The ACA's Annual Public Lecture entitled 'Avon Environment Watch - Conservation for the Next Generation' will be on Wednesday 25th October at 7.30 pm in Thurlestone Parish Hall and should be attractive to adults and children alike. Entry will be free of charge. Mick Loates (wildlife artist and fisherman) and Kelvin Boot (Director of Plymouth Aquarium) will make presentations and local experts will be discussing the future of our river in a quiz-like format.

At the AGM we announced that we would be arranging an Annual Draw to raise funds for our various activities. Although nothing has happened yet, we may organise a blitz of publicity towards the end of the year to catch you all in a mood of seasonal goodwill. Meanwhile, if you are overwhelmed by the desire to donate, John Crawford's purse is always receptive (strictly for the benefit of the ACA). On the matter of fund-raising, HM Revenue & Customs have at last ruled (in a fashion) on our application for charitable status, lodged in April. In July, I was asked to submit more evidence to show that the ACA was not set up as a pressure group, which would disqualify us, apparently. That I duly did but I have now heard again from their agent who seems to have ignored the earlier correspondence and, instead, develops a separate theme. It is worth quoting his letter exactly: 'The Association's governing document does not establish a charity as its objects are worded in a way that is charitable in law. Its powers are also lacking.' How's that for plain English? If there is a lawyer amongst our members, please step forward. The separate Charity Commission application papers are still gathering dust, while all the required historical information is assembled but it seems that we might need to review our constitution in line with an acceptable 'conservation charity' model if we are to succeed in this quest.

Conservation

We have been exceptionally busy in matters pertaining to river water quality. As members of the ACA you will know that there is a need to address problems in the river system that threaten plant and animal life. The causes can be many and varied, including discharges from sewage works and domestic sewage systems, boating waste, or pollution from villages, roads and farmland. However, it is widely recognised these days that the effects of run-off from agricultural land are having a major influence on rivers throughout the country. The effects of modern agricultural practices in steep-sided valleys such as the Avon can be particularly important. The imperative of the EU's Water Framework Directive means that these problems are at last being addressed in a systematic fashion by government agencies.

We applied jointly with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) for a grant from the South Devon AONB's Sustainable Development Fund (SDF) to finance a programme of advice and encouragement for local farmers which it is hoped will reduce the impact of diffuse pollution from farmland on water courses throughout the Avon's catchment. Our application was successful and the £3600 from the SDF will be matched by £1200 from the ACA's own funds. The project is offering landowners and farmers 1) free and confidential visits to farms by a FWAG adviser 2) guidance on Environmental Stewardship (Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship) to help address environmental issues.

In a related but separate proposal, following general agreement at the May 2006 meeting of the Avon Estuary Forum, the ACA subsequently applied for an Associate Project grant for £20000 (excluding VAT) from the new Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative (CSFI) in collaboration with other groups in the AONB Partnership. Thanks especially to Alan Stapleton, our application was successful and will build on the farm advisory work, results from our Siltation Research Project and our efforts to protect the shellfishery, to provide farmers in high risk areas with access to specialist advice on soil management, watercourse protection measures, livestock management, nutrient management and manure management. This specialist advice will be developed into whole farm plans for less intensive or less polluting livestock enterprises incorporating soil and water protection measures. The CSFI associate project status will provide farms within the Avon's catchment with the same level of help as

the neighbouring Kingsbridge/Salcombe and Erme/Yealm catchments which were included as primary areas within this national programme (based, we think, on their SSSI status). It is no exaggeration to state that without the ACA's enthusiasm, background conservation work and members' financial support, this application for the Avon would not have been successful. Gratifyingly, it seems the Avon scheme is already ahead of work on the primary catchments owing, largely, to the mass of local knowledge at our disposal.

In July, there was a flurry of activity about a planning application for a hydrogeneration plant at Gara Bridge. I lodged the ACA's concerns with the planning authorities about the probable effects on wildlife of diverting a substantial part of the Avon's flow through a turbine system in an area where otters, a protected species, are known to live and game fish come to spawn. Curiously, at that stage no environmental impact assessment had been conducted by the Environment Agency (with whom we remonstrated!). I am pleased to report that the application was refused. I am assured that a more recent application for development work at Torr Quarry is unlikely to affect the Avon despite the fact that the Torr Brook drains into the river. However, these applications do serve to emphasise the vulnerability of the river to developments elsewhere in the catchment that at first glance seem quite remote. The impact of catchment drainage patterns was highlighted when, as part of the effort to protect the shell fishery, we were able to assess the bacterial load in agricultural run-off into remote tributaries by microbiological analysis of water taken directly from specific points on the Avon.

