

# The river looks ‘messy’ – should we do something?

The appearance of rivers often reflects the way people live and is influenced by the economic, social and environmental trends and needs of the times. Whether this appearance is something that requires some action depends on the character of the river, and what is causing the ‘messiness’. Is it rough vegetation and bare earth, or is it litter and supermarket trolleys? On the whole, natural ‘messiness’ is good for the river and its wildlife, whereas rubbish should be cleared up.

## WHY does this matter?

It is important to create an environment that is appealing and inviting to everyone while at the same time providing good wildlife habitat. Often what people call ‘messy’ is actually perfectly natural and supports a wide range of wildlife. In fact, wild plants and animals tend to thrive in places where a range of conditions are available for them to live, feed and breed.

But ‘messy’ appearance can also be caused by people being careless and can be unsightly or even harmful to the river. Litter and rubbish is all too often dumped along the river and presents a very real danger to wildlife (for example through suffocation or infection). Importantly, it also creates a less welcoming environment for people. Many affected areas also suffer from anti-social behaviour and become ‘no-go areas’ for locals rather than an asset to be enjoyed.

## WHAT can be done?

There is a balance to be struck between managed ‘tidy’ areas where people can access the river, and its mainly natural parts. Many improvements can be easily put in place to make the river more inviting and appealing to people while still leaving plenty of room for wildlife.

Also, providing information can help people understand and appreciate why an area looks as it does (eg. where an area of dense vegetation on the bank is deliberately left to provide shelter and food for water voles).

The following outlines suitable ways of dealing with some common issues:

### ▶ Bank side vegetation:

It might be possible to have some areas for access, where the grass is mown regularly, and other areas that are left totally unmanaged or just cut once in the autumn (see BCTV handbooks, overleaf).

### ▶ Non-native invasive plants:

See sheet two, ‘How do we deal with non-native invasive plants?’

### ▶ Weed cutting:

Some people view the plants growing in the river (often termed ‘weed’) as something that needs to be managed and cut, either for fishing or to increase drainage. Others would prefer unmanaged weed growth. River vegetation provides a crucial habitat for invertebrates and fish as well as helping to maintain other key habitat features, such as clear gravel runs. It also buffers low flows in summer by maintaining water depth and flow diversity.

Things that can make the river and river bank look ‘messy’



*BAD: Fly tipping, near the river – a common problem*



*GOOD: Bankside vegetation provides great wildlife habitat*



*BAD: Abandoned shopping trolley in the river*

Management of river vegetation needs Natural England consent as excessive removal of river weed can damage the river ecosystem, may be costly and may not achieve your objectives.

#### ▶ **Litter, fly tipping and dog fouling:**

The provision of well managed litter and dog fouling bins can dramatically improve the problem. Any concerns about litter, dumping of refuse or fly-tipping of larger volumes of waste should first be passed on to your local authority's environmental health department. Locally you could arrange for a litter picking day with members of the community – this will not only reduce the problem but also engage people and promote future care for the river. Shopping trolleys in rivers can be a particular problem. This can be reported to the shop they come from – many shops have a collection system to pick up abandoned trolleys.

It is a good idea to use posters or signs to make people aware of problems, explain what actions are taken to improve the river environment and encourage everyone's involvement. This will help people understand about good river management and show that the river is being cared for. Some readymade posters can be ordered from the Keep Britain Tidy group.

#### **WHO can do it?**

Anyone can report fly tipping and dog fouling to their local authority. If you would like to alter the management of an area you will first need to discuss this with the landowner. It can be straightforward to alter existing grounds maintenance contracts to change the way that an area is maintained and looked after in order to provide a welcoming space for people and wildlife.

#### **WHAT needs to be considered?**

- ▶ Deal with rubbish and fly tipping as soon as possible. Rubbish normally attracts further rubbish.
- ▶ Maintain a balance to accommodate both people and wildlife. Think hard what the area is used for now and what and how you would like it to be used for in future.
- ▶ Before planning any work find out who owns the area of river concerned and contact everyone who has an interest in the river: landowners, farmers, river users such as fishing clubs etc. A coordinated approach yields the best results.
- ▶ Get the necessary consents and permissions for work in the river and along the river bank – early contact with the Environment Agency, Natural England and your local authority is vital.
- ▶ Cover insurance and health and safety issues. Risk assessments are crucial at the outset of any work in and around the river.
- ▶ Avoid disturbing protected species such as otters or water voles. Plant and animal surveys may need to be undertaken by an ecologist. Your local Wildlife Trust or Natural England can provide advice. Any sightings of protected species should be reported to your local biological record centre.

#### **WHO can help?**

There is plenty of written and direct help available from the organisations listed, right. The Keep Britain Tidy group is a good first point of general information. Any concerns about litter or fly-tipping can be reported to your local authority. If they or other organisations responsible for the area fail to clear it up, any member of the public can take legal action to get a 'litter abatement order', but this is likely to be time-consuming and complicated.

#### **WHERE can I get more information and ideas?**

- ▶ **Keep Britain Tidy:**  
[www.keepbritaintidy.org](http://www.keepbritaintidy.org)
- ▶ **River Care:**  
[www.rivercare.org.uk](http://www.rivercare.org.uk)
- ▶ **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers:**  
[www2.btcv.org.uk](http://www2.btcv.org.uk)
- ▶ **BTCV handbooks:**  
'Health and Safety Overview', 'The Urban Handbook' and 'Waterways and Wetlands' (<http://handbooks.btcv.org.uk/handbooks/index>)
- ▶ **Environment Agency:**  
[www.environment-agency.gov.uk](http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk)
- ▶ **Environment Agency (Blandford):**  
'Weed cutting information pack' available on request (01258 483386)
- ▶ **Natural England:**  
[www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)
- ▶ **Natural England/ Environment Agency:**  
Guidance note 'Weed cutting code of practice 2010'
- ▶ **Councils:**  
Wiltshire ([www.wiltshire.gov.uk](http://www.wiltshire.gov.uk));  
Hampshire ([www.hants.gov.uk](http://www.hants.gov.uk));  
Dorset ([www.dorsetforyou.com](http://www.dorsetforyou.com));  
New Forest ([www.newforest.gov.uk](http://www.newforest.gov.uk))
- ▶ **Wildlife Trusts:**  
Wiltshire ([www.wiltshirewildlife.org](http://www.wiltshirewildlife.org));  
Hampshire ([www.hwt.org.uk](http://www.hwt.org.uk));  
Dorset ([www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk))

