



AUNE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

'Conserving the Devonshire Avon from source to sea'

NEWSLETTER – June 2019

Firstly, I'd like to thank the committee for the hard work they have contributed in their different ways to help make the river a better place over the past year: that is, Ros Brousson (Secretary & Treasurer), Mary Clark, Mike Cooper, Paul Furlong, Ryan Hooper, Peter Marsh, Bill Starey, and Eric White. They represent a wide spectrum of interest, experience and geographical location.

This Newsletter is quite long but is intended to provide an update on developments around the river and estuary over the past year, based on my Chairman's Report to the 2019 AGM.

This year our AGM featured an eloquent, semi-philosophical and much appreciated talk by Isabel Carlisle from the Bioregional Learning Research Centre (BRLC) in Totnes. At the Centre they are '*Building collaborations to shift South Devon towards long-term climate resilience. We work in and at the intersection of economy, ecology, learning, arts and culture and the gaps in between.*' I met Isabel through my attendance at South Devon Catchment Partnership meetings and at our AGM she spoke about the Centre's plans for a citizens' charter for the River Dart. Such a charter would imply that everybody living or working around the River Dart has a psychological investment in the welfare of the watercourse and, therefore, a common interest in its future. Comparison with our own situation is interesting. Although we don't immediately identify with resilience to climate change, in my opinion we already have an informal but not very widely or explicitly recognised version of that charter around our much smaller Avon where so many people feel blessed to be able to live in the magnificently beautiful and varied environments of the river valley and estuary. Many of us feel that we 'own' a little bit of the river or estuary and are therefore keen to conserve and improve its natural beauty overall. I would like to think that the ACA helps to pull those feelings together in a small way and act as a champion when the need arises. So, for example, conservation of river water quality and quantity has always been a primary concern for us and the challenges of climate change will ensure this goal will remain in place for the wellbeing and conservation of habitat and species - including our own!

Like the BRLC, our work depends upon extensive collaboration with other 'stakeholder' groups and organisations, upon effective cooperation, understanding and communication for the common good - the subject of most of my 2019 Report.

One of our main communication platforms is the biannual Avon Estuary Forum (AEF). Sadly the Chairman, John Coates - formerly of Aveton Gifford - died just before the Spring meeting this year. Judy Pearce (SHDC's Salcombe & Thurlestone Councillor), John's deputy, was appointed as the new Chair but, because of her extensive commitments elsewhere, she has asked Nigel Mortimer (AONB Estuaries Officer & AEF Secretary) to find an alternative Chair at the next meeting on Tuesday October 15th 2019. Hopefully, Judy will stay on as deputy because the SHDC influence is important.

As one of the spin-offs of the AEF, I recently forwarded an invitation to ACA members from Adam Guy, a PhD student at Plymouth University, to tell him about how you would enhance the 'Natural Beauty' of the estuary if you had a free rein. This could be your chance to express your views as one

of the many 'owners' of the estuary. You can contact Adam at <mailto:adam.guy@plymouth.ac.uk> or 07773 321 591.

As mentioned above, I also participate on the ACA's behalf in the South Devon Catchment Partnership, a collaboration between many organisations, organised by the AONB Unit and the Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT). I am pleased to report that this year, the Partnership's application (to which the ACA contributed) for an EU-funded Water Environment Grant was partly successful. The funds are to be used for 1) a region-wide soils project, 'The Devon and Cornwall Soils Alliance Project', which aims to deliver improved soils advice as a way of reducing diffuse pollution. This harks back to the Catchment Sensitive Farming Initiative in which the ACA was a primary participant some years ago 2) to survey and control invasive New Zealand Pigmyweed (*Crassula helmsii*) in Stover Park SSSI and, if a budget becomes available, 3) the Devon Fisheries Project - which would work towards identifying and addressing barriers to fish migration, and to undertaking fisheries habitat improvement works. The fisheries project would be a continuation of parts of the very successful SHRImp programme, run by WRT, in which the ACA was extensively involved through our Devon Avon Group (DAG), a loose team of like-minded organisations with interests in the Avon Valley and in conserving fish habitat, in particular.

