



## RECREATION FACT FILE 6/9

*“If you enjoy fishing, or watching people fish, or studying wildlife, or taking a picnic, or canoeing (slalom or otherwise), or rowing or sailing, or just messing about in boats, or simply cycling or strolling along ... whatever you enjoy doing on or around our rivers, we’re working to make it even more enjoyable.”*



**ENVIRONMENT  
AGENCY**



# the environment agency

The Environment Agency for England and Wales is one of the most powerful environmental regulators in the world. It provides a comprehensive approach to the protection and management of the environment, emphasising prevention, education and vigorous enforcement wherever necessary. The Agency's creation on the 1st April 1996 was a major step, merging the expertise of the National Rivers Authority, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution, the Waste Regulation Authorities and several smaller units from the Department of the Environment.

## Thames Region

England and Wales are divided into eight Environment Agency regions. Thames Region is responsible for the protection of a 13,000 square km area of great diversity. The Region extends from Cirencester in the west to Southend in the east and from Luton in the north to the Surrey Downs in the south. Because this area contains a fifth of the nation's population, development pressures and demands on natural resources, particularly water, are greater than elsewhere in England and Wales. Thames Region is subdivided into three areas (West, North East and South East) which are the first point of contact for local issues.

Recreation, the subject of this leaflet, is one of our key responsibilities. The others - Conservation, Water Quality, Fisheries, Flood Defence, Navigation, Water Resources, Waste Regulation and Integrated Pollution Control are covered in separate leaflets.

In reality, we can't treat these responsibilities separately, whatever we do must be done in the context of the whole catchment. This means that the work of one specialist department can only be effectively carried out in collaboration with others. (So it's a good idea to read all the leaflets, and not just this one. In that way you'll get a better understanding of what we are trying to do.)

In the recreation section we work closely with anyone or any organisation interested in promoting the use of open waters for recreational purposes. Examples of some of these external 'partners' are shown below.

But the most important collaboration is with individual members of the public. The media - newspapers, magazines, TV and radio - help by keeping people informed about recreation problems. But only public opinion can ensure that the water environment continues to be given the care and attention it needs. That is why your interest and support is so critical.

*"We also receive valuable guidance from the Thames Regional Fisheries Advisory Committee. Membership is drawn from a wide range of local and national bodies. Meetings of this committee are open to the public."*

## Some of our external 'partners'

(in addition to ones mentioned above)

- Sports Council.
- Governing Bodies of Sport and other Recreational Groups (including British Canoe Union, Royal Yachting Association, British Water Skiing Federation, Ramblers Association, National Federation of Anglers, and many others).
- Thames River Users Groups.
- Port of London Authority.
- English Nature, the statutory advisor to the Government on nature conservation in England.
- Countryside Commission, the statutory body responsible for the conservation of landscape and promoting access to the countryside.
- Central Council for Physical Recreation.



## PLEASURE PARK PAR EXCELLENCE

*"This is the water heritage of the Thames - and we want you to enjoy it to the full."*

Here in Thames Region, you have some of the loveliest countryside in Britain, right on your doorstep.

And such variety too! There are hills and vales, lowlands and wetlands, broad lakes, lagoons and hidden ponds, tumbling streams and winding rivers, some with islands, all of them for some of their course skirting deep woods and flower-filled meadows. Then there's the Thames Estuary itself with its tides, mudflats and tang of open sea.

Everywhere you go, you can savour the magic of the past - the Thames itself has been called 'liquid history'. There are bankside villages, famous river towns, stately homes, and the battlefields of long-forgotten wars. There are corn-mills and cottages, old inns, barns and bridges, follies and beauty spots, weirs and locks, plus many newly discovered relics of pre-history. And most of them are on or near the water.

You can also enjoy whatever's best in today's outdoor entertainment - regattas and race meetings, fun fairs and game fairs, gymkhanas and country shows, leisure parks, theme parks and safari parks.

You can sail, paddle or row. You can travel, sedately, by pleasure steamer. You can angle or ramble, watch birds or just watch. You can picnic on the grass, dine in style at riverside restaurants or take tea and cakes in any one of a myriad of tea shops.

And everywhere you can see and admire all the wonderfully fascinating wildlife that thrives in our English waters.

This is the water heritage of Thames Region - and we want you to enjoy it to the full.



## Water for fun? It's our duty too!

We're all enthusiasts for water at Thames Region. Those of us in Recreation are especially keen, every one of us, to ensure that the open waters in the Region are used to the full by those who want to use them for fun.

