

THE FIRST THREE YEARS

The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee and its counterpart the Lower Bann Advisory Committee were created to advise Government and Local Government, through Co-ordinating Committees, on management and development in the Lough Neagh/Lower Bann basins. They have now completed their first 3 years of existence.

The Committees are required to take account of drainage and navigation, the maintenance and, where possible, the enhancement of the aquatic and terrestrial environments, including native flora and fauna, natural habitats and man-made heritage. They must consider the promotion of recreation and enjoyment of the countryside, tourism, commercial and rural development and fishery interests.

The composition of the Committees broadly reflects user interest and Local Government responsibility.

After 3 years what has been achieved?

Inevitably after the Committees were established there was an initial settling in period – “marking our territories” one member suggested. That we had corporate identities was, however, fairly quickly accepted. This was mainly due to a general will to meet the challenges facing us and a determination to produce enhanced working arrangements for safe and sustainable use of the water areas and the adjoining land in the interests of all concerned.

We have recognised that to advise on management and development requires a good data base, strategic planning and a need to view development on a catchment wide basis. Thus, there has been emphasis on accessing information on inter-committee relations and on joint working groups; in all of these matters we rely heavily on our Liaison Officer. It is against that background that we have advocated Tourism and Recreation Studies for both areas; these have been completed and the co-ordinating committees are working on implementation. Preliminary steps have been taken also towards devising an environmental strategy which can be related to physical development prospects.

At the same time, and of necessity, we have had to address ongoing problem issues affecting users. Many of these issues are, of course, long-standing and intractable but we have sought nonetheless to secure at least viable working compromises where resolution has not been possible. A good example of this has been the production of recommendations on how to manage watersports activity on the Lower Bann minimising conflict with other users such as fishermen and avoiding environmental damage.

The officials of Government and Local Government with whom we have worked have contributed significantly to the development of the Committees. Their guidance and support has been invaluable.

In all our work, in relations with other Bodies and Agencies and with the Co-ordinating Committees we are indebted to the permanent staff, Bob, the Liaison Officer and Anne his assistant. Their courtesy is unfailing, their dedication is exemplary as is their professionalism.

At the end of three years the national and local election process has caused a delay in re-constituting the Advisory Committees but we look forward to building on our acquired experiences and working with new appointments later in the summer.

Jack Gault
Chairman,
Lower Bann Advisory Committee

Brian Wood
Chairman,
Lough Neagh Advisory Committee

RECORD FISH CATCH ON LOWER BANN

Last September sixty-seven new fishing stands were finished at Movanager Wood on the outskirts of Kilrea.

In early October the local Lower Bann Coarse Angling Club held the last of its summer league competitions at Movanager Wood and with it saw a twelve year old record smashed in a very big way. The previous record held by Charles Sergeant of 121 lbs of fish was beaten with a catch of 193 lbs by Philip Harton. Second was Gert Heinz with a catch of 154 lbs and third was Hugh Elder with a catch of 95 lbs. Club official, Davy Smith of Smith Tackle, Ballymoney was thrilled with the competition and the winning catch. Davy believes that bigger catches are still to be taken out of this stretch.

Coleraine Borough Council funded Kilrea Enterprise Group to build these fishing stands on Forest Service property. The development includes facilities for disabled anglers.

JACK ALLEN

We wish to pay a tribute to the person who played a major role in the development of the Advisory Committees and who devoted much energy and enthusiasm over many years to what were essentially the ideals which the Committees have espoused. Councillor Jack Allen who passed away on 17 April will be missed at our meetings and wherever Lough Neagh and the Bann are discussed. Our sympathy and condolences we offer to his wife and family.

RURAL REGENERATION PROGRAMME FOR THE LOWER BANN

The European Union Leader II Programme is an initiative to help the regeneration of rural areas and provide grant aid to the community and private sectors for rural development projects.

