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WATER SOLUBLE

How do we stop pollution and abstraction?
Simon Cooper senses an agreement



GOODNESS, THIS HAS BEEN A LONG time coming — finally, a consensus as to what ails our water industry and a clear line of sight to a solution. I say that advisedly; the line of sight is probably only as yet visible for those of us who write about rivers, love rivers, fish rivers and try to protect them.

I have written plenty about the water industry and I hope, in some small way, I have moved the needle, but I cannot claim to be the first. I think all of us who fish have known, for a decade or longer, in our heart of hearts, that there was something rotten in the state of Britain. It was hard to put a finger on it. Dank riverbeds that once shone bright. A decline in favourite hatches. A lack of rising fish. Side streams that once laced their way around pretty villages parched all year. I am sure you have your personal markers to numerate this sorry descent.

I think it's fair to say the angling community's grasp of the plight of our rivers was way ahead of the curve, but we found it hard to break out into the wider public consciousness. A load of grumbling old gits reminiscing about some imagined glorious past; that was us. But, to use a phrase much loved by management consultants, the inflection point was WASP. A small team of retired scientists who used publicly available data, from the EA and water companies, to prove that unregulated sewage pollution was destroying their once lovely River Windrush in Oxfordshire.

Even then, it took a good few years for it to be understood that the issue was not local; the travails of the Windrush were not isolated to a pretty Cotswold valley with sharp-elbowed natives. It was social media, high-profile campaigners and the coming together of wild swimmers, canoeists, surfers and nature lovers to highlight that the criminal (literally) levels of pollution, and to a lesser extent, abstraction would eventually

put a stake through the heart of our already degraded rivers and coastline.

So began the "what to do?" phase, a phase that soon became a national game of finger-pointing. Politicians. Water companies. Regulators. Professional pointers all. But really the shoe did not drop until the financial woes of first Southern Water and latterly Thames Water exposed the post-privatisation business model, which had taken publicly traded water companies private, as having traduced the many honourable aims of the original 1989 privatisation.

That line of sight I spoke of at the start directs us on a path that will remake the private ownership of the water companies as businesses that are rewarded for providing plentiful, clean water that does not deplete our rivers while returning the subsequent waste to Mother Nature as clean as the original water arrived. It is not difficult. It is not hard. We used to do it until the water companies, aided and abetted by inadequate regulators, lost sight of the purpose of the 1989 mission.

It is around this market-based reform of the water industry that opinion from the *Financial Times* to *The Guardian* has coalesced; we now just have to get government on board. Sometime in the next year or so, there will be an election. Who will win I do not know and to an extent, it will not matter, for there seems to be little appetite across the electoral piece for renationalisation. We know what to do, so we must ensure the next government, of whatever hue, sets in train the reforms that will take decades to bear fruit. But, as the saying goes, even the longest journey starts with a single step. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters' Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk