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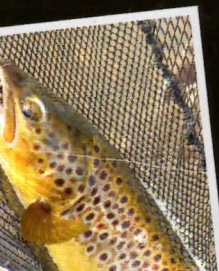
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CHALK TALK

Catch the rain

*Reducing abstraction is achievable and would attract public support, argues **Simon Cooper***

THE “E” WORD HAS BEEN MUCH in use recently, though for a change the word is existential rather than environmental, though the former did (ironically) fall from the lips of Sir James Bevan, chief executive of the Environment Agency, when he made a keynote speech to the Waterwise Conference, which was promoting the reduction in water consumption, back in the spring.

The thrust of his speech was that England is facing an existential threat because within 20-25 years the country would reach the “jaws of death” when demand for water outstrips supply. He cited two reasons for this impending crisis: climate change and population growth. Whatever your views on the climate change debate it seems increasingly clear that if the population rises by the predicted ten million over the next two decades we’ll still have enough rain, but it will be falling in the wrong places at the wrong times. The challenge is to store, move, create and conserve it. For all anglers this poses both threats and opportunities.

The threat is pretty damn obvious for all rivers, though I will put in a special pleading for the chalkstreams. Look at a map of England that shows the locations of the reservoirs. Then overlay on to that a map of the chalkstream regions. It will be something of a revelation. For wherever there are chalkstreams there are no reservoirs. The water companies in both their pre- and post-nationalisation lives have been sucking the life out of our chalkstreams because nobody told them not to. But now both desalination and reservoirs are back on the agenda, or at least Sir James hopes so.

Plenty of us have been banging on for years about

desalination. It seems insane that some of the purest river water on the planet is allowed to flow uncaptured into the ocean. I have no idea what the daily outflow on the Avon, Itchen and Test might be, but I suspect it would make a mighty dent in our water needs. But there is, at last, the talk of a plant on the south coast; finally, recognition that we can’t keep pillaging water direct from the ground.

Desalination plants are not as difficult as everyone supposes; the one that was built in Beckton in 2010 at the east end of London seems to be the country’s best kept secret. The plant produces 150 million litres of water a day, which is enough to supply 900,000 people and runs on 100 per cent renewable energy. The plant takes water from the tidal Thames during the last three hours of the ebb tide and removes salt using a reverse osmosis process. It wasn’t exactly cheap to build at £250 million. But on the other hand, if we waylaid the current budget for HS2 (a government-financed high-speed rail link between London and Birmingham) of £55.7 billion for desalination we’d have enough water for a population of 222 million.

Commercial desalination might be relatively new, but reservoirs are not. The first in England, Thirlmere in Cumbria, opened in 1894 and the most recent, Devon’s Roadford Lake, in 1989. Thirty years on and not a single new reservoir. Why? A reservoir is not exactly a nuclear power plant; the resultant beauty and amenity hard to argue against. The truth probably lies in the year Roadford opened; it was the year the water industry was privatised. No pun intended, but governments of all hue took that moment as the cue to wash their hands of water issues. Reservoirs are massive infrastructure projects that require a level of political will to override local objections that is currently absent.

You might ask why I think that all of the above provides the angling community with opportunity. On the whole,

“Reservoirs are massive projects that require a level of political will ... that is currently absent”

I think water companies do a pretty good job of delivering us with cheap, regular, clean water; I suspect that just about everyone’s water bill is less than their mobile phone bill. Of course, there are accidents and spillages. Sewage treatment is still far behind the times. But the latter is the fault of regulation and oversight; commercial firms will only do what they are asked or told to do.

Ultimately, our rivers will be saved when the demand for water is met from elsewhere. When the rain that falls in the winter is stored for the summer. Homes and businesses evolve to use less water. When water is “created” by desalination during droughts or shortages. Beating up the water companies for their perceived perfidy won’t get us to that point. However hateful it may seem, we have to support them to make this all happen. I never met anyone who didn’t love a river. We can use that to win the day. **T&S**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the chalkstream fishing specialists (fishingbreaks.co.uk). He is author of the best-selling *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters’ Tale*. His new book *Frankel: The Greatest Racehorse* is published in July.