

CHARTER FOR CHALK STREAMS

Let The Rivers Flow



May 2013



Foreword

National wildlife and conservation organisations have formed an alliance with local river restoration groups to press the government and its agencies to radically reform water policies to enable England's endangered chalk streams to return to good health. The 'Charter for Chalk Streams' was launched on May 23rd the banks of the over abstracted river Beane in Hertfordshire which was once a famous fishing river and is now little more than a dried up ditch in parts.

The Charter follows on from a special summit called in December 2012 by George Hollingbery MP, chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Angling and in Hampshire by the Angling Trust and the Salmon and Trout Association and is supported by WWF-UK, The Wildlife Trusts and the Rivers Trust along with local fisheries and river groups from Dorset to Yorkshire.

Chalk streams are recognised as a unique global asset providing a pristine environment for wildlife with rich clean water and high quality habitat. Some 85% of the worlds chalk streams are located in England and many in and around London have almost disappeared in normal weather conditions. Only a handful receives the high levels of protection that their conservation status requires.

The Charter for Chalk Streams calls for a range of measures, including the introduction of compulsory water metering to reduce waste and cut unsustainable abstractions.

What we are saying....

"It beggars belief that UK governments have had the nerve to lecture Third World countries on the management of their rainforests when our own environmental stewardship of these globally significant and once pristine rivers is so lamentable. We waste water in this country on an industrial scale while paying lip service to wildlife conservation. The destruction of so many of the planets chalk streams is both a litmus test of our failure and a wake call to take action now."

National Campaigns Coordinator for the Angling Trust, Martin Salter.

"There is a lack of top level political commitment to protecting the UK's rivers and dependent species, of which the degradation of our once pristine chalk streams is the most blatant example. We have particular international responsibility toward conserving these rare and fragile chalk rivers, of which we host a globally significant percentage in England. If we cannot protect chalk streams, what chance is there for any other river system?"

Paul Knight, Salmon & Trout Association's Chief Executive.

"England's iconic chalk streams are under threat, these unique and fragile ecosystems, if lost through our over exploitation, will be lost to the world forever. These rivers are at risk for a number of reasons including over-abstraction and diffusion pollution. WWF-UK have been working for over 6 years to explore how we can support the more efficient management and use of water in the UK to deliver positive outcomes for our freshwater environment.. WWF-UK very much welcome the Chalk Stream Charter to drive action to protect these endangered ecosystems"

Lucy Lee, UK Freshwater programme manager, WWF-UK.

Charter for Chalk Streams

Introduction

Over 85% of the chalk streams on this planet are in England yet the condition of these iconic waters which uniquely rise from the compacted carbonate shells of minute floating organisms laid down in another age are a national disgrace; they suffer from pollution and over-abstraction and have experienced a significant loss of their natural habitat. Both industrial and housing developments are approved in their catchments with little thought to the potential impacts or about what chalk streams represent. In short we have provided them with wholly inadequate protection. How can we lecture countries like Brazil, Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Congo on their lack of care of the world's rainforests when our own stewardship of the majority of the world's chalk streams is so poor?

Rivers, streams, fish and the wealth of other wildlife found in our precious aquatic habitats have been largely ignored by those in charge of the government's scientific bodies, including Natural England as too complicated to deal with. Habitats like raised and blanket bogs, limestone pavements and Caledonian pine forests have the ultimate legal protection of being designated Special Areas of Conservation, or SAC for short, (one of the strongest official legal protection categories possible in the UK) en masse but chalk streams with their noted abundance and richness of species of all kinds have largely not been so protected.

It is time that conservationists, wildlife groups, fishery managers, anglers and those who love our chalk streams stood up for them and demanded that they are afforded the care and protection that their uniqueness and vulnerability deserves.

This Charter for Chalk Streams evolved from the 2012 'Chalk Stream Summit' hosted in Stockbridge, Hampshire by George Hollingbery MP and organised by the Angling Trust and the Salmon and Trout Association, but open to all, to build on the campaigning work done by a myriad of other organisations and individuals over the years. The charter does not seek to duplicate the excellent work of the Blueprint for Water Coalition but aims to use the iconic status of the English chalk streams, which are to be found from Yorkshire to Dorset, to press for more urgent action from government, Natural England, the Environment Agency, water companies, farmers and land managers.

