

Action for the River Kennet

River talk

A PARTNERSHIP OF PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE KENNET

A Year of Green Action

Our fragile environment needs ARK's wonderful volunteers.



helping people engage with the natural environment through its marvellous network of community volunteers, now boosted by a growing contingent of corporate volunteers. As Emma Howard Boyd, chair of the Environment Agency, said in June 'We need to put the environment at the heart of business decision making ... Boards need to see the business benefits of a healthy environment'.

In the months and years to come, we hope that ARK's corporate volunteers will be able to play an ever stronger role in the way their businesses engage with the environment – not only in reducing their negative impacts on it but also in helping in positive and creative ways to give it a better and more sustainable future.

Richard Clarke

The Government is determined to get more people to experience and be involved in the natural world. That is why the Department for the Environment and Rural Affairs has labelled 2019 the Year of Green Action or YoGA. Their thinking is that the more people who start to visit the countryside and to appreciate its wonder and beauty the more likely they are to support measures to conserve the environment.

Last year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that if global temperatures rise by more than 1.5C the world-wide risk of droughts, extreme heat, floods and widespread poverty will be very significantly increased. That stark

message was followed in May 2019 by the equally shocking news from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystems Report (IPBES) that plant and animal species are disappearing from the planet faster than at any other time in human history. These are not just problems for governments. As David Attenborough constantly reminds us, it's society as a whole that needs to be raising awareness of our natural environment and the help it desperately needs.

ARK cannot fault this logic, and it is what drives everything we do in this small, beautiful but fragile corner of the planet. For years ARK has been



Summer River Walk

We are thrilled to invite members to our annual summer river walk, a chance to experience the glorious riverbanks along a private stretch of the River Kennet. It's on Saturday 7th September at Barton Court, Kintbury. For more details see the back page.

News from the Chairman

Less water means using it better.

In the Kennet Valley we have had three dry winters in a row. We know from experience that this is not good news for our chalk streams. During winter the rain soaks into the soil, down through the chalk and into the natural aquifers which keep our rivers flowing and our taps running through the summer. Last year our dry winter was 'rescued' by the spring snowfall – it melted slowly and its impact on recharging the aquifer boosted river flows and kept our rivers in good health through the summer. In 2019 we didn't get this reprieve and the River Kennet and its tributaries are starting to look fragile. Groundwater and river flow are both below average for the time of year and a few wet days won't help us now.

Thames Water built a new pipeline in 2017 which means that less Kennet water is piped to Swindon. While this is undoubtedly a triumph and has reduced pressure on the Kennet, climate change, growing population and increasing water use means that it's only part of the solution.

Last year water demand over hot weekends reached a peak that had never been seen before, and when filling up a giant paddling pool at home is cheaper than going to the local swimming pool it's hardly surprising.

At a policy level, ARK is engaged in Thames Water's resource planning process and supporting measures which bring more water in to the

west of the Thames River basin, which will help to meet London's water deficit at the same time as relieving pressure on our chalkstreams here in the Kennet Valley.

We are also campaigning with the Rivers Trust, Angling Trust, Fergal Sharkey and others to draw attention to the ongoing 'Chalk Stream Crisis'. We have succeeded in getting an investigation into the impacts of abstraction above Marlborough into the next Water Industry National Environment Programme, something we have been calling for since 2012, and we are communicating with Thames Water about ways in which better use could be made of Farmoor Reservoir to supply Swindon.

It was refreshing to hear James Bevan, Chair of the Environment Agency, use strong words about the need for collective action from water companies, Ofwat and Defra to ensure that the legal, policy and regulatory frameworks secure long term water resilience in his recent 'Jaws of Death' speech.

