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CHALK TALK

Unintended consequences

How will moves to counter climate change affect our rivers?
asks **Simon Cooper**

IT HAS BEEN DECIDED, AT LEAST BY the government committee who have oversight on these things, that Britain should be a carbon neutral nation by 2050. Should that become the core of national policy there will be huge cost to the British people in both financial and lifestyle terms. Now you may or may not agree with this policy. We could debate for many hours but for me the more interesting question is how the interests of the countryside, and our rivers, should be inserted into this debate.

I ask that because, in the headlong rush to achieve global targets, there is a good chance we will be forgotten. While the government basks in the warm glow of international congratulation, you and I will stand beside fetid rivers surrounded by a landscape ravaged by urbanisation and intensive agriculture.

There are clearly aspects of the proposals that, from an entirely selfish standpoint, we'd be mad to stand in the way of. Electric cars are the most obvious. Noise intrusion is one of the most hated aspects of rivers I have near roads and under flight paths. In the past three decades, first with the arrival of the M3 and then the rebranding of Southampton airport as international the Itchen valley that Keats so movingly wrote about has become, at times, unbearable. No longer will a sudden summer downpour wash a slick of petrol and fuel detergent into our rivers. The roar of cars will be replaced by a gentle hiss. Happy days ahead. Not since the arrival of the railways in 1825 will the British countryside have fallen so silent.

But and it is a huge but, the push for less meat and more cereals will change our rural landscape. There is no doubt

that the drive for food security that began in WWII has come at a huge cost to our insect and wildlife. There is a saying in gardening that a weed is only an unwanted flower. The pest in pesticides are only pests to the farming industry. I am not a huge fan of Communist regimes, but it is no coincidence that the purest and most sought-after honey on the planet comes from Cuba where agriculture is still largely chemical free. As the ruminants disappear from our countryside, along with the meadows in which they live, who will be pointing out that this is not necessarily a good thing?

“Who is following the chemical trail from manufacture, to use and then on into the natural landscape?”

As we push for the end of single-use plastics, green energy and a more sustainable nation how will that filter down to purer and better rivers, both figuratively and actually?

My guess is very little because the focus will be elsewhere. There is only so much bandwidth in government policy and public acceptance for disruption. And that's before you even start to take account of the financial impacts. The PR machines of our leading retailers will purr with satisfaction as we are told that the bleach bottles on the supermarket shelves have attained the required sustainability standard. But who is talking about what is in those bottles? Who is following the chemical trail from manufacture, to use and then on into the natural landscape via the treatment works? Well, there is a certain amount of oversight via bodies such as the Environment Agency, but it is woefully inadequate in both the standards set and the ability to enforce those standards.

In the end it falls to us anglers to make a fuss. Rivers matter to us as much as the planet matters to those who currently have the ear of government. We need to find a way to be heard not just to protect our pastime but to show how important rivers are to the natural world of Britain. It might not be as exciting as blue whales breaching in the vast expanses of the oceans but it's what we have on our doorstep. It is where we played as children. It is where our children play. It is where we hope their children will play.

Somehow, we must persuade all those that will listen that we are not only trashing the planet but our countryside as well. Rivers and their catchments deserve a special level of environmental protection rigorously enforced by law. Every bit of water that is touched, used or recycled by us in town, village or factory must flow to the river as pure as the day it fell from the heavens. And we can make this happen by becoming the local insurgents to the global climate change movement. **TRG**

■ 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.