

Eel Express

Issue 1

The Advisory Committees

Unless you have been directly involved in the Lough Neagh Advisory Committee (LNAC) or the Lower Bann Advisory Committee (LBAC) you will have heard very little about the work of the two committees. To help keep you informed we have decided to produce a newsletter, the Eel Express. It will be produced twice each year by the Liaison Officer and will include issues addressed by the advisory committees as well as news of what is going on in the area.

But what have the committees been up to? Well, they first met in June 1994 and have settled down to a pattern of four meetings per year. Most of our meetings are held at our offices at Sperrin House, Magherafelt.

Bob Davidson has been appointed as Liaison Officer for the advisory committees and, with clerical support, acts as secretary for the two committees. He has a general go-between role amongst committee members and between the advisory committees and representatives of government agencies.

On the Lower Bann consultants are working on a Tourism and Recreation Strategy. The consultants have been busy gathering information from a wide range of people, not least advisory committee members. A brief article in this newsletter outlines the work they have been asked to do. The consultants are due to report in January. Considering their recommendations and monitoring the response of local and central government authorities to the proposed Tourism and Recreation Strategy will be a key issue next year. Other issues addressed by LBAC include water level control, water quality, fishing, the Bann Estuary and the management of Bann Woods.

A working group of the LNAC has been looking in some detail at safety and navigation issues on Lough Neagh. Progress on this front is encouraging and is outlined elsewhere in this newsletter. The LNAC has addressed a whole range of issues including Lough Neagh water level control, water abstraction, water quality, nature conservation designations and tourism. It is hoped that a major tourism and recreation study will be carried out next year.

Leaflets outlining the work of the advisory committees are being circulated with this newsletter. The Committees are there to represent the views of all users and interest groups. If you have any issues you wish to raise or points clarified please don't hesitate to contact the Liaison Officer at Sperrin House.

Brian Wood
Chairman, LNAC

Jack Gault
Chairman, LBAC

Tourism and the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre

So has this Northern Ireland tourism boom we have all heard about reached Lough Neagh this year? Certainly from where we are at Oxford Island, 1995 has brought changes to the numbers and type of tourists visiting the Discovery Centre and the Nature Reserve. The number of visitors from the South, particularly from Monaghan and Dublin directions, has grown noticeably, with more preparation for the Republic's Bank Holidays now being essential! Our visitor book now reads like the index of a world atlas, with many more long distance travellers from USA and Australia have called in, as well as an increase across the board from mainland Britain, Europe, Asia and South Africa. One of the most exciting growth areas has been the appearance of Tour coaches from across the water – we are already getting signs that the tour buses we've seen so far are only a fraction of what might appear in the next few years. So, depending of course on the general situation, there is every reason to be optimistic about the tourist potential of Northern Ireland and Lough Neagh in particular. Apart from some worrying comments about specific shortfalls such as the amount and quality of accommodation, the universally positive reports that this year's visitors have told us bode well for the future and serve to wake us up to the fact that we live in one of the most beautiful parts of the world – something that we forget all too easily!

Jim Bradley
Manager
Lough Neagh Discovery Centre
Tel: 01762 322205

Exploring the Bann

The Causeway Coast Kayak Association organised a Bann Cruise on the Lower Bann on the weekend of 19-21 May. The flotilla of eight Canadian canoes, two long sea canoes, two Dingle currachs and a lugger started at Newferry on Friday under the leadership of Robin Ruddock. People were very impressed by a walk amongst the bluebells in Portglenone Forest and spent the first night at the Kingfisher Centre.

The onward journey the next day, with an enlarged fleet, was quite memorable passing through the well manicured Portna Lock and salmon leap near Kilrea followed quickly by the old three arched Kilrea Bridge and the attractive Movanager canal and lock noted for its wildlife and coarse fishing.

Salmon fishermen at Carnroe must have been surprised at the motley crew passing through but were delighted with the brief company and weren't at all upset by the traffic passing through their expensive fishing stretch.

Arrival at Drumaheglis marina and caravan site was a little daunting as speedboats and skiers turned the waters into a frenzied state, threatening to smash the currachs and canoes against the jetties. Some boats had to moor off-shore and wait for the activity to settle down and a little diplomacy was needed to alert the power boat users to the danger of their wash to smaller craft.

