

A New Vision for Water Recreation

Paddle away with Roger Goulding, Recreation Advisor at the Environment Agency and find a route to providing better water based sport and recreation across England and Wales.

A sharp but bright mid-winter's morning on the River Thames. Sunlight bounces off the ripples in the water and brightens up the bare branches of the bank-side willow and alder trees. It's a perfect day for messing about in a boat or taking a bracing towpath stroll. Whatever your age, whatever your physical abilities, whatever the time of year, our water world offers inspiration, discovery and fun and we want more people, from more diverse backgrounds, to share in it.

Coupled to this aim, our inland waterways are the healthiest they have been for two centuries thanks to a blend of Environment Agency work, tough regulation, investment and better environmental performance by business.

But, creating more recreational opportunities on rivers and coastal waters is full of challenges: Just how do we utilize new growth areas? How do we minimise the impact of increased participation on the environment? How will climate change alter our landscape and what will the knock on effects be for outdoor activities?

ENVIRONMENT IS KEY

In order to answer such questions and put the environment firmly at the heart of all future plans to develop water-related sport and leisure, the Environment Agency is leading a landmark study.

In England, we are heading two projects to assess and shape provision for water-related recreational needs in the South West and East of England. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is funding both initiatives. A range of partners with expertise in sport, leisure or tourism, including Sport England, Natural England and British Waterways, is also supporting the initiatives. The Regional Assembly, Regional Development Agency and Government Office in each pilot area are also taking part.

Meanwhile, a project to plan new or improved water sport facilities in Wales also got underway in 2007 and is being funded by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and Environment Agency Wales. Another set of 'expert' partners, including the Countryside Council for Wales, Visit Wales, British Waterways, Forestry Commission Wales, Welsh Local Government Association and the Sports Council for Wales are backing the Welsh initiative.

The Environment Agency is overseeing *the Strategic Planning of Water-Related Sports and Recreation Study* because it's our job to look after the water environment in England and Wales. This means not only managing how much water is abstracted for industry, agriculture and public use. It also means planning and promoting water-related sport and recreation in a way that generates the greatest economic, social and environmental benefits.

We are also taking a lead role on limiting and preparing for the impacts of climate change, such as more frequent drought and flooding and rising sea levels. We need to better understand how the management of sport and leisure activities may need to be adjusted to take account of these changes.

SPORTS STUDY, WHAT AND WHERE

English projects are focusing on South West and Eastern England because both regions contain coastal and inland waters and water-based leisure and tourism is a key contributor to their local economies. In fact both areas are earmarked to play a part in the 2012 Olympics, with all sailing events set to take place out of Weymouth and a yet-to-be-confirmed site in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire pencilled in to host the world's top canoeists.

A research team headed by Professors Andrew Church and Neil Ravenscroft, leading experts in outdoor recreation based at the University of Brighton, is conducting the study. The team

also includes Professor Nigel Curry from the University of Gloucestershire and researchers from exeGesIS Spatial Data Management Ltd, Collingwood Environmental Planning and G&L Hughes Ltd.

The English and Wales projects, the first of their kind, are:

- *Auditing* existing water-related recreational facilities and use
- *Collating* Environment Agency data on river flows, water quality and rises in sea level. The aim is to get a clearer picture of how the English regions and Wales are responding to improvements in water management and climate change and understand how this will impact on sport and recreation in the future
- *Consulting* via workshops involving a wide range of interest groups, including sporting and governing bodies, conservation agencies, landowners and local authorities. These have been held to gather views on current and future provision for water-related sport and recreation.
- *Listening* to people. Anyone with a keen interest in watersports and leisure pursuits, ranging from boaters and paddlers to ramblers and anglers, has been encouraged to have their say by logging onto www.brighton.ac.uk/waterrecreation and commenting on the opinions expressed and issues identified at the workshops. Researchers are now assessing these valuable responses. You can also continue posting comments on the study via a blog on the Brighton University website. We want to create a debate about the right way to improve access and participation and we want as many people as possible to take part.

Ultimately, our study will help decision makers such as local authorities, planners and governing bodies, take an informed view on sport and leisure development. It will help them for example, to assess how facilities built for the London Olympics can benefit the nation well beyond the closing ceremony and help funding bodies decide where money is needed most.

WHAT NEXT?

We look forward to submitting the study's findings to Defra and WAG in Spring 2008. What then? Well, Defra may decide to fund similar studies across other regions in England to gain a clearer picture of the future of water-related sport and recreation in the country. Meanwhile, WAG plans to fund several recommended schemes from its project. As for the Environment Agency, we will continue working in partnership with others for a better environment and healthier people.

To find out more about the Strategic Planning of Water-Related Sports and Recreation Study, visit www.brighton.ac.uk/waterrecreation To learn more about the Environment Agency's Recreation role and to read the latest Conservation, Access and Recreational Report, click onto www.environment-agency.gov.uk/recreation

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