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TESTING TIMES

Capture the data and you may catch the polluter, says Simon Cooper



WHY ARE THE BRITISH PUBLIC and media now kicking up such a stink about sewage? How is it that every media outlet from primetime BBC news to the leader column of

The Times is carrying stories and opinion about the unacceptable dumping of raw waste into our rivers and coastal waters? Why, finally, is Ofwat and their fellow traveller in the destruction of our rivers, the Environment Agency, finally getting the kicking they richly deserve? The answer lies in the data.

Now, we anglers have known for years of the rich cocktail of nasties seeping into our rivers, even if we could not exactly identify or explain the precise nature of the pollution. I say seeping because for the most part it's been just that. Unobtrusive to the casual observer. Which is part of our problem. Lean over the River Test bridge in Stockbridge and you'll see pellucid water, bright shining gravel and thick-waisted brown trout hanging between the rafts of gently waving water buttercup. It is a joy of joys to behold, but it is a beautiful picture painted on a gently rotting canvas.

I recall the first time I truly understood the invidious nature of "accidental" pollution back at the start of my professional chalkstream career when I had just taken on a beat near the source of the Test. However hard I tried, there was a 50-yard section where the ranunculus simply would not grow. I tried all the tricks — replanting, narrowing, letting in more light — but it remained a fishless desert of gravel. The odd thing was that out of season the weed would make a winter comeback but then brown off and die once the spring flows abated. Eventually, I worked it out. The cause was massive nutrient overload from slurry run-off seeping from a nearby dairy farm.

I called on what was then the local National Rivers Authority (forerunner of the Environment Agency)

guy. He was keen to help, completely understood the issue and even went to have an informal word with the farmer, but essentially he and I were powerless to take effective action by way of a cease-and-desist notice. Why? Because we had no data. To bring any enforcement action, iron-clad scientific data, from an unimpeachable source that would stand up in court, was required. I didn't have that, and nor did I have the money to engage laboratory sampling for two or three years to bring a civil action. And for the NRA this was too small a beer to bother with.

But just imagine if the length of the Test, and every river in Britain had a constant monitoring regime that built up data over months and years. Soon, polluters, accidental or serial, would be identified. Prosecutions would follow, but best of all, as Voltaire wrote of the execution of Admiral Byng in 1757, the very existence of the testing would *pour encourager les autres*.

Clearly, we don't have such a testing regime, though it's something we should all campaign for. However, in the past five years, we have seen the emergence of sewage overflow data that is in the public domain with, it is estimated, 89% of "spills" recorded. The recording is still rudimentary, with an automated system due to be in place by 2025 (water companies are pushing back on this) but the fact we know the water companies discharged untreated sewage into rivers in England more than 400,000 times for tens of millions of hours in 2020 is a huge step forward.

Knowledge is power, and in our modern, connected world, data is king. Let's fight for more and use it wisely to fight our causes. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk