



State of the River Char and Monkton Wyld Stream: a summary

This full report and this summary were initiated by Char Valley Parish Council (CVPC) and compiled during 2021 by the Dorset Wild Rivers Partnership, a partnership of the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Dorset Wildlife Trust and Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest, with the support of the Dorset Catchment Based Approach, Environment Agency and Wessex Water. It drew on many sources including CVPC residents & farmers, Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT) and the Environment Agency (EA).

The River Char, Monkton Wyld Stream and accompanying Marshwood Vale is a renowned pastoral landscape with bountiful hedges and hedgerow trees, and the vale is rimmed with characterful hill forts. The rivers are not formally fished and, it is believed, have never been stocked, resulting in an unusually 'natural' brown trout population of high conservation value.

Medium to large dairy units dominate much of the area with agricultural land use in the catchment being nearly all permanent and temporary grassland. The exception to this is maize cultivation, the extent of which varies from year to year. In the headwaters of the Monkton Wyld Stream there is also extensive coverage of woodland. There are significant patches of SSSI and SNCI grassland.

Both the River Char and Monkton Wyld Stream are classified as **Moderate** by the Environment Agency (EA) and are therefore considered failing watercourses in need of improvement. Historical EA reports from 2000 identify pollution from agriculture, run-off from roads, invasive species, disease of alder trees and poor conditions for wildlife as the main issues. Further concerns about land management, sewerage and health & safety issues associated with bathing water quality downstream at the mouth of the River Char (Page 21 of the main report) have been expressed in the EA's Water Framework Directive assessment, Char Valley Parish Council and voiced by local residents.

The combined areas of most concern, as identified by the Environment Agency (Page 20) and other agencies, local people and those that work in the area (Page 22) are:

1. Sediment and phosphate contamination from agriculture
2. Phosphate / sewage pollution from septic tanks
3. Flash flooding
4. Poor habitat for wildlife
5. The impact of invasive species, particularly Himalayan balsam
6. The desire for the river to function as naturally as possible, but without causing issues downstream

There is a will from local people to try and improve the state of their river, and actions have been identified that will allow this to happen from the winter of 2021.

Possible actions to address the problems identified:

1. Monitoring

Interested community members could be trained in simple river monitoring techniques, from looking at the insect life that lives in the stream through the chemical properties of the water. Undertaking regular monitoring would give the community early warning of pollution incidents and an opportunity to inform the relevant authorities. It would also allow the community to monitor the effectiveness of any restoration undertaken. It would also create a sense of ownership and pride in this important habitat. Greater frequency of monitoring would also allow us to improve on the statutory agencies' basic monitoring regime



2. Habitat improvement & restoration

This would restore the natural processes of the river where it has been altered. This would allow aquatic plants and fish species to thrive. A lot can be achieved relatively simply and in conjunction with groups of volunteers. Looking beyond the river itself, reconnecting the river to the floodplain and restoring wet woodland and wet grassland would help the river both to function naturally and to better connect isolated habitats throughout the catchment.

3. Invasive species control

Himalayan balsam: this would allow native bank flora to thrive and reduce the potential for bank erosion, which is a source of sediment. Again, this is relatively easily achieved and can use volunteers. The infestation on the River Char is large, and it is unlikely that full control will ever be achieved, but with a strategic approach, working from the headwaters downstream, a difference could be made.

Mink: monitoring of riparian mammals using mink rafts, would allow us to improve our understanding of the species that are using the rivers. Mink control, if found to be present, would reduce pressures facing the native water vole, which is fast-declining nationally.

4. Research & survey

Further research, with the help of interested community members, could help refine what condition we should be aiming for with the River Char and Monkton Wyld Stream. Particular areas of interest are:

- What the natural state of the river would be (a geomorphological appraisal of the river)
- What animals and plants would we expect to find here compared with what we do find (an ecological appraisal of the river).

Further work could also be undertaken to identify hotspots for invasive species, habitat loss and erosion, and where there are opportunities for re-wilding rivers.

5. Community engagement

As well as practical hands-on opportunities to improve the state of the river, walk, talks, demonstrations and other awareness raising activities could take place to highlight the success of any projects, and highlight what could be done about some of the issues, for example better septic tank management.

6. Agricultural land management change

By working with the farming community in the catchment to make changes to the way the land is managed, we could reduce sediment runoff and therefore nutrient pollution. It could also improve rainwater infiltration and therefore delay and reduce flood peaks.

7. Natural Flood Management

At strategic locations throughout the catchment, interventions such as small leaky woody dams, gully blocking, and tree and hedge planting could be installed to slow the flow of water over the land and increase storage of water within the soils. By doing this we could delay and potentially reduce flood peaks and reduce sediment runoff. The nature of the works involved would allow volunteers to help with delivery.

The full report can be read / downloaded at www.charvalley.org/riverchar

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