

REFLECTIONS ON THE END OF THE MERSEY BASIN CAMPAIGN (AUGUST 2009)

JEREMY CARTER, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

Who will take responsibility for the Northwest's water environment in the future?

As an idealist, I'd like to think that the public could assume a greater role in this agenda, and people could really take responsibility for their local water environment. In some places this is already happening, which is partly down to the catchment-based approach taken by the Mersey Basin Campaign.

I'd also like to see the natural environment itself playing a bigger part. When you're looking at challenges like flood risk, or water quality, just leaving the natural environment to do what it's there to do – for example to provide a buffer against flooding, or to absorb pollutants – can be very helpful. If that could be built into the system a bit more, that would be ideal.

In reality, though, I think it comes down to three groups – the local authorities, the water provider, United Utilities, and the Environment Agency. Within that, I think the local authorities have a particular role to play, as they're responsible for land use and development, and many of the problems we see are related to changes in the use of land. Increasing the role and responsibility of local authorities is important, but obviously that does bring resourcing issues of its own.

MARK ATHERTON, NWDA

What have been the greatest strengths of the Mersey Basin Campaign?

I think the Campaign's greatest strength has been that it exemplifies something the Northwest is really, really good at – creating partnerships that are cohesive, add value and really work. I've worked in other regions where that ethos doesn't exist, and trying to create it is extremely difficult.

What the Campaign has done throughout its life, but especially over the last 5-10 years, is bring together disparate groups from business, the private sector, the voluntary sector, right down to individual members of the public, and made them feel part of something far bigger than they could ever be acting alone.

It's also been particularly good at acting as a broker between different factions, and can sometimes negotiate an agreement where other organisations couldn't.

And its biggest weakness?

To achieve more, I think the Campaign could have been better financed. It had a tremendously difficult job to do, and it has substantially achieved its aims, but that could have happened more quickly if there had been additional finance, especially in the early years.

As the Campaign comes to an end, what do you feel is the greatest environmental challenge facing the Northwest?

The biggest challenge that we're facing, not just in the Northwest, but in the UK and globally, is the impact of climate change. I suspect we're heading towards unavoidable climate change, the effects of which we don't yet fully understand.

I'm one of those people who feels that things are going to be worse than we currently imagine – that's just my gut feeling. I tend to think that, given human nature, we'll go to the brink of catastrophe before we're actually driven to come back. But on the positive side, I do believe in the power of human ingenuity, so once we reach that point, we will find solutions, be it through modifying our behaviour, or developing technological answers.

What worries me when I'm trying to sleep at night, though, is that we'll leave things too late, and find ourselves in a 'rubber band' effect, where the damage we've already caused escalates beyond our control. Science doesn't prove that right now, but that's what I think the challenge might be. And of course, that will affect the water environment as much as every other part of the Northwest's environment.

Who will take responsibility for the Northwest's water environment in the future?

The Environment Agency have to take huge credit for the improvements to water quality, as indeed do United Utilities, who genuinely do an awful lot to improve both the quality and the quantity of water in our watercourses. Those two organisations together must continue to do good work.

Where they fall down, through no fault of their own, is in engaging with communities. Both try very hard, but they tend to be seen as 'the government', or 'the private sector' respectively, and the public can be sceptical because of that.

Meanwhile, the Mersey Basin Campaign is seen as a broad partnership, a coalition, that's based within communities. Actually, I don't see who's going to step into the breach there. The Healthy Waterways Trust is to continue, but it won't have the same resources as the Campaign. Local authorities will have a role to play, but other public sector bodies will need to step forward too.

What's the biggest change you've seen over the life of the Campaign?

The biggest change, and the greatest success of the Campaign is the alteration of people's perception of the Mersey, right from its source to the sea. I grew up in Liverpool, and there were constant jokes about the state of the river. It was seen as a dirty vein running through the region and the city. I think that has changed. In Liverpool, and areas of Greater Manchester, there's great pride in the river again.

The Mersey was always the life blood of the region, but it was seen in a slightly tainted light. What you've started to see with the redevelopment of the waterside in Liverpool, and in the whole Mersey Waterfront regional park, is the return to the idea that the city's heritage faces the river, which is tremendous.

