

How can we resolve conflicts over river use?

People visit the river for many different reasons, for instance to walk, canoe, fish, watch wildlife, or just sit and enjoy the peace. Some activities are purely recreational, some others have an economic value – and they are not always compatible.

WHY does it matter?

The various river related activities can sometimes seem to be in conflict with each other. Canoeing and fishing, for example, don't always go together easily. Showing consideration for the river, the surrounding land and for other visitors and users is essential if people want to reach a consensus on how a stretch of river should be used.

Despite the different use of the river by different groups of people the reasons why the river is loved and cared for are usually quite similar. Instead of focussing on the different ways in which the river can be used it might be helpful to focus on the common features that people value about the river, such as its wildlife or the tranquility that it provides. If people can agree on ways to protect or enhance these valued features it is more likely that everybody will consider these when involved in any river related activities.

WHAT can be done?

First analyse the situation with regards to:

- ▶ How is the area looked after for recreation already?
- ▶ What activities are there at a location and what are the causes of any conflicts – misunderstandings or genuine problems?
- ▶ When does the conflict occur – is it at particular times of the day/month/year?
- ▶ What statutory rights and traditional freedoms are being exercised?
- ▶ A voluntary solution with the support of recreational users rather than an imposed statutory resolution.
- ▶ How to accommodate and manage recreational use rather than remove it.
- ▶ Clear, measurable targets which the solution should achieve.

Next communicate and consult with the involved parties and the public to increase understanding and support. Then work out and agree on:

An example would be to divide a heavily used area of river bank into three zones: a quiet area, a controlled access area and a busy area. In the long term such an inclusive approach could save time and money, create greater ownership of the process and the solutions, help to increase understanding and develop new working relationships.

It is advisable for someone neutral to lead and manage the whole process in a positive and flexible manner.

Ways in which the River Avon system is enjoyed by different groups of people



Canoeing practice with one of the Avon-based clubs



Fly-fishing on the River Till



Walking the Avon Valley Path

- ▶ Be prepared to drop or re-appraise pre-conceived ideas and do not try to impose them on others.
- ▶ Do not be rushed into things.

WHO can do it?

Everyone who uses the area will need to be involved. Often it is the role of the parish council, the land owner or manager to drive this process and make sure everyone is kept informed and involved.

WHAT needs to be considered?

- ▶ Before considering any changes 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 changes to management from Natural England and the Environment Agency.
- ▶ For questions regarding free fishing or activities such as crayfish trapping please contact the Environment Agency.

WHO can help?

Visit the 'Best of Both Worlds' website, which explains a comprehensive approach to consensus building and problem solving in the countryside (see right). It might also be useful to contact groups that have had similar experiences to you for some tips and ideas.

WHERE can I get more information and ideas?

- ▶ **River Restoration Centre:**
www.therrc.co.uk/rrc_manual_pdf.php
- ▶ **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers:**
www2.btcv.org.uk
- ▶ **BTCV handbooks:**
'Environments for All', 'Local Action', 'Health and Safety Overview' and 'Waterways and Wetlands' (<http://handbooks.btcv.org.uk/handbooks/index>)
- ▶ **Wild Trout Trust:**
'Chalkstream Habitat Manual' (www.wildtrout.org)
- ▶ **Environment Agency:**
www.environment-agency.gov.uk
- ▶ **Natural England:**
www.naturalengland.org.uk
- ▶ **Wildlife Trusts:**
Wiltshire (www.wiltshirewildlife.org);
Hampshire (www.hwt.org.uk);
Dorset (www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk)

