



Water-based sport and recreation: the facts

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The aim of this paper is to provide a short appraisal of the above research contract which was recently completed

Section A: Background

▪ This report is produced as a final output of the research project *Water-based sport and recreation: the facts*. The research followed from a meeting, hosted by officials from the Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, with representatives from groups interested in water sport and recreation. The meeting participants agreed that there was a need to establish some clear facts about current levels of participation and the extent of problems about access to water for sport and recreation. DETR (now Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)) awarded a research contract in February 2001 to a consortium led by the University of Brighton. The project was also sponsored by British Waterways, Countryside Agency, Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency and Sport England.

▪ Concerns about recreational access to inland water in England and Wales have been evident for many years. While having potential as a recreational resource it has been noted that there are a number of issues to address: opening more inland waters to public navigation; addressing the conflicts between navigators and anglers; and removing uncertainties about the legal position of public rights of navigation.

▪ Public rights of navigation and water available for licensed navigation amount to 4 700 km of inland canals and major rivers in England and

Wales (approximately a quarter of the major river and canal network). Just over 40% of this resource is within 15 km of a major urban area. It is however unevenly distributed, with a relatively high per capita resource in East Anglia and a low per capita resource in the South East of England.

▪ The navigation rights on the remaining major river and canal network are privately owned, usually by those owning the adjacent watersides. Some of this resource is available, mainly to clubs, through voluntary agreements with the landowner. In some cases, clubs have bought the adjacent land to secure their rights.

▪ Some of the principal user groups feel strongly that the extent and permanency of access to inland water for recreation is inadequate. Problems are perceived to persist through a mix of complex, inadequate and inappropriate navigation rights, which often lead to tension and conflict between user groups, particularly anglers and canoeists.

Section B: The Facts

▪ Approximately 3% of all day leisure visits from home in 1998 (14% of all countryside visits) made some use of inland water. These visits involved approximately 5 million people (12% of the adult population) and were predominantly local. Regular dedicated water sports enthusiasts tend to travel long distances to participate.

- Approximately 3% of the population regularly participate in water-based sport and recreation. In most water-based sport and recreation activities the participation rate for women is considerably lower than for men. In terms of participation, angling is by far the most popular water-based sport and recreation activity.
- A range of evidence suggests about three-quarters of regular dedicated water sports participants are likely to be men aged 18 to 60 years. Over 60% of participants in inland water-based sport and recreation are from social groups A, B, and C1, although these groups comprise less than 50% of the UK population.
- The overall level of water sports participation has been static since 1995, although there has been a perceived structural shift in participation, away from formal club use to informal and *WATER-BASED SPORT AND RECREATION: THE FACTS* casual participation. Participation rates are expected to remain static or fall slightly over the next 20 years.
- There is little evidence of widespread unmet demand for inland water-based sport and recreation activities. Rather, there are specific 'hotspots' and sub-areas of England and Wales where demand is greater than supply, particularly for specific resources such as white water. However, there is currently a significant lack of information about water-based sport and recreation opportunities which, if addressed, could lead to greater demand and potential consumption.
- While some reports suggest that there are no overriding barriers to participation in waterbased sport and recreation, there are some significant constraints, including: the quality and proximity of facilities; the exclusiveness of some clubs; cost, perceptions of pollution and safety; lack of appropriate blocks of time; and lack of skills and experience.
- There are case study examples of where environmental designation has prevented the use of inland waters for sport and recreation. There are many concerns and claims that local planning authorities restrict the development of moorings, slipways, marinas and other associated facilities.
- Approximately 8% of the major rivers and 3%

of the canal network in England and Wales is covered by a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) designation. Almost 500 enclosed waters of 1 hectare or more in size (24% of the total) are covered in part or whole by a SSSI designation.

- There are approximately 2,500 clubs associated with inland water sport and recreation in England and Wales. Approximately 50% of these are angling clubs; 13% are canoe clubs.
- In addition to major rivers and canals, there are nearly 2 000 enclosed waters of 1 hectare or more in size in England and Wales, with a mean size of 27 hectares. Of these, approximately half are known to be used for sport and recreation. The mean size of those used for sport and recreation is 41 hectares. Angling occurs on 88% of these enclosed waters, sailing on 28%, wind-surfing on 19% and canoeing on 14%. All other water-based sport and recreation activities occur on less than 10% of them.
- The position with regard to the use of waterways is more difficult to establish. Current data suggests there are fisheries on 13 700 km of major rivers and canals (68% of the total) and this figure is likely to be an underestimate. On these waters there are 8 800 km of wellknown angling resource identified for use for in guidebooks and by public organisations.
- Cruising and canal boats have access to the major river navigations and canals, although there are some depth and width constraints. Canoeing takes place on all major river navigations and canals. There are also formal access agreements over 812 km of waterways that are not subject to a public right of navigation. Informal canoeing is promoted in guidebooks on some 7 000 km of major rivers with no public rights of navigation (46% of the total).
- Most user and representative groups desire more spaces in which to undertake their activities. This is less relevant to angling than to the other activities. Many angling organisations are particularly concerned to maintain the quality of waters to which they currently have access. In some cases, canoeing for example, the desire is for particular types of resource, especially white water and longer lengths of waterway for canoe touring. In other cases, the desire is to obtain space in areas of shortage.

