



# TAW TORRIDGE ESTUARY FORUM

Minutes of Quarterly Meeting held on Mon.17th July 2023 held at Fremington Parish Council Offices, Beechfield Centre at 7.00pm

## Present:

Alex Gibson	River Taw Fisheries & Conservation Assoc. ( Guest Speaker)
Mark Haworth-Booth	West Country Rivers Trust
Debbie Frazer	Devon Wildlife Trust
Sandra Knight	Coastwise ND
Ian Rowland	Torrige District Council
Peter Hames	Northam T C
Sue Prosper	Love Braunton
Chris Northrop	Appledore Instow Ferry
Chris Salisbury	Taw & Torrige Wildfowling Club
Andy Cox	Bideford Amateur Rowing Club
Chris Dee	BTO WeBS
Paul Brown	Bideford Harbour
Graham Bell	Braunton P C
Tom Humphreys	Skern Lodge
David Dixon	Barnstaple Gig Club
Jeff Needham	Tawstock P C & Vice Chair
Jim Bell	Yelland Action Group & Fremington P C
Andy Bell	ND Biosphere
Tony Pratt	ND Yacht Club & Chair
Ian Crawford	Secretary

**Apologies:** Jenny Carey-Wood, Chris Hassall, Ricky Knight, Michael Day, Alan Kavanagh, Chris Fuller, Mark Cann, Ian Harrison, Matthew Edworthy

**Speaker:** Alex Gibson was welcomed to the meeting. He explained that as former Chair of the River Taw Fisheries & Conservation Association (RTFCA) he was fully aware of the problem of river pollution and its damaging effect on the ecology of the river system including of course fish stocks. Different parts of the river system suffer different water quality levels. The Upper Taw with its tributaries is the worst; the Mole has been deteriorating because of the expansion of winter maize mainly used to feed the South Molton anaerobic digester (AD); the Bray and Molland Yeo have the best water quality on the system. The importance of the estuary to migratory fish was emphasised as well as the close relationship RTFCA has with its sister fisheries association on the River Torridge. Poor farming and sewage practices have led to high levels of nitrates, phosphates and siltation in the river. RTFCA has made efforts to force South West Water (SWW) to improve the 32 sewage treatment works (STWs) above New Bridge with some success. It was noted that there are a further 15 STWs on the Taw estuary and 11 on the Torridge estuary. It is important to pressure SWW to place STWs on the 5 year price review, the next being PR24. This review will include the investment programme for STW improvement. Unlike many rivers and other related organisations in the southwest the Taw receives no funding from SWW and this makes it easier to challenge SWW. The major pollution incident and fish kill on the River Mole in 2019 was given as an example farming pollution where a large volume of digestate flowed into the river. The EA prosecution of the farmer resulted in a derisory £2,000 fine and was followed by a private action co-ordinated by RTFCA with an £18,000 settlement. Concerns about ADs in the Taw catchment were emphasised as well as the problem of slurry; “maximum cow” has been reached in parts of the catchment. Real-time monitors are being trialled in the Little Dart as a way of producing reliable data on pollution and polluters and RTFCA has an annual programme of gravel washing to remove silt from compacted spawning beds. RTFCA works in partnership with many organisations involved in river ecology, in particular Westcountry Rivers Trust and the EA which sadly continues to be underfunded. Alex Gibson answered questions from Forum members and was thanked for his informative talk.

## **Refreshments Break**

**Minutes of Meeting held April 17th:** These had circulated and were adopted as an accurate record subject to an amendment to the Appledore Ferry Report, below;

***Appledore Ferry** CN reported that both boats were on the water on 23rd March in readiness for April 1st and school holidays. Outside of school holidays the service is run with one boat. PB encouraged reporting of obstacles in the estuary which interfere with piloting to be reported to Bideford Harbour office for removal.*

**Matters Arising:** There were no matters arising

## **Reports:**

### **a) Consultation & Planning Committee:**

The following report from TP had been circulated by email;

1. Attempts have been made to enlist the National Trust and Devon Wildlife Trust to the Forum so far without success.

2. The Forum has begun basic investigations into the possibility of the Estuaries becoming a Trust Port along the lines of the Teignmouth Harbour Commission. The Bideford Harbour Master may need support in taking any plans for the future of the port of Bideford forward.

3. Having investigated HELAA which initially was not easy the Forum discovered that the only Community Representatives were two members of the District Councils.

4. The question of who owns the banks of the estuaries has been raised. Initial research shows that this is likely to be an expensive and long term action.

5. Various planning applications and future applications affecting the Estuaries have been responded to. These include St. Andrews Road and Chilpark housing, tree felling on the Yelland Power Station site, more development near the power station and the White Cross Wind Farm cabling. Some of the above are pre-application and are being watched.

6. In view of the national interest in river pollution the Forum is currently examining this on the two rivers in conjunction with the Biosphere and other agencies.

7. Other items considered included; signage for bird protection, rubbish under the Tarka Trail and preparation for the July Quarterly meeting.