The Problem

Our chalk streams are gradually, and in many cases rapidly, losing their precious natural qualities. Action to halt their decline must be adopted as a national priority. This is particularly the case for undesignated streams such those in the Chilterns. These are perhaps, amongst the most threatened of all chalk streams, crippled by more than half a century of over abstraction, which has severely restricted their ability to tolerate drought and has degraded their ecology considerably. At the height of the 2012 drought, three were completely dry and a further two were dry for more than 50% of their total length. Even in 'normal' years the best of the Chilterns rivers only has sufficient flow to support their special ecology for 38% of the time.

Despite its status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and reputation as an outstanding trout fishery, the Upper Kennet has not escaped unsustainable abstractions and significant reductions in water quality. In January 2012 the river completely dried up above Marlborough for the first time in living memory, and recent stock surveys have yet to show evidence of any significant populations of fish returning.

In the Thames Water area a staggering 70% of abstractions outside of London come not from storage reservoirs but from groundwater sources. The problem is that chalk aquifer water is free, ready filtered and of high quality. We have a water resources planning process overseen by a regulator which gives scant regard to the environment and provides perverse incentives to abstract from the aquifers rather than to collect and store surface water run-off. No new reservoir has been allowed in the Thames region for over 40 years despite a huge increase in population and demand.

The water regulator, Ofwat, currently has an inadequate duty to promote environmental sustainability and is a roadblock to reform. Ministers lack the power to make significant beneficial policy changes, except through primary legislation. Our chalk streams are one very serious casualty.

Both the government and the regulator need to accept the Abstraction Incentive Mechanism supported by WWF. This mechanism creates price incentives, not as a full long-term solution, but certainly as something that will amount to progress for the PR14 period.

Despite producing the widely welcomed Water White Paper, Water for Life, promising the type of wide reaching reforms that would benefit our chalk streams and other rivers the government has produced a draft Water Bill which simply fails to deliver and which in some areas will make matters considerably worse. There is now a potential danger of a new market in trading hitherto unused abstraction licences which could result in our chalk streams will being in a much worse state than they are already.

It is absurd that the planning process for new developments allows for public objections on grounds of too much water i.e. flooding, but not on grounds of too little available water i.e. the impact on vulnerable rivers and streams of over-abstraction.

And the problems facing chalk streams are not solely related to abstraction. Controls on agriculture practices and reduction in point source and diffuse pollution are crucial as are the development of water friendly farming practices and the proper management of adjacent wetlands and water meadows, river connectivity and natural morphology

Valuing Water

The basic problem is that water has been taken for granted for too long. It has been treated as an inexhaustible resource and a combination of population growth and climate change should have taught us all that we simply cannot carry on as we are. Water is not valued and is wasted because it is comparatively cheap and available on demand with little constraints on useage. Part of the solution must be to make water more valued and more realistically priced in order to both cut demand and waste and to generate the infrastructure investment needed to provide resilience in the water supply network to reduce the prospect of environmental damaging abstractions.

Only when Ofwat and the government clears the way for this to happen will we be able to save our chalk streams. Abstractors *have* to develop alternative sources. These are eminently possible: reservoirs, river mouths etc. But right now chalk water is uphill, clean and free, whilst other sources are downhill and dirty or otherwise expensive. Somehow this price gradient has to be tipped the other way and demand management measures introduced.

The wonderful chalk streams of England really are rivers on the edge and without a significant change in policy at government level and also in the way we value, and use water, there will be no way back for them.

Key Facts

- The UK has less rainfall per person than our northern European neighbours
- London is drier than Istanbul
- In the UK **every person uses approximately 150 litres of water a day**, a figure that has been growing every year by 1% since 1930.
- If we take into account the water that is needed to produce the food and products we consume in our day-to-day lives (known as embedded water) we actually consume nearer 3400 litres each per day.
- The UK has less available water per person than most other European countries.
- The South East of England, where many of our chalk streams rise, is the most water stressed part of the country.

Key Issues

Listed below are a range of issues that affect the health and sustainability of chalk streams that were raised at the recent Chalk Stream Summit in Stockbridge and in other publications. Those highlighted in bold have been selected as priorities for this Charter for Chalk Streams.