What will be your lasting memory of the Mersey Basin Campaign?

It won't be one particular thing, but most of the times that Walter Menzies gets up to speak in public. He has a way of engaging with audiences, of conveying urgency, flagging up successes, and putting across pertinent messages, in a flamboyant manner that only he could carry off. So, Walter standing up in front of an audience, extolling the virtues of the Campaign, but being quite robust about the challenges still to be faced. That will be my abiding memory.

LOUISE MORRISSEY, PEEL HOLDINGS

What have been the greatest strengths of the Mersey Basin Campaign?

The greatest strength of the Campaign has really been the people who've worked there. They have the objective of putting water quality and the water environment at the forefront of people's thoughts, and it's those personalities that drive the projects forward, large or small, local or corporate.

As the Campaign comes to an end, what do you feel is the greatest environmental or regeneration challenge facing the Northwest?

The continuation of the focus on the Mersey and water will be extremely important. In terms of a wider environmental and regeneration challenge, it's immense. A lot of us who work in regeneration and the physical environment spend much of our time mending what I call the 'sins of our fathers'. I think sometimes people go off in a certain direction, thinking they're right, but if

you just do a bit of careful thinking, maybe the solution you have in mind has been tried before, and perhaps we got it wrong in the thirties, or the sixties or seventies. I just worry that the people coming after me and my generation will think that we got it wrong as well.

Unfortunately, with the current state of the economy, there will be cutbacks in environmental improvement – ‘frills and spills’ tend to come when the economy is racing ahead, and that will be a pity. The real challenge is that the job never ends, and we’ve all got a lot of work to do.

Who will take responsibility for the Northwest’s water environment in the future?

There’s been such flag-waving and torch-bearing responsibility given to the Campaign with regard to water and the water environment, and people’s enjoyment of that. That profile-raising activity has really changed the way that people think, which is one of the things the Campaign can be most proud of. I don’t see any organisation apart from the Environment Agency who will be able to have that kind of focus. Hopefully that won’t be just about climate change, or flood risk, or drainage.

I do believe that a Campaign like this should have a beginning, a middle and an end, and the Mersey Basin Campaign has made an incredible difference. I do worry that all those good works are now going to fall off the radar. We need to keep the focus, learn the lessons of the Mersey Basin Campaign, and build on what it has achieved.

What’s the biggest change you’ve seen over the life of the Campaign?

Well, for one thing, we actually now think about water and the water environment, whereas traditionally we turned our backs on it. I don’t know why it was once acceptable for coal mines and steelworks to turn streams black, or to culvert streams and not look after them, but somebody somewhere thought it was.

Closer to home, there’s been a change in Peel’s attitude. Our involvement with the Campaign has helped us set our own environment agenda, not because we have to, but because it is the right thing to do. I think when you have a partner like the Mersey Basin Campaign banging on the door, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in that private companies like Peel do things better by association.

On the ground, the biggest change I’ve seen is through the fantastic Speke and Garston Coastal Reserve, a project I’ve been involved with since the very beginning. I remember going down there in the early days – I thought we were meeting on the shore, but we weren’t, as it wasn’t safe. I must admit that the memory of feeling threatened and in the wrong place at the wrong time will never leave me. Rolling forwards 5 or 6 years, I remember the Walk For Health that we did at the opening of the reserve, and it was a tremendous feeling, not least because there were all sorts of incidental people there – families and dogwalkers – enjoying the reserve at the same time. That’s testament to the change around that’s happened, and stems directly from the energy that the Campaign brought to that piece of land.

What will be your abiding memory of the Mersey Basin Campaign?

The soapboxes that kept popping up at the forums we attended always made me smile. When you’re in a private company, and embroiled in business and commerce every day, you do forget about the ordinary person, the ordinary story, and the ordinary bandwagon. With the soapbox speakers, you never knew what was coming next – a bit like this job, really. The panic on people’s faces when the speakers overran, or wouldn’t stay on topic. I think they really were testament to the wide assortment of bodies that made up the audience for the Mersey Basin Campaign.