

Catchment Matters

The newsletter from the Parrett Catchment Project

Issue 4, summer 2004

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1. Welcome

Welcome to Issue 4 of *Catchment Matters* from the Parrett Catchment Project (PCP) - the quarterly email bulletin for members, supporters and everyone who wants to hear about the work underway in the Parrett catchment to reduce flood risk and bring water levels under control. *Catchment Matters* is a quick, breezy read to find out about the Parrett Catchment Project, what our partners and working groups have been up to, current lobby issues and how to get more involved. Dialogue matters; please do give us feedback and suggestions for future editions. Attached is the full colour version with photos as a PDF (368KB).

Also new this month is the *Catchment Matters: Farming Edition*. This is available to view on our website at www.parrettcatchment.info or from the PCP office. Contact Nickie Harris on 01823 355281 or by return of email if you would like to be included on the mailing list or if you would like a hardcopy.

2. Sharing Information across the partnership - www.parrettcatchment.info

Sharing information between members is a key benefit of partnership working, but it's something that, in practice, is not so easily achieved. We have therefore decided to use the PCP website as an information source, where members can submit and access useful information, as well as up to date progress on the project, relevant government policy changes and more detailed technical information. As a result we have revamped the PCP website where you will now find a huge amount of news and information. The website address is www.parrettcatchment.info, and the site itself will be under constant review to keep pace with changes.

At the moment the website contains:

- Updates about projects & progress of PCP's Action Strategy components.
- 'The Information Exchange': information gained through meetings with our Dutch and German Waterboard partners in the JAF project, plus useful information submitted by partners – please submit any information you think would be useful to share to nharris@somerset.gov.uk
- Latest press releases, articles and photo galleries.
- Publications - including the PCP leaflet, *Catchment Matters*, festival posters.
- The PCP's partners with hyperlinks to your websites.
- Latest activities & initiatives to raise awareness.

3. PCP progress and some staggering results

It has been over four months since the last bulletin and progress has continued a pace. For a taster here are a few details about just two of our projects: -

1. Flood retention demonstration schemes

We are on schedule with our Farming Water floodwater retention schemes and can report that the heavy plant will be rolling on to six farms in the catchment to start ground works this August. These sites are:

- Bower Hinton, nr. Martock
- Creedy Bridge, South Petherton
- Vokers Bridge, near Wellington
- Parsonage Farm, near Ashill
- Balham Hill Farm, Chiselborough
- Moortown Farm, Curry Rivel

And all will be operational by the end of this year. Each scheme is unique; designed to account for the site characteristics (e.g. topography, hydrology, biology) and have been subject to agreement from the landowner and the legal procedures (licencing, approvals and consents).

The scheme at Bower Hinton Farm, Martock, is probably the most expensive of the schemes at c. £37,000. The multi-purpose flood attenuation pond, 0.4 hectares in size, will incorporate irrigation and wildlife benefits. The pond, not linked directly to a stream, is fed by runoff from the uphill fields and woodland. This will be diverted into the pond inlet via a soil trap. The pond outlet feeds water into the River Parrett. This outlet will stay open most of the year but upon receiving a flood warning from the Environment Agency the farmer will close the outlet, which remains closed until the flood peak in the River Parrett passes. The pond will be excavated well below the normal water table level to ensure permanent water, where reed beds will provide valuable wetland habitat.

By contrast the scheme at Balham Hill Farm, Chiselborough is low-cost at c. £5,000. This is a retention scheme, aimed at impeding floodwater flows rather than storing them. A 250m length of existing boundary hedge bank has been badly eroded over the years as it lies across the path of floodwaters from the River Parrett. These hedge banks will be strengthened, gapped-up (replanted) and fenced off.

Information about the other schemes is available on the PCP website.

2. Soil run-off monitoring and demonstration schemes

The soil-runoff demonstration project has yielded some staggering results, strengthening the case against specific farm practices at certain times of the year. Late harvested crops, such as maize, root crops and vegetables, require heavy machinery for harvest which often takes place in wet conditions. This increases the risks of soil compaction, surface runoff and soil erosion. The demonstration discovered that harvesting in wet conditions led to 20 X more runoff than compared to chisel ploughing after harvesting, which would equate to a soil loss of 1.4 tonnes per ha. over a five month period. The results from the demonstration are being made accessible to the farming community with the aim that farmers will turn them to positive action, with advice and guidance provided by FWAG. You can read more about this in the first issue of *Catchment Matters: Farming Edition*.