As a country, and as individuals, the time to act is now. We all know how to use less water. We know it isn't that hard, but we do need to put our words into action. So I challenge you, choose not to wash the car with tap water, install a water butt (or three), don't leave the hose running, run only full loads of washing, turn the tap off when you brush your teeth, choose a short shower instead of



a bath. And before splashing out on that giant paddling pool just remember that a family paddling pool uses more water to fill than the average household would use in 11 days. When it's time to empty it make sure you re-use the water to wash the car, water your garden, flush the loo – but much better still, put away the paddling pool and get down the river to cool off!

Richard Clarke

The Great British Spring Clean

ARK once again was one of many Rivers Trusts that in April supported the national Great British Spring Clean campaign.

Upstream ARK volunteers got into waders and litter-picked the Kennet and its banks through Marlborough in collaboration with the Town Council who cleared adjoining land.

Downstream in Reading Thames Water and PepsiCo employees and several other volunteers collected more than 50 bags of rubbish from the riverbanks. Using a grappling hook several large items (including a bike!) were retrieved from in the river.

Anna Forbes

ARK goes to Hampton Court

The need to take care of our most precious resource is greater than ever.

Weather is increasingly unpredictable, with drier summers and wetter winters. In the first week of July ARK was at the Hampton Court Garden Festival and RHS Flower Show. We were supporting Thames Water in their gold-medal winning 'Flourishing Future' show garden. The show garden demonstrates how small changes, such as drought-friendly planting and use of rain gardens, can have a real impact. The principles of the show garden are the same as the ones used for ARK's Rainscape Gardens at Preshute, Ramsbury and Baydon primary schools.

Aldbourn School's eels were on show and visitors were fascinated by their amazing lifecycle and delighted to have the chance to see this endangered species up close. We used the opportunity to help



explain how caring for water in the garden has a direct impact on the health of our whole freshwater environment, including of course our chalk streams.

The show garden contains three main planting areas: drought-

tolerant with *Eryngium giganteum* and *Agave americana*; moisture-loving, featuring *Caltha palustris* and *Lythrum salicaria*, and nectar-rich wildflowers with bug and bird boxes set among woodland trees to encourage wildlife.

We are delighted that after the show key elements of the garden will be re-used in ARK's Rainscape Garden at Aldbourne Primary School, which is a project in progress.

Our most recent garden at Baydon Primary school was featured on BBC Points West in June and Wendy Allen's innovative design was on show as part of Baydon Open Gardens on 6th July.

Charlotte Hitchmough

Aldbourn St Michael's Rainscape

Work has begun in earnest at Aldbourne Primary School's rain garden.

St Michael's Primary School, Aldbourne is the final playground to benefit from our Rainscapes Project. Wendy Allen has come up with some beautiful and innovative designs which catch, slow and clean rain water, at the same time as improving the play space for pupils.

The school playground regularly floods and areas can't be used by children after rain. The rain garden will slow the flow and create space for water to soak into the ground making all the space available all

the time, which is just one of the immediate benefits of the project.

We are very lucky to be able to bring a substantial quantity of plants and materials back from Thames Water's prize-winning Flourishing Future Garden and the school community has already been amazing in their practical help and support. We should especially mention PA Matthews Groundworks who kindly brought machines to dig holes for new trees and all the staff and parents who have been working

very hard through the hot weather to turn designs into reality.

This is our most ambitious project so far, and will take place in phases as funding becomes available. If you work for a company who offers a 'time to give' or CSR programme that might be able to help us complete the garden, we'd love to hear from you.

Charlotte Hitchmough

Down on the Farm

Smarter farming is the gateway to a healthier river.



Throughout its life ARK has worked tirelessly to protect and enhance the River Kennet – one of England's finest chalk streams and an irreplaceable habitat for wildlife of every kind. But to do that successfully we need the support and goodwill of the farmers whose neighbouring land feeds the Kennet with its precious water.

Over the past half century the drive for ever greater yields has driven those same farmers to adopt agricultural techniques that have the potential to cause significant

harm, whether through the leaching of chemical fertilisers into the aquifer or the washing of soil directly into the river and its tributary streams.

