

Solent Water Quality Conference 2010



Enjoying Water

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Introduction and Background

Enjoying Water is a partnership project led by the Environment Agency, working with a number of other organisations across the London and South East. It is essentially a strategic planning project looking at water related sports and recreation opportunities across the London and South East regions. Our terms of reference include all recreational sports and activities taking place – in the water, on the water or near the water.

Do any of us have any idea of the significance of people being able to enjoy water in our region? Do we know what enjoying water means for local economies? What does it mean for our quality of life and what will it mean for our region in the future?

We will all have a picture in mind if we think about these questions and it won't be the same for each of us. But for all of us the image probably includes good quality water, good amenities and good access to the water.

A few statistics from the most recent Watersports and Leisure Participation Survey commissioned by ¹BMF, RYA and others help to set the scene; nationally an estimated 13.2 million adults took part in watersports and water-based leisure activities last year. Of these participants, 3.7million were undertaking boating in one form or another. Participation rates are up on last year for most activities. Most of this activity takes places in coastal locations and the highest participation rates for any boating activities are here in the South.

And so we might assume that all this activity is supported by a strong planning framework that takes proper account of the demand for and the opportunities for water related recreation but research and experience suggests this isn't the case: We're not seeing the significance of water and blue space, reflected in regional plans and strategies. We're not seeing much evidence that planning is taking into account our changing climate and how this may result in increased demand for access to water for recreation when at the same time, in some locations, there could simply be less water around to accommodate these activities. These are some of the reasons why we have become involved in strategic planning for water related recreation.

Project Aims

The Enjoying Water project was set up in September last year. The consulting team is from the University of Brighton and the Steering Group comprises a wide range of partners including British Waterways, Department of Health South East, Natural England, Sport England, SEEDA and Tourism South East. The aim of the project is to:

- Identify gaps in provision for water related sport and recreation
- Protect existing activities and facilities
- Identify a set of priorities for new and improved opportunities for people to enjoy water in London and the South East

Work so Far

We have carried out audits of relevant plans and strategies and also audits of waterbodies and how they are used. Then in January and March this year we held a series of seven consultation workshops across the region. These were attended by a wide range people including watersports clubs, governing bodies of sport, local access forums, water companies and local authorities.

From the workshops we've picked up on key issues for users and managers of the waterspace and land near water, both on the coast, on rivers and on inland lakes and ponds.

¹ *Watersports and Leisure Participation Survey 2009, British Marine Federation et al.*

We found that people really valued doorstep opportunities to take part but also that travel was unavoidable for participants in some activities, for those living in London and wanting to do kite surfing for example!

We learned how in some areas development pressure can affect space for recreational facilities for example in growth areas such as urban south Hampshire and the Thames corridor.

We found examples of good practice in areas of deprivation where opportunities to take part in angling and other activities play a key role in tackling social problems such as youth crime and truancy.

We also met with professionals from the health sector who saw a role for water recreation in helping to meet government targets for levels of physical activity in the population.

The workshop phase is over and now we are putting together a set of strategic priorities which will form part of an online consultation from July to September.

Benefits of Enjoying Water in other Regions

In Wales, the Strategic plan resulted in a commitment of £1.2million from the Welsh Assembly Government for a Splash fund to improve opportunities for people to access water. And in the South West, the Enjoying Water process has resulted in a number of initiatives including the development of eight inland hubs for water related recreation. The Rural Development Programme for England earmarked up to £3m to support these.

The South West has also seen the launch of the Blue Gym – an initiative by the Peninsular Medical School and supported by ourselves and Natural England. Blue Gym aims to get people more physically active through water based opportunities.

We look forward to working with partners and seeing the benefits of Enjoying Water in our region. However, we are not just looking to realise more at projects on the ground. This is a strategic approach and we are also using this process to influence at all levels the plans and the strategies of other organisations. We want to see a move away from plans and policies that marginalise water recreation. Instead we want to see more plans and policies acknowledging the value of blue space and the diverse role of water recreation across our region.

Consultation and Contacts

Details of the e-consultation can be found on the university of Brighton website: www.brighton.ac.uk/waterrecreation. Please take the opportunity to visit the website and look at the work done to date including the workshop posters submitted by workshops attendees.

Email us on: enjoyingwater@environment-agency.gov.uk