Three partnership companies have been set up to manage the Leader II fund covering disadvantaged rural wards in

- Coleraine
- Magherafelt
- Ballymoney/Ballymena/Antrim

All three Leader II groups have an allocation of money to support projects on the Lower Bann over the next few years. Grant aid will be available for a wide range of projects including the establishment of environmentally sustainable projects based on the Lower Bann and projects to promote rural tourism and countryside access.

For further information on the grant application process contact:

Kathryn McFaul
COLLAGE Leader II Co-ordinator
Economic Development Unit
Coleraine Borough Council
Portstewart Road
COLERAINE
BT52 1EY
Tel: 01265 52181

Chris McCarney
Magherafelt Area Partnership Limited
Magherafelt District Council
50 Ballyronan Road
Magherafelt
BT45 6EN
Tel: 01648 32151

Ciaran Boylan
Lower Bann Leader II Action Group
Antrim Borough Council
The Steeple
ANTRIM
BT41 1BJ
Tel: 01849 463113

LOUGH NEAGH TOURISM AND RECREATION STUDY PUBLISHED

The Lough Neagh Tourism and Recreation Study carried out by consultants last year is now complete and the report has been published.

The study examines the current visitor facilities and infrastructure, explores the strengths and weaknesses of the Lough Neagh tourism and recreation resource, identifies market opportunities and makes recommendations for a sustainable development strategy for tourism and recreation on Lough Neagh.

A seminar will be held in the autumn to consider the implications of the study and the actions that lead organisations will take in implementing a Tourism and Recreation Development Programme for Lough Neagh.

For further information contact the Liaison Officer on 01648 301289.

LOUGH NEAGH'S WETLAND HABITATS UNDER THREAT

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has recently expressed concern that many of our most important wildlife sites are being damaged or neglected. The condition of these Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) is the subject of the RSPB report "Safe and Sound – a Health Check of Northern Ireland's ASSI's".

Lough Neagh ASSI was declared in 1992 and is our largest ASSI. Because of its size, the Society was worried that the important habitats around the lough may have sustained some damage since its designation. For this reason, the RSPB did its own survey of habitat loss or damage around the lough in spring 1996.

A total of 68 examples of damage were recorded. A few of these may have been on the edge or just outside the boundaries of the ASSI. Yet since the survey was conducted from public roads and paths, other damaging activities may have been overlooked.

The most common type of damage recorded was clearance of willow or alder scrub, dumping or infilling with soil and other materials, and over-grazing by cattle. Much of this damage was obviously recent and in some cases was still going on at the time of the survey. Although many examples were small scale, some damages was extensive and the combined impact of these activities could have a serious effect on the ASSI.

The RSPB has sent a report to Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), who are responsible for the protection and management of ASSI's. EHS was aware of many of the examples provided, and the Society accepts that the Service has a difficult task to ensure that this damage is restored. To this end, RSPB has called for more resources to be made available to EHS to allow this important work to be done.

MANAGING WATERSPORTS ON THE LOWER BANN

In the last issue of Eel Express the "Calming the Waters" article outlined proposals by Magherafelt and Ballymena Councils to introduce management measures on the Lower Bann at Newferry aimed at creating safer conditions for watersports enthusiasts and reducing conflict with anglers and other users.

The introduction of a registration scheme and clearly defined zones for different users proved highly successful. The Lower Bann Advisory Committee, in close consultation with the councils, Rivers Agency and the Sports Council, have now produced detailed recommendations for a similar management approach at Ballymoney's Drumaheglis Marina and Coleraine Marina.

LOUGH NEAGH TOURISM UPDATE

Since October, Lough Neagh Tourism have been involved in an extensive direct mail campaign for each of the specialist markets, birdwatching, angling and golf, along with ongoing advertising for these.

The Lough Neagh main guide and Explorers guide have been updated for 1997 with new accommodation and attraction providers coming on board in each of the council areas.

Mary Jo McCanny departed as Tourism Marketing Officer for Lough Neagh in November 1996. She was replaced by Judith Boyle for a few months but now Judith too is moving on to pastures new. The post is currently vacant but in the meantime Zoe Lindsay will be standing in.

