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CHALK TALK

Who should protect our rivers?

Simon Cooper demands radical change

IT IS NOW THREE MONTHS SINCE news of the biggest water pollution scandal in years hit the headlines. Southern Water, the private company charged with treating the wastewater and sewage that flows into the rivers and seas of Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, West Sussex, East Sussex and Kent, was issued with financial penalties totalling £126m by the regulator Ofwat. Criminal prosecutions are under consideration.

The newspapers that carried the story are by now just so many fish 'n' chip wrappers so it is worth reminding ourselves of just what happened. Essentially, Southern Water was guilty of not one but two crimes. Firstly, it discharged wastewater into the environment from its sewage plants that breached the industry code – it wasn't as clean as it should be. If that wasn't bad enough, it then deliberately misrepresented (the water companies are self-regulating in this respect) the performance of the plants from 2010-2017 to hide what was going on. By acting dishonestly (not my word but that of its chief executive, Ian McAulay) it polluted the rivers and seas of southern England from many of its 300 sewage-treatment works; to date we have not been told which plants or where.

It might be tempting to give Southern Water the benefit of the doubt but for two reasons. Firstly, it has form, having been fined £20.3m in 2007 for “deliberate misreporting” and failing to meet guaranteed standards of service to customers. The then chief executive Les Dawson said: “Today’s announcement draws a line under a shameful period in the company’s history.” It clearly didn’t. And secondly, nobody in the industry seems to think Southern Water is the sole offender, simply the only one to get caught.

You might fairly ask at this point where the Environment Agency (EA), largely funded by the taxpayer with an annual budget of £1.3bn per year, was during all this. After all, one of the three purposes it states for its existence in its 2017/18 *Annual Report* is “the regulation of industry”. Now you might forgive the EA if Southern Water’s transgressions were occasional or short-lived. But seven years? A headline writer for a tabloid newspaper might pithily sum it up with “Asleep at The Wheel”. A politician would declare the EA not fit for purpose. Whatever phrase you use, or view you take, it really does make you wonder: what is the point of the EA?

As anglers we only see the tiniest tip of the giant iceberg that is the EA. Its geographical and regulatory reach is huge. Climate change. Air quality. Landfill. Incineration. Asbestos. Clinical waste. Nuclear waste. Water quality of lake, river and sea. Abstraction. Fishing. Canals. Navigation. The list goes on and on covering 13 million hectares of land, 22,000 miles of river and 3,100 miles of coastline seawards to the three-mile limit, which includes two million hectares of coastal waters. Is it any wonder that among this vast array we come low on the totem? Even in cash terms angling is a gnat bite: the fishing licence income is £23m, just seven per cent of the total £320m the EA raises annually from fees and charges.

It seems clear that when it comes to our rivers, only 14 per cent of which are currently classified as in good health, the EA is failing in its duties. So, what to do? Well, I suppose we could create a regulator to regulate the regulator but that seems to me to miss the essential problem with the EA: it is trying to do too much, is hampered by the regulatory regime of which it is a part and is often conflicted in how to allocate resources. When I tell you EA income from abstraction

“Our population, up eight million in two decades, is putting ever-greater pressure on water”

licences is £118m a year I think you’ll get what I am driving at. It is time for an independent river protection authority.

Unbelievably, we have never really had such a thing in England and Wales. True, we did briefly have the National Rivers Authority between 1989 when it was created in the wake of water privatisation, and 1996 when it was subsumed into the EA. But it was fatally flawed, having to buy from the private water companies the water in reservoirs that had been specifically built to sustain rivers in times of drought. Prior to that there were regional water authorities, catchment boards, drainage boards and all manner of bodies who were generally local-authority run with a brief to provide cheap water, low-cost sewage treatment and prevent flooding; there was little or no oversight of the health of rivers. As the adage goes, the more things change the more they stay the same.

But they need to change. Our increasing population, up eight million in the past two decades, is putting ever-greater pressure on water – where it comes from and where it goes to. No longer can we rely on self-regulation and agencies with multiple responsibilities. We need a Pure Water Authority with great funding, draconian powers and the single-minded brief to protect, preserve and improve our rivers. **IRIS**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk), the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of the best-selling books *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters’ Tale* published by William Collins.