

AINA CASE STUDY

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

River Great Ouse: nature conservation on a lowland river



Consensus building helps protect the river environment without compromising recreational activities

The River Great Ouse and its tributaries, the Cam, Lark, Little Ouse and Wissey, comprise the major navigation network in the Fens and East Anglia, providing about 240 kilometres of navigable waterway. There is a natural river flow, but abstraction is regulated to prevent adverse impact on ecology, water quality or boating.

The river passes through many areas important for their landscape and nature conservation value, but the lower reaches take boaters through open fenland landscape where the Great Ouse catchment represents a heavily regulated lowland river. Much of its course has been engineered for flood defence and land drainage, with re-alignment of the channel and bank reinforcement. Width varies from 12 to 80 metres, and depth from one to six metres.

Despite the modifications, there is much wildlife interest with a range of adjacent designated sites, and boating and biodiversity need to be considered together. National Biodiversity Action Plan priority species and habitats include reed beds, wet grassland, otters, water voles, bitterns and various invertebrates. To maintain this interest, the Environment Agency performs biological monitoring and performs routine chemical testing against nitrate, phosphate and other standard parameters. The river is also monitored by Natural England and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and perceived trends include an improvement in water and biological quality.

Environmental Impact Assessments are completed for all maintenance and capital schemes, and careful research means few issues have arisen between navigation and nature conservation. Low-level concern by some boaters that wildlife interests can lead to boating restrictions remains unproven.

The Environment Agency's Great Ouse Waterway Plan outlines the strategic aims of managing the navigation. Nature conservation measures include retaining marginal vegetation when weed cutting and issuing best practice guidance with illustrated methodologies for use by machine operators. Formal meetings to share work programmes and specific projects take place to ensure good and continuous dialogue with all interested stakeholders.

Such measures, over two decades, have protected the river environment without compromising recreational activities, helping to build trust between the Environment Agency and conservation and boating groups - enabling all to listen and help understand each other's needs.