In the Marketing Plan for 1997 there are plans to develop new specialist markets. For example, a cycling route around the Lough and the promotion of more watersports activities.

Emphasis in the Plan will be given to raising the profile of Lough Neagh in the media and will also be looking to extend the traditional tourism sector by promoting activity breaks and out of season breaks.

As in previous years, the Consortium will also be attending a range of exhibitions at Shannon, Belfast, Cork, Glasgow and Birmingham.

For further information on Lough Neagh Tourism, please contact:

Tourism Marketing Officer
Lough Neagh Tourism
Antrim Borough Council
The Steeple
ANTRIM
BT41 1BJ

Tel: 01849 481312/463113

A WATER QUALITY MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR LOUGH NEAGH

Environment and Heritage Service has given a commitment to prepare a Water Quality Management Plan for the Lough Neagh catchment. The plan will be drawn up by the Water Quality unit of Environment and Heritage Service with the aid of EU funding through the INTERREG initiative.

As a cross border project the plan will be drawn up in partnership with DOE (ROI) Dublin and Monaghan County Council. Lough Neagh will be the fourth catchment to have a plan prepared – work is already well advanced with plans for the Lagan, Erne and Foyle catchments.

Catchment management plans aim to:

- Assess the state of the catchment
- Identify and assess major uses of the catchment
- Collate information on the catchment
- Identify significant issues affecting water quality
- Ensure the provision of adequate monitoring and information systems
- Provide a framework for effective water quality management

Preparation of the Lough Neagh Water Quality Management Plan will bring together a lot of existing data into a single database and the extensive consultation process will bring together in a more harmonised way different perspectives on water quality. With this information it will be possible to prioritise action and investment to most effectively manage water quality in the catchment.

The Lough Neagh catchment includes the rivers Maine, Sixmilewater, Crumlin, Glenavy, Upper Bann, Blackwater, Ballinderry and Moyola. The Lower Bann and all of its tributary rivers will also be included in the plan.

The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee and the Lower Bann Advisory Committee warmly welcome this initiative and will be working closely with Environment and Heritage Service throughout the plan preparation process.

For further information contact:
Mr Angus McRobert
Environment & Heritage Service
Calvert House
23 Castle Place
Belfast
BT1 1FY

1997 SHALLOW LAKES CONFERENCE

Craigavon Borough Council and the European Movement (NI) are jointly hosting a major international conference addressing sustainable development based on the natural resources of shallow lakes on 9-12 September 1997 at the Craigavon Civic Centre.

The conference is being supported by the European Commission and will have speakers from Iceland, Hungary, Denmark, Scotland, Republic of Ireland and the UK. Lough Neagh will be one of the lakes examined in detail. One of the principle aims of the conference is to produce guidelines for the integrated sustainable management of shallow lakes. If you wish to find out more about this conference contact:

Mrs P Holmes
Positive Action
63 Spa Road
Ballynahinch
BT24 8PT

Tel: 01238 562332

NEW CRAFT FOR LOUGH NEAGH RESCUE

Lough Neagh Rescue Service has launched a new Kinnego-based inshore lifeboat.

The lifeboat, named Bungy, replaces the existing seven-year old lifeboat at Kinnego which will continue to fulfil a training/back-up emergency role. The purchase of the new boat was part funded as a water based tourism measure under the European Union's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. LNR depends on local fund-raising and discretionary contributions from the six local councils bordering Lough Neagh to cover on-going costs.

At the official launching ceremony Craigavon Mayor, Alderman Sam Lutton, thanked all concerned for their support of search and rescue operations on Lough Neagh.

NEW SEWAGE DISPOSAL SYSTEM FOR CRAIGAVON

At present the sewage from the Craigavon area is treated at three major sewage treatment works situated at Bullay's Hill, Ballynacor and Seagoe. In different ways the discharge from all three sewage works causes problems.

