

U3AC WORKSHOP REPORT

WATER. “*Water, water everywhere but maybe not....*”

THURSDAY 25TH June 2020

Water, water, everywhere...but maybe not...

The U3AC Environment Group held a virtual Zoom seminar on 25th June on the subject of water scarcity, both globally and more locally here in the Cambridgeshire area.

The seminar was timely as two days before the Environment Agency had published a warning of prolonged dry weather leading to drought for the Cambridgeshire area.

There was a short introductory presentation on global and national issues by one of our Environment Group members, Simon Blackley who had worked for the Environment Agency. The main speaker was Stephen P. Tomkins, Chair of the Cam Valley Forum. The title of Stephen's talk was "***Cambridge Area Water Management and Why All Is Not Well with the River Cam***". {These PowerPoints are on the Environment Group are of the U3Ac website.}

Simon Blackley first outlined the global and political, national and local background to water issues. At the global scale, the availability of fresh water will be substantially changed as a result of climate change, increased temperatures will cause more evaporation, and floods and droughts will become more frequent and intense.

Stephen Tompkins, Chairman of the Cam Valley Forum drew attention to an excellent report that the Forum has produced called, '***Let It Flow*** which is available on their website and now on the U3Ac one too. {We were asked to look at the report and send feedback to the Forum.}

The main issue re water supply is overabstraction. Quotas for the private water companies had been set in the 1960s and it now apparent that these were far too generous. The private water companies, when criticised as having not declared a drought last year or on their huge water losses due to leakage (much higher in the Cambridgeshire area than elsewhere in the UK) or relatively low targets that they had set themselves for improvement) usually state that they are not abstracting as much as they were permitted.

Analysis of rain fall in the Cam Valley area shows little real change over the last hundred years or so. It had been thought there is a greater water loss from the soil due to the higher summer temperatures however analysis by Anglia Ruskin University researcher shows that this was not the case.

In Cambridgeshire river flows are augmented by water abstraction from underground sources thus lowering the underground water reserves, and by treated effluent from sewage treatment plants. In spite of this at some points the river and its tributaries had dried up in recent summers eg at Stapleford. As a result in the River Cam is about half sewage output in the summer, and is thus rich in nitrate and phosphate which is concentrated on the bottom of the riverbed. The quality decreases as the river flows along. The Cam is classified officially as having '*poor water quality*' from Saffron Walden upwards.

In our area we have chalk streams which have lost their unique richness due to overabstraction and pollution.

In Cambridgeshire there is no water recycling and very little water storage. Building a reservoir is problematic because the land is so valuable in the area and also because of the huge financial costs. Recycling of water would also be costly.

As the Cambridgeshire area was booming and there is a huge national and regional push for growth of the area this produces a huge demand for housing. Although there is some sustainable housing such as at Eddington there is national building standards have been reduced so that there is no requirement to build houses with inbuilt low water usage.

Retrofitting houses to reduce water usage is costly as is installing greywater systems.

A huge amount of water is lost in the distribution pipes. The water companies could do a lot more to reduce water leakages but there is no real incentive for them to do so and the targets that they set themselves are very low.

Water companies are private and thus their priority is to make money by selling water. {See article that appeared in following week -

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/01/england-privatised-water-firms-dividends-shareholders> }

There are several regulatory bodies involved. A regional body has recently been set up.

Personal reduction of water use:-

- Install water meters (less water used so lower your water bill)
- Fix leaking taps. (Check for leaks.)
- Don't run water to clean teeth
- Installing low flush loos or simply put a filled bottle in cistern
- Shower for a shorter period of time and use an aerator or other type of efficient shower head
- Recycling bath water after having bath with less water. (bath less often)
- Run dishwashers and washing machines less often with full loads
- Don't water gardens or use recycled water (plan a drought-tolerant garden)
- Reduce (or no) use of hoses or carwashes

Some suggested contacting our MPs and the environment minister(s) about these matters. Examine Local Plans proposals for water management and then feedback comments and questions to the relevant councils.

Elizabeth May 2/7/2020

U3AC Environment Group