More recently ARK has been working to help the Kennet Catchment's farmers find other ways of improving the productivity of their land while at the same time protecting the river from the pollution that was an unintended bi-product of their vital work of providing the food for our tables.

Southern Streams Farmers

The Southern Streams group of farmers that Peter Lemon wrote about in River Talk 39 is going from strength to strength. In May ARK were delighted to be part their first meeting to review the opportunities for catchment management and natural flood management in the Shalbourne, Inkpen and Wilton sub-catchments. The area covers 10,000 acres (4000 ha) of farmland between Hungerford and Burbage.

It's a pleasure to work with such a highly motivated group of farmers, who have decided to focus not only on reducing the impacts their farming has on the water environment but also to adopt practices which will lead to improvements in the quality of surface and ground water as well as reducing the risk of flooding.

The group are continuing to develop their work without funding from government – the 'Farmer Facilitation Fund' money with which they began is no longer on offer and a promised 'Tests

and Trials' opportunity appears to have fallen into disarray within DEFRA. Fortunately, North Wessex Downs AONB have stepped in with a modest amount of funding to support ARK's farm advisor Tim Clarke for a couple of days a month. Meanwhile ARK continues to support the group through staff time funded through our own very limited core funds.

Cover Crops

The Southern Streams farms include George Hosier's at Wexcombe. George is one of the UK's pioneers



explore opportunities to construct a wetland to clean up polluted runoff before it ever reaches Wilton Water.

Marlborough Downs Space for Nature

A few miles further west, the Marlborough Downs Space for Nature farmer group celebrated its 7th anniversary this year. It now includes 31 farms covering 25,000 acres (10,000 ha). Much of that land is in the headwaters of the Kennet catchment, a chalk landscape that feels arid but in fact harbours the powerhouse of our entire river system: the winterbournes and the aquifer beneath the Marlborough Downs. ARK were therefore delighted to be invited to speak about managing winterbournes and then to host a lunchtime walk around Stonebridge Meadow to take a look at what's living in and alongside the Kennet and talk about how farmers can protect and enhance our chalk streams.

Looking ahead

The evidence shows that in the Kennet catchment farming has a larger negative impact on water quality and sedimentation than any other sector, but that farmers collaborating at a landscape scale have the power to make real change.

Whatever replaces the current system of European farm subsidies after Brexit is likely to include the provision of ecosystem services that benefit the whole of society. And that in turn means equipping farmers with the knowledge to make the best possible decisions about how to use their own land, so that we will all know that the investment of public money for public good has been wisely spent.

Charlotte Hitchmough

in the use of both no-till farming and cover crops – plants grown after the main cash crop to protect and enrich soil. His farm has been a key study site for Tim Clarke's cover-crop trials, which you read about in River Talk 40. His farming methods not only reduce soil erosion but also dramatically limit the leaching of damaging nitrate into the aquifer, so protect ground water quality too.

Leaky Dams

A rather different kind of project recently sponsored by Peter and David Lemon at their farm in Wilton involved the installation of 'leaky dams' to slow the flow of water into the pond at the heart of the village during heavy rainfall. The purpose of the dams is to reduce the risk of flooding to neighboring properties and we are now looking for a way to fund a set of 'free station monitors' to measure their effectiveness.

Vetiver Grass

Peter and David Lemon will also be working with Reading University to trial 'Vetiver' grass (*Chrysopogon zizanioides*), which is used around the world in a wide range of bio-engineering applications – from soil erosion control, slope stabilisation and natural flood control to the phyto-remediation of agricultural, leachate and septic tank pollution. At Wilton the Lemons will be using it at the base of a sloping field above a watercourse to trap sediment from

the field before it reaches the water. The plants are guaranteed to be non-invasive and sterile.

