

# BRITISH CANOE UNION PRESS RELEASE

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## **The BCU highlights the flaws in the Environment Agencies report into rivers access - Putting pilot voluntary canoe access agreements in place**

On the 3rd October the Environment Agency will be publishing their report **Putting pilot voluntary canoe access agreements in place**. The work was carried out by the University of Brighton but commissioned by the Environment Agency (EA). The British Canoe Union (BCU) has raised grave concerns over the piece of work and the manner in which it was undertaken. This announcement highlights the dire lack of public access to rivers in England and Wales, unlike Scotland where there is a right.

NB Access to and along water was omitted from the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) that gives public access to land areas. The BCU unsuccessfully lobbied for access to water to be included in the Act and pressed for further government action. England and Wales are unique with 41,000 miles of inland waterways with no public access; whereas in Scotland and other countries there is public access to inland waters.

### **The purpose of the study**

On behalf of DEFRA the EA asked Brighton University to test and demonstrate the processes involved in negotiating voluntary agreements and to secure voluntary canoe access agreements on four rivers in England (Mersey, Teme, Waveney and Wear). These rivers had featured in an earlier feasibility study carried out by the Countryside Agency. The study concluded that additional access to rivers could be provided through voluntary arrangements, but that more advice and guidance was needed.

### **The claims**

- ***Demand in England for recreational access to inland waters is not widespread.***

This claim contradicts the reality\* that canoe & kayaking is the most popular watersport for the fifth year running, with over 1.5million paddlers participating and membership levels increasing month by month. There is an overall demand by the recreation and sport of canoeing and kayaking for access to inland waters.

Furthermore, the Countryside Agency – Land Recreation and Access Report concerning National Parks (June 2005) stated that there was a great unmet demand for white water canoeing in the National Parks.

- ***Approaches to securing canoe access by voluntary agreement are successful.***

On approximately half of the rivers in this study access was already in place or not contested. On one river the agreement is for a 1 mile stretch and for very restricted time periods. Given the popularity of canoeing, this is not successful, sustainable or acceptable. In fact on a couple of the pilot study rivers there is now less canoeing available than before the intervention of the work by the EA/Brighton University.

### **What has the study actually achieved?**

72kms (45 miles) has been negotiated for paddlers, but in reality there was already agreement and acceptance for canoeing to take place on much of the area of study. (the EA had sponsored a Canoeists Guide to one of the rivers). So in two years a meager 20 miles of access have been gained with some of that being highly restrictive and complicated.

There are over 41,000 miles of rivers (over 3 meters wide) with no access! At this rate gaining access to rivers is too slow and certainly not adequate!

The EA report demonstrates the difficulties and limitations of gaining access to water by voluntary agreement where it is contested; and where it is granted the uncertainty of access remaining in place as parties can change and withdraw:

The R Teme is over 60 miles in length and only 1 mile of access has been negotiated on certain days for 9 months of the year. From over 50 miles of the River Wear, 7 miles of access is agreed, some we understand only in principle. The opposition to access faced by the consultants in their negotiations with local interests is in keeping with the national picture. This is why the BCU believes legislation is the only way to gain access that is both secure and has certainty.

### **Just a few reasons why the study is flawed**

- On approximately half of the rivers addressed in this study access was already in place or not contested
- There was very little consultation with the British Canoe Union, the National Governing Body of the sport, representing the interests of over 50,000 paddlers.
- Rather than finding an innovative solution this study fuels the angling versus canoeing debate.
- In the light of the Scottish Land Reform Act and following example from other European countries, Canoeists are right to expect a more realistic approach to access.

### **The Four Projects**

- River Mersey: 28 km from Stockport city centre to Carrington - This is, in fact, a realisation of an earlier scheme put forward by the British Canoe Union in 1994/5 and supported by the Environment Agency NW Region. A gain brought about by Local Authorities, who have a statutory remit to promote recreation. Access was uncontested by other interests, so the voluntary agreement could be considered a formality.
- River Teme: only 1 mile or 1.6km of whitewater around Ludlow – including four weirs- This is highly restrictive with no access in June, July and August and considerably reduces access the rest of the year with a potentially unmanageable booking system. The current arrangement is for all year round paddling based on suitable water levels. The intervention of the Brighton Team has given the opportunity for locals to close down the paddling opportunities.

