

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust

Ymddiriedolaeth Natur Maesyfed

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Protecting **wildlife** for the future

Patron: Iolo Williams

Gwarchod **natur** ar gyfer y dyfodol

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Wildlife Charity warns of catastrophe in Radnorshire's rivers if pollution continues

Phosphate pollution will continue to kill aquatic life in Radnorshire's rivers if the authority responsible for protecting them remains under-resourced.

The warning comes from Radnorshire Wildlife Trust which is calling on the Welsh Government to reverse years of real-term budget cuts to National Resources Wales. Only then it says can NRW start to properly protect the Wye and its numerous tributaries the Lugg, Ithon, Elan, Edw and Marteg from excessive phosphate levels which have had a devastating impact on the quality of the water and the biodiversity of aquatic life.

Phosphate occurs naturally and events such as flooding can cause levels to rise. But late last year an NRW review** confirmed that there is a more widespread and serious problem. It found that 60 per cent of the Wye catchment, a designated Special Area of Conservation (SAC) was failing new, stricter water quality targets, sometimes by a wide margin, due to excessive phosphate. NRW concluded that the reasons for this were complex but that human factors such as mains sewage, septic tanks and agricultural practices were likely contributory factors.

RWT is so concerned about the situation that it is supporting a major citizen science project to evaluate water quality on the Rivers Wye and Lugg. In conjunction with Cardiff University, we are working with Friends of the Upper Wye***** and Friends of the Upper Lugg to professionally train more than a hundred amateur scientists to collect river water samples. This work is seen as critical to establishing the health of the river system and enabling proper management in the future.

Many campaigners however have long suspected that manure from the high number of intensive poultry units now in the area is having a cumulative effect. Whilst the NRW review stated that there was no direct evidence of this being the case, it now appears to have changed its position. The River Wye SAC Nutrient Management Plan Action Plan produced in April 2021 by Natural Resources Wales, the Environment Agency and Natural England states:

"The reasons for failure on the River Wye and its tributaries are likely to be from a diverse range of sources, including mains sewerage and septic tank misconnections and most significantly diffuse agricultural pollution. Much of the Wye catchment is rural and until recently has been predominantly farmed for sheep and beef cattle. More recently there has been a rapid expansion of chicken farms and pig production. In both the Upper Wye sub-catchment and the Lugg sub-catchment, source apportionment modelled analysis



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suggests that 25% of the total Phosphate load comes from Wastewater Treatment Works, 66% from agriculture and 9% from other sources.

Dwr Cymru Welsh Water AMP 7 improvements will be completed between 2020 – 2024 and these percentages will change slightly to 67% agriculture, 23% sewage treatment works and 10% other. In the Lower Wye sub-catchment, 33% is from WWTW, 61% from agricultural sources with 6% other.”

Heightened levels of phosphate have already caused a process called eutrophication in some stretches of the river. This allows excess algae to form and the resultant green blooms block out sunlight and deprive aquatic life of oxygen, leading to the death or decline of many vital species. Among these is a plant called *Ranunculus fluitans* or river water-crowfoot, which supports a wide range of river organisms, insects and fish. If it declines substantially, the ecology of the river will change.

The state of the Wye has recently hit national headlines, with phosphate pollution blamed for turning the water into a “pea soup” and the river into a “wildlife death trap.” **** And concern for rivers and water quality are receiving attention in the news following community action and several high-profile campaigns.

James Hitchcock, Chief Executive of Radnorshire Wildlife Trust said: “We are in the UN’s decade of ecosystem restoration. Many people now realise that we need nature to thrive if we are to live happy and prosperous lives. The state of the Wye and the lack of support that this is receiving through appropriate monitoring and enforcement from our statutory bodies is no longer acceptable. We must change the system to support the return of nature to Radnorshire’s most iconic river; we need people to support our calls for change.”

AND

Jenny Chryss, Chair of Radnorshire Wildlife Trust said: “I’m fortunate enough to live alongside the Wye, and I am greatly saddened by the deterioration of the river in recent years. Five years ago it was vibrant and colourful with plentiful vegetation and aquatic life. Now it appears relatively lifeless. The decline of this vital habitat is an environmental catastrophe. As a Trust we want to see a far more robust and well-funded approach to its protection in the future.”



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Background Information and References.

Radnorshire Wildlife Trust is a registered charity, part of the federation of 46 Wildlife Trusts working across the UK to protect and restore nature, inspiring people to connect and take action for wildlife. We have over 1000 members and currently manage 18 nature reserves covering over 400Ha of land.

For further information please contact James Hitchcock On 07949 828589 or visit <https://www.rwtwales.org/blog-start-wye> to read RWT's blog on the state of the Wye and sign up for RWT's e-newsletter, donate or join online.

Links

** <https://naturalresources.wales/about-us/news-and-events/news/nrw-issues-new-advice-to-safeguard-the-river-wye-special-area-of-conservation/?lang=en>

*** <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/downloads/file/22477/letter-to-defra-motion-from-council-june-2021>

**** <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/20/its-like-pea-soup-poultry-farms-turn-wye-into-wildlife-death-trap>

***** [Friends of the Upper Wye \(fouw.org.uk\)](http://fouw.org.uk)

RWT wants to see the following as a matter of urgency:

- NRW's budget to be restored to 2013 levels as a minimum, followed up with future year on year increases, with specific sums ring-fenced annually for river pollution monitoring and mitigation work.
- NRW to urgently investigate and publish the exact cause or causes of the pollution and to take robust action to reverse excessive phosphate levels and protect the river catchment in future.
- NRW to make clear in its Annual Reports what it has done each year to combat river pollution in Radnorshire and what plans it has to improve water quality in the following year.
- Welsh Water to conduct an investigation into the condition of its mains sewage works within or upstream of Radnorshire, and to take urgent action to ensure that any pollution arising from these plants is reversed.



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- NRW and Powys County Council to ensure that Manure Management Plans form a compulsory and central part of planning permissions for new or expanding farm enterprises in Radnorshire. Also, that these are properly designed with expert input, fully-approved and monitored for future compliance.
- The planned Nitrate Vulnerable Zone (NVZ) for the whole of Wales to be fully implemented.
- For a well-funded catchment-based approach to be adopted for the Wye, through the Agricultural Act. This would allow statutory bodies, conservationists, farmers, landowners and community groups to work together to improve the standard of the river as it flows through their areas.
- For specific targets for the restoration of nature in Wales to be adopted – 30% of the land and 30% of the Sea to be actively managed for nature by 2030 – and this to be enshrined in the emerging Agriculture (Wales) Act.
- A Sustainable Farming Scheme for Wales that requires sustainable stocking levels and nutrient management planning, and provides a new Farm Assurance Scheme plus the provision of ecological advice.
- There are also a number of ways in which our members and supporters can help us to drive this forward:
- Write to your Senedd member and County Councillor to outline your concerns.
- Contact Dr. Caroline Turner, Chief Executive, at Powys County Council and Cllr Huelwen Hulme, Portfolio Holder for the Environment, to request that Powys County Council declare an Ecological Emergency so that the nature crisis and loss of biodiversity is given equal weight to the climate crisis.
- Join the Citizen Science Project. <https://www.fouw.org.uk/citizen-science-training>



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