Sunday morning awoke to a brisk southerly wind providing an opportunity to raise sails (yes, even on the canoes) and savour the peaceful countryside. The flotilla ran before the wind out to the tidal waters of the Bann Estuary to finish the cruise at the Coleraine Marina in colourful splendour.



ALNUS STEPS DOWN FOR LOUGH NEAGH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

After nine years dealing with issues on Lough Neagh the Association of Lough Neagh Users (ALNUS) held their last meeting in September 1994 before passing the reins to the new Lough Neagh Advisory Committee.

ALNUS was formed in September 1986 with representatives from a range of statutory, commercial and voluntary organisations and ordinary citizens. Their aim was to improve, protect and conserve Lough Neagh and environs for the benefit of the public.

A major concern of ALNUS from its inception was that Lough Neagh required an integrated approach to its management and that a vehicle adequate for this job should be created.

As a result of pressure exerted by ALNUS and others the new Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Management Structure was formed with a Lough Neagh Advisory Committee and a Lough Neagh Co-ordinating Committee.

A paper prepared by H. Averley, Honorary Secretary of ALNUS, summarising issues addressed by ALNUS and on which further action by Lough Neagh Advisory Committee might be required is available at Sperrin House.

New post for Community Group

The South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association, a local voluntary cross community group established to encourage economic and social development throughout the area has made its first appointment.

Mr Philip McFarland has been appointed as Development Co-ordinator with the association.

ROLE

Mr McFarland's role as Development Co-ordinator will be to carry out a study to investigate the opportunities for development throughout the South Lough Neagh region covering Derrymacash, Derryadd, Derrytrasna, Derryinver, Derrylard, The Birches, Maghera, Derryloughan and Derrytresk.

Mr McFarland said, "Rural communities suffer from a range of problems such as a dependence on the agribusiness, poor road networks and restricted employment opportunities. This is a challenging and exciting time for people living in rural areas, with European (Leader II), International Fund for Ireland (IFI) and Government initiatives targeting disadvantaged rural regions. Such initiatives provide assistance for local communities to determine and shape their own future. Quite simply, this gives communities the opportunity to improve the quality of life in their area".

CONTACT

Mr McFarland warmly welcomes and encourages comments from the local people and businesses, living and operating throughout the area. He can be contacted at Unit 31, Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation Complex, Carn Drive, Carn Industrial Area, Craigavon, BT63 5RH. Telephone: - 01762 361759.

A new Tourism and Recreation Strategy for Lower Bann

The Lower Bann River is an attractive waterway flowing through delightful, unspoilt countryside from Toomebridge to Barmouth near Coleraine. There is a growing interest in making more of the river and its surroundings for recreation and tourism. This needs to be done in a managed way, ensuring that the character and quality of the river is safeguarded.

At present there are a few hot spots with much activity. For example, there is water-skiing at Newferry and Drumaheglis and rowing and sailing at Coleraine. The five locks allow boats to pass the full length of the Bann from Lough Neagh to the sea but remarkably few boats travel the length of the system.

Consultants have been asked to develop a strategy for the sustainable development of tourism on the Lower River Bann and its corridor. The study has been commissioned by the following bodies in the Lower Bann Co-ordinating Committee: DANI Watercourse Management Division, DOE Environment Service, Sports Council for Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and the five riparian councils (Antrim, Ballymena, Magherafelt, Ballymoney and Coleraine).

Study Objectives

The study will address a number of key objectives:

- Compiling a database of tourism and recreation resources along the Lower Bann;
- Establishing the current levels and patterns of activity on the river and its banks;
- Evaluating current and potential environmental impacts of these activities;
- Identifying opportunities to enhance and develop safe facilities for the enjoyment of the river corridor;
- Considering how the current activities interface, and identifying current and potential conflicts;
- Recommending management approaches to the river to resolve conflict, avoid detrimental impacts and to ensure safe practice;
- Assessing the current and potential economic impact of recreation and tourism;
- Identifying the aspirations, proposals and priorities of statutory, commercial and community interest on the Lower Bann;
- Recommending enhanced approaches to co-ordinating events and developments on the Lower Bann;
- Addressing examples of good practice from similar sites elsewhere.

