

# Our Freshwater - Rivers, streams, lakes

Notes and further information from talk given by Chi Gerrard at CAP event 15th March 2025 at St George's Church Hall, Preston

1. Our River Ribble is one of 1500 river systems in the UK, comprising over 200,000 km of waterways. Aim of talk was to look at why rivers important, what threatens them and what we can do about it.
2. Some of the ways rivers are important include a) habitat for wildlife b) fresh water for drinking, farming, other uses in towns and cities c) recreation including angling, wild swimming, playing with children, dogs etc. Importance of natural green and blue spaces for people's physical and mental health discussed d) natural flood defence e) associated wetlands and saltmarsh excellent carbon sink (per hectare much better than forests) - see <https://www.wwt.org.uk/uploads/documents/2023-01-30/wwt-blue-carbon-route-map-2023.pdf>
3. Biodiversity discussed. Some precious biodiverse habitats include ancient woodland, wetlands, peatlands and river systems. A lot of these habitats have been lost in UK ( 70% of ancient woodlands, 97% wildflower meadows, 90% wetlands, 80% peatlands ) Britain is one of world's most nature-depleted countries - see State of Nature Report 2023 <https://stateofnature.org.uk/>
4. Why is biodiversity important? All species important for the health of whole ecosystems and biosphere, which we (humans) are part of. Losing biodiversity risks damaging entire ecosystems. Biodiversity also brings more resilience to challenges e.g. extreme weather, climate change, disease, pests, predation
5. Rivers in UK are in crisis. Only 14% rivers in England are at "Good" ecological state (close to the river in its natural state - Water Framework Directive) 0% rivers in England are at "Good" from chemical point of view! Figures better in N. Ireland, Wales and Scotland as river quality reflects human population density and corresponding toll on the environment. See <https://environmentagency.blog.gov.uk/2024/09/22/world-rivers-day-what-are-the-biggest-causes-of-river-pollution-and-whats-being-done-about-them/> Rivers can be damaged through structural alterations e.g. canalisation- important habitats destroyed, normal meandering route and flood plain which provides some defence against flooding downstream, are lost.
6. Main problem affecting rivers is pollution. 40% pollution is from Agriculture, 35% from sewage, 18% from town/road run-off, plus others.
7. Lakes, too, are getting polluted e.g. Lake Windermere - in this case mainly through sewage effluent. Thriving wildlife previously in the lake e.g. brown trout are completely gone. Campaigns such as Save Windermere are trying to raise awareness and fight for a cleaner lake. See <https://www.savewindermere.com/>

8. Example of extreme damage to a river by pollution is River Wye, Herefordshire/ Monmouthshire. In this case damage is through agricultural waste and run-off which over-enriches water (eutrophication). Vast number of intensive chicken farms allowed to exist in small area - 51 million chickens in Wye and Severn valleys i.e. 79 chickens for every human in the region! So many chickens need a lot of feed (further unwanted consequence as feed usually imported from 1000s of miles away and is often soya, grown intensively in places like the Amazon Rainforest following deforestation). So many chickens also produce a lot of muck - too much for the land to absorb.
9. Process of Eutrophication explained. See this: The dirty secret that's killing our rivers | Stop Killing Our Rivers from The Soil Association Videos. This gives a very good explanation of the damage from eutrophication <https://youtu.be/TECnFi0NcEI> Run-off of fertiliser e.g. slurry into streams and rivers discussed.
10. Campaigns e.g. River Action have been trying to address the problem which came about through poor planning by local government, failure to monitor or regulate pollution and environmental damage. Unfortunately, even current Labour government have announced plans with economic growth as main aim which could harm rivers more e.g. loosening planning regulations, making it easier to develop intensive chicken farms, etc. Also Environment secretary has fought back against groups e.g. Yorkshire Anglers, taking legal action against the government's failure to protect their local river from pollution. There is still a lot of work for campaigners to do!

See 3 news items about recent government actions that will jeopardise rivers further:

a) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jan/24/uk-climate-nature-bill-dropped-deal-labour-backbenchers>

b) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jan/14/ministers-to-appeal-against-river-pollution-ruling-won-by-yorkshire-anglers>

c). <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/campaigners-warn-against-relaxation-chicken-farming-regulations>

Also:

d) Friends of the Earth & Compassion in World Farming Muck Map.  
<https://friendsoftheearth.uk/nature/muck-map-how-much-factory-farm-waste-does-your-area-produce>

e) Lots information re campaigns and action so far to save the Wye and Severn, also about intensive poultry farming in the UK  
<https://riveractionuk.com/> (River Action Homepage)

11. Things individuals can do to fight against these problems: a) talk about it with friends, family, colleagues b) write/ talk to your councillors / MP c) eat less meat/ dairy and more veg - better for the environment and for your health d) look after your own bit of biodiversity: garden in pesticide-free, peat-free, wildlife-friendly way e) volunteer with organisations involved in conservation and river restoration e.g.

Ribble Rivers Trust, Lancashire Wildlife Trust, Angling Trust f) report any suspected pollution incidents to the Environment Agency

How to contact your MP

<https://www.theyworkforyou.com/>

How to report to the Environment Agency

<https://www.gov.uk/report-environmental-incident>

Ribble Rivers Trust

<https://ribbletrust.org.uk/>

Angling Trust Water Quality Monitoring Network Annual Report 2023

<https://anglingtrust.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/WQMN-Annual-Report-2023.pdf>