



AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'

NEWSLETTER – DECEMBER 2012

It's been a very wet year in the South Hams; the water level at the Environment Agency's gauging station at Loddiswell, which measures the flow rate and depth of the Avon throughout the year, reached a record high of 3.06m on 7th July; the normal range is 0.25m-0.89m! Many 'fair weather' boat owners (me included) did not even bother to launch their vessels during the year.

One of our main pre-occupations has been our collaborative effort with several organisations, in particular the Avon Fishing Association (AFA) and the Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT), to improve the conditions for fish and other species in the Avon. It struck me that there are parallels with the book/film 'Salmon Fishing in the Yemen' in the number of obstacles to be overcome! You may have seen the article in the Kingsbridge Gazette, describing how the WRT managed to secure a grant of almost £700,000 to help with this task by improving the waters of several local rivers – hence the catchy acronym SHRImp for the South Hams River Improvement Project. It is our hope that the population levels of sentinel fish species - eel, salmon and trout - which are excellent indicators of the overall health of a river will be restored to a state of abundance or to such a level that the river and its tributaries are achieving their full ecological carrying capacity. The challenges are many but we are certain that the South Hams offers a far more welcoming environment for fish than the Yemen!

The WRT has now appointed a new River Officer, Karensa Lawrie, to drive the SHRImp forward and she is currently conducting a survey of obstructions to fish movement to update EA records before



re-assessing existing information about fish stocks in the river. Examples of known obstructions include (moving in a downstream direction): 1) the reconstructed weir at Curtisknowle (see adjacent photo) which was built in contradiction of the EU's Water Framework Directive guidelines; a fresh assessment of the environmental impact must be completed by the owners by April 1st 2013; an eel pass will be obligatory 2) The river bed at Loddiswell gauging station will be re-configured by the EA prior

to next spring's major fish migrations to provide a more accurate baseline for water measurements; inevitably this will cause some disruption of normal flow 3) The downstream face of Venn Weir, owned by the EA, has fallen off (presumably due to flood damage) and is in desperate need of repair, including the fish pass, and 4) the tidal flap below Venn weir is in need of repair. Added to these problems for fish movement, the perennial illegal netting of fish in the estuary continues to cause

great concern because these activities will undermine much of the SHRImp-related work by removing mature, migrating fish from the river. The matter was raised, as usual, at the most recent meeting of the Avon Estuary Forum but the byelaws for the Avon need to be clarified, as they have been on the Exe, to avoid willful misinterpretation. Maya Plass has recently filmed a video on the beach at Bantham showing discarded netting with many entrapped bass (to view the video, click on this link - <http://t.co/h3jRpYwm>) and the media have become quite excited; the same incident featured on BBC's Spotlight. Although we don't know where the net was deployed, the estuary is a bass nursery and fishing is prohibited there from 30th April -1st January.

On different matters, we are re-launching our environmental awards for work on the river (see our website). We are also investigating the possibility of developing our relationship with the WRT to make use of some of our financial reserves alongside their experience and facilities. Our idea is to help schoolchildren become involved with the river and its environment – as with our successful 'Moor to Sea' project run by Maya, last year. We'd like to include Devon Wildlife Trust's South Efford Marsh reserve in this new programme because its transformation from fresh water- to sea water-marsh is a fascinating, ongoing experiment.



Our quarterly programme of sociable beach cleans on Cockleridge continues (see photo) but the number of helpers is usually disappointingly low although, in mitigation, we appreciate that access to the beach is not easy for many of our members. Sporadic clean-ups around the Tidal Road also continue and we are planning another for 2.00pm on Tuesday 1st January 2013 – don't miss it!

Also on the Tidal Road, we are hoping to position some large rocks at the entrance to the footpath on the AG side of Milburn

Orchard Creek to deter vehicles from churning the mud into an impassable quagmire. For a similar reason we shall again be digging out the drainage channels nearby, along the TR, to deter 4x4's from driving over the salt marsh – volunteers welcome; keep your eyes on our website and your e-mail inbox for details.

This year, Mary Gaskins expertly led a really enjoyable walk above the Avon Dam (see adjacent photo). In 2013 we are planning another walk and picnic upstream of Curtisknowle Weir towards Gara Bridge – a relatively unknown but beautiful part of the river. We are also planning – by popular demand - to hold another BBQ event at Mount Folly Farm, courtesy of Jane and John Tucker; probably towards the end of July, to



guarantee our usual fine weather . If you have any ideas for other ACA activities in 2013, please contact me or another committee member.

If you know of ACA members who do not have access to e-mail, please share the contents of this Newsletter with them.

Lastly, for even more environmental variety, a photo of Lydia Gorge on the upper reaches of the Avon, where Peter Marsh and I saw salmon jump during a very wet spell in October – not the Yemen but a real thrill and well worth the soaking! Unfortunately, the fish does not feature in the photograph.



**THE COMMITTEE WISHES YOU ALL A
HAPPY CHRISTMAS AND A
PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR**

Stuart Watts

REMINDER: for more information about our activities, check our website at:
www.auneconservation.org.uk



NEXT EVENT – You and your seasonal visitors are very welcome to blow away those hangovers by helping to tidy up around the Tidal Road at 2.00pm on Tuesday 1st January 2013. Start at either end of the road and, hopefully, we'll all meet up and perhaps enjoy a beverage at the Fisherman's Rest afterwards. Please wear bright clothing because of the traffic hazard and come prepared with wellies, rubbish bags and gloves.