The consultants (Pieda plc & Judith Annett, Countryside Consultancy) will be reporting early in the New Year. The Lower Bann Advisory Committee will be looking closely at the recommendations and how they are adopted by the statutory authorities.

New Caravan Park

The caravan park at Maghery Country and Caravan Park was officially opened on 11 April 1995.

Watercourse Management Division provided nine touring caravan stands with toilet and washroom facilities on their Craigavon Borough Council lakeside site. At the end of the season Angela Lavin, from Craigavon Borough Council, said "With virtually no promotion the park attracted a small number of caravans and tents most weekends. We're looking forward to higher levels of usage next year now that the caravan park is listed in the tourist brochures".

Special Environmental Award

The work of Lough Neagh Discovery Centre has been recognised in a major environmental award. Last February the centre picked up the Special Judges Award in the Interpret Britain awards recently figured highly in the judging of a BT Special Environmental Award. This is all part of an initiative being co-ordinated by NI2000 to encourage organisations to become involved in projects to improve the environment.

The event which drew particular attention was the "May Mud Lark" at the Discovery Centre. This involved transplanting plants from Kinnego Pond into the large pond at the Discovery Centre to attract more wildlife and improve the appearance of the site.

(Lurgan Mail, May 18, 1995)

Fertilisers threaten Ecological disaster on Lough Neagh

Lough Neagh is again under threat from poor water quality and increasing levels of algae. Excess algal blooms cause oxygen depletion in the water which in turn kills fish and unless the situation is brought under control Lough Neagh could face serious ecological damage.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s algal levels in Lough Neagh steadily increased and scientists identified an oversupply of the nutrient phosphorus as the primary cause. In an effort to reduce the amount of phosphorus reaching Lough Neagh, Government introduced a system of phosphorus removal in 1984 from all the main sewage treatment works discharging into Lough Neagh. Since then about 75 tons of phosphorus per year have been removed from sewage works and prevented from entering Lough Neagh. Initial indications were that levels of both phosphorus and algae were going down in the Lough.

All seemed well until 1988 when improvement slowed and phosphorus levels in the Lough began to rise again. Scientists have now discovered that the additional phosphorus is coming from farmland. When phosphorus is added as fertiliser to agricultural land most is bound up in soil, some is used by plants and some is washed away into ditches and drains. It is the increasing proportion that is washed away that is causing the problem. The Department of Agriculture found that up to 50 per cent of the soils tested for phosphorus already have more than enough for plant growth. Farmers are therefore adding more than they need and some of the surplus ends up in Lough Neagh promoting algal growth in the Lough rather than grass growth on their farms.

If farmers systematically tested their soil for nutrients and added only what was necessary they could save an estimated 6 million pounds annually. The Lough Neagh Advisory Committee are speaking to representatives of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Environment to examine ways of reducing this ecologically damaging and financially wasteful input of phosphorus to the Lough.

Tour meets dead end

A scouting party of four young Belfast men who are part of a larger group interested in walking round Lough Neagh this summer was stopped in their tracks when they reached the River Blackwater only to discover that there was no way across. They were faced with the options of swimming across, walking miles to find a bridge or trying to find someone who would ferry them across. Fortunately they eventually found someone with a boat who took them across from Derrylaughan to Maghera.

They experienced the same problem when they reached the River Bann at the Bannfoot but a local fisherman, Vivian Tennyson came to the rescue and ferried them over to the Derrytrasna side.

This incident highlights a problem which is experienced by local people every day of the week despite all the discussions about community development and tourism potential. A community group, the South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association has been set up in the area and their main objective is to encourage funding to provide a means of crossing the two rivers, preferably by bridges and roads rather than by ferries which was the original method of crossing. The Association hopes that this will reunite the community which has been divided by the demise of these crossings.