- **Designation of all chalk streams as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) – see note below.**
- **Reform of National Planning Policy Framework to allow for meaningful objection to development on grounds of lack of water resources.**
- Bringing the EA's RSA programme in to the PR14 process to ensure that changes to licences to address current unsustainable abstractions are funded through price limits rather than the compensation pot
- Reform of historic abstraction consents
- Introduction of a robust abstraction incentive mechanism through the PR14 process
- **Amend Draft Water Bill to remove danger of unused abstraction licence trading in water stressed areas**
- **Impose a primary duty on Ofwat to promote environmental sustainability**
- Realistic pricing of water
- **Compulsory water metering and an education campaign to reduce water demand**
- Reduction in diffuse pollution from both urban and rural sources

- Removal of phosphates and chlorides from point source pollution
- Stronger enforcement of existing environmental legislation
- More robust enforcement of EU Habitats Directive
- Higher standards for abstraction consents
- Stronger controls on damaging agriculture practices
- Tackling point source pollution from sewage treatment works, water cress and trout farms and industrial sites
- **Less reliance on groundwater sources and clear targets for replacing aquifer abstraction with surface supply and storage**
- **Some immediate government pilots schemes in three separate regions to restore specific chalk streams to good ecological health**
- Reforms to the Water Resources Management Planning process so that long term implications for the natural environment and impacts of climate change are more fully taken on board.
- **Restore channel morphology and connectivity and encourage management regimes such that chalk streams can function naturally**

These priorities are immediate and with a draft water bill still under consideration, and the development of Water Company Water Resource Management and Business Plans, a number of them are achievable in the short to medium term. They do not unduly cut across the work of the Blueprint for Water Coalition and would form a basis for amassing public support for a radical change in policy of specific benefit to not only chalk streams but to the river system as a whole.

Summary

The UK's stewardship of 85% of the world's chalk streams has been lamentable with many iconic rivers suffering from over abstraction, habitat destruction, pollution and invasive species. Both our development control and water resource planning processes are woefully inadequate. Chalk aquifers have been over exploited as an easy and cheap source of ready filtered water at the expense of the environment in general and chalk streams in particular. There is an urgent need for abstraction reform and far greater use of reservoir storage of winter run off rather than depleting groundwater sources. Scarce water is wasted as there is little effective demand management. We cannot go on like this.

The current regulatory framework is inadequate and the draft Water Bill needs serious revision as it risks making a bad situation worse. Our chalk streams deserve much greater protection. River restoration is possible and the government should commission immediate pilot schemes to plot an effective way forward before we lose more chalk streams forever.

Therefore the individuals and organizations supporting this Charter for Chalk Streams are calling for:

- 1. A national designation of all chalk streams as Special Areas of Conservation (see notes below)**
- 2. Reform of National Planning Policy Framework to allow for meaningful objection to development on grounds of lack of water resources and where development is granted ensure water saving measures are included.**
- 3. Amendments to the Draft Water Bill to remove danger of abstraction licence trading and to allow ministerial direction of policies to drive specific targeted improvements.**
- 4. A primary duty on Ofwat to promote environmental sustainability**
- 5. Compulsory water metering and a national education campaign to reduce water demand**
- 6. Less reliance on groundwater sources and clear targets for replacing aquifer abstraction with surface supply and storage**
- 7. Government pilots in three separate regions, including the Chilterns, to restore specific rivers to good ecological health**
- 8. Restore channel morphology and connectivity and encourage management regimes such that chalk streams can function naturally**

Please show your support for our chalk streams by signing up to the Charter for Chalk Streams.

Reply to: George Hollingbery MP, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA or email chalkstreamcharter@anglingtrust.net

Next Steps

We plan to present this Charter to the government, the water companies and to have the issues debated in parliament.

For regular updates on the progress of the Charter go to

www.anglingtrust.net/charterforchalkstreams

NOTES:

1. Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)

Proposal - That all chalk streams in England be designated as Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) regardless of present condition and that the species of interest in these designations include relevant fish as well as the white clawed crayfish and the presence of *Ranunculus* together with the evolutionary significant units relating to specific chalk streams.

What does this mean? As noted above, there are several reasons why chalk streams are so heavily degraded; over abstraction, diffuse and point source pollution from both the urban & rural environment, urbanisation, flood defence work, industrial use of the waters, barriers to fish movements, management for recreation; the list goes on and in many cases the problems will be specific to a particular stream or reach of that stream. This legal protection will therefore be the instrument of change with strict time lines to bring about that change for the good but it is fully recognized that this will not be a panacea on its own; more campaigning on all fronts will be required.

Why aquatic species? This will focus the government's attention. By taking this action the overriding target will have to be restoring the natural fish populations of that specific chalk stream. This will mean action will have to be taken by government departments across the spectrum, industry, agriculture, water companies and their regulator OFWAT and will give the environmental NGOs the tools they need to hold government to account in ensuring the required targets are met. In the process the fortunes of a wide range of other species will be improved in chalk stream valleys and flood plains as a whole.

