

## MY WAY OF THINKING

## MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the pollution levels in England's waterways and invites your thoughts on the subject.

There is one thing we should be able to take for granted in our so-called civilised society during the 21st century: clean rivers. I remember a time when we mindlessly and routinely treated our stinky waterways as dumping grounds but, surely, we've learned from past mistakes?

Apparently not. The Government's green watchdog, the Environment Agency (EA), recently released data on water quality in England – and it makes woefully depressing reading. Every single river in the country is polluted beyond legal limits. And just 14 per cent reach an ecological standard high enough for wildlife to flourish.

England's rivers are now officially among the dirtiest in Europe (where, on average, 40 per cent are considered healthy). But even 40 per cent isn't something to sing and dance about – we should be aiming for all our rivers to be clean and ecologically healthy.

Hamstrung by a slashed budget, the EA's response to a year-on-year deterioration in the quality of our rivers has been less testing (assessments were undertaken annually, until 2016, when someone decided it would be better to switch to once every three years instead). The Government made a promise (in the 25 Year Environment Plan) that, by 2027, at least three-quarters of English rivers, lakes, canals and other waterways will be rated 'good'. But if they continue with this apparently lackadaisical approach, I just can't see it happening.

The main culprits behind the dismally poor state of our rivers are agricultural run-off, industrial effluent and – perhaps most reprehensibly – large-scale sewage discharges. During 2019, water

companies in England discharged raw, untreated sewage into rivers on more than 200,000 occasions. There are no fewer than 15,000 approved 'sewer overflows' across England (permitted, under licence, to reduce the risk of sewage backing up during 'unusually heavy rainfall') and most of these discharge into rivers. But a WWF report reveals that water companies are discharging much more illegally.

That is the crux of the sewage problem – and why the health of England's rivers lags far behind the rest of the UK. In Scotland, 65.7 per cent of water bodies are considered healthy; 64 per cent are healthy in Wales; and 31.3 per cent in Northern Ireland. It's no coincidence that Scottish Water and Northern Ireland Water are

“England's rivers are among the dirtiest in Europe - they're polluted beyond legal limits.”

public corporations – not privatised entities – and Welsh Water is a not-for-profit company with no shareholders. England's water and sewerage services, however, are provided by money-making businesses that have paid £57 billion in dividends since they were privatised three decades ago. That's nearly half the sum they spent on maintaining and improving the country's pipes and other critical infrastructure.

One potential game changer comes from campaigners in Yorkshire, struggling to clean up the River Wharfe, near Ilkley. Yorkshire Water's own data shows that, in the last eight months of 2019 alone, there were no fewer than 136 sewage spills into the river. EA regulations state that more than 60 spills per year should automatically trigger an investigation – yet the campaigners have been told that an investigation will not begin until 2030 and they may have to wait until 2035 for any remedial action to be considered. So, they've taken matters into their own hands and launched an application for a section of the river to receive bathing water status. If approved, the Wharfe will then be monitored regularly during the bathing season (ie all summer) for bacteria detrimental to human health.

But the only long-term solution is legally binding targets and transparent, properly funded monitoring and enforcement. Only then can the future for England's rivers be more hopeful. 🐾

**MARK CARWARDINE** is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?** If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)



Pollution in England's rivers is a major concern for people and wildlife.