

Inland Waterways News

Derg and Ree Catchment Monitoring: Final Report or New Beginning?

Paddy Mackey

After four years' intensive work on the Shannon's water quality, the ***Final Report of The Lough Derg and Lough Ree Catchment Monitoring and Management System*** was launched in July. Among all the suits, free lunch specialists and glinting chains of office at the launch were a few of a more hardy breed, those who have long campaigned to halt the decline of the Shannon. People like Joe O'Donoghue of the Lough Derg Anglers Association and Hugh Hanley of the Lough Ree Conservation Society who had "shouted stop" when it was neither popular nor profitable.

When the Lough Derg and Lough Ree Catchment Monitoring and Management System was first mooted in 1996, it met with scepticism from water quality campaigners who had observed a steady deterioration in the Shannon's waters over the years. IWAI stalwart Michael Gill was heard to say that he had "a wheelbarrow full of reports" on the Shannon. We seemed to be in danger of having the most comprehensively monitored, and reported on, dying river in Europe. The main problem afflicting Derg and Ree was eutrophication, plain and simple over-enrichment, caused in the main by phosphates. Everyone knew the sources of the problem and in theory how to fix it. But how could we break the logjam of official neglect and political buck-passing?

However, when we found out what exactly was being proposed, we realised that this new way of working could have a lot to recommend it. The project was sponsored by the Department of the Environment and Local Government and jointly administered by Clare and Roscommon County Councils. Seven other Shannonside county councils and statutory agencies, such as Dúchas and the Shannon Regional Fisheries Board, were also represented. The reports were prepared by Belfast-based independent consultants Kirk McClure and Morton, who had no political axe to grind. At the helm was former Cavan County Council engineer Pat Duggan who knew his way around the local authority scene. Pat came out very strongly during the course of the project saying "If we don't take the measures now to address the problem, we will find years down the road that we have very little good water quality left in the Shannon."

As the work got under way, we encountered a modus operandi we weren't used to, which included consultation meetings and an open door policy. For people who had grown used to letters being ignored and officials who just wanted us to go away, this was a very welcome development.

The brief of the project included

- study the Shannon Catchment in detail
- establish water quality
- identify pollution sources
- evaluate and assess pollution control strategies
- establish an overall Water Quality Management System.

In the main, these objectives have been realised. Over 23,000 water samples have been tested at the project laboratory in Roscommon Town. GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and computer modelling were used to show, in a clear understandable form, exactly where pollution problems exist. Individual sources of pollution were pinpointed, such as Hannons Poultry in



Roscommon and the Clareen Stream in Nenagh. Examples like these showed that water quality issues needed to be addressed by all sectors. Local Authorities, business and industry and even householders all needed to clean up their acts as well as farmers.

Over £60,000,000 is being spent in four years up to 2002 in upgrading municipal sewage plants in the Catchment. The **Final Report** recommends strict monitoring and reporting procedures to demonstrate compliance by these plants. This confirms unofficial reports about new treatment plants costing millions of pounds simply not working properly. The report is strongly critical of the standard of monitoring of Local Authority Licensed Industries and suggests how the EPA could improve their IPC (Integrated Pollution Control) Licensing.

Agriculture is the worst offender in terms of "non point pollution sources," the insidious type of water pollution caused by over-use of fertilisers and poor farmyard management. To try to find a way to tackle this, the project surveyed three sub-catchments (one each in Cavan, Roscommon and Tipperary) in detail, with the co-operation of local farmers and Teagasc. This was radical stuff indeed and provided a previously unheard-of amount of detailed knowledge about conditions on individual farms. These studies proved that LDYC-based angler Frank Lewis, a part-time farmer himself, was right to highlight the need "to walk every stream and go into every farmyard." Arising from the Management Proposals published by Kirk McClure and Morton in 1999, Cavan and North Tipperary County Councils introduced Bye-Laws to reduce agricultural sources of pollution. Despite strong lobbying by the IFA, these Bye-Laws were passed into law by the elected County Councillors: a momentous step. Much remains to be done; staffing levels are low and further decisions will need to be made at Estimates time to make sure the Bye-Laws really work.

It would be a mistake to think we can relax. It is important that all the recommendations of the Final Report are acted on without delay. In the past summer both Westmeath and North Tipperary Councils had to advise against bathing in the Shannon due to algal blooms. The wild card that is the Zebra Mussel, and its ultimate impact on the eco-system, must also be considered. The IWAI, with its wide network and considerable lobbying power, has a role to play in making sure that the powers-that-be know how important the Shannon is to us all.

Future developments such as the implementation of the new EU Water Framework Directive will provide many opportunities to keep water quality high on the agenda. Over the coming years it will be vital that user groups like IWAI and NGOs (Non Government Organisations) make the transition from merely being consulted to full participation in the decision-making process.

Paddy Mackey is Joint Honorary Secretary of SOLD — Save Our Lough Derg, a Director of Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment and a member of the Shannon Regional Fisheries Board, the National Council of An Taisce and the Lough Derg Branch of the IWAI.

Future plans

The Government has announced that the project is to continue and be expanded to cover the whole Shannon including the estuary. £6,000,000 has been made available to run the Shannon River Basin Management Strategy over the next four years.

Pump-outs

Of special interest to IWAI members, the **Final Report** has recommended that Waterways Ireland should carry out an annual audit of pump-outs, report their findings and take action to create new facilities or improve existing facilities.



What you can do to make a difference

Families

Use phosphate-free detergents

Make sure your septic tank is working properly

Farmers

Use fertilisers correctly

Spread slurry only when weather conditions are suitable

Business people

Prevent discharges from your premises

Train staff to protect water quality

