

TIME

Polish your crystal ball, it's time to peer into the future of water in the Northwest.



The Mersey had seen a fair few life forms come and go before Margaret Thatcher's Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine peered into its brown depths in 1982 and declared it "an affront to the standards a civilised society should demand of its environment," in the speech widely credited as the catalyst for the Mersey Basin Campaign.

Salmon, which had teemed through the river before 1700 and the industrial revolution, were almost as distant a memory as the woolly mammoths, which last roamed the Mersey Basin 15,000 years ago. Not a single Mersey salmon had been recorded since 1856. The old Liverpool joke always had it that you wouldn't drown if you fell into the Mersey. You'd die of poisoning instead.

Things could only get better. And they did. The Castlefield waterside development of the mid 1980s in Manchester; the arrival of seals and octopuses; and in 1999, what Northwest industrialist and Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC) chairman Joe Dwek describes as "the symbolic breakthrough" - the capture of the £45,000 prize for best river clean-up campaign on earth, at the World River Symposium in Brisbane, Australia.

by damaging riverbanks when they don't even pay for river rights," says Huw Owen, River Dee salmon fisherman. "More focus on rural rivers away from the industrialised [river] basin, like ours," says Mike Callery, organiser of Friends of the River Yarrow in the Ribble basin. "More stock proof fencing to keep those darned cattle off."

"A boat link from Manchester city centre to the Lowry," says Ruth Turner, managing director of Vision 21. "A riverside walk along the Irwell through Manchester as an absolute minimum," says property developer Chris Brown, who helped revive Albert Dock in the 80s. "That dilapidated river makes me quite emotional. Its upkeep is dreadful."

And above all, don't let the public be fooled into thinking the job is done. "If you oversell the first 20 years you've got a problem," says professor Roger Ford, lecturer in innovation and technology strategy at Salford University. "Everybody says 'oh, come on, look at the waterways, they're fine.' Developing the basin sustainably needs massive civil solutions. It's a very complex system, a lot of people live there. It needs a big strategy with all partners."



RUTH TURNER,
MANAGING DIRECTOR
OF VISION 21

From fishermen to property developers

Then this April came the news that, for the first time since the industrial revolution, oxygen levels are high enough to support fish along the entire Mersey estuary.

So that's the first 20 years pretty much accounted for. What about the next 20? What's left to be done?

A colossal amount. From fishermen to property developers, the consensus is that MBC's job has hardly started. "Bring together more of the river users groups and help make the canoeists understand the irritation they cause

Locals near the section of the Manchester Ship Canal where the UMIST Tyndall Research centre's Simon Shackley lives still know it as 'The Big Ditch.' "Get out of Salford Quays on one of the new Mersey Ferries trips and it's very dubious," he says. "It will take perhaps £10 million to put that right."

Public perceptions aren't the only thing focusing minds. The European Water Framework Directive (WFD) with its decree that all river basins should reach "good ecological status" by 2015, makes this a defining moment for water

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Words Ian Herbert



quality. As does the impending fourth round of Asset Management Plans (AMP4) for the water companies - under which United Utilities and others will lay out their spending commitments for the next five years. Infrastructure improvements are likely to mean a 10% increase in water bills under the forthcoming review of prices (PR04) - so everyone will have opinions.

But WFD is the biggest issue. "It's changed the goalposts, though many people haven't yet woken up to it," says Walter Menzies, MBC chief executive. "But the public's expectations where quality of life issues are concerned have also moved on. If this region's going to become an economic powerhouse, we can't accept an area of derelict land equivalent to seven cities the size of Preston."

Other European regions are impressed by us. "MBC's brilliant at getting the private sector to work with you," says Esther Widdershoven, project manager of a river basin clean-up on the IJssel, in the Netherlands. "We're way behind on that."

"Yes, you have a culture of public/private sector

The nightmare scenario for the next 20 years would be a failure to develop our water sustainably. "We've got to be careful," says Felicity Goodey, chair of The Lowry - that supreme advertisement for the commercial benefits of clean water. "We must maintain some waterways as arteries of the environment, simply to be enjoyed."

Arlene McCarthy, a North West region MEP, shudders at the thought of the detritus she's seen dumped in the Ship Canal. "I've even seen vacuum cleaner hoses in there, bobbing along with the beer glasses. In Amsterdam and Copenhagen they respect their rivers. We have to instil that culture."

Colin Sykes, BBC North West environment correspondent, says it would help if the cleaner waters were used more: "They're not always being used and embraced as they are on the continent."

There's no danger of these myriad views being ignored, since the WFD's defining principle is participation and inclusion - issues at the core of MBC's purpose.

"The Campaign was never conceived as a bunch of



AVIKA ZIEMINSKA,
MASTERS STUDENT

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partnerships which is just not developed on the continent. It's vital to the finance of projects," says Frank Rothmann, manager of a project in Germany's Ruhr Valley.

Avika Zieminska, a Polish masters student from Warsaw who has just completed an MBC secondment, agrees that everyone talks and participates - but the results can be chaotic! "When I began hunting out information, I got many overlapping reports done at the same time, talking about the same thing. A central database might be the answer!"

people sitting in a building in Manchester," says Walter Menzies, whose efforts to make MBC more inclusive currently involves considering a new name and brand for the organisation. "We've got to engage everyone. After 20 years, we're only at the end of stage one."

No wonder this year's annual conference theme is 'shaping the future.' The first 20 years of gains are about to become a distant memory.