



The Future of the Waterways – Communities Working together

At the National Festival in August the IWA announced the Save Our System (SOS 2010) campaign. Members of Save Our Waterways (SOW) and other waterways' enthusiasts could be forgiven for being a mite confused as the name and detail of the campaign seemed strangely familiar.

SOW takes this as a compliment and, as such, we had no problems in deciding to support the aims of the campaign along with other boating user groups.

The central theme of the campaign is to encourage the formation of community-based advocacy groups who will identify and promote local benefits and issues to their communities at wide. The Winter 2009 issue of IWA's 'Waterways' magazine encourages branches and regions to take the lead and convene local meetings with other stakeholders and centres of influence. This is a great opportunity for IWA to demonstrate the grass roots influence that should be part and parcel of an organisation with 18,000 members, and I look forward to being contacted by my local branch.

As IWA Chairman, Clive Henderson has pointed out, the cut recently announced by DEFRA has virtually wiped out the £5-10 million annual saving that BW will be squeezing from their operating costs over the next 10 years.

These savings have largely come at the cost of jobs and, as such, this seems a particularly pernicious act on Government's part. Furthermore, there are now renewed reports that BW's property portfolio is to be put up for sale and if there is any substance in this report we have solid grounds for mass protests.

Clearly any campaign activity needs to allow enough time to influence election manifesto promises and as the election date could be as early as the first week in May 2010, it is clear that we need to making preparations for a campaign no later than March. We organised 50 protests in November 2006 from scratch in 6 weeks so we can surely achieve that by working together with determination and commitment.

SOW believes that any protest should focus on stopping the 'sale of the family silver' and to use the £30 million funding short-fall to emphasize the critical state of BW finances. As long as this country is recovering from the recession, we suggest that it will be counter-productive to focus the campaign on trying to get DEFRA or any other government department, to cover the £30 million funding shortfall. In our view, the answer to medium and long term funding is to transfer more financial responsibility to local and regional authorities.

When the re-write of 'Waterways for Tomorrow' is released this winter, it is expected to contain numerous references to 'greater community' involvement. It will also feature the research commissioned by

DEFRA/IWAC which clearly demonstrates that waterways are a sound economic investment as well as meeting universally held social objectives.

The central theme of the BW AGM in October, 2009 was its 2020 Vision, which sees its future as a Third Sector, charity-like organisation that relies more heavily on volunteers, public donations and working more closely with local authorities. Comparisons were made with comparable Third Sector organisations that are managing their 'estates' without being reliant on financial support from government. Organisations like the RNLI, RSPB, Ramblers and, notably, the National Trust and the Woodland Trust, do so with the support of thousands of volunteers and significant fund raising activities.

The better use of volunteers has, of course, long been a point of contention with BW. The culture within BW – from top to bottom – needs to change dramatically from one that gives lip-service to the concept to one that embraces the volunteer culture and delegates functional and managerial responsibilities to volunteers. WRG and the societies that run restoration projects and manage navigations on a volunteer basis are excellent examples of professionalism that should be an intrinsic part of a Third Sector BW and we all need to find ways to catalyse the formation of complementary groups in other areas of expertise. The formation of community support groups would be a good start.

BW have a significant advantage in this regard. As NABO has pointed out, which other Third Sector organisations have such a large body of boat-owning stakeholders with a vested interest of perhaps as much as a billion pounds? Which other body has a defined market of property-owners along 2,200 miles of waterway? Which other body takes care of a recreational resource that passes through the local community of nearly 20 million people (250 parliamentary constituencies)? All of these people are potential supporters of any initiative that will want to protect and improve the recreational value of our waterways.

The idea that riparian communities should play a greater role in the upkeep and future of their local waterway makes a lot of sense. It is, after all, local residents that reap most of the benefits of a thriving, vibrant waterways: the recreational benefits; enhanced property values; the trade and related jobs from passing boaters, walkers, cyclists, anglers etc. Conversely, it is the anti-social behaviour of those local residents that use the waterway for fly-tipping and honing their graffiti skills – acts that cost BW millions each year to clear and deter paying visitors. Factor this with statistics from BW's surveys which suggest that 95% of users are local people enjoying the towpaths as a means of personal recreation and it is clear that local authorities should be taking more responsibility for the costs of maintaining the waterside in good order.

With or without a protest campaign, we could make good use existing waterside festivals to start to build community-based groups of activists from all types of users. We must find ways to involve all types of users; it simply must be a priority to make sure that we have non-boating interests properly represented.

At the beginning of 2009, SOW chaired a meeting in Westminster where the heads of major user groups briefed Ann McIntosh, Shadow Environment Minister, on the major issues facing the waterways. During that meeting, the idea of a National Waterways Authority was raised and Ms McIntosh referred us to a [website](#) which contained a series of documents that represented current Conservative thinking, thinking that we presume will become a part of their election manifesto..

The most relevant of these is entitled '[Water – The First Essential](#)' and it makes a powerful case for a National Water Association which would regulate all aspects of sustainable water management. The rationale for a

single overseeing body is that '*integrated water management cannot be provided while the responsibilities for regulating its interrelated components remain in different hands*'. Central to this is the European [Water Framework Directive \(WFD\)](#) which is targeted to be implemented by 2015. The paper was written

While the NWA '*would have overall responsibility for all matters related to water, is not intended that it should act as an arm of government. It is intended that it should be an instrument of all those who have a direct interest in the good, long term management of water. In voluntary terms, it is more like the CPRE or the Wildlife Trusts whose strength lies in their local organisations*.' The NWA envisages the establishment of volunteer community groups based on local water catchments. Bodies – such as private companies, local interest groups, local authorities, community collective, etc – would be invited to tender for the responsibility to establish these community catchment groups and ensure that they were fully integrated into the local decision process.

The document names British Waterways as one of these 'bodies' and it may be more than coincidence to that much of BW's 2020 Vision plan is designed to neatly fit this proposal. The proposal is that BW '*be entrusted with responsibility for navigation and recreation in all inland and transitional waterways, man-made and natural. The Port of London Authority would be disbanded and its duties subsumed by BW. The former EA responsibilities relating to navigation and recreation would also be transferred to BW. The new BW would be regulated as a service provider by the NWA in order to ensure that it acted in a sustainable manner and balanced navigation and recreation needs against the other components of sound integrated water management*.'

The devil in this proposal is the detail. Clearly, a straight merging of EA (and by implication other navigations too) would attract a significant amount of opposition from waterway stakeholders. [SOW's paper on the concept of a strategic waterways authority](#) approached this particular issue in a less contentious way but there are clearly many other implications of such a dramatic new concept that need to be debated by all stakeholders with a view of reaching a consensus before Conservative election policy is finalised.

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