



Action for the River Kennet



15/03/2022

## Eel project highlights the value of citizen science

An environmental project, piloted by Action for the River Kennet (ARK), has discovered that there are many more barriers in rivers than scientists thought. This is bad news for the critically endangered European eel. Comparing new data with existing data, the Thames Catchment Community Eels Project identified a 61% underestimate on 24 rivers and a 52% underestimate on the five target rivers for the project.

Local people from the Kennet and Pang valleys were part of the project team that tested 'ObstacEELS' a new method for trained volunteers to work together to identify different barriers in rivers and assess their 'passability' for eels. Of the 457 barriers recorded and mapped over seven months 278 were 'new' (not present in existing baseline data).

The European eel is a species of fish that spends the majority of its life in our freshwater rivers, including the River Kennet and River Pang, yet they start their lives hatching from tiny eggs 6,500 kilometres away in the Sargasso Sea, in the Atlantic Ocean. The tiny eels that make it across the ocean to the Thames and migrate up our rivers are currently blighted by a range of in river obstacles, such as weirs, that prevent them dispersing further upstream.

Eels need to swim freely up and downstream along rivers to find places to hide and food to eat in order to successfully grow. Mature eels make the immense journey back to the Sargasso Sea. Eels only breed once in their lifetime and it is thought this happens upon successfully returning to the Sargasso Sea. Connectivity from the sea all the way to the top of our rivers is critical to their survival.

ARK played a key role in the project, using ObstacEELS to map barriers on the River Kennet from Reading upstream to Hungerford and on the River Pang. As part of the Thames Catchment Community Eels Project 31 volunteers were trained by ARK and between them and ARK's Eel Project Officer an amazing 163 km were surveyed and 221 obstacles were logged. Seventy eight of these were not on current datasets.

The new data has fed into the Environment Agency's Thames River Basin Eel Management Plan and Thames Estuary Partnership's Fish Migration Roadmap, where the findings are freely available.

Importantly the findings are helping ARK plan practical projects to aid eels, Charlotte Hitchmough ARK Director said 'This new information is already helping us to plan projects to remove river barriers, or work out how to make weirs and sluices easy for eels to swim past.'

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Thames Catchment Community Eels project is a partnership, led by Thames Rivers Trust working with Action for the River Kennet (ARK), South East Rivers Trust (SERT) and Thames21 (T21); working closely with Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and Thames Estuary Partnership (TEP) to aid the long-term survival of the European eel.

'The European eel is an iconic fish and plays an important role in the ecosystems of the Thames and its tributaries. We are very pleased to have been able to give local communities along five rivers in the Thames catchment a range of opportunities to discover more about their rivers, eels and their local Rivers Trust. The next step is to secure funding for barrier removal or eel passes at the priority sites for eel passage identified during this project', said Thames Rivers Trust Chairman Dave Wardle.

The project has also had success with a huge community and educational outreach programme, connecting people of all ages with nature at their local rivers. In just over a year, together the project partners have inspired more than 2,500 school children through innovative eel workshops and assemblies; and over 680 people of all ages have enjoyed led riverbank eel walks or have attended eel talks.

**The Thames Catchment Community Eels Project is project is funded by the government's Green Recovery Challenge Fund. The fund is being delivered by The National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency.**

**For more information about Thames Catchment Community Eels Project**

**[mia@riverkennet.org](mailto:mia@riverkennet.org) website [www.riverkennet.org](http://www.riverkennet.org)**



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### Notes to editors

High resolution images attached to the email.

Image 1 - Group of ARK ObstacleEELS volunteers assessing a weir as a barrier to eel migration.

Image 2- ARK Project Officer Mia Ridler delivering an ARK Eel Workshop to a group of cub scouts.

For more information about Action for the River Kennet and the Thames Catchment Community Eels Project please contact Mia Ridler ARK Project Officer

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