

Landowners allowing voluntary access to their rivers is the way forward, says Environment Agency

A two-year study by the Environment Agency into how landowners can open up more rivers across England for canoeing has been completed and the findings released today (October 3, 2006).

The Minister for Biodiversity, Landscape and Rural Affairs, Barry Gardiner, and the Minister for Sport, Richard Caborn, will hear about the successful conclusion of the project, and be handed the final report, on October 3, 2006, at the Riverside Centre, on the River Waveney, Bungay, Suffolk.

"The Voluntary Canoe Access Agreements report sets the watermark for future voluntary access agreements across the country," explained Environment Agency Acting Chief Executive Dr. Paul Leinster.

"The Environment Agency has a statutory duty to promote the use of water and watersides for recreation, at the same time balancing the needs of the competing water users and the environment. The popularity of canoeing is increasing and if more water is made available, more people will be encouraged to take part."

Over 30% of the major rivers and canals in England provide access for various canoeing activities such as canoe touring and white-water paddling, and thereby generate additional income for local riverside communities and provide opportunities for physical recreation. The Environment Agency's study involved putting voluntary access agreements in place on four rivers and looking at how they worked in practice and could be used elsewhere.

"Canoeing is becoming an increasingly popular sport at both grass root and elite levels," added Minister for Sport Richard Caborn.

"The voluntary access pilot projects, like the one in Bungay, have shown how valuable the inland waterways are for recreational activities. By making access to these waterways easier more people will have the opportunity to enjoy canoeing and other water-based activities helping to drive up participation in sport."

More than 70 kilometres of canoe access have been created as part of the pilot projects, including the River Mersey between Stockport City Centre to Carrington; the River Teme near Ludlow; the River Waveney from Brockdish to Ellingham; and the River Wear north and south of Durham from Houghall to the Sands.

The potential benefits of the scheme, including help to manage health and safety and using rivers for the social and economic well being of all, were explained beforehand to 400 local landowners. Nearly 99% of them consequently agreed to consider access to rivers running through their land. Although concerns were raised, the pilot projects proved it was possible to develop practical solutions to meet them.

canoe access (2)

“From this work we now have new methods and a better understanding of what is needed. We have learnt from setting up the pilot projects there is no overwhelming reason why landowners, with the right advice and guidance, should not voluntarily allow access to canoeists. In return the canoeists need to respect the agreements and codes of conduct that are put in place,” continued Dr. Leinster.

Based upon our experiences across the pilot rivers the Environment Agency has produced a toolkit giving advice and information on voluntary access agreements, including:-

- Basic access rights as they now stand;
- What sort of voluntary agreements can be put in place with landowners;
- How to find out who owns the land and water;
- How to approach different owners;
- Codes of conduct;
- Risk assessments;
- Details of other organisations which can help

The on-line Voluntary Canoe Access Agreements Toolkit will be available soon. It includes details of funding opportunities, plus data on social and economic benefits of canoeing.

Visit www.environment-agency.gov.uk.

“The value of water-related recreation is huge. Some 250 million leisure trips are made to water venues each year, resulting in about £2.5 billion being spent. In the following five years it is expected that an extra two million people will take part in water-related activities,” added Dr. Leinster.

“To help meet this growing demand the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has asked us to explore the development of a strategic approach to water-related sport and recreation, searching for the best places to provide new opportunities and facilities that encompass social as well as economic benefits.

“Our next step will be to look for opportunities across our South West and Anglian regions. Working with all stakeholders we will create a plan that shows where new opportunities can be created and identify the social and economic benefits these can bring.”

Photograph and interview opportunity:

When: Tuesday, October 3, 2006

Time: 10.30am – 12.30pm

Where: On the River Waveney at The Riverside Centre, The Staithe, Bungay, Suffolk.

Event: Launch of the findings of a two-year study on the delivery of canoe access.

Who: The Minister for Biodiversity, Landscape and Rural Affairs, Barry Gardiner, and the Minister for Sport, Richard Caborn. The Ministers will also paddle along the River Waveney.

Media contact: Adrian Westwood on 0207 8638797 or 07985 483083.

Ends

Media enquiries: 020 7863 8710 (five lines), or outside normal office hours, please contact the National Duty Press Officer on no. 07798 882 092