For example, rowing and windsurfing organisations both identify locations on the fringes of London where access to more inland waters is desirable. More rowing spaces are also desired in and around other major cities, such as Birmingham.

For water-skiing, the desire is to obtain more space in the shortage regions of the West Midlands and the west country and to retain the spaces currently used (especially in National Parks), or to find suitable local alternatives

Section C: Major Issues

- *Participation in and latent demand for water-based sport and recreation activities:* Water-based sport and recreation activities are undertaken by a small minority of the population. However, many of these activities are, or have the potential to be, socially inclusive and, with a modest level of skills training, can be undertaken by a wide age and ability range. The latent demand for these activities is currently low. However, if information about the activities were made more accessible, and a more comprehensive and inclusive approach taken to facility development and management, the demand for some activities, particularly sports where national participation appears to be growing (e.g. canoeing and rowing), could be stimulated. Furthermore, good quality water spaces have an amenity value for nonparticipants in water-based sport and recreation.

- *Barriers to participation:* While water-based sport and recreation activities have the potential to be inclusive, many people currently experience barriers to access. These barriers can be related to a perceived lack of appropriate skills, or they can be financial and time-related. Equally, they can relate to a sense that some people have that many of the activities are elitist, not only requiring skill, time and money, but also social class or connection. More generally, there is a widespread fear of water, especially among older people, and a perception that most inland waters are polluted to unacceptable levels.

- *Imbalances in the supply of resources for water-based recreation:* There is no overall shortage of water resources in England and Wales. However, the volume and type of water resources – and their availability for recreation – vary

between regions. Some areas experience competition for the available space, while in others the available resource is underused. Improvements in information about the available opportunities would mitigate some of the problems. Where this is not sufficient, there is potential to gain recreational access to some of the many enclosed waters and stretches of major rivers that do not currently support recreation activity.

- *Local and regional planning and strategy issues:* There is much concern about the lack of planning policy guidance on water-based sport and recreation, particularly where it has led to local authorities failing to identify and plan for additional facility provision. There are many claims that this has resulted in an unfavourable planning environment for some operators, particularly inland marinas. There is also concern that this failure has been exacerbated by the administrative division of responsibilities for water-based sport and recreation (between DEFRA, DLTR & DCMS).

- *The impact of conservation designations:* There is no available and reliable evidence regarding the overall degree to which inland water-based sport and recreation is restricted by environmental considerations. However, many stakeholders are concerned that changes to the designation process arising from the European Habitats directive and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) may mean that some resources would no longer be available for sport and recreation activity.

- *Conflict and conflict resolution:* There are many claims about the level of conflict occurring between people on some inland water resources. There is little independent evidence to substantiate these claims. In the main, conflict arises either when the objectives of different water space users differ, leading to competition to control the space, or when legal users of space encounter illegal users. Traditionally, anglers have been able to assert control on nonnavigable waters by acquiring rights over the water. This has led to tension and conflict with others – usually canoeists – wishing to use the water. A number of agencies in England and Wales have prepared model agreements for anglers and canoeists, and provide guidance on conflict resolution. There is no assessment of the effectiveness of these approaches.

Section D: Potential Solutions

The report considers the 8 following policy scenarios for addressing user wishes and the problematic issues associated with water-based sport and recreation:

- Minor development of current planning policy and strategies
- Targetted purchase of services and revised funding arrangements
- Targetted acquisition of land and water rights
- Voluntary agreements
- Voluntary agreements with dedication
- Compulsory access orders
- A selective increase in statutory rights of navigation
- Statutory rights of navigation to all major rivers, canals and water bodies

The potential of each scenario was assessed using the following six evaluation tests:

- Extent of access
- Quality of access
- Permanency
- Clarity and certainty
- Cost
- Time to implementation

The report concludes that elements of certain scenarios could be implemented relatively rapidly especially much needed improvements for water-based sports and recreation in terms of:

- Information availability on provision
- Co-ordination between central government department and their agencies
- Planning policy guidance.

In addition, it is also tempting to believe that voluntary measures and public land purchase, perhaps funded by the Lottery or landfill tax credit scheme, could address the current lack of access to some types and locations of water. However, there is little empirical evidence that such approaches would be successful in achieving the desires of all stakeholder organisations.

The way forward may therefore lie in a hybrid approach based on elements of the different scenarios in which achievable gains, such as improving information about opportunities, developing better planning policy guidance and purchasing key sites, could be pursued in tandem with longer term approaches that may eventually yield the strategic inland water network envisaged by some stakeholder organisations. Whichever approach is adopted it is also apparent that better co-ordination and communication amongst government bodies is required, especially at the national level, to ensure users receive the guidance and information they need to access satisfactorily inland waters.

Water-based sport and recreation: the facts can be obtained from Professor Andrew Church, School of the Environment, University of Brighton, BN2 4GJ, or from DEFRA, Countryside Division, Zone 1/03, Temple Quay House, 2 The Square, Temple Quay, Bristol, BS1 6EB.

The Research Summary may be photocopied, or further copies can be obtained from <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/resprog/findings/2001dec.htm> or by writing to DEFRA, Countryside Division, Zone 1/03, Temple Quay House, 2 The Square, Temple Quay, Bristol BS1 6EB