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# SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF THE RIVER ITCHEN SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION

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September 2001

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## River Itchen Sustainability Study

A River Itchen Steering Group has been formed, to develop a sustainable management strategy for the River Itchen candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC).

The Environment Agency, which has responsibility for water resources, fisheries, environmental protection etc under national and European legislation, leads the sustainability study, which is investigating the impacts of water company operations on the conservation interests of the river.

The study is concerned with integrating the Environment Agency's regulatory functions with English Nature's conservation objectives for the Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in the most efficient manner. The Steering Group will be seeking the co-operation of landowners and others involved with the management of the River Itchen and the wider catchment to facilitate:

- ecological surveys;
- cross sectional surveys of the river channels for modelling studies; and
- sediment surveys for assessment of the influence of sediment dynamics on salmonid spawning grounds.

The purpose of this newsletter is to inform potential consultees (and beneficiaries) about the study.

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## The River Itchen candidate Special Area of Conservation

The Chalk rivers of southern England are important in an international context because they represent a significant proportion of this river type in the whole of Europe. Of these rivers, only the Itchen and the Test were recorded as having the 'classic' Chalk river communities described in published river type classifications.

The flows on the Itchen are almost entirely spring-fed and

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1 Introduction and Background

The River Itchen is a classic Chalk stream, rising near Alresford in the Hampshire Downs and flowing through Winchester and Eastleigh before discharging into Southampton Water. Its national and European conservation status is recognised by SSSI and more recently candidate SAC designations.

The water resources of the valley are used for public water supply; dilution of treated sewage effluent, fish farms, cress beds, agriculture, angling and other forms of recreation.

There are water company surface water abstraction intakes at Otterborne and Gaters Mill and groundwater abstractions throughout the catchment.

## The Challenge

The whole river, including its three headwater tributaries, was notified as an SSSI in 1996 for its Chalk stream habitat, including flora, invertebrates, fish, birds and mammals. Most of this SSSI is also a candidate SAC for its water crowfoot (*Ranunculus*) and southern damselfly populations, atlantic salmon, bullhead, and brook lamprey, European otter, and white-clawed crayfish.

The SAC and SSSI species need various habitat types found in the Itchen catchment. The Itchen is a designated salmonid river of national importance although brown trout and salmon populations in the Itchen are in decline. Failure of spawning is attributed primarily to siltation of gravels but other factors may influence the success rate.

The agencies represented on the River Itchen sustainability study steering group are required to protect and enhance the conservation interests of the river system as it has been inherited from our predecessors. The challenge is to protect and enhance the SAC while planning for further development in the catchment.

## Chalk Stream Management

Many people consider a typical Chalk stream and its environs to be one of the pleasantest of English natural landscapes. However, it is in fact a highly modified and managed ecosystem.

In its untouched state the River Itchen would probably have been a much-braided channel flowing through a waterlogged flood plain covered in alder and willow carr. The water would have been shaded and the ill-defined channels would have been littered with fallen trees and branches.

In most places the channels were probably silted and clear gravel areas would have been the exception. *Ranunculus* would not have dominated, salmon were probably much less abundant than they have been in the recent past, and bullhead, brook lamprey would have thrived.

Human modification of the Chalk stream environment (probably) started thousands of years ago, and since that time the river has been channelised for land drainage and navigation, dammed for milling and water-meadow flooding, abstracted for water supply, and otherwise manipulated for a range of agricultural, sporting and landscape purposes.

A regime of management has steadily evolved as different uses and interests waxed and waned. If all human management stopped, parts of the river could eventually revert to the primeval state.

## Management and Programme of the Sustainability Study

Halcrow Group Ltd were appointed in October 2000 to co-ordinate and manage the constituent projects of the sustainability study's work programme (below) on behalf of the Itchen Steering Group.

# MEMBERSHIP OF THE RIVER ITCHEN SUSTAINABILITY STUDY STEERING GROUP

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A River Itchen sustainability study Steering Group has been formed, consisting of the relevant competent authorities (Environment Agency, and the two water companies, Southern Water and Portsmouth Water, Hampshire County Council, Eastleigh Borough Council, Winchester City Council), together with English Nature and DEFRA.

The sustainability study will develop a database, which the Steering Group will use to inform future management of the Itchen catchment and assess the potential effects of proposed new development on the Special Area of Conservation and the catchment as a whole.

**Southern Water and the Environment Agency are the largest contributors to the funding of the study.**

## Consultation

The consultation process would involve consultation meetings with interest groups, interviews and/or questionnaire survey of experience and knowledge of the Itchen catchment and management. Information collected will be collated and analysed and results fed into the development of a sustainable management strategy. The main steps in the consultation process would be as follows:

- a) Consultees would be invited to attend a meeting/interview with the study team and/or complete a questionnaire.
- b) Consultees attend a meeting or complete a questionnaire, with the completed forms returned to the study team at:

*Halcrow Group Ltd, Burderop Park, Swindon, SN4 0QD. (Attention: Kunle Akande, Programme Manager – River Itchen Sustainability Study).*

*Tel: 01793 816374. Fax: 01793 812089*

*Email: Akandek@halcrow.com*

- c) The study team arranges a follow up meeting or