(Lurgan Mail, April 13, 1995)

The second bird watching and wildlife fair

Despite the vagaries of the weather which are all too predictable for the end of September, the second Birdwatching and Wildlife Fair was an outstanding success, with 3000 people arriving at Oxford Island on the last weekend to take their choice of a myriad of talks, walks, boat trips, demonstrations, conservation stalls and of course our own birdwatching version of Mastermind, with none other than Magnus Magnusson himself presiding! Magnus was particularly pleased to be present at the launch of the Link between Oxford Island and the Myvatyn-Laxa Conservation Area in his home country of Iceland.

Other highlights of the event included the 30th birthday party of the Young Ornithologists' Club (YOC) and a wonderful exhibition of wildlife art, including marvellous works by Julian Friers, Terry Dorrian and Mairead McGeown. All in all, people seem to be getting the message that the Fair is not just for dedicated birdwatchers, but for anyone with an interest in wildlife. This promising early start in the space of two years means that Lough Neagh can look forward to being the venue for what could become one of the major events of the calendar.

Jim Bradley

Improvements agreed for Navigation System on Lough Neagh

Provision of navigation markers, lights, dredged channels and charts is very poor on Lough Neagh. There is some hope of improvements however resulting from recommendations made by a Lough Neagh Advisory Committee (LNAC) working group with co-opted members of Lough Neagh Rescue.

A list of 17 recommendations made by the working group was considered by the Lough Neagh Co-ordinating Committee (LNCC) and some progress has been made. It has been agreed that Watercourse Management Division (WMD) will increase the number of navigation markers from 29 to 48. These markers will be given identification numbers as an aid to location finding and be painted with reflective paint. As an additional navigation aid 5 white cairns will be maintained at prominent points on the Lough.

Consideration for a new chart for Lough Neagh and a boat users' code of conduct is being referred to the Consortium of Lough Neagh District Councils.

Agreement on the installation of navigation lights and the dredging of a series of safe havens for craft around the shores of the Lough has been more difficult to gain. A major difficulty lies in the fact that there is no navigation authority for Lough Neagh. The Lough Neagh and Lower Bann Drainage and Navigation Act (NI) 1955 places a statutory responsibility for navigation with the Department of Agriculture (WMD) for the Lower

Bann but not for Lough Neagh. WMD have agreed to establish and maintain 48 navigation markers but are not prepared to take on additional responsibilities. Proposed changes to the Water Act (NI) 1972 expected next year will extend the permissive powers of WMD to do additional work but resources will be limited and LNAC may have to press hard to have the navigation infrastructure on Lough Neagh further improved.

Welcome for Area Based Strategy

The Department of Agriculture has allocated one million pounds in financial assistance for rural development on the western and southern shores of Lough Neagh over the next three years.

The area included lies within the three council areas of Craigavon, Cookstown and Dungannon and includes the local government wards of Loup, Ardboe, Coagh, Killcolpy, Washing Bay, Killyman, The Birches, Kinnegoe and Aghagallon. The aim of the strategy is to stimulate the economic and social revitalisation of this disadvantaged area through partnership between public, private and voluntary sectors.

A group known as Lough Shores Area Based Strategy Action Group (LSABSAG) comprised of representatives of Department of Agriculture, Department of Environment, Department of Economic Development, Rural Development Council, local communities and business sector will be set up to implement the strategy. LSABSAG will assess the social and economic needs of the area and identify opportunities for development. The overall benefit to the area will be more than £1 million as the LSABSAG will be able to influence certain aspects of government policy to the advantage of the people in the area. Also, any money spent will be matched with funds from other sources.

A Strategy Manager will be appointed to help co-ordinate the work of the various groups involved. In the meantime Sean Nugent of the Rural Development Division can answer questions. Tel: 01365 325004.

Fishermen again under pressure from “cowboys” on jet skies

Last November an uncontrolled jet ski, tearing along the Lower Bann at more than 30 mph, could have killed two anglers. The incident occurred at Newferry while visitors from Holland, France, Germany and Portugal were taking part in a five day fishing competition.

On Saturday afternoon, the second day of the competition, fishing became virtually impossible due to around 8 jet skiers using the river and then on Sunday Morning an unmanned jet ski went out of control and headed towards Lough Beg at considerable speed. It passed between two anglers before ending up 12 feet into a field. Luckily on

this occasion no one was hurt but the incident highlights the dangers caused by irresponsible jet skiers and emphasises the need for some kind of control.

