

AINA CASE STUDY

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

River Thames: habitat creation and biodiversity



The upper reaches of the Thames include meanders, reed beds and backwaters which are all important wildlife habitats



The Environment Agency seeks a careful balance between the needs of wildlife and navigation

The Thames and its flood plain contain a diverse range of valued habitats including flood meadows, wetlands and reed beds, and are home to several aquatic Biodiversity Action Plan priority species. 35 water-related SSSIs, one National Nature Reserve, three Special Areas of Conservation and one Special Protection Area lie within the river's corridor, though none include the main navigable channel. Locks and weirs protect some important sites that are water flow and/or level dependent, but the richest areas are the shallow margins where water lilies and reeds provide valuable cover. Backwaters also provide special habitats and various wetland creation schemes have been undertaken adjacent to the river.

The majority of the Thames has good biological quality, with some exceptions on the lower reaches as a result of reduced water quality and hard bank protection. Key issues affecting nature conservation include diffuse pollution, water abstraction and low flows, habitat modification through bank works and dredging, invasive species and boating traffic. The Thames Waterway Plan has therefore been prepared to address issues of navigation and recreation, and was subjected to Strategic Environmental Assessment and developed in consultation with members of the River Thames Alliance (see separate case study).

For the current ecological status to be maintained and improved, the Environment Agency manages navigation to ensure there is no threat to wildlife, and perceived adverse impacts from boat wash and marina development need to be continually addressed. Key requirements to help resolve uncertainties include improved risk assessment tools to identify proportionate responses to bank erosion and better understanding of the impact of boat use on river banks and wildlife. An enforced speed limit of 8km/h is an excellent control of boat wash.

All capital works, such as lay-bys, weir rebuilds and bank protection, are subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment process and design guidance is provided, e.g., at one site a naturalised by-pass channel was created to mitigate impacts of a weir structure as a barrier to fish movement, providing the opportunity to create scarce habitats previously lost because of navigation management pressures.

Mutual understanding and respect helps the Environment Agency to develop consensus and compromise solutions, and face to face discussions via River User Groups remain important.

The Thames Waterway Plan is available from: www.riverthamesalliance.com/plan