

Quality of rivers in Kent and East Sussex continuing to improve

Environment Agency provides an easier journey for fish on River Medway
Water quality in Kent and East Sussex has improved for the nineteenth year in a row, the Environment Agency announced today. This follows a national trend, which has seen cleaner rivers across England and Wales. As a result, more rivers are becoming home for species that were once thought to be in terminal decline, such as salmon, eel and otters.

The improvement has been achieved mainly through investment by water companies, tougher action on polluters, changing farming practices and local projects.

Work by the Environment Agency to improve life for fish is one step the organisation is taking to raise the "ecological status" of the River Medway. The Environment Agency is building a series of fish passes along the Medway, this will mean that important and protected fish species will be able to travel upstream to their natural spawning grounds. In turn, this will help to restore the natural balance of wildlife in the river.

The Environment Agency recently opened the UK's first combined canoe and fish pass on the River Medway near Tonbridge, providing essential habitat and passage for migrating fish while making it easier for canoeists.

Artificial plastic reeds slow the flow of water and create back currents to enable fish to swim up the pass.

Canoeist and migrating fish share around 19 miles of the River Medway south of Tonbridge, so this project shows that encouraging people to take up outdoor activities and protecting our river life can go hand in hand. Work on two more fish passes at Eldridge's Lock and Allington Lock started in September 2009.

A new European directive sets even higher quality standards for rivers using a wider range of measures than previously. Under the Water Framework Directive, 18 per cent of rivers, canals, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters currently achieve a "good" ecological status. A further 67 per cent are "moderate".

The Environment Agency will be working to revitalise and transform more of the water environment by 2015 and aims to have 23 per cent of it in good condition.

This will mean continuing action from the water industry to tackle discharge from sewage treatment works and the removal of water from rivers. It will also require action from farmers, to stop pollution from land getting into rivers, lakes and coastal areas. Pollution from towns and cities will also need to be tackled if the improvements required by Europe are going to be achieved.

Harvey Bradshaw, Regional Director for the Environment Agency in Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight said:

"We have been working hard with a range of partner organisations to continually improve the water environment across the region. Projects from managing abstraction on the River Darent to building fish passes on the River Medway has helping us to achieve this.

"We would ask people across the region to help us to speed up the improvements for their local river. Using environmentally friendly cleaning and gardening products, reporting pollution to the Environment Agency making sure any chemicals are stored carefully and properly and using less water around the home are all ways that local people can protect their local water environment.

"For our part, we will go even further in working with water companies and farmers to reduce pollution, we will continue to improve the environment for wildlife and we will continue to find ways to reduce the amount of water taken out of the natural environment for public supply."

Environment Secretary Hilary Benn will comment on and when satisfied with the content will approve the plans, which include comments made during a six-month public consultation held in 2009.

For more information our rivers, lakes and the general water environment, visit www.environment-agency.gov.uk/wfd

First for the country brings boost for Medway canoeists



Medway visitor numbers are set for a boost with the opening of the UK's first combined canoe and fish pass near Tonbridge, making it easier for canoeists to navigate Porters Lock while providing essential habitat for migrating fish.

During the last few years the Environment Agency has carried out vast improvements on the landing stages at many of the locks along this stretch and creating "The Medway Canoe Trail" to encourage more canoeists to use the river.

The new combined pass allows canoeists to stay in their boats and safely pass Porters Lock without damage to their canoes thanks to innovative "fish brushes." These artificial plastic reeds slow the flow of water and create back currents to enable fish to swim up the pass. The softness and flexibility of the individual reeds allow canoeists to simply glide down the new pass.

Phil Munslow, Environment Agency Project Manager, said: "We want to open the Medway up to visitors and the new combined pass makes it easier for canoeists to come along and enjoy the local environment while exercising.

"Canoeist and migrating fish share around 19 miles of the River Medway south of Tonbridge, so this project shows that encouraging people to take up outdoor activities and protecting our river life can go hand in hand.

"This particular project was very challenging with complex engineering works and a difficult island site to work on, but it is definitely worth it for the boost to visitor numbers it will bring."

The pass is just one of the recent major access improvements we have made on the Medway making it easier for all canoes and small boats to enjoy the Medway Canoe Trail.

The design of the pilot scheme comes from Germany, where similar structures have recorded passage of 14,000 fish in just 20 days. The installation at Porter's Lock took three weeks to build and involved the use of an 80 tonne crane to lift equipment onto the lock island. If the pilot project in Tonbridge is considered a success the design could be used at many other sites across the country.