4. Sluice boost from new partnership

A partnership of organisations dedicated to developing and championing the proposal to build a tidal sluice on the River Parrett near Bridgwater to reduce the risk of flooding and pave the way for economic regeneration, held its first meeting in Bridgwater this May. Initiated by the Parrett Catchment Project and hosted by Councillor John Lang, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council, the meeting appointed distinguished former diplomat, Francis Cornish, as Chairman of the Parrett Sluice Partnership.

Mr. Cornish said afterwards: "As someone coming to this project fresh and from the outside, I found the degree of consensus and enthusiasm tremendously encouraging. There is a lot of hard work to be done in debating the options and ensuring that the proposal which is eventually put to the Environment Agency and DEFRA for funding is of the widest possible benefit and is sustainable in every sense, but I am convinced that this is a project whose time has come. The potential benefits for Bridgwater and the surrounding areas in terms of both flood risk reduction and economic regeneration are huge, and I am really excited at the prospect of helping to take the project forward."

Councillor John Lang, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council added, "The potential benefits of the sluice are enormous, not only to Bridgwater but the rest of Sedgemoor too. Getting all these organisations working together is very important so that we can put a good case together to the Regional Flood Defence Committee."

The meeting was given presentations by Richard Symonds of the Environment Agency on the potential of the sluice to reduce the risk of catastrophic tidal flooding of Bridgwater, and by Sarah Diacono, of Somerset County Council, who is leading a research project to establish the wider economic benefits of the sluice as well as the potential for "green energy" generation.

In outline, the proposal would involve the building of a tidal gate across the River Parrett, probably near Dunball, to prevent high tides pushing up river in times of flood, and also with the potential to hold water in the Parrett upstream of the sluice, so as to enhance the amenity and the appearance of the river through Bridgwater and for several miles upstream. The much greater degree of control over water levels that the sluice would provide could also be used to enhance the many internationally important wildlife sites in the Parrett catchment, and reduce the risk to them of damaging salt water flooding.

Mr. Symonds told the meeting that the sluice would help safeguard the 11,000 properties at risk in Bridgwater and the surrounding villages from a one in 200 year tidal flood. It is estimated that it would cost between £20 and £40 million, but that compares favourably with the estimated cost of the main alternative option for flood defence, which would be to raise the flood banks on either side of the river. The cost of this is put at least £75 million over the lifetime of the sluice.

However, the Parrett Sluice Partnership is conscious that, whilst the proposal appears to have a huge amount going for it, there are many interests, including Dunball wharf, passage for boats, the discharge from the King's Sedgemoor Drain, siltation, and the environmental sustainability of the project, all of which must be taken full account of as the plans are developed.

The Parrett Sluice Partnership is due to meet again on 19th July, when the initial results from the economic impact assessment commissioned by Somerset County Council will be available. The Environment Agency's Regional Flood Defence Committee will decide in April 2005 whether to include the sluice in its capital programme.

5. PCP cited

Ben Thorne, from the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group continues to speak on the national conference circuit and promote the PCP. On 13th July 2004 he will speak at the Chartered Institute of Water and Environmental Management (CIWEM) conference in London: The Water Framework Directive Series: Integrated Catchment Management: Lessons in River Basin Management. For a copy of Ben's presentation please contact the PCP office on 01823 355281.

The Flooded Forest: Guidance for policy makers and river managers in Europe of the restoration of floodplain forests (FLOBAR). 'Think catchment, think long-term, think cooperation' is the message from the latest document from FLOBAR (FLOodplain Biodiversity And Restoration) and the PCP is cited as 'a good example of a multi-purpose, catchment-orientated project'. A well illustrated report with photographs and figures, it explains how floodplain forests work, what the principle threats are to these ecosystems, ways of restoring them and the policy and institutional contexts within which their restoration might take place. To download a copy visit the website: www-flobar.geog.cam.ac.uk/reports/final/ or email Dr. Francine Hughes at fhughes@apu.ac.uk or Professor Keith Richards at ksr10@cam.ac.uk to purchase a hard copy.

6. Messing about on the river

French Weir Park in Taunton was the destination for many people on Sunday 23 May where a feast of activities was on offer at the PCP's River Festival. Over 4,500 people joined in the celebrations in glorious May sunshine on the bank of the River Tone. This second festival of three continued the success of the River Parrett Festival in Langport last year.

