

FAO Sir David Henshaw, Chair, NRW Board

By email only: chair.office@cyfoethnaturiolcymru.gov.uk

Dr. Guy Mawle

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15 November 2021

Dear Sir David,

Report: The state of the river Usk - A dying river?

I attach for your attention a report that I have just completed on the state of the river Usk, one of Wales' principal rivers and designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Please note that this report has not been commissioned but produced out of personal interest. I have known the river Usk for over forty years and was once its Fisheries, Conservation and Recreation Officer. In recent years, I have observed a progressive degradation in its ecology and wished to have more factual information. This report is the result.

You will see from the one-page summary that many aspects of the ecology of the river are deteriorating, including protected habitat and species. There is also a chapter at the end with suggested lessons for the Usk and other rivers.

The Senedd recently declared a Nature Emergency in Wales and rivers and streams are a 'priority habitat' under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. There are also legal duties under regulations relating to SAC rivers. Regrettably, this report clearly shows that NRW is failing to deliver the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources on the River Usk. Furthermore, neither NRW nor others, such as Welsh Government and the Future Generations Commissioner, seem to be fully aware of the degradation that has taken place. This reflects, in part, the limitations of NRW's monitoring and reporting. For example, the State of Natural Resources Report 2020 (SoNaRR) uses some data that are now considerably out of date and therefore misleading.

Of particular concern, is the 2020 status of the otter. As reported in SoNaRR 2020, this was the only SAC feature in 'favourable status' across Wales. It is no longer, neither in the Usk SAC nor in other SACs. The otter relies on the general health of the river so it is not surprising that its status now reflects those of other SAC features. The Future Generations Commissioner cited the recovery of the otter as a '*sign of hope*' in her 2020 report. It would seem that hope could be misplaced.

It is evident to me that the current management of our rivers, under NRW, is not up to the challenges these now face. This is not a reflection on the commitment of staff on the ground. I acknowledge that NRW needs more resources, and this needs urgently addressing by Government. I also appreciate that there are couple of laudable projects about to start that, I hope, will achieve significant improvements. But whatever they achieve will not be sustained without effective regulation by NRW which has patently been lacking. There is much more that NRW should and could be doing especially in relation to enforcement and monitoring.

I do not believe that the title of my report “The state of the River Usk - a dying river?” overstates the case. Therefore, urgent action is required and I am writing to you as the Chair of the NRW Board to provide the leadership needed to address the issues I have recorded in my report.

These thoughts and the report are offered in the spirit of positive criticism. I will be sharing both this letter and the report with others, as indicated below. Thank you for your time.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G Mawle', written in a cursive style.

Guy Mawle, BA, MSc, PhD, FIFM, CEnv

Cc: With report

Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd

Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner

Audit Wales

NRW:

Prof. Steve Ormerod, Vice Chair

Clare Pillman, CEO

Steve Morgan, South East Wales Area

Jon Goldsworthy, South East Wales Area

NGOs:

Afonydd Cymru (with request to forward to Wales Environment Link members)

Wye & Usk Foundation

Gwent Wildlife Trust

Powys Wildlife Trust

Media