

Inland Waterways News

Winsome loos sum

Brian J Goggin

I've spoken to one of the officials of the NI Department of the Environment who met boaters over the summer. He tells me that they met 51 owners altogether:

- 41 were NI-based boats, of which 25 were compliant with the Erne rules: they had a holding-tank or a chemical toilet or no toilet at all
- 9 were RoI boats, of which only 3 were compliant
- 1 was from England; it was compliant.

It is clear that his department would like to see some progress on this issue: the regulations have been in place for quite some time but they haven't been enforced. A similar sentiment seems to lie behind the recommendations of the **Lough Derg and Lough Ree Catchment** report. And some individual boat-owners have said that we have to decide whether we're serious about ending sewage discharges from boats and, if we are, we have to do something about it.

What happens elsewhere

Overseas visitors are sometimes shocked by our habits. A regular Finnish visitor to the Irish canals said that he could not understand how we allowed discharge to the water. Tom Bailey, who had his boat in Holland for some time, said

*When I had **Mimi** in Holland her holding tank was essential and the law was enforced. It is illegal for any craft to pump filthy water (as the Dutch call it) overboard. The showers and sinks also empty into the holding tank (100 gals) to comply with European regs.*

Rachel Leech said

In mainland UK waterways, my experience is that you are permitted on to the inland waterways with a "sea heads" on board, as long as you can prove it's not going to deposit into the waters. I was asked to wire mine up on passing through Teddington Lock on to the non-tidal Thames. The tidal stretch, controlled by the Port of London Authority, has no such regulation, but the Environment Agency have the right to board and inspect that you have rendered your sea heads inoperable on entering their waterways (ie that your vessel is compliant).

And on the British canals, controlled by British Waterways, there is no question about it: you use a holding-tank or a portable toilet and you empty it at a proper facility, run either by British Waterways or by a marina.

Are You Soft on Sea Toilets?

Paddy Mackey

Anyone who has ever explained the workings of a sea-toilet to the average non-boater will be familiar with that look of horror as you reach the part about where the waste and KittenSoft end up. Such an experience alone should tell us that it is no longer sustainable to argue the case for the continued use of sea toilets which discharge directly to freshwater. But there are other important reasons why we need to get our act together about this matter, sooner rather than later.

Even though sea toilets only contribute a small amount of the total phosphorus loading, their effect in an enclosed harbour can cause problems. There is also the fact that use of sea toilets is simply illegal on our waterways. Unless we want to support the “Irish solution to an Irish problem” approach, where legislation is passed and then ignored, we must be seen to be law-abiding citizens. IWAI members cannot pick and choose which parts of legislation they want to comply with. Politically it is hard to argue that householders, farmers and industry must all change their attitudes to water quality, while we continue to pollute the rivers and lakes which we claim to cherish.

What is to be done?

I think Paddy Mackey has got this right: it's time we began to take the issue seriously. Some of the powers-that-be seem to be moving in the same direction, and I reckon we'd be better to take the initiative ourselves rather than acting under duress. So, in the next couple of issues, we'll be looking at the practicalities of installing holding-tanks and other options.

But private owners are not the only ones who need to take action. I was amused to find recently that one hire-firm, which had lent a boat to a television production company, had insisted that its boats were not contributing to pollution because they were fitted with holding-tanks. However, it was not clear that they actually used the tanks.

If we were to prioritise actions, I suggest that stopping boats discharging in harbours is much more important than stopping discharges in the middle of the rivers (the canals are a different matter). I reckon the best way of doing that is to build good toilet blocks at all harbours and then to ensure that they are kept clean around the clock.

If Waterways Ireland is serious about its own bye-laws, it has to ensure that there are toilets at all its harbours. You wouldn't build a caravan park and then refuse to build a toilet block on the grounds that that was the local authority's job; why do that with a harbour? After the toilets are built, they need staffing throughout the summer to ensure they're kept clean and thus usable.

Above all, there must be facilities for emptying holding-tanks and portable toilets. those facilities have to be kept in working order all the time. That is not happening at present and it is not always easy to buy the smart cards needed to operate them. Perhaps it would be better to locate the pump-outs in private marinas or at hire-boat bases, and let their operators make a few quid — or euro — out of running the service.

Taking this subject seriously means action by boat-owners, hire-firms, Waterways Ireland, local authorities and perhaps marina owners. We'll look at all those aspects in future issues.