A challenge was raised to the implication that District Council members could be considered as community representatives. IR from TDC stated that a councillor from each of the two district councils sitting on the HELAA was 'modest' community representation **and that the number of town and parish councils (over 120) made it impossible to have representatives from all communities.** He reported that HELAA panel meetings are to be held in the autumn followed by community consultation **on the local plan in due course.** Misgivings about the efficacy of community consultation were expressed by Forum members and an assurance was given by IR that parish and town councils would be consulted over their respective local developments **as part of the preparation of the local plan and** before its finalisation.

#### **b) North Devon Biosphere:**

AB reported that several projects were running in wetlands and farms.

Devon Woods, <https://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/devon-woods.html> is a project to check sediment coming off land.

CRITTER is a project which works with landowners and land managers to improve water quality, reduce flood risk, increase the health of local soils, create areas of new salt marsh, all supported through a simple small grant scheme process. Intertidal areas in the project are up to Umberleigh for Taw and up to Weare Gifford for Torridge.

-The amount of wind farm cable coming ashore **should be minimised** on land, **and with** minimal disturbance during peak season **which** raised Forum members speculation over whether 'season' applied to nature's cycles or tourists!

-Coastal Nature Recovery Plan includes monitoring and reduced bird disturbance - funding for coastal schemes is awaited.

-Releasing of water voles is underway.

**c) Port of Bideford:**

PB reported that trade in the port in ball clay is still affected by the European recession. Three abandoned boats had been removed at a cost of around £3000. Discussions with the civil service about establishment of a harbour authority are at an early stage. Our estuary has the only harbour without an authority in the UK. TP asked about the Harbour Board and PB confirmed that access to the Board is through TDC website.

**d) Appledore/Instow Ferry:** CN reported that the two boats were running well

**e) Natural England:** The following written report was circulated at the meeting.

We currently have some enforcement cases in the area but nothing that we could comment on at the present time.

We are currently working closely with the MMO, EA and NDDC on progressing the White Cross Wind Farm but have yet to see the full application. We expect the client will be submitting their terrestrial application to the LPA by the end of July.

**f) Other Reports - Website:** CD reported that he was still awaiting information from the website's original developer. Crab tiles are the subject of a code of conduct on the website and the statement ends mid sentence. AB offered to update the code of conduct and make it complete. **Action AB**

CD recommended we identify the supporters of the Forum by name and sketch outline. It was agreed after discussion that Forum members would be invited to consider how best to reflect the names of supporting organisations on our website. A pro forma to sent out inviting views. **Action IC & TP**

**g)** The following report from **Northam Burrows** was circulated at the meeting.

**Bird disturbance** -Torrige District Council changed the Dog Control PSPO to include wildlife disturbance and have installed signage to inform the public alongside the Skern where the only 2 high tide roosts, vulnerable to dog disturbance, are in the district. Unfortunately North Devon Council has had problems implementing a similar PSPO as they do not own the land where roosts exist in their district. Therefore it has been decided that educational information should be provided to promote a good code of conduct. To this end Torrige District Council are working together with North Devon

Council and Tim Jones to produce some interpretation to guide recreational estuary users.

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The target audience will include dog walkers as well as kayers, SUPers and other water users. It will include a map and information on the location of roosts as well as a code of conduct when visiting these areas. The graphics produced will be suitable for signs, leaflets and to be displayed on websites/social media to ensure that this information is seen by as many people as possible. There is a plan to install the signage as part of the English Coast Path Roll out and the production of the signs is likely to wait until the launch of this, which should be happening soon. However we hope to get the leaflets, social media and websites produced ready for this winter.

**Bio Blitz** -The Northam Burrows BioBlitz was run over the 14/15th of June as part of the North Devon Coast AONBs Finding Nature's Footprint project. Over 400 people attended and we recorded 269 species in total. 189 were new species that were previously unrecorded on records kept by the Devon Biodiversity Record Centre. Here is a link to the joint press release from TDC and the AONB for further information if you want to share this with the group: <https://torridgedistr-newsroom.prgloo.com/newrecord-number-of-species-found-at-northam-burrows-bioblitz>

**Agenda Items prosed for next meeting:** Whitecross wind farm was raised as a matter which the Forum should monitor and establish our view/position on a planning application when it arrives. Forum members were concerned at the lack of transparency on plans. JN called for re-instatement of natural corridors associated with any construction work to lay cables and infrastructure. It was agreed that TTEF would call a special meeting in the event of a planning application appearing before our next quarterly meeting in October.

**Action IC & TP**

**AOB:**

GB raised the issue of flood defences along the North coast of the Taw going downriver from Barnstaple to Braunton

DD announced a Regatta - Barnstaple Pilot Gig Club, Annual Sprint Regatta, Sunday 6th August 2023, 0800hrs to 1100hrs by Castle Quay slipway

**Dates of Future Meetings: Mon. 16th October, Mon. 15th Jan.'24**

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