

River Asker Project

A project update for August 2019 to January 2020.

Issues

The State of the River Asker

Issues and opportunities are presented in the State of the River Asker report (there's the main report and a shorter summary report).

The main issues identified were:

- **Artificial barriers in the river:** this impacts fish populations and causes sedimentation of the river bed
- **Shade from riparian trees:** this impacts aquatic plants and riparian plants.
- **Catchment land use:** this has the potential to impact the duration and severity of flood waters and is a source of sediment.
- **Invasive species:** this impacts riparian plants and causes bank erosion, which is a source of sediment.

Activities

Volunteers

From October to December 2019, four volunteer sessions were led by Nick Gray of the Dorset Wildlife Trust. Nick brought his usual Thursday Volunteer Group of about 20 individuals along, and a few locals also attended (but not many). The focus was on river restoration, natural flood management solutions and Himalayan balsam bashing:

1. Natural Flood Management

The aim here is to try and slow flood waters down using semi-natural solutions at a large number of locations. Each individual structure has very little impact on its own, but combined they hold back floodwater so that the impact downstream is lessened.

We've laid scrub into adjacent ditches at Lodersland and installed a large leaky woody dam at Askerswell (which took one day of a tree surgeons time plus two days' worth of volunteers) to add to our efforts earlier on in 2019.

We have also invited Dominic Stubbings from the Frome, Piddle and West Dorset Fisheries Association to help out, as part of effort to engage more with the Rivers Trust movement.

2. Habitat enhancement

Again, at Loderlsand and also at Hembury Mill, we've coppiced adjacent trees and scrub to allow more light to the river banks, which will encourage more riverside and instream plant growth. This is important as it is home to insects and small fish, which are vital parts of the food chain for bigger fish, kingfishers and even otters. This has totalled about 100m.

3. Himalayan balsam bashing

We had good numbers of Askerswell residents out at Lodersland, pulling the balsam in the headwaters. Infestation is manageable and we'll be back there to repeat the treatment this coming summer.

Leaky woody dams



Before – heavily shaded



After - holding back high flows

Land management

Tim Bowden, Resource Protection Advisor with the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group SouthWest, has been working with land owners in the catchment on several initiatives that will help keep the water quality high in the River Asker.

We've continued the installation of silt traps at known hot-spots for sediment pollution and will monitor these to see how bad the issue really is. Work is underway to reduce flooding impacts on Shipton Lane, leading to the Jordan Brook. Work involves opening up flow paths into functioning ditch network (and trying to keep the water as long as we can in there) and also raising the level of some farm gates so water doesn't spill onto the road. Tim has also been overseeing a trial into different ways of establishing herb-rich pasture, to see if there is a way of keeping up the grass productivity but reduce environmental impacts.

Riverfly monitoring

Eight community members received training in 2018 in Riverfly monitoring. This technique uses the number of insect species found in the river as an indicator of how healthy it is. If the number falls below a certain threshold, then a closer look is taken to see the cause of the problem. This is part of a national scheme and you can find out more at www.riverflies.org. The trained group have been out monitoring the river once a month over the summer period, and initial results show that the Asker has a relatively good water and high biological quality. Differences among the sample sites in the abundance of various invertebrates in part reflect differences in habitat at those locations and not necessarily a change in quality.

We will extend our monitoring using the Westcountry Rivers Trust Citizen Science Investigations programme and also use camera traps to monitor for riverside animals, such as otter, water vole and others.

We'll also be out surveying for native and non-native crayfish over the summer.

Project Management

Funding

This work has been made possible by contributions from the Dorset Governance Group, who oversee the Catchment Based Approach in Dorset, the Environment Agency, Dorset Wildlife Trust and Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

So far, we have raised £77,000 to help deliver the project, and hope to raise more over the coming year to allow the project to continue.

Steering Group

A Steering Group made up of representatives of the two parishes and landowning community guide the work of the project.

Community network

Over 40 of you have signed up to the wider distribution list and have helped make this project possible with your dedication and enthusiasm. Thank you!

Future

Talks

We're putting on a few evening talks focussed on the river and wildlife. They are:

- 28th January. A talk by the Wild Trout Trust on how the iconic wild brown trout can help us look after our river.
- End February. A talk by Dorset Wildlife Trust (TBC) on the how to manage your garden for wildlife and water.
- End March. A talk by Westcountry Rivers Trust on their work, including citizen Science.

Look out for details on the Dorset AONB website: www.dorsetaonb.org.uk/events. All events are free, so please do come along, and bring a friend too!

Have-a-Go!

We're running a couple of Have-a-Go sessions for new volunteers. So, if you are interested, but not sure what's involved, come along and find out!

The first is during the day of 13th February, where we will be undertaking some river restoration at Askerswell. The second is the evening of 16th July, where we will be pulling more Himalayan balsam. More details of these activities, and others on offer by the Dorset AONB, can be found here:

https://www.dorsetaonb.org.uk/celebrating_60_years/have-a-go/

Fish survey

We had to cancel electrofishing on two occasions last year due to very high river levels. We have rescheduled again for the coming **September**. Fingers crossed that it doesn't rain! There'll be an opportunity to come along and see what they find at Well Plot playing field. Details available closer to the time.

Electrofishing



Find out more

Get in touch with Ian Rees to find out more: ian.rees@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk or **01305 228235**.

