

A leader in his field

Source chats to the Northwest's new environmental champion.



David Crawshaw of United Utilities is not your typical green crusader. Sound bites and spin simply aren't his style. Nor is he your typical tree hugger. David is every bit the gentleman, mild mannered, level headed but deeply passionate about the things that matter. Never one to blow his own trumpet, his years of quiet dedication have recently been recognised with a major award and an MBE.

Starting his career as a river pollution inspector on the River Ribble, David has been with the Northwest's water company, United Utilities, for 35 years and was their first regional environment manager. From partnership initiatives such as United Utilities Landcare and ENWORKS to the work of the Mersey Basin Campaign and more recently the SCaMP project, David has been a staunch advocate and key player in the region's environmental agenda for over three decades.

David Crawshaw is currently Regional Catchment Estates Manager for United Utilities and the winner of this year's Environmental Leadership Award at the Northwest Business Environment Awards.

MORE INFORMATION

Details of next year's Northwest Business Environment Awards will be available shortly on www.merseybasin.org.uk

Q Have you received other similar awards? No, the mantelpiece is pretty bare. This was a surprise and an honour.

Q How did you first get into environmental protection? I started as a research chemist. Working in heavy industry really opened my eyes to some appalling environmental practices. After that, I wanted to work in river pollution management to help tackle the issue.

Q How has your job changed in 30 years? I started as a fighter of pollution, but as battles have slowly been won, the focus is now sustainable development. There is more money available than thirty years ago but the challenge now is to spend it wisely. Some expenditure gets rubber stamped without an active dialogue. Space and time is needed to consult properly and make the right decisions. It's easy to spend money, the challenge is to make a real difference.

Q How important is the process of consultation? It's essential to work with local communities; we ignore them at our peril. You just need to listen and understand where people are coming from and work to deliver what the community wants and needs. Our big challenge over the next decade is to focus on what is sustainable, rather than what ticks the right policy box. We must ensure that there is genuine dialogue with stakeholders and fortunately the Water Framework Directive makes this a requirement.

Q How has water quality in the region changed? It has changed absolutely and totally. I worked on the River Ribble thirty years ago. At the time, parts of the catchment around the Calder were some of the worst polluted waters in the Northwest, experiencing serious toxic pollution. I was genuinely shocked at the blatant disregard for the environment. Parts of the catchment were totally devoid of life.

It was extreme, some of the trade effluents were too toxic even to be allowed into the sewer – the scale of the job was tremendous. The change since then has been transformational and dramatic.

Q What is our biggest environmental threat today? Climate change is the most fundamental threat we face. We are still spending money dealing with the impacts not the cause, meanwhile emissions continue to rise. It's questionable whether we will take collective action quickly enough to deal with this threat. We need to act swiftly and decisively.

Q Is nuclear the answer? It would be foolish to have a completely closed mind on nuclear, but it isn't the answer. There are smarter solutions. We must look towards tidal energy and other renewable solutions. Nuclear fusion may one day provide a technical solution but right now we don't have time to wait.

Q What is your dream job? I'm already doing it and wouldn't change it.

Q If you could make one law today, what would it be? If I had a magic wand, I'd require sustainable development and consideration of climate change to be an overriding and ingrained part of all decision-making throughout government. It certainly isn't at the moment.

Q Would you swim off the Northwest coast? I'd swim in the sea with no hesitation. We should be proud of our coastal waters – it's only the temperature that stops us now!

Q I hear you have just been awarded an MBE? Yes, that was totally unexpected. I just hope they don't expect me to retire as a result! I've still got a lot of work to do.