Suggestions have been made that controls be put onto the public slipways so that only people who are fully insured, sensible and aware of the safety code would be allowed on the river.

(Northern Constitution, 1 April 1995)

(Editor's note: The consultants carrying out the Tourism and Recreation Study are looking at possible means of resolving the conflict between fishing and watersports activity.)

New promotional drive for Lough Neagh Tourism

The Lough Neagh Tourism Group – made up of all six Councils around Lough Neagh – Antrim, Lisburn, Craigavon, Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt – and supported under the European Community Marketing Development Support Scheme, are set to launch a new promotional campaign. The Group have appointed a new Tourism Marketing Officer, Mary Jo McCanny with a brief to increase awareness of Lough Neagh as a destination – in key markets and to increase the value and volume of tourism in the area.

A strategic Marketing Plan has since been prepared and a budget allocated.

Commenting on the Consortium Plans, Mary Jo McCanny adds:

“We will very much be concentrating on targeted marketing, promoting Lough Neagh as an ideal destination for short breaks, and particularly activity and special interest holidays like fishing, golfing and angling to key markets in the Republic of Ireland, Scotland and England. We also hope to gain a greater share of the groups market through specific promotions to coach and group organisers encouraging them to include Lough Neagh in their future programmes.

The Consortium have a range of activities planned for late 1995 and early 1996 – which include production of new promotional literature including a new tourism guide, which will include an accommodation section in the area. Other new publications include a map, a heritage trail, golfing and caravanning brochures, posters, and fact sheets in birdwatching and angling.

The Consortium will also be attending a range of trade and consumer holiday exhibitions, at Dublin, Cork, Shannon, Belfast, Glasgow, as well as British Travel Trade Fair and Angling 96 in Birmingham. Other promotional activities planned for 1996 include advertising, direct mail campaigns and events promotions.

Copies of the Marketing Plan for 1996 should be available from the end of November.
For further enquiries on the Consortium's activities, contact:

Mary Jo McCanny –
Lough Neagh Tourism
Antrim Borough Council
The Steeple,
Antrim,
BT41 1BJ
Tel: 01849 463113

Wildfowlers thank the council

Members of the Federation of Lough Neagh and Lough Beg Wildfowlers have been showing their appreciation of Craigavon Council's support in their conservation efforts.

They recently presented a replica of their Queen Mother's Birthday Award for conservation to the Mayor of Craigavon, Councillor Brian Maguinness.

The Federation is now hoping to erect bird nesting boxes, feeding tables and two summer seats at suitable sites.

Their locations will be decided with the help of the pupils and principles of Derrymore Primary School and Carrick Primary School, Mrs Falloon and Mr Lennon respectively.

Lurgan Mail, May 4, 1995

Habitat improvement scheme

Farmers around Lough Neagh will be eligible to receive payments to manage their land in a more environmentally beneficial way under a new Habitat Improvement Scheme (HIS). The HIS forms part of the European Agri-Environment Programme and offers annual hectare payments to farmers who modify current farming practices in order to create, restore or protect wildlife habitats. Farmers whose land borders the existing Lough Neagh and Lough Beg ASSI or the Ballinderry or Moyola Rivers will be eligible.

A variety of options are available on grassland, woodlands or waterside habitats for periods of 10 or 20 years. Farmers who join will be required to stop using fertilisers and pesticides; either reduce or stop grazing and generally comply with an agreed management plan.

Payments range from £50 per hectare per year to £325 per hectare per year depending on the quality of the farmland and the length of time taken out of production.

This seems an excellent means of rewarding farmers to look after the environment. LNAC will watch with interest to see the level of take-up and the eventual impact on wildlife communities.

Farmers interested in the scheme should contact DANI at 01232 524512.

The tourists “home from home” on the banks of the Bann

Kilrea Enterprise Group has opened the doors of an existing new tourism venture on the Bann at Kilrea.

Portneal Lodge is a two-storey accommodation centre nestled in seven acres of woodland overlooking an unspoilt stretch of the River Bann. It offers the discerning visitor superior bed and breakfast accommodation in a homely and relaxed atmosphere with evening meals available on request.