Microbiological monitoring is obligatory wherever shellfish are farmed. The ACA is very grateful for this requirement because it is a vital ingredient in protecting the quality of the river water for all user groups. Although superficially clean, the microbial content of the water has fluctuated quite widely over recent months for a variety of reasons. Consequently, there has been an on-going battle to prevent the river being downgraded to a lower category for shellfish farming. This battle has entailed an almost forensic tracking of sources of microbial pollution on the lower reaches of the river which has provided very valuable information for the Environment Agency to act upon and, similarly, will inform the CSFI programme about where to direct education and advice. Such a direct scientific approach will also allow us to assess the outcomes of the SDF and CSFI programmes; apparently, this was a key factor in the success of our grant application. So far, everybody approached to help clean up the water has been extremely cooperative as soon as the problems have been identified and explained.

On a more immediately obvious scale, we have organised a couple of flotsam and jetsam clean-up operations so far this year. The most recent of these took place by boat and kayak on a beautiful sunny morning in September. when it was a sheer delight to be out on the water. Parties from Stakes Road and Bantham managed to fill a pile of sacks with waste from the less accessible places that always seem to accumulate bits of fishing net and line, plastic bags and containers. These are a hazard to wildlife and boat navigation. We shall probably hold a repeat of our popular New Year clean-up and bonfire by the river as it provided a welcome opportunity to get out into the fresh air and start the year on a helpful basis in 2006.

Safe Navigation

At our AGM, the unregulated state of some of the moorings at Aveton Gifford was drawn to our attention. Apparently AG Parish Council and SHDC are aware of and are monitoring the situation. The Duchy of Cornwall's Estate Manager has offered the license of the moorings to the ACA as nobody else is interested in taking it on but I have declined on the basis that such a commercial operation would fall outside our conservation remit.

Early in the summer, I met and established a productive dialogue with the Chairman of the Aune Valley Ski Club (AVSC) following a meeting of our Safe Navigation sub-Committee. I was invited to attend the Club's AGM, which I did. On both occasions I was impressed with the AVSC's

responsible attitude to the river and other river users. They, too, are troubled by unlicensed skiers on the river but recognise the problems of local people excluded from club membership by the quota system, are very supportive of the Patrol Boat (although they were unaware of our financial contribution), are concerned about water quality (they breathe an aerosol of all the river's contents whilst skiing!), and are keen observers of wildlife whilst queuing for 'their turn'. My understanding from Neill Schroeter, the Bantham Harbourmaster is that most byelaw infringements are not caused by club members and the results of the Water Ski Watch that we started amongst ACA members this year suggest that the problems are relatively minor, apart from a few transgressions early in the season. The AVSC members now know we are watching! My own experience on the river suggests that the problem of speeding and disregard for other river users lies with a couple of boats from elsewhere on the river that are well known, locally.

I hope it is not tempting fate to write that the problem of boat and outboard motor thefts from moorings seems to have diminished this year. The ACA encourages all owners to keep photographs of their boats and engines, to register their craft with the MOD Devonport Marine Police Unit (01752 553384) and to mark their motors with the kits available from Kingsbridge police station. Prominent 'boat watch' stickers for cars and boats were distributed at our AGM to help as a deterrent to boat crime.

Siltation Research Project

Plymouth University and the Plymouth Marine Labs. will be reporting the results of their studies in detail at a seminar in Thurlstone Parish Hall in June 2007, when we hope that all the threads of their research will be brought together to provide a comprehensive account of the history and probable causes of river siltation. Meanwhile, Peter Hebbard has joined the Siltation Research Group to extend the studies around the estuary mouth. He is setting up five student projects which may be summarised as follows:-

1. To model the impact of the Avon Dam on river flows and determine whether any siltation effects might be reversed or mitigated
2. To examine the river courses that maximise silt removal from the Estuary.
3. To quantify the effects of storm-related events on sand movements through the river mouth.
4. To assess the impact on hydrodynamics around the estuary mouth of groynes installed below Cockeridge in the 1950's.
5. To assess the impact of tidal flow on sand/silt transport around the estuary mouth.

Peter has managed to borrow some very sophisticated equipment to monitor tidal flows, etc., and he has obtained permission to sink some of it in the estuary mouth, out of harms way, before the winter storms.

Ecology

Despite my invitation at the AGM, only one person has contacted me concerning the revitalisation of our ecology group; others are too busy. I am consoled by the realisation that much of our conservation work should have a positive, if long-term, impact on ecology and I am inclined to focus our available time where we can produce the maximum good. However, if anybody is interested in pursuing the idea of recording boards around the river or has any other ecology-based interest that they are prepared to champion, please let a member of the Committee know. Enthusiasts can always be co-opted. I do intend to put some further work into developing an ecology section on our website as soon as time allows.

With good wishes,

Stuart Watts, Chairman