Bullay's Hill sewage works serves the town of Lurgan and discharges treated effluent to the Woodville River which flows into Kinnego Bay in Lough Neagh. Kinnego Bay has a very narrow entrance which results in poor water exchange between the bay and the open lough. Effluent is therefore slow to disperse throughout the main body of the lough and poor water quality in Kinnego Bay has meant that it has been impossible to promote water sports that bring people into contact with the water.

Ballynacor Sewage Works, serving new housing developments and industry in Craigavon also discharges treated effluent into Lough Neagh at Derryadd Bay. The outfall pipe was placed at the lake edge as a temporary measure in 1970 and since then has frequently caused local problems with smells and surface slicks especially during calm summer weather.

Seagoe Sewage Works serves the town of Portadown and presently discharges treated effluent to the lower reaches of the Upper River Bann. Water Quality is affected especially in summer when flows are slower and the mixing effect weaker.

To deal with all of these problems Water Service have decided to bring sewage effluent from all three sewage works together to be treated at Ballynacor before being finally discharges into Lough Neagh. Ballynacor is on a rural site where Water Service have room to extend and upgrade the works to cope with the increased load and treat the effluent to a higher standard. An outfall pipe on the lake bed will release the treated effluent 480 metres offshore in water 5.5 metres deep at the mouth of Derryadd Bay midway between the Ardmore Rectory Point and Croaghan Island.

Water Service have met Lough Neagh Advisory Committee to discuss their proposals and the Advisory Committee welcome the benefit this will bring to water quality in Kinnego Bay and the lower reaches of the Upper Bann.

The first phase of the project involving the piping of effluent from Bullay's Hill, Lurgan to Ballynacor is planned to begin at the end of this year. Users of the Kinnego Marina and Kinnego Bay are looking forward to cleaner water in future with much lower bacteria and ammonia levels and expect to use the Bay again for water contact sports such as windsurfing.

Whilst the water in Kinnego Bay should become safe from a public health point of view difficulties with the water quality will remain as the bed of Kinnego Bay has accumulated considerable quantities of organic matter which will continue to consume oxygen on the lake bed. It remains to be seen if this will cause a problem for fish life in the bay. Water quality in the Upper Bann downstream of the former sewage works at Seagoe will improve when the effluent pipe is made redundant in a few years time but not only by a small amount as the pollution load from other sources in the river have been identified as the main cause of poor water quality there.

NEW SIGNS FOR THE LOWER BANN

Following on from the Tourism and Recreation Study on the Lower Bann, Rivers Agency commissioned a special study to identify signage needs along the river.

As a result of this Rivers Agency now has plans to replace the safety and navigation signage throughout the length of the river corridor this year with easier to read, more modern signs. The new signage will incorporate the Bann Disc logo as used by the Lower Bann Advisory Committee and will follow up-to-date British and European waterway management practice using clearly recognisable symbols and pictograms. All of the navigation markers through Lough Beg will be replaced by red and white channel navigation markers similar to those used on Lough Erne.

For the first time visitor welcome signs will be placed at either end of the Lower Bann navigation with information on aircraft on bridges, maximum draft, length, main settlements, number of locks and overall fall of the river.

LOUGHSHORES PROJECT APPLICATIONS ROLL IN

The aim of the Loughshores Area Based Strategy (ABS) is to facilitate rural regeneration, in the western and southern shores of Lough Neagh, through providing support for the social, economic and environmental infrastructure. The Strategy is involved in the distribution of funding to projects in the area.

In February and March 1997, community groups and private individuals who had a suitable project for ABS support submitted formal applications. Approximately 56 completed applications were received.

This graph shows the proportionate split of projects over the three councils. The split relates well to the proportion of the district contained in the ABS study area. Two projects span all of the three council areas.

Projects may span several of the Strategy themes depending on their content. It is therefore difficult to allocate them to one theme.

This diagram gives an idea of projects received against the three themes of Communications, Environment and Indigenous Business.

