

**FRY
TIME**
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Blagdon trout

TROUT & SALMON

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Autumn glory

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salmon and
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his secrets

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moves**

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THE WAY FORWARD

Simon Cooper suggests new fronts in the battle to protect our rivers



WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE NOW that all of the children have grown up? For you, me or anyone reading this column, those children are us. The last generation who grew up in a time when most rivers and coastlines around Britain were considered clean. In our lifetimes, excepting the few urban rivers that have had a renaissance on the back of our decline as an industrial nation, we had childhood waters to safely swim, drink and enjoy.

It's now autumn and time has moved on since Southern Water were fined £90m in the summer for what the judge called "persistent pollution of the environment" with 168 previous offences and cautions, including fines of £126m in 2019 and £12m in 2011, which had been effectively ignored and not altered its behaviour.

You, like me, probably wonder if capitalism and the free market can deliver a water and sewage industry that pays more than lip service to protecting our rivers. So, where do we go from here? I like the triple A approach: awareness, action, and accountability.

Awareness first because, if we don't take the public with us, we will never win the arguments for the hard road that lies ahead. On this, I think, we are actually doing well. Issues with sewage pollution have shot up the agenda thanks to BBC *Panorama*, the Southern Water fines, the George Monbiot www.rivercide.tv, wild swimmers and Surfers Against Sewage. Likewise, Feargal Sharkey. He of The Undertones fame is our high-profile crusader for clean rivers and very effective he is, too. However, you'll notice fish and angling are absent from this list. Fish simply do not excite public sympathy. Nor does the plight of anglers. To win this fight we'll have to piggyback on a wave of concern for swimmers, surfers, and ecology.

Action is going to have to be by way of legislation; both OFWAT and the EA need to be replaced. The Office

for Water Regulation (OFWAT) is too skewed towards producer interests. The Environment Agency (EA) has too much on its plate with more than 100 regulatory jurisdictions from atomic waste to fly-tipping. We require the creation of a single body. As I've suggested before, let us call it the Pure Water Authority (PWA) which will oversee the processes governing every drop of water from the moment it is first collected to the time it is returned to the river or sea.

Finally, accountability, which needs to happen on two levels. Firstly, the PWA, or whatever it happens to be called, will need real teeth. It strikes me as insane that if I were a restaurateur, I could face sanctions, including jail time, for breaches of public health law, but as a water company executive I can pollute the water of millions but avoid any personal punishment. Secondly, as a nation, we must account for the water we use by reflecting the real cost both in collection and treatment. Since privatisation in 1989, the average household water-sewage bill has fallen in real terms by 42%; a recent survey of West Country households rated broadband a more important utility than water. We have long accepted the principle that the polluter pays; it is time for the consumer to do the same.

By the way, I can't claim credit for the opening line; it is from an Alan Parsons song. If you haven't heard of Alan Parsons the songwriter, you will certainly know of Alan Parsons the record producer, the man behind Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* album. If only we could turn the clock back to 1973 and start all over. ■

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