

<b>HABITAT ACTION PLAN : Canals</b>
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<p><b>Associated Species Action Plans</b></p> <p>Amphibians</p> <p>Bats</p> <p>Floating water plantain</p> <p>Great crested newt</p> <p>Water vole</p> <p>White-clawed crayfish</p>	<p><b>1. Current Status</b></p> <p>There are approximately 130 miles of canals in Birmingham and the Black Country.</p> <p>The majority of these are owned and managed by British Waterways, although there are a number of other organisations owning stretches of canal.</p> <p>For example, Dudley Council own approximately 2 miles of the Dudley No 2 canal in Halesowen; Sandwell Council own a railway interchange arm and basin which formerly connected with the Ridgacre Canal in West Bromwich and a private firm, Olympus Distribution own the Great Bridge railway interchange basins, which are managed by Groundwork Black Country. The Dudley Canal Trust have restored and own a 80 metre stretch of the Pensnett Canal in Dudley.</p> <p>The Transport Acts of 1962 and 1968 established the British Waterways Board and set out its basic powers and duties. Canals were designated as either ‘Commercial’, ‘Cruiseway’ or ‘Remainder’. The Canals of Birmingham and the Black Country consist of “Cruiseway” and “Remainder” canals. None are designated as “Commercial”.</p>
<p><b>Associated Habitat Action Plans</b></p> <p>Buildings &amp; the built environment</p> <p>Rivers and streams</p>	<p>The Acts gave British Waterways the duties to ‘maintain Commercial and Cruiseway waterways in suitable condition for use by commercial and cruising craft respectively’ and to ‘deal with the Remainder waterways in the most economical manner consistent in the case of retention with public health and safety and preservation of amenity by retention, management, development, elimination or disposal.”</p>

More recently, Section 22 of the British Waterways Act 1995 places general environmental and recreational duties on British Waterways (BW).

Under Section 22 subsection (1) BW is obliged when formulating or considering any proposals in relation to its function:

- a) so far as may be consistent with the purposes of any enactment relating to those functions, so to exercise any power conferred on them with respect to the proposals as to further the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty and the conservation of flora, fauna and geological or physiological features of special interest;

- b) to have regard to the desirability of protecting and conserving buildings, sites and objects of archaeological, architectural, engineering or historic interest; and:
- c) to take into account any effect which the proposals would have on the beauty or amenity of any rural or urban area or on any such flora, fauna, features, buildings, sites or objects.

Under subsection (2), and subject to obligations set out in subsection (1) BW is also obliged when formulating or considering any proposals relating to its functions:

- a) to have regard to the desirability of preserving for the public any freedom of access to towing paths and open land and especially places of natural beauty.

## **2. Current factors affecting habitat**

Some of the isolated fragments of canal or small arms and basins are sometimes sold off, resulting in some of them being infilled. However, there are plans to secure the necessary funding to dredge some of these and manage them for their benefit to wildlife and as an amenity for local people.

Over time, silt gathers on the canal bed. This combined with submerged rubbish thrown into canals and general debris tends to reduce the navigable depth. Dredging operations remove this and hence improve the canals for navigation.

Project Aquarius in Birmingham has the additional aim of removing the canals' 200 year old legacy of contaminated silt and replacing it with crushed limestone. This aims to improve the benthic habitat for wildlife, and also to increase the water's aesthetic appearance.

Dredging operations cause disturbance to benthic communities (for example, crayfish and swan mussels) but also play their part in arresting habitat succession in favour of open water.

The sides of the canal were mostly built or rebuilt with a brick wall on the towpath side, and on some sections on both sides. Over time, these decay and need to be replaced with new brickwork. The brickwork forming the towpath wall often has an associated flora. A recent cost-effective trend had been the installation of continuous steel-sheet piling. This can have an adverse effect on marginal vegetation and on the habitat for bankside species such as crayfish and water voles.

In some areas, 'soft-bank protection' is being trialled. This involves installing vegetative fibre such as coconut matting. Emergent plant species can also be planted to help protect the bank from water-wash.

Aquatic weed growth can impede navigation, clogging boats' propellers and can also physically impede water-flow. Weed cutting, therefore, forms part of the routine maintenance for many navigable canals.

To aid increasing access to the canals for recreation, many towpaths have been improved in recent years, often to a two metre-wide Breedon gravel cycleway specification. Also, most towpaths have a grass-cutting and weed spraying programme of vegetation adjacent to the towpath-edge, which has implications for the canal corridor habitat.

Trees and shrubs that establish themselves in the towpath walls are removed due to the damage the roots can do to the brickwork as are trees whose roots can affect the integrity of canal structures, adjacent buildings or the clay-puddle lining of the canals.

Vegetation overhanging the towpath is cut-back to maintain public access.

There is scope along a number of stretches for tree planting, planting up gaps in hedge-lines and hedge-laying.

Structures such as locks and weirs need to be maintained. Birmingham and Black Country has a number of canal tunnels which need to be maintained in a safe condition. This can have implications for bats.

