

THE WORSHIPFUL COMPANY OF WATER CONSERVATORS

The Company marked the 50th Anniversary of the creation of Regional Water Authorities based on river basin and catchment management on 1st April 1974, with its latest Bakers Hall City Water Debate on the eve of World Day 21st March 2024

Go with the flow: Working with nature and managing catchments.

Catchment management has a long history. On 1st April 1974, Water Authorities were created, based on a system of geographical principles of River Basins and Catchments, which still underpins the structure of the water companies and the Environment Agency. It is fundamentally a robust system and, indeed, forms the basis of the implementation of the Water Framework Directive. And the Environment Agency has set out substantial guidance on the requirements. There are still substantial challenges in realising the full benefit of this concept, particularly in how its execution embraces all sections of society, including land management and food production. The Defra Water Plan focusses on this and there has been a rise in intense interest in the ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’.

In response to that interest, the Debate was organised as part of the Company’s programme focusing on the ‘wisdom of water’ in which there is a series of Debates, webinars, and think pieces and responses to consultations, which are archived on its website. These provide a space for open non-confrontational debate and draw on the knowledge and experiences of its members.

The Debate was framed in the context of the principles of catchment management, with a focus on the variety of nature-based solution (NBS) tools available to for its effective delivery. It showed how much has been done on catchment management and the application of nature-based solutions and also just how much more needs to be, and can be, done.

It was conducted under the Chatham House Rule and involved short presentations by Bart Schoonbaert (Associate Director, Arup), the Right Hon Ruth Kelly PC (Chair, Water UK), Mark Lloyd (Chief Executive, the Rivers Trust), Richard Bramley (Chair, Environment Forum, National Farmers’ Union) and Peter Simpson (Chief Executive, Anglian Water). A question-and-answer session followed.

Headline insights from the debate

- There are many kinds of nature-based solutions, since the mid-2000s, available to meet the unique needs of each catchment and they are an effective way of bringing together land and food production management with that of water resources and environmental quality, including biodiversity, and floods.
- There is a need for an overarching national water strategy embracing catchment management and NBS, which should always be the default option.
- This requires a national template of catchment management with plenty of flexibility for the needs of each catchment.
- Regulations must be developed and applied to secure the best outcomes rather than outputs, with clarity of objectives; and these must include metrics which provide better understanding of success or failure.

- Partnership working is needed between all stakeholders, including government departments, regulators, water companies, local authorities, farmers and other land users, communities and investors, not only at the national level, but locally, at the catchment level.
- Catchment management and NBS will provide new opportunities for socially aware investment.
- For an NBS which involves a water company, the implications and costs must be reflected in Water Company Licences and Ofwat Price Reviews.
- The emerging needs for integrated management provide innovative opportunities in developing education, skills enhancement and employment.
- Better communications cross-cutting cooperation will be essential to re-build trust.
- No one can be complacent, much needs doing. Even so, there are some inspiring developments and the Debate heard about exciting developments in Anglian Water and the Sustainable Solutions for Water and Nature initiative (See Footnote 2).

This highlighted the mantra set out previously by the Company ‘Learn from the Past, Plan for the Future, Act in the Present’. The Company produced a substantial think piece last year on the subject following publication of the Water Plan and now has to consider how that might be updated following the debate.

Footnote 1

The Worshipful Company of Water Conservators is a City of London Livery Company focussed on the long-term health of our water resources and the broader environment. Our members include senior professionals from water, environmental and related industries and regulators, along with others who share our concern for water and the environment. Our experience and knowledge ranges from the complexities of environmental sciences, through the application of engineering to deliver the goals identified by those sciences, and the subsequent management of the assets created. The WCWC’s purpose is *promoting a diverse and sustainable environment*. Information on its programmes and activities and joining the Company can be found on its website (<https://www.waterconservators.org/>).

Footnote 2

Sustainable Solutions for Water and Nature initiative (SSWAN)
<https://www.sswan.co.uk>

Launched in early March, SSWAN advocates a new partnership model for a catchment-based, holistic approach to managing our water courses, putting the emphasis on nature-based and low carbon approaches.