

# URBAN RIVERS DEBATE

## What does river restoration mean in urban environments?

Report of a public meeting held at ICOSS,  
University of Sheffield on 26 May 2009

Tom Wild, URSULA project manager  
University of Sheffield  
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### **Session 1. Welcome and introductions**

The meeting facilitator Tom Wild provided a brief welcome to participants, together with whom he reviewed the agenda for the workshop (see Annex 1). Tom then set the context for the workshop by posing the question what kind of river do we want. He showed images of the River Don at various locations in Sheffield, representing very different treatments of rivers in the urban environment. Tom noted that global forces, including economic trends and increased likelihood of flooding associated with climate change, were all-important in driving or stifling the process of regeneration in the city. This in turn has major impacts on the physical manifestations of change in the urban environment, including the morphology of the river. He postulated that these changes come with both opportunities and threats for the city, and that man-made impacts can be brought about extremely quickly as compared with natural processes such as colonisation.

### **Session 2. Presentations on urban river restoration in Italy and the UK**

The next part of the meeting involved the participants hearing about two very different experiences with participation of communities in urban river decision-making processes. First, Giancarlo Gusmaroli presented the outcomes and lessons learned from a major community engagement process undertaken in the Province of Novara in Northern Italy. Next, Simon Ogden and Lisa Judson gave a talk on the history of the Five Weirs Walk Trust and wider personal perspectives on the volunteering movement in Sheffield, with particular reference to its rivers. The presentations are available to download from the URSULA website [www.ursula.ac.uk/events](http://www.ursula.ac.uk/events).

#### ***Giancarlo Gusmaroli, CIRF – Italian River Restoration Centre: Urban river restoration in Italy and the ‘contrat de riviere’***

Giancarlo Gusmaroli presented a summary of the process by which CIRF, the Province of Novara and the Region of Piedmont in the North of Italy have produced a ‘contrat de riviere’, which he explained is a French concept relating to partnerships in river management stemming from the early 1980s.

He suggested that in considering river management in urban environments it was vital to think first about quality of life, and to consider river restoration in terms of anthropic activities, recreation and amenity, as well as nature.

Giancarlo gave an overview of the catchment of the Agogna, a major tributary of the River Po, that flows roughly southwards from the Alps, and through the city of Novara between Milan and Turin. He explained that historically the river had been heavily modified through impoundments, the creation of weirs and removal of sediment and gravels as building materials. The river in this area flows through important agricultural land, and particularly rice fields.



The remainder of Giancarlo's talk focused on the engagement of stakeholders and communities in decision-making relating to the Agogna. This two-year scheme had involved an innovative and extensive process to build capacity for river management and to deliver commitments for partnership working towards shared goals. Giancarlo explained both how this had been delivered and the result, in terms of timetables of agreed actions. An important innovation in the structure of the partnership involved close working relationships, and iterative decision-making between three working groups: (1) the basin assembly of stakeholders (2) a directors board and (3) a technical secretariat.



Giancarlo concluded his presentation by noting that the contrat de riviere in Novara, and in several other cities in Italy, was not simply a 'pilot' or peripheral project but was in fact 'mainstream' business in taking forward the requirements of the Water Framework Directive.

***Lisa Judson & Simon Ogden, Five Weirs Walk Trust  
The Five Weirs Walk: personal and historical perspectives***

Next Simon Ogden and Lisa Judson provided a thought-provoking commentary on river volunteering since the 1970s. They introduced two important historical characters, Alf Green and Ernie Wall, who were the original 'River Don cleaners' and used to remove debris and metal for scrap from the river.

Simon showed images of the various river-related campaigns over the years, and explained how the Five Weirs Walk Trust had come about. He highlighted the importance of the broad range of interests and activist involved in the group from the very beginning.

He concluded by saying that living rivers are highly complex organisms and that despite the increasing interest of agencies and professional researchers in urban rivers, the role of the voluntary activist with their deep and regular knowledge of their local river and its behaviour remains essential. But such groups needed to take a larger catchment-wide view which makes initiatives like the River Don Trust and the Living Don Project so important now.

Lisa then gave her personal perspective on the way the Trust and the Walkway had developed, including practical issues such as land access rights, but mainly focusing on the motivations and roles of the different people involved in the process. She reflected that an important lesson had been the way the group pulled together a broad coalition of individuals from different backgrounds, with complimentary expertise in a range of different fields and with various 'day jobs' that were vital in getting things done. This combination of different 'heads and hats' had proved vital in making progress towards changing the minds of people who thought the group were 'mad' in trying to promote access to the River Don, which was perceived as dirty and a lost cause.



### **Session 3. Discussion: what does river restoration mean in urban environments?**

Next, the group held a debate on river restoration in the city, chaired by David Lerner. Questions and comments were raised in series then discussed by the panel of speakers.

Tony Canning commented that there appears to be a great deal of ignorance over who owns the river, how it 'works' and whose are the key roles and responsibilities. He asked, how can we promote understanding and greater involvement of communities?

Simone Bizzi asked whether since the 1980s economic crisis in Sheffield appears to have been taken as an opportunity to make use of the river as an asset, was it possible to use the credit crunch as a chance to get people involved and raise awareness, as a 'second generation' of activists?

Helen Batt noted that it is important to reflect on the Italian experience of 'right-holders' signing up to the River Contract. She asked do activists in Sheffield really have the power to influence these decision-makers. She added that we really seem to be still quite far from truly democratic approaches to river management, so how could this engagement with non-statutory stakeholders be facilitated?

David Rowley commented that the understanding of how rivers work seems still to be quite limited, since so many examples exist of schemes that cause as many problems as they are designed to fix. He gave the example of dredging the river to improve conveyance, which he argued is counterproductive, and that a more sustainable approach is to restore the river so that it could 'process' sediment itself through more natural regimes of erosion and sedimentation. This he said is close to the heart of the Don Catchment Rivers Trust.



Paul Gaskell highlighted the importance of this kind of catchment scale approach, which could complement well the local initiatives and work by smaller groups exemplified by the Trout in the Town Trust. However he contended there is a pressing need for significant resources for this broader scale approach.

Giancarlo Gusmaroli picked up on the question of how the river works and the services it can provide. He noted the need for concerted effort to develop a shared understanding of the language used, and the importance of drawing in a wide range of interests (users) not just powers. In Novara he noted that an important step had been a visible political decision, taken in front of the 'community' of interests, to support the river contract process.

Tom Wild responded to the issue of whether there was currently an opportunity to get people involved as a result of the global economic downturn. He recalled Lisa's comment that in the 1980s a river cleanup campaign had attracted 700 teenagers as volunteers. That level of engagement did not seem to be likely at present due to a distinct lack of awareness of Sheffield's rivers and less opportunities for younger people to access water. So an important first step was to reach out to communities and then to raise interest in volunteering activities.

In answer to the comment about confusion over riparian ownership, Simon Ogden commented that this was largely a result of there being many small parcels of land under private, and public, ownership which meant it was practically very difficult to achieve strategic goals such as improving access. Furthermore, in many instances riparian landowners really did not want to own the river bank and do not see it as an asset. This he said was a large cultural problem that required the attention of national policy makers. Simon also commented that in terms of river enhancement the recession is indeed an opportunity since there is more chance of creating room for the river as a result of falling land values. He



contended that the trend for higher and more dense urban development in the city centre was less strong, which raises the possibility of temporary treatments. However there would also be less planning gain money available of course.

Thom White asked two questions, first whether there is a similar organisation to the Environment Agency in Italy (it is entitled the Italian Environment Protection and Technical Services Agency) and second whether the EA here is the friend or the foe of river restoration.

Fay Tivey commented on the Making Space for Water scheme on the Derwent in Derby, where widening of the blue-green corridor was being planned. She asked was there a similar approach in Italy and how likely would this be in Sheffield.

John Lewis suggested that the river would only be looked after if it was used more, for a wide range of recreational activities. David Lerner responded by questioning whether this would create conflicts with the conservation of wildlife in the city?