Chris Packham, the successful filmmaker and wildlife presenter, Humphrey Temperley, PCP Stakeholder Chairman, and The Mayor of Taunton officially opened the event. Chris Packham praised the PCP for its long-term vision, which he believes vital in view of the impact climate change could have on floodplain communities and wildlife. He joined the celebrations throughout the day and fascinated everyone with his cabinet of curiosities collected from his travels around the world.

The river was transformed by a colourful flotilla of craft and there was opportunity for people to zip about in a solar powered canoe or enjoy a more sedate cruise in a traditional narrow boat. It was wonderful to see the river being used by craft of all shapes and sizes and to see the ensuing level of enjoyment generated as the riverbanks

bustled with people. The exhibition marquees and yurts also buzzed with activity. The displays of minibeasts, birds and fish fascinated children and adults alike. Families donned their thinking caps to take part in quizzes and competitions. Many enjoyed watching the model boats, listening to storytelling, and taking part in the comic and historical walks along the river.

Local artists enjoyed a day in the sunshine demonstrating their crafts such as rush seat bottoming, willow charcoal drawing, basket making, stone carving and willow weaving. If that wasn't enough one could lie back in the sunshine and listen to the music on the stage performed by Five Furious Fish and The Rivertones.

Our thanks go to Caroline Dunn for her hard work in ensuring the event was a resounding success. Some of us are still reeling from the aftermath of the Festival, but already Caroline is preparing for the 2005 event. This will take place at Bridgwater Docks and the adjacent Brewery Field on Sunday 22nd May 2005. If you would like to contribute in any way please contact Caroline on email: CLDunn@somerset.gov.uk or tel. 01823 356156.

7. 'The Big Sponge' Project

Have you ever poured water onto a damp sponge? The sponge will hold a lot of water before it slowly starts to leak. This analogy is commonly applied to wetlands with their sponge-like ability to absorb rainwater and reduce the potential of damaging floods.

Through 'The Big Sponge' Project we are expanding this concept beyond wetlands, we are thinking large-scale. 'The Big Sponge' will fire public imagination and inspire people to consider ways they can hold rainwater (or potential floodwater) and slow down the flow of rainwater runoff from their homes, gardens, school grounds and developments.

In essence a network of garden ponds, school ponds and boggy areas, water butts, soakaways and reed beds across the catchment would create a giant sponge capable of holding millions of gallons of potential floodwater. Not only would 'The Big Sponge' help to reduce local flooding, but would also protect against drought during extended dry spells by holding moisture and slowly releasing it back into the surrounding ecosystem. Other benefits of this Project might include: creation of wildlife habitats; creation of education resources; and incorporation of attractive amenity areas within development designs.

'The Big Sponge' Project is an amalgamation of all PCP's watery awareness-raising initiatives: the Somerset Water Butt scheme, which is being expanded to schools this July; the School pond & bog initiative, to be launched next year; and a campaign to encourage local developers to incorporate rainwater holding ponds and soakaways in their developments.

If you would like to get involved in the scheme or would simply like further information please contact Nickie Harris on nharris@somerset.gov.uk or tel 01823 355281.

8. "Living with Flooding" school art competition

Winner of the "Living with Flooding" competition, Melanie Hosken (Age 10) won £250 for her school, Bishop Henderson CE Primary School, with her super drawing entitled "Be prepared". Television wildlife presenter Chris Packham picked Melanie's drawing out from over 30 drawings and paintings on display at the River Festival. In total over 60 drawings were submitted from three Somerset schools: Bishop Henderson CE Primary School, Huish Episcopo Primary School and Lydeard St. Lawrence Primary School. Melanie's drawing, plus paintings and drawings from all the runners-up are available to view on the PCP website.

The 10 finalists who each won an art pack were: Melanie Hosken (Age 10), Jessie Warren (10), Daisy Newberry (10), Josh Hancock (9), Rhiann Bowden (10), Cara Sedgewick (9), Rebecca Osmond (9), Lucy Ramwell (11), Tom Ramwell (9), Curtis Scadden (11), Tansy Purdey (9), Hal Sexton (10), Megan Morley (9), Aidan Johnson (9), Tom Murray (11), Jessica Beth Walker (11).

9. Date for your diary

2004 PCP Annual General Meeting - Early September 2004, 9:30-12:30 at Creech St. Michael Village Hall. The invitations and agenda will be sent out mid August.

This document is available on request in Braille, large print, audiotape or disc and can be translated into different languages. Contact: Nickie Harris on tel: 01823 355281 or email PCP@somerset.gov.uk