

We have a niggling and persistent problem and each of us can help to solve it

The Middle Thames is a publicly accessible and shared river. Apart from the indigenous wildlife, we share it with wild swimmers, paddle boarders, rowers and various powered craft as well as bankside walkers and in general we all 'rub along' fairly harmoniously.

Harmonious shared usage requires all concerned to be both considerate and to comply with their responsibilities which includes legal obligations. Sadly there is a small minority who are unwilling to share these social obligations and think they can do what they please. For fishermen these obligations mean a valid EA rod licence and not fishing from land where they have no right to fish. Footpath users must ensure that travel is on foot; as cycle or powered bikes usage on designated footpaths is contrary to the byelaws. Legally compliant use of all craft (Including paddle boards!) on the river requires registration and an annual EA licence and valid insurance.

The HPoWAS stretch is on the longest section between locks; some 7 miles. Inflatable craft (and unregistered craft) cannot travel through locks. There are 2, parish council owned, publicly accessible free entry points for small boats; the Cholsey slipway (opposite the entrance to our stretch) and a couple miles downstream on our bank at South Stoke. Despite repeated requests to the EA to put up signage advising boat users of their legal responsibilities and what is (and is not) permitted. We are still waiting..... further encouragement for more non-compliance.

Recent changes to the controllers of fishing rights on the Benson Lock to Goring Lock section mean that virtually all the bankside fishing rights from Wallingford to just upstream of Goring both banks are controlled by clubs (including HPoWAS), none of which permit fishing from boats for their members. Bankside rights are from the bank to the middle of the channel and where both banks are controlled by such clubs, no fishing from boats is permitted as the entirety of the channel is subject to their joint control.

What has been happening?

Sadly this season has seen a repeat of anti social and criminal behaviour which has disrupted yet again the harmonious status quo on our stretch. I refer to mainly young/middle aged East European males fishing from unregistered inflatables, across the channel after mainly perch and pike. On the first day of the season, 9 such craft were apparent with between 2 and 4 fishermen in each. When challenged, all feign ignorance (no defence), lack of understanding of English (ditto) and can be abusive and deliberately provocative ('so.....what are you going to do about it?'). I reported it to the EA. We all pay for our right to fish, club membership, EA licence etc. These people do not, and they are stealing the resource paid for and provided by others.... And that is all of us!

Well, what are we going to do about it?

Be in no doubt these individuals are committing numerous offences; some criminal (including theft of rights or fish under S1 of Theft Act 1968) a police matter, while some matters (fishing without a rod license, use of an unregistered and uninsured craft) contravene Thames Byelaws which is enforced (or not) by the Environment Agency in the first instance, but as byelaw contravention is classed as a criminal offence which can be tried in the magistrates courts they can involve the police.

A craft without a visible name and/or visible black numbers and/or letters cannot be registered for legal use with the EA because it has no distinguishing features. No annual registration (licence) is issued without unique identification and valid insurance so if such a craft is on the

river it is almost certainly contravening EA byelaws. If the occupants are fishing they are also committing theft (rights); both the navigation and fishing contraventions are criminal offences.

Part of the reason for growth in this antisocial, inconsiderate and illegal activity is that there is no fear of consequence, so for the most part it is unreported and therefore not investigated and by failing to report it, each of us unwittingly help to promote a vicious circle of illegal activity. Unchallenged illegal behaviour is interpreted by the perpetrators as acceptance. Whilst I am no defender of the EA, whose 'light touch' approach to enforcement (better known as turning blind eye) merely encourages a growth in such illegal activity, the EA's inadequate approach is in part because in real terms EA enforcement budgets have suffered cuts of 80% (that is correct - 80%) since 2010. The result? There is currently 1 full time enforcement officer whose (massive) territory includes the Middle Thames and works a 5 day week with 1 day a weekend on alternate weeks. However a 2nd has just been recruited

Note that I said 'a fisheries enforcement officer' because the EA works in silos, and joined up thinking is only just beginning to dawn on historically inept and disillusioned EA management. There are also navigation enforcement officers (number unknown). Observant readers will be one step ahead and realise that this problem is in more than one 'silo'.....

As I pointed out to the Fisheries Manager (with whom I followed up my report of 16 June 3 days later and he seems alert to the issues and promised action on the missing signage - which I have subsequently learned has been ordered on 28 June). I explained that it would not take much from the EA to arrest the currently unchallenged illegal activity and lay down a marker. EA enforcement officers visiting Cholsey and/or South Stoke on a Saturday or Sunday for perhaps an hour on a couple of weekends (between 8 and 10a.m and/or between 3 and 5pm) would have immense deterrent value as the 'jungle telegraph' would soon spread the word in the East European Community. I noted that the 9 boats from 16 June are likely to owe a total of around £500 in unpaid licence fees. In effect the extra revenue accruing to the EA would make this a self financing exercise.

I have also been promised attendance at 2 weekends on one or more of the 2 entry points this summer. Each of us can promote EA action by reporting any suspected illegal activity as outlined above.

I am asking for your help please in dealing with this nuisance issue.

Any of us can report the activities described above as follows:

EA Incident line: 0800 80 70 60

Police (non emergency) **111** or (if an illegal activity is actually happening) **999**

Crimestoppers: 0800 555 111. Please put these numbers in your phone.

If you report this to the EA they will ask you for your name, a location and a brief description. They will provide you with an incident number which can be sent to your email. Crimestopper reports can be made anonymously if you wish.

An adequate location description would be the Thames between Wallingford (the major EA office for the Middle Thames and where enforcement officers are based) and Goring, specifically between the Cholsey slipway and the GWR rail bridge. If you report this to the EA please send the club the incident number. As the club are in dialogue with the EA Fisheries Manager, I promise to follow up these reports.

By our actions we can and will and make a difference and all club members will benefit.