

On the brink: Conservationists reveal the rivers still suffering

Last week the Environment Agency released a list of the ten most improved rivers in England and Wales. Conservationists have criticised the report saying it presents a rosy view of river health and ignores the many waterways struggling with pollution, over abstraction and other threats.

River wildlife experts at the RSPB, WWF, the [Angling Trust](#) and the Salmon and Trout Association - all partners in the Our Rivers Campaign - have responded with a list of ten rivers where not enough is being done to tackle these environmental pressures.

This list paints a different picture - one in which salmon, trout, watervoles and other river wildlife are under threat. Two thirds of rivers in England and Wales are failing European targets for water quality and too little is being done to address this.

The only river to appear on both lists is the Thames. Despite the Environment Agency hailing the return of salmon to the river, a University of Exeter report revealed last week that attempts to create a self sustaining salmon population in the Thames have failed. The report claims that salmon found in the Thames were more likely to be strays from other rivers.

Mark Lloyd, Chief Executive of the Angling Trust said: "*Last Christmas the Environment Agency put out a press release celebrating that our rivers were cleaner than at any time since the industrial revolution. We wrote to the EA to point out that this might give the wrong impression that everything was okay with our rivers.*

"Well, another silly season is upon us, and the Agency doesn't seem to have listened. It has put out another release with 10 examples of improvements that have been made - there should be hundreds of examples like this if it has done its job properly. Many of the 'success story' rivers still suffer from sewage overflows, damaging low flows in summer and barriers to migrating fish.

"Many of our fish stocks are in crisis and the EA presents this as a triumph! We will be raising this again with the EA to try to get it to see sense"

Jack Clarke, Our Rivers campaigner, said: "*It is right to celebrate the improvements that our rivers have seen in recent decades - but we cannot ignore the continuing threats our native river wildlife faces.*

"Most of the ten rivers highlighted in the Environment Agency's report last week are doing well - but it is a different story for many hundreds of other rivers crossing England and Wales.

"The stories we hear from people living near these rivers are all too familiar - salmon and trout numbers at a fraction of their former levels, sewage being released directly into the waterway, riverbeds drying up in the summer due to unsustainable abstraction. The ten rivers we have chosen illustrate these problems, but they are only examples of a much wider issue.

"We are failing European targets for river health in a big way - and no amount of glossy PR from the Environment Agency is going to change that. Instead we need to see more ambition in their plans to restore rivers and we need reassurances that the Government's upcoming Water White Paper will tackle the serious problem of over abstraction which is threatening river wildlife."

The Our Rivers campaign is currently running an online survey to help paint a picture of the state of rivers in England and Wales and find the best places to spot river wildlife. The survey results will also highlight species which have disappeared along certain rivers. **To take part visit www.ourrivers.org.uk/survey**

The ten rivers chosen by the Our Rivers campaign

River Thames - Water quality in the Thames has improved over the past 50 years. This has come about through a combination of industrial decline, investment, and the hard work of the Environment Agency, conservationists and members of the public. But pretending that the Thames has been transformed into a pristine river supporting healthy salmon populations is a step too far, as highlighted by the University of Exeter report into salmon populations in the river which concluded: "Our findings highlight the futility of long-term stocking without corresponding improvements in habitat and water quality."

Hampshire Avon - Salmon catches on the Hampshire Avon have fallen dramatically from a peak of 1,400 fish a year in the early 1970's to around 200 fish in recent years. Salmon are a good indicator of the overall health of a freshwater ecosystem. The Environment Agency has confirmed that the Hampshire Avon has failed to reach the official conservation limit for salmon and the population is at risk. The river has also seen a dramatic fall in roach populations.

River Rea - The River Rea in Birmingham suffers so much from urban diffuse pollution from the City of Birmingham that sections are designated by the Environment Agency as "Bad" for insect life under the Water Framework Directive. This is the worst category that the Environment Agency uses to classify rivers. Birmingham City Council have obtained funding to try to address this issue but it will take many years before we see improvements to this and to the river bed.