- River Waveney: 33 km from Brockdish (east of Diss) to Ellingham (east of Bungay) – This is nothing more than a duplication of the work undertaken by the British Canoe Union, Environment Agency, Local Authorities and the East of England Development Agency in 1999. This previous work was not identified by the EA and Brighton Team and as canoeing has taken place for many years access was not contested. The Paul Hiney Secret Rivers programme this month paddled it and traced navigation on it back to the Romans.
- River Wear: 9 km from Houghall south of Durham to the Sands north of Durham.- In reality this is probably 3 mile (5km) stretch around the Durham peninsula which has always been used by canoeists. The extra distance is taking in Houghall College. There is no certainty that this will be included, as they only own one of the riverbanks. In August 2006, the Environment Agency admitted that they had achieved nothing and could only claim success if the owner opposite to Houghall would agree access.

### **Why voluntary rivers access agreements do not work**

From over 41,00 miles (66,000kms) of rivers in England and Wales without a public right of navigation, only 510 miles (812 kilometres) of mostly highly restricted access has been negotiated. Some agreements are for just a few days each year adding very little (1.2%) to the 4% of inland waterways with a public right of navigation. Ultimately, access is in the hands of riparian owners. If they refuse to engage in negotiation, there is no way canoeists can make progress. This leads to unauthorised access to rivers and possible conflict. For example, in Wales only eight out of 300 rivers have negotiated access.

### **Why legislation for rivers access is needed**

Legislation such as the successfully implemented Scottish Land Reform Act 2003, codifies responsible access to land and water. It protects the environment and activities of canoeists, anglers, other users and landowners who are all required to adhere to the Scottish Outdoor Access Code. Canoeing is not seeking a conflict with anglers and other river users. It wants to successfully co-exist to the wider benefit of the whole community, as canoeists do in Scotland, all over Europe and the rest of the world.

A legal right of access to rivers would provide more recreational opportunities for a whole group of people including canoeists, swimmers, and boaters with, knock-on benefits for public health. The recreational aspects of canoeing could coincide effectively with government's "everyday sport" and Welsh Assembly Government's "Climbing Higher Strategy" if only river users had more access.

It is not just recreational paddlers that would benefit. British Canoeing has an outstanding record in the Olympic Games. Our athletes achieved three Olympic medals in Athens and in London 2012 we want to achieve 4 Olympic Medals including possibly 2 gold. A legal right of access will directly help to improve the UK's Olympic standing.

In addition to increased opportunities for recreation and elite sport, increased access to rivers would mean more money for rural communities. Research has shown that canoeing contributes about £750 million a year for the economy of England and Wales as well as supporting over 15,000 jobs.

Legally protected access would provide clarity and certainty for those visiting our rivers and remove conflict from the situation.

For more detailed information visit: <http://www.riversaccess.org/>

\* RYA 2005 Survey

Ends

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**Notes to the editors:**

Set up in 1936 to send a team to the Berlin Olympics, the British Canoe Union (BCU) is the lead body for canoeing and kayaking in the UK. In 2000 the BCU federalised to become the umbrella organisation for the Home Nation Associations in Scotland (SCA), Wales (WCA) and Northern Ireland (CANI). In England, Canoe England was set up, on a par with the other National Associations, as a division of the BCU, to support the development of canoeing in England.

The BCU is responsible for leading and setting the overall framework for the National Associations; including representing canoeing interests through coaching, competition and campaigning for increased access to Britain's waterways for paddlers. In the Athens Olympics, Canoeing was one of Team GB's most successful sports with medals for Ian Wynne (Bronze), Helen Reeves (Bronze) and Campbell Walsh (Silver).

Today the BCU has a membership of over 60,000, including over 500 affiliated clubs and 145 approved centres. According to the Paddlesport Review there are an estimated 2 million people take to the water in a canoe each year. The vast majority do so under a watchful eye of one of the 13,000 BCU Qualified coaches or as part of an affiliated organisation. For more information visit: [www.bcu.org.uk](http://www.bcu.org.uk).

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