As the canals are made more accessible, and facilities provided, it is likely that both the numbers of towpath visitors and boating traffic will increase.

This is likely to cause some species and habitat disturbance. An increased public presence, however, is also likely to reduce some of the negative activities that sometimes occur such as vandalism, lighting fires and the use of airguns.

Poor water quality can have an adverse effect on aquatic diversity. Water quality can be adversely affected by pollution; for example: chemicals entering the canals via discharge pipes or seeping from dumped containers. In some locations there are storm water overflows, which in times of severe rain, can on occasions cause an inflow of raw sewage. In addition the impact on water quality of less obvious sources of pollution, particularly diffuse sources, can be considerable. Diffuse pollution sources tend to drain slowly and indiscriminately from farm, residential, industrial or derelict land bordering the canals, reservoirs or their tributaries.

Two hundred years of industrial activity has caused the silt on the canal-bed to be contaminated with heavy metals and hydrocarbons in many areas which can cause decreases in water quality if disturbed.

### **3. Current Action**

#### **3.1 Legal Status**

With increasing investment in and use of the canals, the 'Remainder' classification of some of them is increasingly seen as limiting and inappropriate. The Department of the Environment, Transport and Regions has indicated that a first stage of re-classification will be included in the appropriate ministerial order along with revised channel dimensions, once the latter have been agreed. It is hoped that the canals of Birmingham and the Black Country will feature prominently in the first stage.

#### **3.2 Management, research and guidance.**

British Waterways are currently introducing an 'Environmental Code of Practice Appraisals' for the various management and maintenance activities carried out on the canals. This involves considering the environmental impacts that activities are likely to have and includes considerations of effect upon habitats and species. It is hoped that these will become an important tool for maintaining and increasing biodiversity.

British Waterways have also produced their own corporate Biodiversity Action Plans for a range of habitats and species. These will be used to inform the preparation of Local Biodiversity Action Plans.

Hedge-laying has been re-introduced in some areas and it is hoped to increase this as a form of boundary management in the future.

Some towpaths have benefited from tree-planting schemes organised in conjunction with the National Urban Forestry Unit.

On the Staffordshire and Worcester Canal plans are being made to install 'vole friendly' bank protection. This may consist of replacing original brick towpath walls with new brick and sandbag piles rather than steel-sheet piling but with sections of softer edging included. Similar works have also been carried out on the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal. A Biodiversity Plan is being produced to inform future maintenance works on this canal and a ten year management plan for trees has been produced.

A possibility for the future is the installation of artificial otterholts to improve habitat to help with the re-colonisation of otters along the Stour Valley.

Work by the Environment Agency and British Waterways' own Water Quality Scientists, to track down polluters and effectively deal with incidents as they arise, combined with the decline of heavy industry, is leading to improvements in the water quality of the canals in Birmingham and the Black Country. Monitoring of water quality, being essential to continuing improvement, is leading to improvements in the water quality of the canals in Birmingham and the Black Country. British Waterways is committed to achieving a water quality standard of class D (fair) or better in all its waterways nationwide and those with existing good quality water should be protected from deterioration.

The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country have conducted ecological surveys of some sections of canal; for example, the Walsall Canal in Pleck and the railway interchange basins at Great Bridge and Wednesbury.

Plans are currently being prepared for a full ecological survey of the canals within the Birmingham City area. This would be carried out by the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country, on behalf of Birmingham City Council and British Waterways.

British Waterways' own Environmental and Scientific Services department have conducted a number of surveys, including the Stourbridge Town Arm Canal and are currently surveying the Worcester and Birmingham and Grand Union Canals.

In a number of locations, organisations are working to restore lengths of canal. For example, the length of the Dudley No 2 canal in Leasowes Park, Halesowen had become a terrestrial grassland habitat. Work has recently been completed to restore it back to a canal in open water. This is part of wider efforts to restore the Dudley No. 2 canal as far as Lapal canal tunnel and to eventually re-open the tunnel.

The Birmingham and Black Country Waterway of British Waterways has an Adoption Scheme programme, whereby schools and community groups can 'adopt' their local stretch of canal. Children are involved in activities such as tree-planting and nest-box building and there is scope to use adoption schemes to further promote the biodiversity of canals to young people.

British Waterways are currently developing the 'Waterway Challenge'. This is a programme of educational and environmental activities for young people, encouraging them to measure, analyse and record the quality of the waterway environment. As well as involving young people, this project will assist with the gathering of baseline biodiversity data.

As part of the Government's National Biodiversity Action Plan, British Waterways is lead partner for floating water plantain and grass-wrack pondweed. The presence of these two species in the canals of Birmingham and the Black Country needs to be safeguarded.