River Trent - The River Trent from Stoke on Trent to the confluence of the River Tame is designated "Poor" for all fish due to urban diffuse pollution from Stoke resulting in ammonia and phosphate levels in the water which have been found to be at unacceptable levels. Historical changes to the river channel compound this issue.

River Kennet - This much loved chalk stream, the longest tributary of the Thames, is perilously low this September, due to low rainfall and high levels of abstraction. Local group Action for the River Kennet was set up 20 years ago to campaign for a reduction in abstraction on this river. Despite their efforts, and agreement from both the Environment Agency and the water company that a reduced licence is needed, nothing has yet been done. In fact, earlier this year the EA renewed Thames Water's abstraction license despite clear and critical issues of over abstraction on this river.

River Beane - This river was once a thriving chalk stream, but today in its upper stretches it has almost disappeared due to high levels of water abstraction. The Environment Agency first confirmed there was a problem on this river over a decade ago, and the local water company has identified a plan to help revive the river. Yet, no action has been taken - much to the frustration of the River Beane Restoration Association.

River Mimram - Issues of over abstraction on this river, a Site of Special Scientific Interest at Tewin, have been identified since the early 1990s when it was claimed to be one of the worst affected rivers in the country. Twenty years on there has been little improvement. Friends of the Mimram have been working with the local water company and the Environment Agency - who have agreed that action is needed, but yet to be taken.

River Ivel - The Ivel in Bedfordshire rises crystal clear from springs in Hitchin, Hertfordshire but as it wends its short course north through Bedfordshire to meet the Ouse, pollution from sewage, roads and farming leave the water grey and cloudy after rainfall and non native species like the north American crayfish are taking their toll on wildlife. The entire river fails to meet the Water Framework Directive's 'Good' status and with the Environment Agency's River Basin Management Plan not including any actions for improvement by 2015 it looks like nothing is going change.

River Wye - The Wye is so special it has every legal protection that can be offered but even this jewel in the crown of our river network continues to suffer. Acid water from forestry, manmade barriers to fish migration, sediment from poor farming practice which smother salmon eggs (depriving them of the water and oxygen they need to survive) and heavy abstraction all work to reduce the quality of this once great river. The Wye and Usk Foundation and others are doing their best to redress the balance but all is far from well in the nation's favourite river.

River Ray - The River Ray in Oxfordshire, which runs past the RSPB's Otmoor reserve and a Site of Special Scientific Interest nearby would once have fed wetland habitats but today its waters are deliberately diverted away from wildlife areas. It is infested with the weed azolla - or water fern - one of the UK's most invasive non native plants. It also contains high levels of pollution from agricultural chemicals and from a sewage works upstream of the reserve.



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Notes to editors:

1. The Environment Agency's press release 'Back from the brink - Environment Agency reveals the most improved rivers' can be found here - <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/news/132754.aspx?month=8&year=2011>

2. An Environment Agency annual report into the health status of rivers in England and Wales last year showed 72 per cent of rivers are failing European targets. Just four rivers out of nearly 6,000 assessed remain 'High' status waterways of near pristine condition. There were 26 per cent in the 'Good' category, the required European standard. The report classed 56 per cent as 'Moderate', 14 per cent as 'Poor' and two per cent as 'Bad'.

3. The Our Rivers campaign conducted a public vote to find the most loved and hated rivers in England and Wales last year. The Wye was voted our favourite river whilst The Thames was voted the worst. Over abstraction was one of the main reasons members of the public gave when voting in the worst river category, alongside sewage discharges, diffuse pollution, manmade structures blocking fish movements and invasive alien species such as American crayfish and mink.

4. Unsustainable abstraction currently affects one third of catchments. The Environment Agency's Catchment Abstraction Management Strategies (CAMS) show that there are areas under pressure from abstraction right across England and Wales. 15% of CAMS units are classified as over-abstracted (existing abstraction causing unacceptable damage to the environment at low flows) and 18% are classified as over-licensed (if licences were fully utilised it may cause unacceptable damage at low flows). There is particular water stress in the south and east of England, where rainfall is lower and population density and per capita consumption is highest. Climate change and increasing demand for water, due to population and lifestyle change, are likely to increase the pressure on rivers from abstraction.