Ecosystem Modelling

Viridian Logic is a high-tech company that models the capability of landscapes to provide the 'ecosystem services' on which we all depend for our food, water and general well-being. ARK was recently able to fund them to identify opportunities for land-use change that would support the wider environment of the Kennet catchment. Each of the river's sub-catchments have been modelled to identify what kinds of new habitat could be created and where, concentrating first on natural flood management, diffuse pollution, erosion/siltation and groundwater recharge. That all sounds very technical, but in the long-term it will help to make the Kennet catchment a better and more sustainable environment for everyone's benefit.

Wilton Water

Wilton Water is the artificial reservoir that feeds the central section of the Kennet and Avon Canal. In recent years the quality of its water has been a persistent problem, leading to pollution of the whole canal and river system. Finding a catchment-based solution is therefore an urgent priority, which is why Karen Davies at Natural England is working with us to

Quidhampton Wood to Horseshoe Bridge

A Reading family walks the Kennet.

Historically, Reading's river is the Kennet. So when we decided to walk a river, source to mouth, the Kennet was the obvious choice. We began in April 2018 and have only got as far as Axford – but we've enjoyed every step of the way!

We began at the furthest source of the winterbourne, the southern tip of Quidhampton Wood on Bassett Down, the east-west watershed of England: standing here, water poured from one hand could reach the Atlantic, the North Sea from the other.

There are footpaths most of the way along the upper reaches of the river so we've usually been able to keep it in sight. We've relished the beauty of the landscape, distinctive wildlife like watercress, black poplars and a grasshopper warbler, and lovely spots like Berwick Bassett bridge or Stitchcombe Mill.

But it's the way the river seems to run through time as well as space that leaves the deepest impression: early Neolithic at Windmill Hill, Bronze Age barrows near the Sanctuary, Roman *Cunetio*, Winterbourne Bassett's fine medieval church. Rural and urban, past and present, nature and people: the Kennet connects.

Jeremy, Judith, Michael and Rachael Burchardt

Getting Prepared

ARK volunteers lend a hand to the Kennet Roach Project



With the Kennet Roach Project set to commence its fifth year of operation, ARK volunteers visited the project in April to lend a hand. They'd come to help make new spawning boards in readiness for the annual egg collection by the Reading and District Angling Association's Fisheries Officer, Del Shackleford.

The onset of spawning is largely determined by water temperature, so up to 20 boards needed to be ready and waiting. At the right moment they are strategically placed throughout the lower river, with the exact locations determined through local knowledge and previous observations of where the fish prefer to lay their eggs.

Following spawning, the egg-laden boards are collected and placed into tanks where, once they have hatched, the baby fish will spend the first year of their life. This nursery stage is followed by a further 18 months growing on in the Project's ponds before they are eventually released back into the lower River Kennet.

Powered completely by solar energy and using water drawn from the neighbouring lake, the project is a good example of a low environmental impact initiative that has resulted so far in the release of more than 10,000 young roach – a welcome helping hand for this well-known Kennet species.

Martin Kent



The damage done by the dredging on the River Lambourn at East Garston has been repaired by the Environment Agency. The photograph taken in early July shows the clear gravel bed, sparkling water and just a bit of ranunculus that has already taken root. This is great to see. The EA's investigation into the actions that led to the damage are still ongoing, but it is their policy to recover the costs of remediation from responsible parties.

Return of the Grayling

Bringing a very special fish back to the Kennet.



Photo: A thousand baby grayling waiting to be released into their new Kennet home.

Like their larger brown-trout cousins, grayling are members of the salmon family. The British population falls into five genetically distinct groups, one of which has its traditional stronghold in the Upper Kennet. In recent decades, however, their

numbers had fallen badly as a result of culling.

In response the Environment Agency has been working with Kennet and Lambourn River Keepers on a programme to increase numbers

of grayling in the Thames and its tributary streams. The project is now in its third year and 2019 has been the most successful so far, with more than 50,000 juvenile fish stocked into Kennet.