The Lodge has 19 bedrooms in total, all of which are en-suite and have colour TV, tea/coffee making facilities and central heating. On the ground floor is a spacious lounge and dining-room area allowing visitors to unwind around a hearth fire and enjoy some old fashioned Ulster hospitality under the management of man and wife team, Tom and Deirdre McAvinchey. The lounge area is deliberately open plan, and therefore easily converted to a small hall where seminars and community groups can meet.

Anglers Paradise

Because of the location of Portneal Lodge, it is the ideal centre for all visitor activities whether it is hill walking, canoeing, or simply sight seeing. First and foremost, though, Portneal Lodge, was designed and built to take advantage of some of the best fishing country in the Province.

The Lower Bann has long been an undiscovered mecca of course fishing in Northern Ireland. Word of the 100lb plus catches at Toomebridge and Newferry has already spread. There are Bream to 9lbs, Hybirds 4-5lbs. Perch and Roach that have never seen a hook! Local canals at Portna and Movanager also offer a good day's fishing with some fine specimen Pike.

Portneal Lodge is a community project owned and operated by Kilrea Enterprise Group Ltd, with assistance from The European Union, International Fund for Ireland, Department of Agriculture for NI, Coleraine Borough Council and the local community.

If you would like to know more about Portneal Lodge further details are available from Tom or Deirdre at Kilrea 012665 41444. Alternatively, messages may be faxed on 012665 41424.

Fishing rights

On the Lower Bann the fishing rights belong to the Honourable the Irish Society and are administered by Bann System Limited. The Department of Agriculture own the fishing rights in the canals. Fishermen must have a fishing permit from either Bann System Ltd or the Department of Agriculture plus a rod licence from Fisheries Conservancy Board.

DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

New Walk

Work carried out by the Department of Agriculture on behalf of the Council has just begun on a new riverside walk from Sandelford Bridge to the Cutts at Castleroe. This will enable you to walk along the river all the way from the centre of the town via the existing Council-owned Christie Park and link up with the Trim Trail at Somerset Forest.

Natural Habitat Retained

However, there will be a major difference between the two walks which are divided by the Sandelford Bridge; the new walk will be in sympathy with the existing riverside habitat. "As much of the semi-natural habitat will be maintained as possible" explained Environment Officer Jim Allen. "... and we also hope to install interpretive panels which will explain something of the natural and local history of the area, including Mountsandel on the opposite bank".

EVENTS PROGRAMME

Date	Event
November 5	Coarse Fishing AT Winter League. Tel: 01849 422407.
November 7	Night Cruise – Causeway Coast Kayak Association Cutts – Coastguards. Meeting Cutts 7.00 pm. Tel: 01265 731599
November 12	Coarse Angling – East Belfast Winter League. Tel: 01849 422407.
November 13	Lough Neagh Wildfowl Count, Oxford Island, Craigavon. 9.30 am -4.00 pm. Tel: 01762 322398
November 18	“Birds by Bus”, Lough Neagh Discovery Centre, 11.00 am – 3.00 pm. Tel: 01762 322205.
November 21	Night Cruise – Causeway Coast Kayak Association Agivey Bridge – Cutts. Meeting Cutts 7.00 pm. Tel: 01265 731599
November 22-25	Bann Bonanza – Anglers World Holidays. Newferry and Portglenone. Tel: 01849 422407
November 26	Coarse Fishing AT Winter League. Tel: 01849 422407
December 2	“Birds by Bus”, Lough Neagh Discovery Centre, 11.00 am – 3.00 pm. Tel: 01762 322205
December 10	Coarse Fishing AT Winter League. Tel: 01849 422407
December 17	Coarse Fishing East Belfast Christmas Match Tel: 01849 422407
December 26	Coldfinger Regatta. Coleraine Yacht Club. Tel: 01265 44503
December 31	Coarse Fishing East Belfast Winter League Tel: 01849 422407.

The venues for fishing competitions listed above will be:

Portglenone

Newferry

Toome

Let the Liaison Officer know of any events planned for April to September 1996 for inclusion in the spring issue.