Designations and process: It became a requirement for the UK to designate SACs following transposition of the Habitats Directive, in the same way that Special Protection Areas (SPAs) were set up following the Wild Birds Directive. The Habitats Directive requires designation of internationally important habitats of "Community Interest" e.g. wet heaths, raised and blanket bogs, limestone pavements and Caledonian pine forests. Chalk streams therefore conform to this description and are specifically mentioned in the Directive and a site does not have to be in pristine condition to be notified

Chalk streams were recognised as a priority habitat under Biodiversity Action Plans which followed the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, under the drive to "Think Globally Act Locally" commitment. A specific group was set up for Chalk Streams, although this has now been disbanded with little progress achieved.

As a result of the present system, we are faced with the bizarre situation of, for example, the Itchen having SAC status, the Test only having SSSI status and the neighbouring Meon having no special protection despite them all being chalk streams. This has brought about the present situation where the local water company cannot abstract any more from the Itchen because of its protection but is proposing to extract from the bottom of the Test.

Way forward: Chalk streams have been degraded throughout the country over the years as was heard at the recent Chalk Stream Summit. This is due to a large number of factors from industrial and business expansion, agricultural practices, flood defence works, over abstraction, Sewage Treatment Works discharges etc. etc. although abstraction is often touted as the main factor, others are just as important. If we are to regard and treat chalk streams as our Great Barrier Reef or rain forest, then they require more legislative protection than they currently have and SAC status is the highest environmental protection in our tool kit. This with the proviso that it be handled carefully and sensitively, but if successful, there could be substantial benefits, although Ministerial guidance to NE may be needed to ensure the correct outcome and it will need the support and input of local communities.

Finally, the UK has a poor record of managing its existing chalk stream SACs, leading to a complaint being made to the European Commission under the Habitats Directive over the failure of the River Avon SAC to achieve conservation targets for Atlantic salmon. Designation of more chalk stream SACs will therefore be pointless unless a new legal framework covering water abstraction and diffuse pollution is included in the forthcoming Water Bill, and significant new resources are provided for Government agencies and the third sector to expend on catchment restoration programmes.

Above all else, though, is the need for genuine political commitment to protecting the aquatic environment, of which our chalk streams are the global shop window. If we cannot protect our chalk rivers, which constitute 85% of the total world resource, we will be truly failing in our international conservation responsibilities.

2. The State of England's Chalk Rivers

Summary report by the UK Biodiversity Action Plan
Steering Group for Chalk Rivers – July 2004

Chalk rivers – an agenda for action

Chalk rivers are a unique and irreplaceable part of our heritage and the landscape of England. They face mounting pressures which threaten to damage them for ever. To make sure we tackle these problems, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group for Chalk Rivers has produced the first ever report on The State of England's Chalk Rivers. The report sets out how we can act to protect and enhance this precious resource.

Chalk rivers and their underground water stores (aquifers) provide significant quantities of water for drinking, industry, effluent dilution and agriculture. They are very important for wildlife. Many chalk rivers are world-famous for their fly-fishing and they are part of our cultural heritage. Their present appearance and character reflects a long history of human intervention from urban development, agriculture, industry and fisheries.

Today these most English of rivers are in a fragile state. They are under increasing pressure from water abstraction, urban and infrastructure development, effluent discharges, agriculture, land drainage and flood defences. Without careful management, these activities threaten the chalk river resources upon which so much wildlife and many people depend.

The character of chalk rivers

Location

There are 161 chalk rivers and streams identified in the report. They follow the band of chalk that sweeps diagonally across England. They occur nowhere else in the UK, and are very rare in the world as a whole.

Appearance and character

Chalk river water is crystal clear. This is because the rainwater is purified as it percolates through the chalk and emerges as springs in the valley floor. As a result, the water is very alkaline or 'hard', with a relatively constant temperature.

Our vision is that: *"Chalk rivers should be protected or restored to a quality which sustains the high conservation value of their wildlife, healthy water supplies, recreation opportunities and their place in the character and cultural history of the landscape."*

Dried up river Kennet at Marlborough in January 2012



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Supporting the Charter for Chalk Streams

River conservation and angling and wildlife groups from across the UK are signatures to the Charter for Chalk Streams including; Angling Trust, The Rivers Trust, Salmon & Trout Association, The Wildlife Trusts, WWF-UK, Wild Trout Trust, Chilterns Conservation Board, Action for the River Kennet, Friends of the Mimram, River Chess Association, River Misbourne Action, River Beane Restoration Association, The Wandle Trust, Herts & Middx Wildlife Trust, Test and Itchen Association, Wessex Chalk Stream Rivers Trust, the Piscatorial Society, Hungerford Town and Manor Fishery.