River Action: In conversation with 3 Wyes Women...

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Women around the world are changing the trajectory of environmentalism and conservation. Our planet is on a precipice and women are rising to meet global environmental challenges through collaboration and courage. While women bear an outsized burden of the climate crisis, recent research has shown that conservation projects achieve better results when they involved women in decision-making.

To mark **International Women's Day 2021**, **River Action** spoke with three women who are leading the fight against river pollution in the **Wye Valley**. The birthplace of **British** tourism in the 18th Century – the Wye is heralded as the country's most beautiful river. Last year, these women kayaked and walked the length of the river and chronicled their trip on social media. However, this was no ordinary sight-seeing excursion, their mission was instead to catalogue the death of Britain's most beloved river.

They told us about their trip, their triumphs and challenges and their calls to action.

#3 Wyes Women…

When **Morgan Schofield** *(left)***, Patricia Ronan** *(centre),* **and Jennie Hewitt** *(right)* set off down the Wye in August 2020, they could not have known that their trip had initiated a sequence of events which would lead to the launch of River Action last month.

It was with great excitement that I got to meet the women behind this very catchy twitter hashtag. Apart from gender, there was one other thing that united them. A love of Herefordshire and, in particular, the River Wye.

“It means something different to us all” says Morgan. Morgan was born and raised on the Wye. She loves the river and has always been active in environmental causes. After some 10 years

travelling to the far reaches of the globe, during which time she obtained an Environmental Science degree from **The Open University**, she returned home and tells me, “I never thought I’d say this, but I was so glad to be back”. Now working for Pedicargo, an innovative trade recycling start-up, Morgan explains that experience of kayaking the river was something she will never forget. “I met Patricia when I had returned in 2018, she was part of the “**Wye Ruin It**” campaign to stop the **Hereford** bypass”.

Dr Patricia Ronan is originally from Wexford in Ireland, she has lived in **London** and many of the Home Counties and, like Morgan, has travelled all over the **UK** and the globe. She now lives on the river in Hereford. Patricia tells me she has many strings to her bow. This seems not to be an overstatement. A senior lecturer at **London South Bank University**, Patricia did a PhD focused on acupuncture for schizophrenia, she has researched, taught and worked in many areas, most recently on the impact of Tai Chi on patients with cystic fibrosis. “My knowledge is very far from conservation” says Patricia. I ask what environmental campaigns she has been engaged in before and she tells me, “I have been busy, so I haven’t really been able to do much. You work for a living, you rear a child, you are studying… you try to get a night’s sleep occasionally, you try!”.

This doesn’t seem to do her environmental work enough justice. I am told she was not just involved in but in fact spearheaded the successful local campaign to fight the Hereford Bypass. And, on a personal level, she tells me of her ongoing battles in day-to-day life, be it with the lack of bike racks at her local **B&Q** or, before the charge for plastic bags was introduced, challenging the **Tesco**’s check out staff when they offer her a plastic bag. “I tell them off, every time. They shouldn’t be offering these bags out – why aren’t they asking customers where their own bags are and castigating them for using so much plastic – it’s crazy!”

With the Wye running through her ward, Councillor Jennie Hewitt is endeavouring to combat river pollution. This has become a central part of her role. For Jennie, who has always cared about the environment, the threat to the Wye coincided with the beginning of her term as a local councillor.

“The environment we are living in is beautiful, yet underneath we know there exists a deadly threat of soils overburdened with phosphates and other damaging nutrients” she says. Jennie is part of **Herefordshire Independents/Coalition** and her ward is **Golden Valley North** where she has lived for over 30 years and taught art for many of them. Like Patricia and Morgan, she was concerned about the environmental damage the Hereford bypass would create. Her slogan is “don’t expect to see a change if you don’t make one”.

When we spoke, Jennie was busy preparing for a Hereford council meeting to support fellow councillor **Toni Fagan** in bringing a motion asking the executive to lobby 2 local MPs to better resource the county so it can deal with the problems related to climate change and managing the pollution caused principally by agricultural runoff. “We have a disaster going on in Hereford, it is a biological disaster, an ecological disaster and also an economical disaster – we have a moratorium on new building in the **Lugg catchment** because the lower part of the Wye is failing due to

phosphate pollution". She adds, "part of the reason I was elected, was my focus on the environment. Herefordians are devastated to see their beautiful river and its biodiversity under threat".

