

Yellow oystercatchers

The yellow oystercatcher is quite a rare bird, except in the Burry Inlet. There, over a hundred oystercatchers have been dyed yellow as a tracking project for CCW and the British Trust for Ornithology. The dye should be lost with the 2008 moult. CCW and BTO ask for any sightings to be reported to them.



Katie Hughes-Ellis

Tees Barrage fish pass

Numbers of fish caught in the Tees have fallen to just a 30th of those caught in the Tyne (which has a full length access agreement). The blame is on seals, which eat many in Tees Bay, and on the barrage, which they find hard to negotiate. It is proposed to build a fish pass to get them clear of the barrage.

Access proposals working?

River Wear

Much of the 9km agreement section was already in use by canoeists, rowers, hire boats and even a floating restaurant, and had a history of a canoe race promoted by the Mayor of Durham, where there is a statue celebrating the improvement in the navigation. After the agreement was launched, the British Canoe Union received a solicitor's letter threatening legal action against any canoeist using a major part of the agreement section.

River Mersey

This 28km was the only genuine new water. Until recently it was too polluted for fish and is of little interest to most canoeists. It is of benefit mostly to local clubs, who now have some water which they can now use without threat.

Even taking your claim at face value, you have only addressed 1/1,000th of the problem in *England and Wales*. This was with considerable expenditure and with no further progress since. The toolkit replaces an Environment Agency guide which achieved nothing, which replaced a National Rivers Authority Guide which achieved nothing. It is expected to achieve nothing and there has been no progress in the first 18 months since it was introduced.

It is just 20 years since the CRACK demonstrations, after which it was said that quiet discussion was the way forward, not public displays of anger. Clearly, that advice was ill founded and there has been no progress worthy of the name.

The Ramblers' Association claim access agreements do not work. Natural England have said that access agreements are not working for the coastal path. They have not worked for canoeists or river swimmers for the last half century.

We are not going to get reform until we have somebody who wants reform. You have made clear, once again, that DEFRA is not that body. We are talking about a quiet, green, healthy, environmentally friendly, affordable activity with a predominance of young participants. I would have expected to hear Government officials asking what they could do to help, not stating that the situation should remain as it is.

More damning than the fact that England and Wales have the worst river access situation of any country in the world is the fact that bodies such as DEFRA think this is satisfactory. DEFRA officials may think this if they like. What they are not entitled to do is take any credit from the failed Brighton University project, which has had the lack of success predicted by canoeists long before the study began.

Regards

Stuart Fisher.

What do the BCU say?

Ignoring the right of public navigation over the whole Wye catchment, including the Lugg, the status of which the EA have always claimed they do not know and have not investigated, do the BCU agree with the EA's claims? I consulted Kevin East, employed on access by the BCU. He advised:

Waveney

The agreement was placed over a 1999/2000 agreement by the local BCU members, local authorities, EA and East of England Development Agency. The section from Ellingham to Geldeston, the banned tidal section, was already being promoted by the Broads Authority as a canoe trail on their website. The new agreement has added nothing.

Teme

Canoeists report no discussions with the EA or their consultants. Conditions of use in the draft agreement were unsafe and unacceptable.

Mersey

There has been some additional participation but the staffing requirements are beyond the resources of the voluntary sector. Access and egress points have given problems, including having to be unlocked at agreed times. Non paddlers have been attracted to the nature park. Rugby clubs at the access points have had increased sales of refreshments.

Wear

A solicitor representing riparian interests has sent a letter banning paddling below Durham. The EA have stirred up objections to long established paddling above and below Durham. Canoeing is still allowed around the Durham peninsula.

DEFRA's current position

The day after the Marine Bill launch at Whitstable, I emailed Jonathan Shaw to clarify a point I had made to him about rivers. I received a reply from DEFRA official Julie Tucker:

ACCESS TO INLAND WATERWAYS

Thank you for your email of 4 April to Jonathan Shaw about access to inland waterways. I have been asked to reply.

In your email you claim that the Environment Agency's access agreement programme has broken down; this is not the case. In fact, the project has increased the understanding of the use of agreements and developed a toolkit for others to use. Seventy kilometres of access has already been created during this work and it demonstrates what can be achieved by such agreements.

DEFRA has every confidence in the Environment Agency and Natural England working with DEFRA to deliver the Marine Bill and does not share your concern.

Conclusions

Whatever the true position, two undisputable facts arise from the above:

- 1) What DEFRA claim is the position is very different from what canoeists claim is the position.
- 2) This difference in opinion is not causing concern to DEFRA and they do not seem to be taking any action to investigate why there is a difference in opinion.