You may recall that during a prolonged series of meetings between 2011 and 2016, the DAG successfully negotiated the activation of compensatory water releases from the Avon Dam by South West Water (SWW) to ameliorate low flow during dry weather in the April/May period - after over half a century of neglect following construction of the Avon Dam. However, these releases were put at risk last year by the retirement of key individuals from both SWW and the Environment Agency (EA). After considerable probing, I managed to discover who in these collaborating organisations would be the new people with responsibility for the releases, and to re-establish a triangular contact between them and the Avon Fishing Association (AFA), so that water releases may continue as in recent years, triggered by the AFA's notification of low water flows at key periods of fish migration.

On behalf of the ACA, I have continued to make modest contributions to the emerging Neighbourhood Plans of the three parishes bordering the estuary, Thurlestone, Aveton Gifford (AG) and Bigbury - my last was to the AG plan about the possible effects of any future building projects on sewage contamination of the Avon, given the poor sewerage infrastructure and appalling history of sewage overflows into the streets - which eventually drain into the Avon. Unfortunately, SWW's expensive Watershed Project has had minimal beneficial effect on the problem.

Our relationship with the Salcombe Harbourmaster has improved enormously since the appointment of Cameron Sims-Stirling to that role. In February, under the aegis of the AEF and in John Coates' final act as Chairman, current sponsors of the Avon Patrol (ACA, Bantham Estate -BE, Avon Valley Waterski Club - AVSC, and Duchy of Cornwall - DoC) met with SHDC's Judy Pearce and the Salcombe Harbourmaster, the Avon Patrol service provider, to put the future of the patrol on a sounder, more business-like footing. Ryan Hooper (BE Manager) was appointed as the new Bantham Harbourmaster by Cam Sims-Stirling and will run the patrol, as SHDC's Agent, on a routine basis. I presented a draft Service Level Agreement, which describes the operation of the patrol, to the group and we have all been working on this document ever since! I have now reached Draft no. 6, which is currently being scrutinised by SHDC's legal experts. We hope to reach final agreement shortly and to formally start the patrol in July this year. There will be an increased annual cost to sponsors, from £250 to £500 each. SHDC will contribute £2500. I am keeping the 3 riparian parish councils informed

of developments because if contributions significantly increase again, we may have to call upon the parishes for contributions to this service, which is so important for the safe and steadily increasing recreational use of the estuary waters.

The revamped Avon Patrol is one example of how our engagement with the Bantham Estate (BE) is so important for the welfare of the estuary. A further example comes from discussions about the future of the Bantham to Cockleridge ferry. Currently, this ferry operates 19th April - 21st September; 10-11am & 3-4pm, but not on Sundays. However, owing to the introduction by Natural England of the England Coast Path in 2020, new arrangements will be necessary to make the ferry more widely accessible for walkers if they are to avoid the long diversion of the SW Coast Path around the existing Avon Estuary Walk to the dangerous Aveton Gifford bridge and back to the coast. It is hoped that the new England Coast Path will 'increase tourism and boost rural economies, connecting communities, allowing us to rediscover our national heritage, and create new opportunities for people to enjoy the simple pleasures of being by the seaside'. The plan is to associate an improved ferry service with the revamped Avon Patrol, both of which will be staffed by SHDC-licensed operators employed by the BE.

The ACA committee was recently invited to carry out a survey of the estuary with Ryan Hooper on 15th May with the use of a BE boat. This enabled us to see the general state of estuary moorings; that new and re-organised moorings had been installed at Bantham (67 moorings of questionable age and reliability were increased to 89 high quality moorings); and that considerable new tree plantings and fencing around the estuary had been carried out as part of BE's participation in Environmental Stewardship - about which the ACA had gratefully taken the opportunity to provide some general advice. Following this estuary excursion, I was able to obtain a re-statement from the DoC of its support for licensees with moorings' upkeep, when necessary (e.g. help with the expensive removal of 'junk' boats).

