

DorsetCAN Case Study 4: ‘Char Valley: River and Lifelines’ – Bringing Back the Wild Things

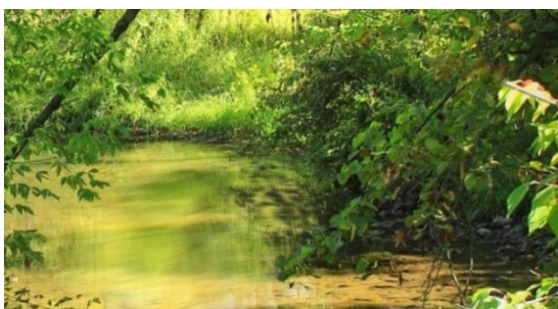
For many, Marshwood Vale (or the Char Valley) in the west of Dorset is an idyllic spot, with farms untouched by time and a river running down to the world-famous fossil beach at Charmouth, where families swim, play and paddle in the sheltered tidal mouth of the river.

Looking more closely, things are less idyllic. A handful of farms are organic; others struggle on in the ‘old way’ – but the economics grow ever more difficult. Others have been consolidated, updated with automated milking parlours, bigger fields and new crops. The process of taking out hedges, using pesticides and fertilisers and becoming ‘efficient’ began after World War 2, driven by government policy, loans, subsidies and economic necessity.

The land is struggling too. As elsewhere, insect numbers are down dramatically, along with numbers of bats, frogs, birds and hedgehogs that depend on them. Locals report seeing dead fish in the river and Environment Agency reports reveal *E Coli* and *Intestinal Enterococci* levels sometimes 3-8 times higher than the upper limit. The river was also classed ‘Fail’ for Priority Hazardous Chemicals.

Glimmers of hope for the river...

This is a familiar story of interests ranged against one another: local businesses reliant on tourism reluctant to publicise the problems; farmers struggling with falling milk and meat prices, regulations and Brexit; some locals and environmentalists crying out for action in the face of climate change and wildlife loss but feeling unheard.

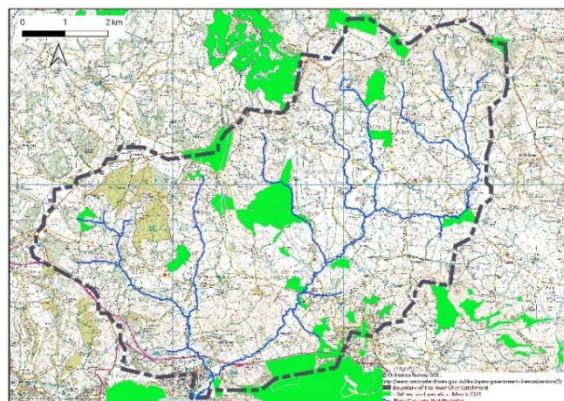


But change *is* possible. Individuals don’t have to act on their own. Inspired by a scheme on the River Asker, a few local people started working through the Parish Council to get the ‘River Char Community Project’ going. Working with Dorset AONB and the Dorset Wildlife Trust, and committing a small amount of its own money and resources, the Parish Council started the project in 2020, with a film, questionnaires, interviews and a preliminary report to be published this summer. A follow-up stage will involve local families in monitoring the river and putting right whatever issues are identified.

In spite of suspicions by farmers that they will be blamed for causing all the problems and fears by householders that they will have to spend tens of thousands on their septic tanks, the project is up and running – showing that there *is* funding and serious expertise available from organisations like Dorset AONB and that Parish Councils *can* initiate and drive real change (as well as their ‘Jackie Weaver’ image as bastions of small and big ‘c’ conservatism).

...and for the land

At the same time, another group of local residents has come together, driven by concern about the loss of insects, to create wildlife corridors across the valley. Here the starting point for the ‘Char Valley Lifelines Project’ is a map – initially a few green dots, now growing into a tapestry of green – representing parcels of land where no chemical pesticides, fungicides or herbicides are used. These include gardens and entire farms, as well as chemical-free fields and field margins on ‘conventional’ farms that otherwise *do* use chemicals.



The map currently shows 1,680 hectares in the Char Valley signed up to the project (that’s six and a half square miles). Again, getting endorsement from the Parish Council was a vital step (they have featured both projects in their newsletter and on their website) and seeing the local National Trust was a big boost. Farmers who had feared being demonised for using chemicals found they could be included via those areas that they farmed chemical-free.

The online map is a great way to engage local people and monitor changes. Lifelines is blessed with a map specialist, John Blanchard, but he’s glad to share his advice and experience and publicly accessible mapping tools are increasingly available.

For details of both projects and contact information, visit: www.charvalley.org/riverchar and www.thelifeline.site.