When Patricia and Morgan asked Jennie if she wanted to join them on their trip down the Wye– it was her suggestion that it was turned into a campaign. "I said we should catalogue what has happened to the banks, the erosion, the impact of flooding and importantly, begin to understand what species are now actually left in the Wye catchment".

Patricia, Morgan and Jennie are all grieving the river's depleted ecosystem. Morgan explains that despite ostensible differences in their areas of work and age "the shared feeling is that we could see the Wye dying in front of us and we all cared about it".

The death of the Wye…

"The river is dead" are the exact words Patricia uttered to her husband one morning last summer. "I swim the river most days in the summer, and one morning I noticed how clear the water was, like what you'd run out of the tap in the kitchen. No insects, not one! I swam around a kilometre down the river and saw no sign of life". We now know the lifelessness Patricia reports was likely to be the result of a pollution spill at **Afon Llynfi,** a Wye tributary. To date, nobody has been held to account for this incident.

Their account of the river's degradation continue. Morgan's degree has given her a scientific understanding of the environmental deterioration.

"Again, and again, we documented cattle in the river, this is really bad! Cows should not have direct access to waterways to help minimise the amount of effluent being added to the river. Additionally, large, heavy animals can compact soils, squashing air pores out. When it rains – water, and whatever chemicals have been sprayed on the soil, run straight into the river, rather than being absorbed into the soil" she says. "On our journey we continued to see many worrying things that are adversely effecting the health of the river. Along huge stretches of the Wye we saw banks completely scoured of trees and plants. Vegetations stabilises the banks, helping to protect against flooding, soil erosion, slows the flow of surface run off, provides vital habitats for a variety of insects and animals and helps keep the water cool among others. It is all extremely worrying – if it continues the way it is, I am left with little doubt that we are going to see a loss of biodiversity along the river".

The highway to nowhere…

When they set off in late August, the UK's lockdown had eased, meaning there were plenty of visitors along their route.

“They should be standing there fighting off midges. It is beautiful! But what people don’t understand is the amount of wildlife that is missing. We have already lost a high percentage of birds and insects. If you speak to people locally, they will tell you about how drastically the bird population has declined. The river shouldn’t look like a swimming pool. These visitors think it is correct and perfect, it is not correct. It really shouldn’t be like this” says Patricia, who is a keen angler.

She continues… “And there aren’t any fish! The salmon are not there anymore. There used to be a lot of salmon caught in the Wye. Estimations suggested there were 6-10,000 salmon a year. Now, you get around 300 salmon out of the river. It’s nuts! We kayaked through the main salmon fishing section in the lower course of the Wye during peak season in September and there were barely any anglers there at all and a lot of them there were struggling. If this river was in good condition – those anglers should have been shoulder to shoulder with their arms hanging off them from bringing salmon in. We were kayaking for 10-20 miles a day and we saw a handful of anglers. What does that tell you? If something isn’t done, we really are on the highway to nowhere”.

Jennie continues this tale of devastation. “One morning, we met a group of women who were walking. They told us that they had been walking the Wye and were part of a group of residents who feed the swans in **Fownhope**. Since the algal bloom and the death of the water crowfoot, the swans were starving as it had killed off their source of food and almost all the cygnets had died. In fact, we saw barely any cygnets on our whole trip down the river and just two or three families with surviving cygnets.” Jennie explains to me that, with the death of the water-crowfoot along the river, cygnets, who feed on the weed and are held in its matt of vegetation from being dragged off downstream and being not yet strong enough to climb the banks like their parents, had no food and therefore starved.

What can be done…

All three women believe raising awareness is an important first step. “Our campaign definitely did highlight agricultural pollution issues. In fact, there are two different agricultural planning applications which have been stopped in the last few months, which I believe in former years would have gone through. Powys now is also actually starting to stop things going through and acknowledge there is a problem with the river” says Patricia.

Jennie believes that the agencies must step up to do something about the nutrients in the river. “We need a buffer zone along the river to stop livestock grazing, that would be a start. **The Environment Agency** recently applied to the **Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)** for 100 more personnel in order to help enforcement and to monitor what’s going happening on the ground. They refused. The work can’t be done unless the resource is there!”