**4. Action Plan Objectives and targets**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Target</b>
1. Protect and enhance the biodiversity of the canals of Birmingham and the Black Country.	Ongoing
2. Carry out surveys to identify and monitor the key habitats and species on the canal system.	By 2006
3. Increase knowledge of the range, distribution and population levels of key species utilising canals.	Ongoing
4. Ensure that biodiversity is considered during all canal restoration, maintenance and restoration works.	Ongoing
5. Raise public awareness of canals and their importance for wildlife and recreational value.	Ongoing
6. Continue with the development of programmes to involve schools and the wider community in efforts to maintain and improve biodiversity.	Ongoing
7. Maintain and improve canal water quality	To at least Class D (fair)
8. Promote partnerships between British Waterways, canal users and other interest groups at both the local and national levels.	Ongoing

## 5. Proposed action with partners to meet objectives

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
<b>5.1 Policy and legislation</b>										
Assemble the relevant policies and legislation so that they are readily available for BW staff conducting Environmental Code of Practice Appraisals.	<b>BW</b>	<b>EA EN LAs WT</b>	•							<b>1, 4</b>
Ensure that available information concerning the biodiversity of canals is considered during any future updates of LEAPs, UDPs and in the setting of water quality objectives.	<b>BW</b>	<b>EA EN LAs WT IWA</b>	As UDPs and LEAPs are prepared and reviewed.							<b>1, 7</b>
Continue with the development and implementation of Environmental Code of Practice Appraisals and Corporate and local Biodiversity Action Plans.	<b>BW</b>		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	<b>1, 4</b>
<b>5.2 Site and species safeguard and management</b>										
Ensure that biodiversity is considered during all canal restoration, maintenance and restoration works.	<b>BW, Canal Trusts</b>	<b>LAs, WT, EN</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	<b>4</b>

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
Ensure that development adjoining canal wildlife corridors takes account of biodiversity.	BW, LAs	EN, WT	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	1
Develop partnership projects to safeguard and manage canal sites.	BW	Canal user groups	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	1, 5
Explore the possibility of producing management plans for canals.	BW	WT	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	1
Prepare and implement environmental appraisals to inform BW maintenance and management work.	BW	WT EA EN LAs	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	1
Ensure that Site Management Statements are in place for canal S.S.S.I's	BW EN				•					1
Improve water quality, including programmes of environmental dredging and improvements to storm water overflows to prevent discharge into the canal.	BW	ST	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7
Monitor canal water quality	EA		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	7
Develop and implement programmes to control invasive plant species and monitor their effectiveness.	BW	EA EN WT LAs						•		1

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
<b>5.3 Advisory</b>										
Ensure those involved in canal management and restoration are aware of current legislation and policy affecting species and habitats.	<b>BW</b>	<b>EN, WT, LAs, EA, Canal Trusts</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
Disseminate information on the distribution of habitats and species amongst those involved in canal-work, and provide conservation advice.	<b>BW</b>	<b>WT, EA, LAs, EN, Canal Trusts</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
Provide training for staff of organisations involved in canal management and restoration on practices to maintain and enhance biodiversity.	<b>BW Canal Trusts</b>	<b>WT, EA, BTCV</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	4
<b>5.4 Future research and monitoring</b>										
Survey canals to determine the extent and status of the various habitats present. Present the information obtained in the form of a comprehensive map.	<b>WT BW</b>	<b>EN EA LAs Canal user groups</b>						•		2, 3
Survey canals to determine the current populations and distributions of plant and animal species, including key species such as water vole, crayfish, great crested newt and floating water plantain.	<b>WT BW</b>	<b>EN EA LAs</b>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	3

ACTION	POTENTIAL DELIVERERS		YEAR							Meets objective number
	Lead	Partner	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2011	
Continue research into soft bank protection techniques and water vole boxes.	BW		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	3, 4
Encourage volunteer groups in their efforts to monitor water vole populations and also involve the wider community.	BW	WT, LA21	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	3, 5
<b>5.5 Communications and Publicity</b>										
Develop interpretation of canal wildlife and habitats through the production of leaflets, signing, interpretation boards and display panels.	BW	WT, EA, LAs, Canal Trusts	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	5, 6
Develop activities and initiatives to improve canal biodiversity involving school groups and the wider community.	BW	WT, EA, LAs, Canal Trusts	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	5, 6
<b>5.6 Links to other action plans</b>										
Buildings & the built environment, Rivers and streams, Amphibians, Bats, Floating water plantain, Great crested newt, Water vole, White-clawed crayfish										

## **6 Co-ordination and review**

This Biodiversity Action Plan will be implemented over 10 years with a first review after 5 years. A group will be set up to co-ordinate implementation and to report to the Biodiversity Steering Group. This group will meet at a minimum on a yearly basis.

The group should include representatives of British Waterways, Canal Societies/Trusts, English Nature, the Environment Agency, the Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country and Local Authorities, the Inland Waterways Association and local conservation organisations.

Review will be carried out in conjunction with related Habitat and Species Action Plans as appropriate.

Review will consist of measuring achievement of targets. The group will, with the support of the Steering Group, develop and implement appropriate monitoring methods which will inform the review process.

The Action Plan will be revised and updated in the light of review results and any relevant changes in circumstances and/or additional information which becomes available during the review period.

In line with national guidance, the Steering Group will report to the UK Steering Group.