LODERS PARISH COUNCIL
Annual Parish Assembly 16 April 2024

River Asker Improvement Project Report

Asker Riverfly Monitoring Group

As reported last year, the Asker Riverfly Monitoring Group has now taken over where the River Asker Improvement Project left off. The monitoring group is led by Howard Atkinson and has up to a dozen or so volunteers who regularly collect data on the Riverfly population in the Asker, Mangerton and Lower Brit. It meets formally at least once each year and since 2019 has prepared a report on its findings. Below is a summary of the report for 2023.

1. Analysis of the data collected in 2023 by a wide range of ecological indicators confirms the conclusion from previous years that the rivers studied have a high water quality and support a wide range of invertebrates.
2. Evidence from data collected by the Environment Agency and more recently by our monitors indicate a progressive increase in water quality of the Asker over the last 30 years.
3. There was evidence of a minor, local pollution event in July 2023 at the Uploders with evidence of partial recovery by September.
4. Otters were frequently recorded at Yondover, Loders with the seasonal variation in their occurrence peaking in September.
5. Mink were detected in the Asker and Mangerton. Their presence probably prevents water voles from re-colonising much of the catchment.
6. The data collected by the monitors represents the most intense data set per river length in Dorset although the number of Riverfly monitors is building progressively across the county.

Future Work and Conservation Issues

1. Continue monitoring the existing sites in 2024 as in 2023. Revise the current threshold of 4 informally to 7 with each monitor alerting all others when such a low value occurs as this indicates a suppression of river health.
2. Maintain mink monitoring rafts during the Riverfly collection season in 2024 and seek expert advice on managing this alien predator. The aim would be to favour water voles re-colonising much of the Asker and Mangerton. They are endangered and have been lost from 90% of waterways in the UK with mink being a major contributor to this decline.
3. Consider transplanting water crowfoot plants (Ranunculus spp) from localities of abundance on the Asker to other sites that have a likely similar habitat. The aim is to extend the plant's range on the river for its refuge value for small fish. Landowner permission must be sought.
4. Press for completion soon of the already commissioned evaluation of options to remove Loders weir as a barrier to upstream fish migration. The hope is that expert assessment be completed for a cost/benefit analysis of the extent of suitable spawning grounds for salmonids along the Asker.
5. Press for installation of a standard eel pass, if practical progress cannot be achieved soon on mitigating the weir as a barrier to all fish. The aim is to enhance this fish's colonisation of the river. The European eel is among the rarest and most threatened animals in the UK and on the critically endangered category on the IUCN Red List.
6. Consider Signal (American) crayfish monitoring along the Asker by Environmental DNA-based (eDNA) detection. The aim is to confirm the conclusion from 4 years of monitoring that this species has not colonised the upper Asker. A recent expert study elsewhere has established that local barriers, as may prevail on the Asker, can prevent upstream invasion by the alien species. If funds allow, the eDNA screening should be extended to the upper

reaches of the Mangerton. The aim would be to introduce a founder population of native white-clawed crayfish providing the American crayfish is absent. An initial step needed is to seek Dorset Wildlife Trust's support for any introduction.

Broadening of scope

During the past year the initial work on the Asker has been expanded by Dorset National Landscape (formerly Dorset AONB) who have obtained funding to include other rivers in West Dorset included under the banner of Dorset Coastal Streams. This includes training further river monitors to operate on the Brit and support for Clean Rivers of West Dorset (CROWD). Members of the Asker Riverfly Monitoring Group have been regular attenders at CROWD meetings organised by volunteers seeking to improve the River Char and in particular to remedy pollution of the rivers and beaches at Charmouth and Seatown caused by sewage overflows.

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