For Morgan, improved monitoring and enforcement is a necessity. “More action and less finger pointing please! We need a more joined up approach – the regional councils and the

Environmental Agency must work together to clear this up, we need quicker responses and penalties for pollution incidences".

Jennie adds "I think accountability and blame need to be separated. The reason why farmers get tempted into intensive livestock units is because they are struggling with insecure economic futures. It's difficult. As an interim measure there needs to be regulation around these units to ensure attenuation and proper run off. In my ward there is a fantastic planning application, for an attenuation pond on a big farm(not an intensive livestock unit), and the pond will sit at the confluence of the **River Dore** and the **Pont y Weston**. It will act as a filtration system and as part of a nature recovery network to encourage biodiversity. This attenuation pond has been devised for the local farm by the Wye and Usk Foundation**.** It just proves, we have the expertise, people who know what they are doing, farmers who want to do the right thing and the political will in the local Council to support them – we just need the funding! That's what elected members will be calling for".

Patricia agrees about not attributing blame to the farmers. She says many would love to farm in an environmentally friendly way, however, most say it is not financially viable. "I have spoken to many who have told me if the government supported them for 3 – 5 years to change farming methods, they would absolutely do it. There needs to be a major piece of government support to say – right you lot, we will help you to bridge that gap in income for the next 3 years while you switch your farming methods so that our soils are not washing into the rivers" says Patricia.

The role of women…

"The vast majority of people I meet through my environmental campaigning and volunteer work are women" Morgan says. "Historically women were the carers of the earth and the natural environment. Being involved in all this conservation work voluntarily and realising that it is women doing most of it – makes me want to preserve the natural, selfless nurturing traits that I think we should celebrate as womenkind. These should be encouraged and awarded". She adds "it makes me angry at how sexism is still prevalent, we go through our lives without realising it, I am angry that the natural nurturing rights are being taken away. Women have a strong role to play in conservation – in fact, I think we are possibly the future for it."

Patricia, who is saddened, that we still have such a thing as International Women's Day tells me "the truth is that most of the decision to pollute or not to pollute are made by men: men are the majority in government, in public service leadership, in big company leadership and in farming. However, this does not mean that it would be any better if women were in charge. For example, the president of the **National Farmers' Union (NFU)** is a woman and they have led a campaign to reintroduce neonicotinoids for farming".

Like Morgan she has noticed that women are leading the push for changes in environmental campaigning. "Women are in the majority of any groups I have seen locally certainly. Whilst they

often push men into leadership roles (and this really needs to stop) it is the women who research and communicate and challenge relentlessly. It is the women who find the funding, organise the events and generate public awareness, much more so than men. Of course, there are some fantastic men who also do this. Women need to step forward more and more, take those leadership roles and really support each other. There are far too many bullies who use dreadful techniques to persuade the public that it is fine to carry on polluting when their real motive is profit. This is wrong" says Patricia.

What's next for the 3 Wyes Women…

"Watch this space…" says Morgan. The trio agree they will be doing something as summer comes.

Jennie would love to take the trip again this year, "we need to see what has changed" adding, "this year of course, we will be sitting and watching and wondering, when the time of year comes again – will any of the weed or flowers have survived, will they appear? I think about the missing flowers all the time. There are two things that cross my mind. They will be like stars that fell from heaven if we do see them again, it makes me want to cry – the prospect of their return. On the other hand, if they do come back, people might turn around and say "we can do anything, the river can take it". It's a double edge sword".

It is hard not to feel a sense of dread about the prospect of Jennie, Morgan and Patricia travelling the Wye again this summer. What if the flowers haven't returned, what if there are no swans and what if there are even fewer fish?

Jennie, Morgan and Patricia's trip down the Wye and their accompanying social media campaigning chronicling what they saw was followed closely by Charles Watson, River Action's chairman. It was their tales of degradation that prompted Charles to launch River Action in February 2021. Our first campaign focused on the egg production industry in the River Wye catchment where growing evidence has suggested that a significant cause for environmental decline is the nutrient-rich run off of chicken excrement.

This article was written by Emma Hooper, River Action's Campaigns Manager.