The 56 project applications received are now being scrutinised and scored by the appropriate Theme Sub Groups. It is important that each project receives consideration, and for this reason, this evaluation process is time consuming. It is envisaged that the ABSAG will be making funding decisions by early summer.

The ABS commissioned a study into the feasibility of Crossings over the Bann and Blackwater Rivers. Taking all aspects into consideration, it is evident that ferries would be the most applicable for both of these crossings. The ABS has now handed the River Crossings Project to South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association. It is hoped that they will further the work of the ABS along with a suitable community economic development project.

The Battery Harbour on the Western Shores was highlighted by the ABSAG as a suitable location for provision of water based tourism and enhancement of fishing facilities. DANI Rivers Agency has appointed Mulholland and Doherty to undertake a comprehensive feasibility study.

It is anticipated that there will be a further application round for ABS funding. This may be initiated in late summer. Details will appear through the local media.

If you would like further information about the Strategy or feel that you could have a significant input into achieving its aims, please contact Caroline Marshall on 016487 36667.

PRINCE CHARLES VISITS PORTNEAL LODGE

On 26 June last year Portneal Lodge had a surprise visit from a very special VIP.

The identity of the forthcoming personality was surrounded by a great deal of secrecy. When the day arrived the level of security was substantially increased with intense activity in and on the Bann. By this stage it was widely known that Prince Charles was in the Province for a three day visit and it became obvious who the VIP was going to be.

The Prince was welcomed to Portneal by Councillor John Dallat, Chairman of the Kilrea Enterprise Group, his wife Anne, and Deirdre and Tom McAvinchey, management team at Portneal. After meeting some of the local people he made his way to the riverbank, stopping at the jetty to talk to local anglers about the game and coarse fishing. The Prince is well known for his love and interest in all things to do with the countryside especially conservation issues. The Prince was very impressed with the concept and design of Portneal Lodge and especially with the idea that it can be used for community activities as well as staying visitors. He appreciated the role of such developments in bringing extra income/business into rural areas.

He thanked all those involved with his visit to Portneal, acknowledged that the time spent was too short and hoped to return some day to take up the management's invitation for a fishing holiday.

COLLAPSE OF FISH MARKET

Commercial fishermen and fish processors on Lough Neagh are experiencing a major setback with the collapse of the market for perch and pollen.

In recent years the Swiss have been eager to buy perch and pollen from Lough Neagh to satisfy a local taste for filleted freshwater fish. Eel fishing is still the mainstay for Lough Neagh fishermen but fishing for perch, and to a lesser extent pollen, have become an important means of income for eel fishermen not holding an eel fishing permit.

Unfortunately for the fishermen the Swiss market collapsed last year when new sources of perch from Eastern Europe flooded the market forcing prices down. To make matters worse the Swiss lakes that had in the past been overfished have now been rested and local supplies are improving. With poor prices for fish Fisheries Conservancy Board has reported a dramatic reduction in the number of licences for fishing nets taken out since last year.

While the situation looks grim for fishermen department on scale fish the outlook for eel fishermen looks a lot better. Each spring elvers run the River Bann on their way to Lough Neagh from the Sargasso Sea. From records before 1960 we know that the number of elvers entering Lough Neagh each spring varied from 15-30 million. By the

1970s this had dropped to 8-20 million and, worryingly, by the early 1990s the elver run had declined to a level varying between 2.5 and 4.4 million each year. The 1996 spring run showed a slight recovery with 8 million elvers recorded. Fishermen are hopeful that this is a promising sign for the future.

HYDRO ELECTRIC STATION AT THE CUTTS STILL AN OPTION

Bann System Limited have been exploring the possibility of building a hydro electric station at the Cutts, Coleraine.

Their latest bid to gain a grant to provide electricity to the national grid under the Non-Fossil Fuel Order has been unsuccessful. As an alternative option the company are now considering the feasibility of supplying electricity to local commercial users in the event of a change to the existing law.