We want to do it - but the fact is that we are legally bound to do it.

## Recreation is always on the agenda

Parliament has laid down that the Environment Agency should take account of recreation needs in everything the Region does.

This means, for instance, that when our Flood Defence specialists are planning flood defence works - which might involve diverting the course of a river, or rebuilding a weir - they must always try to ensure that the finished result protects existing recreational facilities or offers new ones. These could be anything from a footpath or picnic site to a new stretch of water for fishing or canoeing.

Or take our locks - and you've got a very big choice. We try to manage the surrounding area so that people can settle down there to watch all the activity or simply to have a picnic.

That's the general requirement - recreation is an intrinsic part of our overall task.

We also have a duty to preserve and maintain public access to places of natural beauty and to sites and other objects of archaeological, architectural and historic interest.

There's more! We must also ensure that all water and land under our control is made available, wherever possible, for recreational purposes, taking particular care to cater for the needs of the disabled. Where appropriate, we also provide car-parks and toilet facilities.

## More Examples

- We have created camping sites on two islands in the Thames.
- The flood relief channel in the River Lee valley in Hertfordshire provides fishing in abundance.
- A flooded storage lake near the River Lee forms part of a popular country park.
- We have encouraged the local council to lease facilities for watersports on the Liden Lagoon near Swindon.
- Anglers can fish at any one of up to 18 locks on the Thames.
- We have restored many miles of towpath for walking or cycling - and have built, rebuilt or repaired all the necessary gates, footbridges etc.



*"Of course, whatever we do or build is designed to blend with the local environment."*

## Watch the pipeline

We plan to do so much more. We are working on programmes to open up more sites to the public - with facilities such as information points, seats and tables for picnics. We are also improving the look of many riverside locations by landscaping and tree-planting (and at the same time, improving sites as wildlife habitats).

Of course, whatever we do or build is designed to blend with the local environment. And we always consult widely with local councils, environmental organisations and other interested parties. Caring for the countryside in any way should always be a cooperative venture!



### Competing claims

However, developing the waters of our Region so that people can enjoy them to the full is a complex task. Not everyone's idea of enjoyment is the same. More seriously, the sensible needs of one type of water user may sometimes be in conflict with the equally sensible needs of other water users - or would be without give and take on both sides.

For instance, canoeists often need to use every inch of the river to practice their skills. Usually, that might be all right. But what if an angler on that particular stretch of bank is concentrating on a particularly tricky fish?

Or take cruising? What could be more fun? - unless a rowing eight happens to get in the way.

Our task is to help everyone to appreciate the expectations of others. We prepare and distribute a great deal of literature that does just that. For instance, we've prepared a simple leaflet for canoeists. It lists simple guidelines that everyone will acknowledge as sensible and courteous (example: 'Pass anglers quietly').

### Wildlife first?

Perhaps the biggest conflict is that between 'life and death' needs of our wildlife - and the recreational needs of human beings.

Of course, over the years, the demands of industry have done far more harm to our wildlife than the demands of recreation.

Nevertheless, leisure activities have the potential to damage habitat. We try hard to ensure that none of the recreational pursuits we foster throughout the Region affect wildlife adversely.

In this care, we naturally rely to a great extent on the cooperation of the public. Almost invariably we get it. In fact we have reason to be optimistic. People know about wildlife and understand its special needs much better. And the development we carry out for recreational purposes is also designed to preserve and, where possible, enhance habitat.

### Laws Last

We have also been given powers by Parliament to pass bye-laws to regulate the way a particular water sport or pastime is conducted. However, our policy is to use bye-laws only as a last resort. In any case, we would only promote them after consultation with other relevant organisations.

### Cost discipline

Cost also comes into it. Our purse is not bottomless. We have to establish priorities. We have money from the Government which accounts for about 90% of our costs. We are also empowered to charge for the recreational use of some of our sites. Money from this source covers the rest of our costs.



*"We provide information and advice to anyone interested in the Regions open water."*

### Free information - money too

We provide information and advice to anyone interested in the region's open waters. We also offer practical support to a large number of different independent and voluntary organisations throughout the Region. We do it by means of our Recreation Financial Assistance Scheme.

Groups and individuals can apply for financial help to pay for an event, for a service or for a facility connected with water recreation in the region. The major proviso is that it should be for the benefit of the community.

In the past, with the help of this scheme, we have....