Tony Canning commented that the canoeists in Sheffield had recently been reprimanded by the EA for having undertaken some works in the river to improve flow regimes and thereby 'put right' a problem with algae caused by the recent dredging works. This area he said had seen the loss of fish populations and fishing birds, which their work had put right. He said that it is not the EA's river, and in some cases the organisation does not seem to care about its ecology.

Bruce Munro responded that the EA was pulled in several different directions, but the flood defence responsibility has primacy. The June 2007 event had certainly had a big impact, and although ecology had been taken into account budgets were limited. However, mitigation measures were possible and he added that the Don Catchment Rivers Trust would be a helpful partner in the process.

Emma Westling asked how can the 'public' understand the river if the experts do not? She added that what is valued by people will be cared for, but noted that it is not always clear what communities will value and different parts of society have different aspirations. Tony Canning argued that the river should no longer be viewed as an industrial channel. Alison Holt responded that there were in fact a multitude of views and some people may indeed want the river as an industrial channel. Tony countered that this was why education was so important.

Paul Gaskell picked up on David Lerner's earlier point about potential conflicts between access and wildlife. He suggested that it was possible to provide for a wide variety of uses by providing refuges for wildlife, so there would be less degradation through use. Tony Canning added that there was also a downside to improving access which is that it could also promote illegitimate activities and abuses such as vandalism.

Tom Wild responded that this demonstrates the importance of considering maintenance at the planning stage, in other words the challenge is not just to 'make space for water' but to care for the resulting environments and to provide for their management in the long term.

Giancarlo Gusmaroli responded to the earlier question about the environment agencies in Italy, and the multitude of river stakeholders in both countries. He noted that a major challenge with the Contract de Riviere process had been to involve this wide range of statutory bodies in the process in a meaningful way, but the result had been impressive with most signing up to a firm timetable of actions.



Nicki Schiessel asked whether rivers in Italy had always been under public ownership. Giancarlo answered that the 'wet part' was publicly owned but the riparian land was not traditionally owned by anyone. A key first action in the process in Novara had been to undertake a census of ownership of riverside land. This was essential in knowing who needed to be involved in river restoration plans. Tony Canning noted that in the UK only about 2% of riverside land was accessible, as compared with around 98% in France.

Lisa returned to the question of promoting use and access but also potentially causing problems such as vandalism. She proposed that a helpful approach was to consider different stretches separately, and to think about the most appropriate uses in each location – a 'blanket' approach was not therefore productive. She also commented that in her experience, any public use tended to have more of a positive impact, and the abuses of pollution and vandalism tended to be reduced. Lisa added that the EA relies heavily on the public reporting problems to them.

Finally, on the question of whether the EA was the friend or foe of urban river restoration, Simon Ogden commented they were certainly not 'foe' but that his fear as an activist and an officer was that the EA has become progressively remote through a process of centralisation, and this loss of a local knowledge perspective was damaging. He compared the present situation with the times when Yorkshire Water, and later the National Rivers Authority, had scores of local employees who knew their local watercourses intimately. This generation of knowledgeable professionals had he said been progressively lost, making real progress towards restoration more difficult. Simon concluded this point with an example (from the Rivelin Valley Conservation Group) that if you now phoned the EA about a problem say at Redmires Reservoir, the person answering the phone may well ask 'where is Redmires?'. His opinion was that the organisation now had fewer local roots, and this capacity now needed to be replaced or supplemented by better communication with grass roots organisations.



## **Annex 1. Workshop programme**

### A PUBLIC DEBATE: RESTORING URBAN RIVERS

#### PROGRAMME

- 4.30pm      Tea & coffee available  
5pm          Welcome and introductions - *what kind of river do we want?*  
                (Tom Wild, University of Sheffield)
- 5.15pm      *Urban river restoration in Italy and the 'contrat de riviere'*  
                (Giancarlo Gusmaroli, CIRF Italian River Restoration Centre)
- 5.45pm      *The Five Weirs Walk: personal and historical perspectives*  
                (Lisa Judson & Simon Ogden, Five Weirs Walk Trust)
- 6.15pm      *Discussion: what does river restoration mean in urban environments?*
- 6.45pm      Closing comments  
                (Prof David Lerner, University of Sheffield)