

## World Rivers Day 2020 (Friday 25<sup>th</sup> September).

### Our Rivers are Wonderful – Don't give up on them.

After appalling news on the state of UK's rivers last week, Mark Lloyd lifts our spirits for World Rivers Day (Friday 25<sup>th</sup>) and shares Seven Wonders that give us hope for the future. But, he warns that we need much more ambition if we're going to spear head the green recovery we urgently need if we are to return more resilient after Covid and secure a sustainable future for people and wildlife on this wonderful planet of ours.

### The week that was...

Last week was a tough week for nature-lovers, worse still for fish-huggers. WWF's Living Planet Report reported that vertebrate species have declined by 68% in my lifetime, with the biggest losses seen in freshwater ecosystems; the Environment Agency released new water quality data showing us that 0% (yes, zero) of British rivers are in good health; and David Attenborough finished us off with *'Extinction: the Facts'* telling us that if we don't all act now, we will face ecological collapse.

It would be time to head for the hills, if they weren't already clear-felled, on fire and devoid of life. As there is no Planet B, it's time to stand our ground and breathe the life back into it. Our green and blue spaces have provided refuge and a natural health service, the vital benefits of which have been plain to see over the past 6 months. Now they need us more than ever, and we need them more than ever, so is there hope?

### Action

The good news is that we know WHAT to do and we even know HOW to do it. At the launch of the Eden Catchment Plan this week, Professor Dieter Helm forcibly opined that it is an economic no-brainer to restore the natural capital of our rivers and their catchments. The pay back wildly exceeds the costs. All that is needed is for us to get governance and expenditure organised around catchments, to develop a clear consensus of priorities for action and the political will to deliver many more projects like the seven wonders of English Rivers I've highlighted below, at a strategic scale.

1. **Unlocking our rivers for Fish passage:** Severn Rivers Trust's Unlocking the Severn project is carrying out major engineering works to provide safe fish passage round six huge weirs, opening up 158 miles of river to migratory fish.
2. **Revitalising Rivers** - Don Catchment Rivers Trust has led work that has seen salmon return to Sheffield for the first time in 200 years.
3. **Restoring Wetlands** – An award-winning wetland delivered by Thames21 in Broomfield Park, London has reduced flood risk, treated urban pollutants, created new wildlife habitat and engaged thousands of local residents in a nature-based solution.
4. **A new clarity with transparency** – The Rivers Trust has opened the door to transparency by publishing a map of sewage overflows throughout England and the Catchment Based Approach has brought together data from numerous sources to make them available, free of charge, to everyone. We can only start to fix the problem when we have a clear and realistic view of it, however depressing that is to begin with.

5. **Fighting for rivers fit to swim in** – the government is now consulting on whether the River Wharfe at Ilkley in Yorkshire should be the first river designated as a bathing water in the UK, leading the way for rivers fit to play in throughout the country.
6. **Natural flood management solutions**– a pioneering project to use private funding to pay for slowing the flow of water and restoring natural habitat in the uplands above the River Wyre in Lancashire has brought together water companies, regulators, the Wyre Rivers Trust and international banks around a catchment-wide nature-based solution.
7. **Communities coming together for Catchments**– Local Partnerships following the Catchment Based Approach have created local coalitions of the willing to develop a clear consensus about the priorities for action in 105 catchments in England and have generated £3.50 for every £1 contributed by the government.

### **Ambition**

The definition of madness is repeating the same activity and expecting different results. Despite all this great work at a local and catchment scale – and countless other great projects – our rivers are as unhealthy as they were 3 years ago. It's abundantly clear that we need radical change and disruption of water management if we are to avoid being in the same state or worse in three, 13 or 30 years' time.

Good, clear data is essential if we are to turn things around. The Rivers Trust is working on a proposal for a Catchment Monitoring Co-operative to bring all data of known quality together for every catchment in the land, and present it in a user-friendly, open access format that will enable everyone to understand how healthy their river is, and what its ailments are.

Armed with this information, we need a governance structure that builds on the 105 Catchment Partnerships to make clear decisions at a super-catchment scale. This will allow resources from the private, public and voluntary sector to be combined with coherent purpose at a national and catchment scale.

We also need an honest conversation at a national scale about the really big decisions that need to be taken about whether we are prepared to invest HS2 equivalent sums to modernise our drainage and sewerage system, what public goods we should expect in return for farm subsidies and how polluters are going to be properly regulated so that their actions don't heap costs onto the rest of society.

Oh, and we need to improve dramatically the understanding of the water system by everyone so that we massively reduce the impact of chemicals washed down drains, the profligate waste of high quality drinking water, the sanitary products flushed down toilets, the misconnections of washing machines and dishwashers and the poorly-performing septic tanks that collectively cause huge environmental damage.

As David Attenborough said: "What happens next, is up to every one of us."