Like me, you are probably very pleased with the outcome of the DEFRA consultation about designation of the Devon Avon Estuary as a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ). I did respond vigorously to the consultation on behalf of the ACA and provided extra data based on research from Plymouth University about both the estuary and South Efford Marsh, some of which research we helped to fund as part of our Siltation Research Project several years ago. Unfortunately, my request for inclusion of South Efford Marsh and the Sea Bass Nursery Area in the MCZ was not granted (the former because it is not yet considered to be sufficiently mature, the latter because Bass are too mobile as a species to be included in the designation) but the main estuary features of salt marsh, mud, sand and inter-tidal rock were recognised. Perhaps surprisingly in the current atmosphere, no mention was made in the designation of the important biological role of inter-tidal mud and salt marshes in carbon sequestration. The new MCZ status was confirmed on 31st May 2019 and is largely about habitat protection against damage caused by intrusive planning or other factors. However, it remains to be seen what difference the MCZ status will make in practice. All of the government agencies (Environment Agency, Devon and Severn Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authority, Marine Management Organisation) responsible for managing the estuary and maintaining it in 'favourable condition' are seriously short of resources but that is where the ACA can play a useful role as a watchdog!

We are indebted to the Tentacled Lagoon Worm, *Alkmaria romijni*, which you - like me - have probably never encountered! This tiny bristleworm, less than 5 millimetres long, is scarce in this country. It lives in a tube made of mud in sheltered estuaries and lagoons. It has six gills and a

number of smooth thread-like tentacles, which it pushes out from around its mouth to gather food from the surrounding mud. The organisms appear to require muddy sediments in brackish water, which is not fully salty and they are included in national conservation legislation because they are scarce and are vulnerable to changes to, or loss of, the habitats in which they live. We should arrange a muddy excursion to find them! It has even been suggested that we should change our organisation's logo to reflect the importance of this worm.

Returning to the theme of the ACA acting as an environmental champion, it is worth noting that our effectiveness depends in large measure on the perception that we represent local opinion about river and, particularly, estuary concerns. Social activities are important for maintaining that group cohesion. However, I have to confess that in comparison with some years our talks, guided walks, picnics and BBQs have slipped somewhat, recently. There is no shortage of ideas but the committee needs help in developing some of them into a more comprehensive social programme. Everybody is busy and none of us is getting any younger! If you are able to help us in this respect or would like to volunteer in another capacity, please let me know.

Another area in which our performance as a champion has fallen short is our educational contribution to local schools and colleges. Ideas for improvement would be welcome. The ecology, geology and biology of the river/ estuary offer brilliant opportunities for study at all levels. The Tentacled Lagoon Worm could provide some interesting topics for study, I'm sure!

There was a good turn out for our Tidal Road clear up on Sunday 6th January, largely due to the excellent cooperation with Aveton Gifford's parish clerk. However, for a well-advertised Beach Clean at Bigbury-on-Sea on Saturday 25th June, there was a less generous turn out by ACA members - or anybody else for that matter! It can feel quite awkward, as a loner, poking around for plastic waste and bits of fish netting amongst a family picnic on a sunny beach!

Last year, the ACA was one of the first groups to be enrolled as a charity in the Sea Moor Lotto lottery, being run by SHDC/WDBC. There is a regular small contribution to our accounts from donations but we could do with more! If you believe that a **£20 life ACA membership of the ACA for an entire family** is too generous a deal, given what we are trying to achieve in 'conserving the Devon Avon from Source to Sea', you might like to consider buying a few tickets. If so, please copy and click on the link below and sponsor the ACA whilst buying a chance to win a lotto prize:- <https://www.seamoorlotto-ACA>. The ACA would receive 50p for every £1 you invest in trying to win up to £25000 per week. What a nice boat that could buy!

Finally, I have received the following notice from the Outdoor Swimming Society:- the 'Swoosh' swimming event will take place on the morning of Saturday 6th July 2019. Swimmers will be entering the water from 9.20 am at Aveton Gifford and the last swimmers will be exiting the water at 12.05pm at Bantham Beach - I am told! BOAT USERS BE PARTICULARLY AWARE OF SWIMMERS, PLEASE!

I wish you a safe and enjoyable summer beside, in or on the river.

Stuart Watts (Chairman) - 16th June 2019 [e-mail: sdmw2@btopenworld.com tel: 01548 810373]