The adult broodstock are wild fish borrowed from the Kennet system and transported to the Environment Agency's fish farm near Nottingham, where they are spawned before being returned back to their Kennet home. Once the eggs are hatched the larvae are grown on to a size where they are active and able to swim freely, at which stage they are released into the Kennet. It is hoped that in the coming years the whole of the Kennet will once again be a home for this very special and popular fish.

Adam Hilliard

Dawn Chorus Bird Walk

An early start, but richly rewarded!

Led by Hungerford Town and Manor's River Keeper (and ARK Committee member) Rob Starr and Town and Manor Trustee Robert James, the leisurely June walk gave ARK members access to private banks of both the Kennet and the Dun between Denford and Hungerford. There were opportunities to pause and enjoy the surroundings while Rob and Robert shared their knowledge of the local history and the work that has been carried out to improve the river for fish and many other species too.

Within minutes of setting off along the well-vegetated riverbanks several members had viewed a water vole in the river, closely followed by a



kingfisher perching on a small bridge handrail.

We were privileged to watch British Trust for Ornithology bird ringers Jerry and John carry out their work, part of ongoing surveying to collect data which is important locally and

beyond. Members got to see a range of birds up close while they were being ringed, or if already ringed having their details noted. Birds were weighed and sexed along with other checks.

The highlight of the ringing for everyone was the chance to look at a stunning young kingfisher. A number of warblers were also caught, including a Cetti's warbler, one of the UK's most recent colonists (they first bred in Kent in 1972).

The morning concluded with cooked breakfasts and lots of conversation at The John O'Gaunt Inn, Hungerford.

Anna Forbes

ARK People

Eliot Deacon



I volunteered for ARK this year for Duke of Edinburgh and have really enjoyed it, despite the drizzle! We've restored banks in Froxfield and Hungerford, made faggots and walked around a number of villages for Yellow Fish. Highlights have been operating a petrol-driven post driver and throwing big logs into water from a height. I've loved it and fully intend to continue volunteering beyond D of E.

Jack Ulridge



The River Kennet is not only my place of work but also my way of life; I am on its banks or in its water almost every day of the year. The river and its surroundings create such a varied habitat for all manner of species – it's a very special place. The Kennet has some very enthusiastic people working to preserve its beauty and I am lucky to call myself one of them.

Paul Simmonds



I became an ARK volunteer when I retired back to Hungerford in 2017. I spent much of my childhood exploring the very special Freeman's Marsh. I now understand how rare and valuable chalk streams are. I enjoy getting into the river, where I've learnt about the rich wildlife by talking to ARK staff and other volunteers. Everyone is so committed and friendly, which makes the tasks so enjoyable and rewarding.

Dates for Your Diary

Saturday 7 September

ARK Members **Summer River Walk** at Barton Court, Kintbury. Start anytime between 2–3pm. Car share where possible and park in Benchmark Furniture's car park (RG17 9SA, off the A4 midway between Hungerford and Kintbury). Sorry no dogs, but accompanied children are welcome. Bridges to cross and uneven terrain. Refreshments will be served from the Fishing Hut.

Tuesday 9 November

ARK's AGM will be held at 6.30pm at the Royal British Legion, 20 Church Way, Hungerford RG17 0JU

For more details on all these events see our website or contact linda@riverkennet.org

Membership

And finally, a gentle reminder that membership renewals were due on 1 April, £20 for an individual or £30 for a family membership. If you're not sure if you have renewed please contact linda@riverkennet.org

Websites Worth Visiting

Nestled in the heart of the Kennet Valley, Barton Court Estate serves up the crystal-clear water, fresh from the chalk of the North Wessex Downs, that is home to some of the finest trout and grayling to be found in the country.

To find out more please visit: www.bartoncourtestate.com



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Members of ARK receive a copy of this newsletter either by mail or email.

If you'd like to find out more about ARK, volunteering opportunities or membership please visit our website at www.riverkennet.org or email anna@riverkennet.org

We hope you have enjoyed this newsletter and if you have any comments or ideas for future issues, do please pass them on!

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