

Response to **NAW Sustainability Committee**

from the

Wye and Usk Foundation



The Committee's Specific Questions:

Interest

The Wye and Usk Foundation (WUF) enjoys the support and interest of Land Owners, Riparian Owners, Anglers, Environmentalists, Governmental Organisations and some waterborne interests. A typical email newsletter reaches up to 5,000 and our website has enjoyed peak traffic in excess of 80,000 hits per day.

Organisation

WUF is a registered charity No 1080319 concerned with the well being of these two Welsh rivers. Initially, just the Wye Foundation, Usk interests joined following a joint initiative to buy out commercial net fisheries. The thrust of WUF's activities is to restore the environment of the two river systems and hence their fisheries. This in turn brings substantial financial benefits to the rural community as a result of large numbers of visiting anglers. Substantial individual contributions are made and in a series of partnership projects, considerable progress is being made to achieve the goals of The Water Framework Directive. Full details of the Trusts' structure and activities may be found at www.wyeuskfoundation.org

Which stretches?

WUF's charitable objectives cover the entire Usk and Wye catchments. The Wye also flows through England but enters Wales just upstream of Monmouth. Downstream at Redbrook, it separates the two countries. Both rivers are Special Areas of Conservation listed under the EU Habitats Directive.

Voluntary Agreements

The Foundation set up an agreement on the upper reaches of the Usk and Wye in 2007 with the help of funding from the Assembly. In 2008 this was extended and there are proposals to extend these arrangements further still. Funding has been obtained from Splash. The details of these agreements with an appraisal of them follow.

Agreements set up by Wye and Usk Foundation

In 2007 we set up a voluntary canoe access arrangement with the aid of a grant from the Assembly. Some 42 miles of non navigable Wye and 28 ½ miles of upper Usk including some of the best white water canoeing of both rivers is included in the scheme. It is free to users.

The essential tenet of the scheme is that the rivers in question (Wye is the 2nd and Usk 4th largest in Wales) are seldom in ideal condition for both canoeing and angling throughout their entire length for 365 days of the year. The ideal conditions for each sport are different. It was on this basis that we sought agreement from riparian owners to allow canoeing on these otherwise non navigable sections to allow paddling in what are the best canoeing circumstances –ie when additional flows prevail. In addition, we organised access and egress points across private land. These were given freely but only on the basis that canoeing was so organised.

The whole scheme can be viewed at <http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org/navigation/index.php> and covers the Usk between Sennybridge and Crickhowell and the Wye above Hay. Key features include the height gauges, an original idea of WUF, which inform both canoeists and anglers of prevailing water height. Downloadable maps showing where to park, access and egress points are regularly updated. We have installed a series of signs advising where and where not to go. The height gauges may be found as below and we even had a canoeist writing in with a short set of instructions of how to include these on a mobile phone!

<http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org/conditions/gauge1.php>

<http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org/conditions/gauge3.php>

<http://www.wyeuskfoundation.org/conditions/gauge8.php>

The other crucial aspect of setting up this agreement was involving local outdoor centres and particularly their canoeing experts with the local riparian owners. We were able to receive expert guidance from four such groups who contributed advice on health and safety, specific knowledge of the value and risks of each reach. In addition we have added details of appropriate accommodation and other associated providers to our website to further economic benefits.

We are now in our third year and we are very pleased to say that canoeists have responded particularly well to the conditions of the arrangement. It is particularly noticeable that they have familiarised themselves with the electronic gauges. We find that when conditions are ideal they are able to be there in good numbers while they tell us that they are able to avoid the disappointment of driving many miles to find the river either in a huge flood, too low or, as early in January 2009, completely frozen over.

In September 2009 the scheme is being extended to include another two sections of the Wye above Llanwrthwl (just south of Rhayader). This section is typical of the smaller rivers of Wales and canoeing will be arranged against agreed river heights from two new gauges. The Wye will then be canoe-able from Llangurig, near its source to Chepstow some 150 miles. The scheme has been presented to several river groups in England, including the River Eden in Cumbria.

Issues and Conclusions from operating the scheme

1. In the early stages of negotiations, attempts were made to include the national canoe bodies of England and Wales. It was apparent almost immediately that they were unable to enter into any agreement that involved sharing. We also found they represented only a small number of actual Wye and Usk canoeists. We therefore made the arrangements with advice from local canoe groups for the benefit of all canoeists/ paddlers.
2. There are two components to the “access” issue: permission to navigate and permission to cross land to enter a river. The latter sites are identified and properly marked as it is essential to exclude private gardens etc, over which access to rivers is not appropriate and likely to cause conflict. We found some canoeists showed little concern for the sensitivities of locals particularly in respect of changing and their need for loud “male bonding” noises. We moved access points in some cases to reduce impact in certain neighbourhoods.
3. Canoeists have little concept of the need to respect nature. Both Usk and Wye are Special Areas of Conservation. Spawning fish and otters are particularly susceptible. Keeping canoeists away from these sensitivities is a challenge. Additional amounts of litter accrue as a result of canoeing.



A canoe party lunching on an otter holt

4. Canoeists are liable for any damage and for taking out their own insurance. We have no way of checking or enforcing this, however.

5. There have been calls to have canoes marked and make payments. We have found both these issues to be counterproductive: difficult to organise and the problem of evasion and consequent failure to comply with other facets of the scheme too important to risk. There is also the view that anglers and conservationists are net contributors both financially and with help in the overall management of rivers while canoeists are net takers and never contribute to river management. We have found no evidence that detracts from this view.
6. A crucial advantage of voluntary access is that access points, parking etc are given freely. These would in all likelihood cease in the event of a compulsory navigational right. It is worth noting that on the Wye below Hay (public navigation), there is a shortage of these points that is not rectified by having the public right of navigation.
7. Signs are very important for the voluntary schemes we run. Some act as permission, thus reducing the need for paperwork as below:



Others waymark routes to the river, direct paddlers away from sensitive sites or mark safe egress points.

8. Compliance: The canoeing bodies have refused to advertise or cooperate with this scheme and have directed some canoeists down at times when there was a likelihood of conflict with anglers. However, the majority of users have found that we have pitched the arrangements at about the optimum to give both angling and canoeing a fair chance of finding their respective ideal conditions. Conflict has been minimised and the few who unwittingly canoed at the wrong time have, when the situation has been explained, been happy to comply with the scheme.

Conclusions

1. With angling from the Wye and Usk contributing millions of pounds to the rural economy, we have found the agreements currently in place an ideal way to minimise damage to this industry from user conflict. This

This has not been possible on the navigable sections of the Wye where fishing is simply not possible:



2. The availability of canoeing on these river systems is now substantial. However, we have not been able to attribute the same level of economic benefit from canoeing as from angling.
3. We conclude by commending this type of voluntary agreement to the Sustainability Committee. It is also very cost effective.

The author of these comments is Dr Stephen Marsh-Smith.

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