



Community Support - The Future of Our Waterways

Background

Given the economic climate that faces us over the next decade, it is extremely unlikely that any government is going to cover the £45 million operating deficit that faces our navigation authorities each year. This annual deficit has forced British Waterways to operate at 85% of the level required to maintain a steady state of maintenance for several years now and as a result has accumulated a £100+ million backlog. A backlog that clearly worsens each year.

These are familiar statistics to those active in the waterways movement and over the past few years we have made sure that our supporters are aware of the crisis. However, we have failed to get the same message across to the 95% of waterway users that are not members of our stakeholder organisations.

We know quite a lot about this vast body of users. British Waterway's estimate that 11 million people make over 260 million visits a year to BW waterways. Our guess is that similar if not greater numbers apply to the Thames. An average of over 20 visits per person implies that most live close to a waterway and they appreciate the contribution it makes to their way of life. The majority are probably sensitive to their environment and care about its future. Above all, as the main recipients of the benefits that our inland waterways bring, they have the most to lose if decline sets in.

Like boaters and anglers they will lose a valued recreational resource; like walkers and cyclists they will lose a source of exercise and a traffic free route and like us all they will lose a haven for nature and a valued part of our heritage. But as members of a waterway community, they will also lose jobs and passing trade and experience declining property values.

Clearly, the waterway movement needs to gain the active support of this group. Fortunately, they are relatively easy to reach. The inland waterways pass through an estimated 250 parliamentary constituencies. That roughly equates to 18 million people and it seems likely that they include most of BW's 11 million users as well as a significant number of our members. In many of these communities there is already an existing network of supporters in the form of members of user group branches and angling, cruising clubs and water sport clubs; supporters of canal and restoration societies, waterway festivals, community boats, etc.

With that reach of supporters, surely we can organise gatherings in our waterway communities to explain to our neighbours that without community support, they risk seeing the waterways that are such an intrinsic part of the fabric of our community falling into rapid decline.

Taking the Opportunity

DEFRA's 'Waterways for Everyone' encourages greater community engagement and the EA is looking at how they can make better use of volunteers. BW's 2020 Vision goes a step further by foreseeing a future that draws on volunteer skills and expertise by integrating stakeholder groups into its corporate structure and forecasting income from charitable donations.

We support this general direction but concentrating on existing stakeholder groups misses a key target. The 11 million users are unrepresented by existing stakeholder groups and will remain out of the loop unless we find an initiative that will attract their attention so that they, in effect, also become stakeholders.

SOW calls this initiative Waterway Watch (WW). In some ways it is not dissimilar to Neighbourhood Watch and draws on the success of Towpath Tidy except that each community WW would be encouraged to take a wider role than simply assisting with the protection and upkeep of the waterway that passes through their community.

The range of activities in which individual WW communities might become involved will depend largely on the skills and enthusiasms of the local supporters that they attract. Typically, a local WW might take on the role of assisting the navigation authorities in monitoring unlicensed boats and mooring over-stays and taking on some of the tasks of vegetation control. Others might act as intermediaries with local parish and district councils in planning issues, etc. and communicating views on matters of national concern to local Mps.

Think of the wide range of talent that is attracted by the likes of restoration societies; a similarly broad selection of talent surely exists in local communities waiting to be tapped to assist with all manner of issues that directly affect their own well-being. SOW estimates that just looking at the examples of delegating vegetation control and towpath monitoring to a community Watch has the potential of saving BW as much as £3-5 million a year in costs and recovered income.

SOW doesn't see WW as a membership-based structure (thereby eliminating the thorny issue of competing with other stakeholder groups for members), although individual community WWs might decide to raise funds for local projects and activities.

Nationally, the WW movement wouldn't be run by any single stakeholder group, it would be a genuinely joint initiative by local residents drawn from all users and vested interests in that community and would link with the local navigation authority through the user group network. The creation of each community group would, however, clearly depend greatly on the support of the members of stakeholders and presumably would provide an opportunity to promote the interests of individual stakeholder groups.

Central to the idea is to use web technology to provide a central point of focus and communication. This central portal would link together all active WW groups and thereby facilitate a constant exchange of ideas and contacts which could also be the source of donations and increased access to philanthropic, Lottery and European funding. The creation and management of this website could be achieved by volunteers though it may be prudent to pay an outside body to create the initial structure. The cost of hosting the actual web site would be minimal and could almost certainly be maintained primarily by volunteers.

We envision that the website would be owned by a non-profit company limited by guarantee which has guarantors rather than shareholders. The guarantors contribute a nominal predetermined sum to the company. The aim would be to get all participating stakeholders to become guarantors for the company, so that all have a joint interest in making it work. Any surplus would either be ploughed back into the company to meet its objectives, or distributed for charitable purposes.

The important role of disseminating the concept and news of progress through local and national media might also be achieved by volunteers but it seems logical to suggest that this is done jointly by one or more of the professional teams that already exist within navigation authorities and larger stakeholders using feeds generated by local WW groups.

Taking the Initiative

Other than endorsing the concept, SOW doesn't believe this is an initiative that should be taken by the navigation authorities or an individual stakeholder group. In the same way that we launched 49 protests to the cuts in 2006/7, it will benefit most by being recognised as community action. I believe that if we all share the responsibility of promoting the idea to through our members to other users at large, then we will identify individuals in a selection of key communities that will show enough interest to form fledgling groups to explore the idea.

In my case I have had positive feedback from discussions in my community and I have been in touch with several individuals in other areas who are either already involved in a similar initiative or are willing to explore the idea in their community.

SOW believes that our inland waterways face dereliction if we cannot persuade our local communities to exercise some ownership of their section of the waterway, and it is up to us to convince them that the future of our waterway heritage really does lie in their hands.

2nd March 2010 Will Chapman campaign@saveourwaterways.org