- set up a wide variety of waterside facilities.
- purchased water-sports equipment for community use.
- assisted in the restoration of ponds and canals.
- supported many sporting and other recreational events.

We are always delighted to contribute articles, photographs or information to publications promoting water-related recreation. And we're very keen to help people or organisations, public or private, produce informative literature about any kind of water based recreation in the Region.

### For Instance:

...we worked with Wycombe District Council to produce a colourful and well illustrated booklet called 'England's River - a guide to the Thames from Remenham to Cookham'.

...and with Hertfordshire Country Management Project to produce an informative leaflet on the Beane Valley Walk.

*"We receive valuable guidance from our Regional Advisory Committees. Members represent relevant local and national bodies and bring a wide range of expertise and experience. Meetings of this Committee are open to the public."*

### From source to sea (nearly) - the exciting Thames Path

The River Thames has been an important highway - for boats - since the dawn of history. From 1996 it became a highway for walkers, or rather a path on its banks became one.

The Secretary of State of the Environment approved the path in 1989. Much of the route was already a public right of way, but there was a mass of work to be done on

repairs to banks, stiles, gates and footbridges, to say nothing of all the signposts. There were also new footbridges to be built. Creating the Path has been very much a collaborative project between the Environment Agency, relevant local authorities, private companies and voluntary bodies, with the Countryside Commission also providing funds.

The path starts at the rivers source near Kemble in Gloucestershire and goes right down to the Thames Barrier at Woolwich. The total length is just over 210 miles. It's the only long-distance footpath that follows a river for the whole of its length (nearly).

The Path also links up with other paths in the Region, including the Ridgeway, Kennet and Avon Canal towpath, Lee Valley Path and many circular walks.

### Photographs, footprints - and rubbish

We ask people to take only photographs and leave only footprints. Most people respond positively. Some don't.

Tidying up on land can be difficult enough. On a river as big as the Thames it can verge on the impossible - or did, until the advent of the Tidy Thames Refuse Service which we support.

The service consists of a daily collection of rubbish from passenger vessels, floating bars and wharves between Greenwich and Battlesea on the tidal Thames. We also help pay for the Port of London Authority Driftwood Service which picks up driftwood, flotsam and jetsam from the river itself.

### Overall strategy for recreation

At the basis of all our work at the Environment Agency is the idea of catchment planning. In other words, whatever our plans in one particular area, they must be seen, ideally, as part of an overall plan that answers to strategic needs - which must be thought out first.

Our strategic plans in the field of recreation are clear and very simple. They are: to continue improving access to the open waters in our Region and to continue encouraging their use for recreational purposes.



But times and expectations change. Our resources, skills and experience continue to develop. With the Sports Council, we fund the production of a Recreation Strategy for the River Thames. Its key aim is to manage the recreational use of one of our busiest rivers to everyone's advantage as effectively as possible - and make sure that people can enjoy the Thames and its many pleasures for generations to come.

### Making the most of our heritage

The rivers, streams and lakes of Thames Region are all part of everyone's heritage. We all have a responsibility to care for them and make the best use of them.



So we welcome all your ideas for ways of improving the amenity and recreational facilities on or around the region's waters. Please contact us at Thames Region Head Office at Reading:

Recreation Group  
The Environment Agency  
Thames Region  
Kings Meadow House  
Kings Meadow Road  
Reading  
Berkshire  
RG1 8DQ  
Telephone: 0118 953 5000

When we're talking, we can give you more details of all our recreation services and facilities.

You may also want to discuss a particular 'water recreation' project of your own - with a view, perhaps to the Environment Agency involvement or support, financial or otherwise. Again, we'd be delighted to hear about that too.

If your aim is to improve recreational facilities anywhere on our waters, you'll find we're as enthusiastic as you are.

## MANAGEMENT AND CONTACTS:

The Environment Agency delivers a service to its customers, with the emphasis on authority and accountability at the most local level possible. It aims to be cost-effective and efficient and to offer the best service and value for money.

Head Office is responsible for overall policy and relationships with national bodies including Government.

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For general enquiries please call your local Environment Agency office. If you are unsure who to contact, or which is your local office, please call our general enquiry line.

**ENVIRONMENT AGENCY  
GENERAL ENQUIRY LINE**

**0645 333 111**

The 24-hour emergency hotline number for reporting all environmental incidents relating to air, land and water.

**ENVIRONMENT AGENCY  
EMERGENCY HOTLINE**

**0800 80 70 60**

Environment Agency  
Information Centre  
Head Office

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