

TROUT IN THE TOWN

DELEGATES' CONFERENCE

SHEFFIELD, AUGUST 2009

As a result of generous sponsorship from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Environment Agency we were able to arrange a conference at Sheffield University for the personnel directly involved in Trout in the Town projects. Delegates and presenters gathered from across the UK in order to:

- Share innovative approaches between practitioners
- Receive and provide expert technical and practical guidance
- Foster support and communication between projects
- Identify and share the best practices for work in urban river conservation

The programme began on the Saturday morning with Stuart Crofts's inspirational account of the battle for South Yorkshire's River Don, which he and other key figures such as Chris Firth and Gerald Stocks have fought since the 1970s. The fight for the urban sections of the Don continues under the banner of John Blewitt's new Sheffield Trout in the Town Project: SPRITE.

Delegates representing Lancashire's River Colne (Andy Pritchard), London's River Wandle (Theo Pike), London's River Cray (Ashe Hurst), Nottinghamshire's River Erewash (Mick Martin) and Glasgow/Lennoxton's Glazert Water (Danny Connor) each gave stirring accounts of their adopted urban watercourses. Their presentations described a multitude of little-known river-corridor wildlife-havens and revealed the passion that each delegate felt for his river. The recurring message was that we have rivers that are worth fighting for in our towns and cities and that the Esmée Fairbairn funding for Trout in the Town is leading to environmental work of great value.

The morning continued with a virtuoso performance by Japanese Knotweed Solutions Ltd's Managing Director Mike Clough. Mike highlighted the threats to our river-corridor flora and fauna (and to human skin) posed by invasive plant species and he showed how the biology of these plants brought about such threats. He offered to answer all queries

about delegates' own rivers at any time after the conference.

Gideon Reeve of the Wandle Trust came next, showing us the dedication and organisational skills that he has brought to their Trout in the Classroom programme. Everything that we needed to know about how these programmes are run and how local schoolchildren have benefited under Gideon's stewardship was included in a clear presentation.

Adam Brown and Paul Stolk of SUBSTANCE illustrated the importance of recording what our educational and participatory activities within projects have achieved. Adam and Paul also outlined their larger investigation into the overall social/community benefits of participating in angling and they described a number of generous (and hopefully mutually beneficial) services that they can offer to Trout in the Town projects.

After lunch the Agency's Gary Cliff gave an insight and guide to the workings of the EA's "Land Drainage Consent" process. This is the principal process by which any potential flooding-risk associated with habitat works in and around river channels is assessed in England and Wales.

The WTT's Denise Ashton then gave a masterclass on producing successful funding bids to support and sustain conservation projects. This advice, honed during Denise's successful career in industry, was of a very high professional standard.

Finally, Theo Pike returned to the stand to pass on some of his extensive expertise in securing and carrying out volunteer-led river habitat working parties. Volunteer-activities are a lynch pin in all of our Urban River Conservation efforts and Theo's tutorial was of great value.

My thanks to all of the presenters who gave such excellent talks and who all donated their time and effort. Many thanks also to our new Director Shaun Leonard for attending the morning session before rushing away to take care of other important proceedings in nearby Derbyshire.

Much discussion ensued about the key points raised during



Photos

Left: Mike Clough from Japanese Knotweed Solutions Ltd, giving his presentation on invasive plant species.

Above: Urban trout caught (and released) during the activities on the second day.

Facing page: Gideon Reeve.

the day. Questions and answers within the whole group helped to address a number of project-specific and generic problems. Strong cooperative bonds and friendships were forged!

On the second day John Blewitt introduced delegates to his beloved urban River Don. Despite the theme of the conference, I think it is fair to say that this fine river, so often neglected and abused, made a lasting impact on all of our visitors. The sightings of dippers and kingfishers acted as a beautiful counterpoint to the worrying abundance of invasive plant species, tyres and odd patches of litter.

All too soon it was time for people to begin making their way home – many thanks to all who had difficult or long

journeys. I look forward to continuing my work and learning alongside all of you.

It was left to Stuart Crofts and myself to continue the exploration of our own local urban gem. Once more, the river that spawned and nurtured the Steel City gave us an unforgettable and absorbing series of wildlife encounters. It seems that, despite man's abuse and neglect, the river is still willing and able to forgive those injuries in return for the simplest of apologetic gestures – just us taking a little bit of care and interest in her once more.

PAUL GASKELL

